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► **To cite this version:**

Gabrielle Houbre. Âpres vertiges (Tough Times) Prostitutional arrangements and excesses during the second half of the nineteenth century. Guy Cogeval. Splendeurs et Misères. Images de la prostitution, 1850-1910, Musée d'Orsay/Flammarion, pp.30-45, 2015, 0, 978-2-0831-7274-0. hal-01353773

HAL Id: hal-01353773

<https://hal.science/hal-01353773>

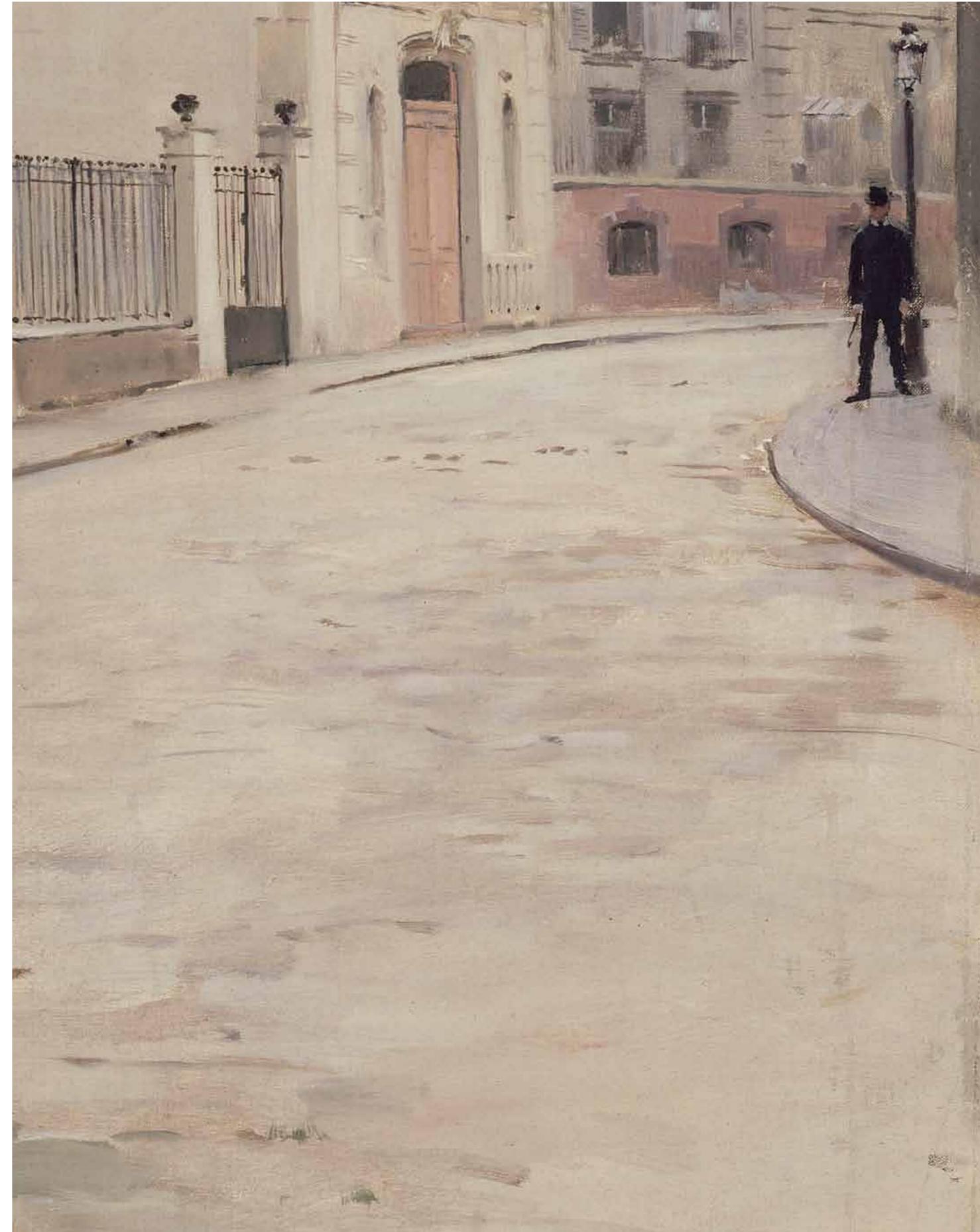
Submitted on 6 Oct 2017

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Après vertiges (Tough Times)
Prostitutional
arrangements and excesses during
the second half
of the nineteenth century

Gabrielle Houbre



Jean Béraud, *Waiting*,
detail » 35.

