

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France

In *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France*, Venita Datta examines representations of fictional and real heroes in the boulevard theater and mass press during the fin de siècle (1880–1914), illuminating the role of gender in the construction of national identity during this formative period of French history. The popularity of the heroic cult at this time was in part the result of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, as well as a reaction to changing gender roles and collective guilt about the egoism and selfishness of modern consumer culture. The author analyzes representations of historical figures in the theater, focusing on Cyrano de Bergerac, Napoleon, and Joan of Arc, and examines the press coverage of heroes and anti-heroes in the Bazar de la Charité fire of 1897 and the Ullmo spy case of 1907.

Venita Datta, professor of French at Wellesley College, where she has taught since 1991, is a specialist of French cultural and intellectual history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is the author of *Birth of a National Icon* (1999) and has published articles in various journals, including *French Historical Studies*, the *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, *French Cultural Studies*, and *CLIO, Histoire, Femmes et Société*. Professor Datta is a recipient of the Chateaubriand Fellowship, awarded by the French government.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity*

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

More praise for *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France*

“Is there anything new to be learned about the construction of French national identity in the decades before World War I? Datta’s thoroughly engaging book shows that there is by exploring the cult of heroes of the day. This strikingly original study finds that the boulevard theater and mass press offered an eager public, anxious about meeting national challenges, a golden age of heroism. A sign of the times was that France’s late-nineteenth-century heroes defined themselves more by martyrdom than by conquest. Carefully reading the evidence not only to uncover France’s culture wars but also to detect less frequently noted areas of national cohesion, Datta makes many surprising revelations, not the least of which is how many cracks there were in the defense of gender orthodoxies. The success of the Third Republic in overcoming poisonous hatreds and preparing France for its life-and-death struggle comes into focus with this important investigation.”

– Lenard R. Berlanstein, University of Virginia

“Through a careful analysis of five *causes célèbres* between the 1890s and the First World War, Venita Datta’s new book probes the many levels on which the cult of heroism circulated in the French cultural imagination. By revealing a series of tensions and pretensions surrounding the virility of men, the potential of women, and the meaning of Frenchness, Datta shows how conflicting ideas about the hero divided the very nation they aimed to consolidate. This is a fascinating and indispensable contribution to our understanding of culture and politics at the fin de siècle.”

– Christopher E. Forth, author of *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood*

“Venita Datta’s masterful book gets to the heart of the way heroism and historic symbols of French national unity were dramatized in the press and in theaters at the fin de siècle, mitigating, if not healing, the many political and cultural divisions of the era, while preparing the nation for war.”

– Robert Nye, Oregon State University

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France

Gender, Politics, and National Identity

VENITA DATTA

Wellesley College



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521186520

© Venita Datta 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Datta, Venita, 1961–

Heroes and legends of fin-de-siècle France : gender, politics,
and national identity / Venita Datta.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19595-9 – ISBN 978-0-521-18652-0 (pbk.)

1. Heroes – France – History. 2. Women heroes – France – History.
3. Nationalism – France – History. 4. Sex role – France – History. I. Title.

P96.H462.F84 2011

944.081'2-dc22 2010046889

ISBN 978-0-521-19595-9 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-18652-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siecle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Sean and Neal

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction The Fin-de-Siècle Cult of Heroes	I
1 Gender, Class, and Heroism in the Bazar de la Charité Fire of 1897	33
2 Cyrano: A Hero for the Fin de Siècle?	76
3 “L’Appel au Soldat”: Visions of the Napoleonic Legend in Popular Culture	108
4 On the Boulevards: Representations of Joan of Arc in the Popular Theater	142
5 Opium, Gambling, and the Demimondaine: The Ullmo Spy Case of 1907–1908	179
Conclusion From One War to the Next: The End of Heroes?	226
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	239
<i>Index</i>	255

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

Every book is to some extent a collective endeavor, and this one is no exception. Although the current work begins more or less where the last one ended, it took me some time to figure out where I was going. I am especially grateful to colleagues whom I also count as friends for reading various book abstracts and early drafts: Elinor Accampo, Barbara Day-Hickman, Ruth Harris, William Hitchcock, Raymond Jonas, Dominique Kalifa, Paul Mazgaj, Karen Offen, Jean Pedersen, Mary Pickering, Charles Rearick, Mary-Louise Roberts, Florence Rochefort, Vanessa Schwartz, Gregory Shaya, Willa Silverman, Charles Sowerwine, Mary Lynn Stewart, K. Steven Vincent, and Robin Walz. I am also indebted to a pair of very tough editors, Jo Burr and Ted Margadant, for (repeatedly) obliging me to revise an article that formed the basis of an early chapter.