COVERING THE PERIOD from the 1850s until the eve of World War I, this book examines the second half of the nineteenth century with its intertwining of political stability and turmoil, economic prosperity and poverty, social traditions and upheavals, cultural classicism and avant-gardism.¹ Out of these contrasts, although tempered by mobile, nuanced interfaces, emerged the striking scenery of prostitution depicted in its plurality, ambivalence and emotional power. Paintings, sculptures, photographs, films, furniture and objects led to so many encounters with the protagonists of a shady world that intrigues, attracts, turns off, repulses, questions without ever becoming tiresome.² This theory of evanescent powers, whereby sex is exchanged for money, bundles together prostitute(s) and client(s), as well as pimps and madams, councillors and police officers, actors and actresses, in the shadow and the bright light of a contested prostitional order.

Regulation, contestation

By placing women and girl prostitutes under the supervision of the *police des mœurs* (vice squad), by forcing them to submit to medical check-ups (1802), then by legalising the existence of brothels or *maisons de tolérance* (1804), the Consulate opted for a novel method of overseeing female prostitution outlined during the Revolutionary period.³ Regulationism met venal sexuality halfway by taking it in hand rather than banning it or trying to eradicate it. With this regulatory social mission to carry out, it was then regarded as a 'necessary evil' in the light of sexual demands consubstantial with virility.⁴ This *doxa*, reflecting ingrained beliefs with respect to differentiated sexual identities, persisted throughout the nineteenth century, and beyond. At the start of the Third Republic, Maxime Du Camp returned to the same type of topos in explaining prostitution in terms of 'the brutality of men's passions, the organic and moral weakness of women'.⁵ These prejudices, mixed with pragmatism, incited the authorities to present regulationism, also developed in the colonies,⁶ as a public health measure helping to control venereal disease and liable to maintain the cosy family unit. The idea was first to identify and create a file for women engaged in debauchery, then to relegate them to specific locations. Placed under the watchful eye of doctors and police, the brothel was expected to optimise the system's efficiency. It fell to the mayors to draft their local byelaws and register the said *filles soumises*, the one exception being Paris, where this task was assigned to the chief of police. Women who applied to join a brothel were registered on the brothel-keeper's books and issued with a number, while those opting to be streetwalkers received a card listing their health and other obligations. So prostitional activity per se was not an offence. However, it could become one, as a 'public offense against decency' under the criminal code of 1810, which also explicitly punished procuring when performed on minors under the age of twenty-one.⁷

Published in 1836, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, a veritable sociological survey of prostitutes, left a lasting mark on minds and writings, and established its author, the physician Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, as the iconic exponent of regulations.⁸ Paradoxically, it was when it was checked by the rise of illegal prostitution and the closing of many brothels that the 'French system' was exported to Victorian England.⁹ Feminists were mobilised, notably under the leadership of the Englishwoman Josephine Butler and the Frenchwoman Maria Deraismes, and the protest movement built up momentum during the 1870s.¹⁰ The French model at that time crystallised the converging criticism from both men and women who called for its abolition in the name of women's dignity, family values, religion, as well as the upholding of common law and individual freedoms.¹¹

In Paris, concerned at seeing the drop in voluntary registrations and the rising number of *filles insoumises*, the chief of police then reviewed his prostitional policy. Fuelled by registered or brothel prostitutes jumping

¹ To summarise briefly, the Second Empire (1852–70) came about through a coup d'état (2 December 1851) and collapsed during the Franco-Prussian War (19 July 1870 – 28 January 1871). The Third Republic, proclaimed on 4 September 1870, was contested by the Commune (March–May 1871) before becoming established in 1875 up until 1940, in two parts either side of World War I. Of the various economic crises, the depression that lasted from the start of the 1870s to the early 1890s was the most serious, so much so that the period that followed up until World War I came to be called the 'Belle Époque'. Forced by the intensification of the industrial revolution, more and more French people became factory workers and city-dwellers, while major inequalities remained between men and women. Paris was modernised and transformed under the impetus of the prefect Baron Haussmann, from 1853 to 1870.

² For an overview of the bibliographical output, see Lionel Le Corre, *Les Publications françaises sur les prostitutions (1975–2008)*, Paris, Pepper, 2011. Among special issues of history journals, see Christine Bard and Christelle Taraud, 'Prostitués', *Clio. Histoire, Femmes et Sociétés*, no. 17, 2003, and 'Prostitution: de la tolérance à la prohibition', *L'Histoire*, no. 383, January 2013.

³ Louis Fiaux, *Les Maisons de tolérance: leur fermeture*, Paris, G. Carré, 1892, p. 1. On the beginnings of regulationism, see Clyde Plumauzille, 'L'administration de la sexualité vénale de la Révolution au Consulat', in Jacques-Olivier Boudon (ed.), *Napoléon et les femmes*, Paris, SPM, 2013, pp. 103–19.

⁴ The expression 'necessary evil' is a recurring reference to St Augustine: 'What can be mentioned more sordid, more bereft of decency, or more full of turpitude than prostitutes, procurers? ... Remove prostitutes from human affairs, and you will unsettle everything because of lusts ... place them in the position of matrons, and you will dishonor these latter by disgrace and ignominy. This class of people is, therefore, by its own mode of life most unchaste in its morals; by the law of order, it is most vile in social condition.... But the order of nature has designed that because they are needful they shall not be lacking.' St Augustine (Bishop of Hippo),

'On Order', in *The Happy Life; Answer to Skeptics; Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil*, translated by Ludwig Schopp, Denis J. Kavanagh OSA, Robert P. Russell OSA and Thomas E. Gilligan OSA, Cima Publishing Company, 2008 (1st edn 1948), pp. 287–8.

⁵ Maxime Du Camp, *Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Hachette, 1875, p. 316. We find exactly the same wording in the article 'Prostitution' in the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* by Pierre Larousse, Paris, Administration du Grand dictionnaire universel, 1875, XIII, p. 295.

⁶ Christelle Taraud, *La Prostitution coloniale: Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc (1830–1962)*, Paris, Payot, 2003.

⁷ Section IV, *Code pénal de l'Empire français*, Paris, Prieur, 1810, p. 50. Article 330 punished a public offence against decency with three months to one year's prison, and a sixteen to 200 franc fine. In 1863, the penalty was increased to six months to two years' prison, and a 500 franc fine. Article 334 punished inciting minors to commit obscene acts with six months to two years' prison, a fifty to 500 franc fine and two to five years' prison, and a 300 to 1,000 franc fine for a procurer in a position of authority over the minor.

⁸ The title reveals its main lines of research: prostitution in Paris, viewed from the standpoint of public health, morals and government: *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris, considérée sous le rapport de l'hygiène publique, de la morale et de l'administration*, 2 vols, Paris, J.-B. Baillière, 1836. Alain Corbin has published an abridged version of the book, *La Prostitution à Paris au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 1981.

⁹ Philip Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

¹⁰ Frédéric Regard (ed.), *Féminisme et prostitution dans l'Angleterre du XIX^e siècle: la croisade de Josephine Butler*, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2013; Maria Deraismes, *Ève dans l'humanité*, Angoulême, Éditions Abeille & Castor, 2008 (1st edn 1868).

¹¹ Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de nocce: misère sexuelle et prostitution au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 'Champs' series, 1982 (1st edn 1978), pp. 315–79.