I offer special thanks to Robert Nye, Christopher Forth, Edward Berenson, Lenard Berlanstein, and Sally Charnow for reading large portions of the manuscript, their lively conversations on fin-de-siècle France, and, above all, for *not* sugar coating their advice. I am grateful for their friendship, and the book is the better for their collegial suggestions.

I express my deep-felt gratitude to my French “family”: Doris Khoury-Serres and François and Olivier Serres, for their generosity in hosting me on every single “hit and run” trip to Paris I have taken these past ten years to look at the archives. I also thank Olivier Wiewiorka and Vincent Duclert, not only for reading various chapters but also for their hospitality. Our lively dinners were a source of nourishment in all respects.

No words suffice to thank Rachel Fuchs, who has been my friend and mentor ever since we ran away from a rubber chicken banquet nearly seventeen years ago. Rachel is the model of the brilliant scholar, teacher,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siecle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

Acknowledgments

and colleague. I could not have finished this book without her unstinting advice, support, and affection.

My colleagues in the French Department at Wellesley College graciously agreed to read parts of the manuscript and help me with translations, even during busy semesters. My warm thanks to Catherine Masson and Vicki Mistacco for the former, and to Barry Lydgate, Marie-Paule Tranvouez, Hélène Bilis, Scott Gunther, Andrea Levitt, Michèle Respaut, and the late Nathalie Buchet Ritchey, for the latter.

I also had the good fortune to work with a splendid administrative assistant Sarah Allahverdi and three talented student research assistants: Leslie Viano, Margaret Samu, and Yukti Malhotra. I also thank Bethany Keenan, who helped me secure various documents in France, and Susan Hall, who helped me clean up the manuscript. I could not have completed this project without the support of Wellesley College's liberal leave policy and of the Wellesley College Committee on Faculty Awards. During my last sabbatical, I was lucky to be a scholar in residence at Wellesley's Newhouse Center for the Humanities – my thanks to Tim Peltason and Jane Jackson for making me feel so welcome.

I wouldn't have gotten very far in my research without the help of wonderful librarians and archivists. At Wellesley College, I am grateful for the support of Karen Jensen and Susan Goodman in the Interlibrary Loan Office, as well as of Dale Katzif, Nancy Karis, and Jacqueline Fitzpatrick. In France, I would like to thank Geneviève Morlet and Marie-Odile Gigou at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris; Jean de Preneuf at the Service Historique de la Marine, as well as the librarians at the BNF, Richelieu; the Police Archives of the Préfecture de Paris, and the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand.

I would also like to acknowledge the debt I owe to a special group of friends: Joanne Berger-Sweeney, Urs Berger, Julie and Hank Donnelly, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, Julie Norem, Jonathan Cheek, Mary Kloppenberg, and Kate Brogan. I thank them for their warmth and affection, especially when I needed them most. I offer thanks as well to Dr. Caroline Block for encouraging me to continue work on my book during difficult circumstances.

Every author needs a sympathetic editor and I am fortunate to have found one in Eric Crahan. I greatly appreciate his enthusiastic (and patient) support of this project. Thanks also to Jason Przybylski for all his advice on how to secure images and permissions.

Last but by no means least, I thank my family, beginning with my husband, Stephen Bold, who has given me much encouragement and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18652-0 - Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siecle France: Gender, Politics, and National Identity

Venita Datta

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

xi

listened to my historical ramblings with great patience over the years. His work on the real Cyrano – among the best I have read on the subject (I may be a bit biased) – was a source of inspiration for my own work on Rostand’s fictionalized version of the historical figure. Steve also helped with tricky translations and served as my technical advisor. My parents, Y. and Urmil Datta, too have supported all my endeavors, intellectual and otherwise, with enthusiasm and selfless generosity. My brother Sanjay Datta cheered me on as well.

I am also indebted to my sons, Sean and Neal Bold, who seem to have grown up (but not quite, thankfully) during the course of my writing this book. I appreciated their patience when I dragged them to various Parisian haunts, among them, the Père Lachaise Cemetery to see the graves of Sarah Bernhardt and Oscar Wilde and the Sacré-Coeur to look at the Joan of Arc stained-glass windows (it wasn’t so bad, was it?). I am also grateful to them for reminding me of what is most important in life – by taking me away from the computer to play – and also for understanding when I needed to get back to my work. This book is dedicated to them.