439. E. Ruppert, *Pimp*, c.1900, aristotype, 6 3/4 x 4 1/4 in., Paris, Nicole Canet, Galerie Au Bonheur du Jour

at the slightest chance to escape government control, the level of illegal prostitution was reportedly seven or eight times higher than the legal variety.¹² The authorities took the view that this was a threat to public health since the illegal prostitutes were not getting the medical check-ups that the *soumises* were getting either at brothels or at the Saint-Lazare clinic, and were therefore deemed high-risk potential carriers for the spread of syphilis. But the interests of families were also an issue, as their harmony might be disrupted by cases of adultery becoming public knowledge or threatened by ruin brought on by the doing of some offspring fanaticised by his mistress.

Accordingly, the Prefecture of Police decreed an 'unremitting war' on the *insoumises*, who reputedly enjoyed a 'more pleasant' status than the registered *filles en carte*, and especially the *filles de maison* in the brothels; and it substantially increased the number of vice squad personnel.¹³ Their first task was to ascertain whether, in these love affairs and sex outside of marriage, there was money changing hands, no easy business given that the boundary between lovers, protectors and clients seemed so ill defined and permeable. Police surveillance was therefore aimed at any woman behaving suspiciously, or reported as operating illegally by a madam who felt she was the victim of unfair competition, by a procuress disgruntled at seeing a prey escape her clutches, a jealous rival, a weary lover, a worried family man, or an outraged neighbour.¹⁴ Now the vice squad had a very negative image, which was nothing new. One complaint was that they were open to bribery and would carry out their repression more or less vigorously depending on how intimate they were with the illegal prostitutes. Their own chief, François Carlier, himself confessed that his officers could 'give in very readily to the temptations that beset them. Once led astray, every day they abuse their powers, dishonour the service, and that is when they can begin to become really obnoxious.'¹⁵

From the end of the Second Empire, attacks were launched against the discretionary powers left in the hands of the police force, guilty, among other things, of arresting suspects indiscriminately in the street, mistaking honest ladies for prostitutes, and carting them off to police headquarters for questioning or even a medical check-up.¹⁶ Such abuses of power provoked a public outcry, with many tending to side with the prostitutes being sometimes brutally rounded up under their noses rather than with the police. The press soon gave coverage to a vigorous campaign orchestrated by the republicans, outraged at seeing the Prefecture of Police still clinging on to its Second Empire methods – 'usurpations', 'inquisitions', 'illegalities', 'repressions', as Louis Fiaux summed up in 1921¹⁷ – and by abolitionists infuriated at seeing that it was stubbornly trying to regulate prostitution. One man, Yves Guyot, a radical republican and travelling companion of Josephine Butler's, embodied this two-pronged fight beginning in 1876.¹⁸ The ultimate symbol of police arbitrariness, Saint-Lazare was in his eyes like the lugubrious 'crown topping the edifice' of prostitution.¹⁹ Run by the nuns of the order of Marie-Joseph, this institution was at once a common law prison and a detention centre for prostitutes, registered or otherwise. Those reputedly suffering from venereal disease were brought together in the prison hospital, as at the jail made popular by the Aristide Bruant song: 'C'est de la prison que j't'écris / Mon pauvre Polyte / Hier je n'sais pas c'qui m'a pris / À la visite / C'est des maladies qui s'voient pas / Quand ça s'déclare / N'empêche qu'aujourd'hui j'suis dans l'tas / À Saint-Lazare' (I'm writing to you from jail / My poor Polyte / Yesterday I don't know what came over me / During the check-up / There are diseases you can't see / When they break out / All the same today I'm among the crowd / At Saint-Lazare).²⁰

Pluralities, equivocal situations

Prostitutional society in the big cities could be divided, depending on one's fortune and lifestyle, into three unequal and not entirely distinct groups.²¹ At the bottom was

35. Jean Béraud, *Waiting*, c.1885, oil on canvas, 22 × 15 ½ in., Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

¹² In 1866, Charles Jérôme Lecour, chief of the 1st Division responsible for prostitution at the Prefecture of Police, proposed a figure of 30,000 illegal workers against 4,000 registered, and the gap between the two categories only increased over the years that followed. 'Police médicale', *Archives générales de médecine*, December 1867, p. 717.

¹³ 'Instruction générale du mois d'octobre 1871', fol. 6, APP/DB/407. The vice squad had a force of thirty-two officers in 1856, forty-seven in 1870, sixty in 1872 and around a hundred in 1907. Gabrielle Houbre, introduction to *Le Livre des courtisanes: archives secrètes de la police des mœurs*, Paris, Tallandier, 2006, p. 14, and Levic-Torca, *Paris noceur*, Paris, Fort, 1910, p. 30.

¹⁴ Yves Guyot, *Études de physiologie sociale: la prostitution*, Paris, Charpentier, 1882, pp. 114, 130; *Actes relatifs à la police des mœurs en France*, Congrès de Genève, 17–23 September 1877, Neuchâtel, Bureau du Bulletin continental, p. 27.

¹⁵ *Les Deux Prostitutions*, Paris, Dentu, 1887, p. 504. François Carlier was chief of the vice squad during the period 1860–70.

¹⁶ *Le Temps*, 30 November 1867.

¹⁷ Louis Fiaux, *Yves Guyot*, Paris, Alcan, 1921, p. 63.

¹⁸ Jean-Marc Berlière, *La Police des mœurs sous la III^e République*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 131ff.

¹⁹ Guyot, *op. cit.* (note 14), p. 308. The woman of letters Pauline de Grandpré, whose lifelong struggle aimed at the rehabilitation of female prisoners upon their release, is no less scathing; *La Prison Saint-Lazare depuis vingt ans*, Paris, Dentu, 1889, p. 34ff.

²⁰ *À Saint-Lazare*, music and lyrics by Aristide Bruant, Paris, Impr. Chaimbaud, 1886.

²¹ On the interrelations between prostitution and the urban setting, see Lola Gonzalez-Quijano, 'Filles publiques et femmes galantes: des sexualités légitimes et illégitimes à l'intérieur des espaces sociaux et géographiques parisiens (1851–1914)', doctoral thesis, EHESS, Paris / University of Naples – L'Orientale, 2012.



the poverty-stricken mass of the nameless in the direst straits and prostituting themselves. Women shut away turning dozens of tricks a day in brothels, *lupanaria* and low sailors' dives, those left empty, listless, legs apart, after servicing client after client until they flopped more dead than alive onto their beds. Better treated were those working in brothels for an upscale clientele, within a broad triangle having its apexes at the Palais-Royal, the Opéra and the Place Saint-Georges. Here, the women had a lie-in, lunched heartily, and took the afternoon off before getting down to their meticulous body care prior to offering their affected nudity to the men, both regulars and newcomers.²²

Outside, both the registered and illegal prostitutes walked the streets, either going it alone or bunching together in the urban space. In Paris, a number of streets running northward from the Opéra were 'every day congested with whores soliciting rudely and persistently', if the locals' complaints are to be believed.²³ In the Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin, thirty-four of them were arrested in the space of a week, including seven *insoumises*, a far cry from the policed bargaining depicted by Béraud in the smarter Rue Chateaubriand. Such streetwalking is marked by the control of the pimps, who spared their protégées any police harassment and lived off the proceeds of their prostitution.²⁴ They were sometimes aided and abetted by their mistress, like Auguste François Lanen who, in 1874, along with Euphrasie Richer, 20, had to answer a charge of procuring involving minors. Thus Blanche Deniau, a nineteen-year-old cashier, told the court that she had been forced to solicit men on the boulevard, accompanied by either one of them, who told her which passers-by to accost, before 'taking all her money'.²⁵ These were the women, although barely considered such, who paid the heaviest price in the face of male violence. In 1886, as the subject of a wager between two pimps, Catherine Levot was thrown into the Seine for the price of a cup of coffee. By way of a eulogy, another scolded the culprit: 'You know full well, you villain, that she earned all our livings! She was the best one we had! That was criminal of you to toss her in the water like that.'²⁶ Many other killings of prostitutes by one-off consumers, as reported in brief news items or reports on court cases, show just how extremely vulnerable these women were.²⁷

This popular prostitution was amplified by occasional or additional recourse to the expedients it offered. Women holding down small jobs in the city were paid fifty per cent lower wages than men. From the factory hand to the milliner, and including the florist, the laundry woman or the housemaid, the pay was too ridiculously small for a woman to be able to afford proper board and lodging, especially if she had one or more children, and maybe even a man to feed as well.²⁸ Beginning with the Exposition Universelle of 1867, women who started replacing male waiters serving in the *brasseries à femmes* became identified with a new character in popular venality who became established in the 1870s and 1880s.²⁹ These *verseuses* ('pourers') would ply their customers with drink, sit down at table with them and follow them to a short-time hotel if they so wished. Of all these women, the best-off lived in self-furnished accommodation, but more often they rented humble furnished rooms – those lucky enough not to have to find somewhere different to crash down each night. Thus the 'exceedingly unhappy' Alphonsine Bonhomme, who was a dancer at the Châtelet, 'gave herself to just anyone for next to nothing.' At the age of nineteen, she was of no fixed abode, 'slept wherever she could' and, when there was no customer to take her home or to a hotel, she landed with some 'very poor' workers she knew, where 'she slept on a sheetless mattress they would fling down on the floor for her', noted a compassionate vice squad officer.³⁰

The top rung of the prostitution ladder was the exclusive domain of the illegal prostitutes. An extraordinary archive, held by the Prefecture of Police and recently published as *Le Livre des courtisanes*, lists 415 for the years 1860–70, for 560 clients.³¹ We observe here a middle class comprising quite a few supernumeraries and second-rate actresses, paid meagre wages and who nearly all had to either find someone to provide their upkeep or secure a supplementary source of income.³² During the early Second Empire, the director of the Délassements-Comiques was so conscious

²² Corbin, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp.124–8.

²³ Report of 1 May 1873, archives of the Prefecture of Police, APP/BM2/56.

²⁴ Léo Taxil, *La Prostitution contemporaine: étude d'une question sociale*, Paris, Librairie Populaire, 1884, pp.92–96.

²⁵ Tribunal de première instance, police correctionnelle (county magistrates' court), hearing of 27 March 1874, archives départementales de la Seine, D2U6/26.

²⁶ *Gil Blas*, 8 and 9 February 1888.

²⁷ Charles Virmaître, *Paris-Impur*, Paris, n.p., 1891, p.158, and Eugenia Parry, *Crime Album Stories: Paris 1886–1902*, Zurich, Berlin and New York, Scalo, 2000.

²⁸ The average daily wage for a female worker in Paris was 2.12 francs in 1853, 2.78 in 1871 and 2.95 in 1881. Émile Chevallier, *Les Salaires au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Rousseau, 1887, p.69. In 1854 in Paris, a pound of wheat bread cost 0.24 francs (information from Archives Nationales (AN), F20/715).

²⁹ Paris had 125 *verseuses* at forty brasseries in 1872 and 1,170 at 202 in 1893. Corbin, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp.250–1.

³⁰ *Le Livre des courtisanes*, *op. cit.* (note 13), May 1875, p.342.

³¹ Gabrielle Houbre, introduction to *Le Livre des courtisanes*, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.9–46.

³² The middle class covers the third category of *dames galantes* (*cocodettes*) listed by Levic-Torca, *op. cit.* (note 13), p.9, and the upper class the first (*demi-mondaines*) and second (*cocottes*) categories. According to *Le Livre des courtisanes*, these prostitutes could cost anything from twenty to a hundred francs a time.

of the problem that he proclaimed: 'My theatre is a brothel.... It's all very simple. I pay my actresses only fifty or sixty francs per month ... my actors don't get much more than that, and they're all pimps and fairies. Often one of the women comes to see me and says that fifty francs isn't enough, and that she'll have to start picking up men in the audience at five sous a time.'³³ We also find among this middle class many *cocottes* or *cocodettes*, little whores who would dive into the festive hurly-burly, whether out of necessity or taste, or both. The Paris guides for provincials and foreigners never failed to enumerate the pleasure venues primarily designed to cater for males: restaurants, cafés, concerts, theatres, opera house, dances, walks through the Bois de Boulogne, horse-racing at Longchamp.³⁴ The Folies-Bergère, famous for the licentious casualness of one section of the audience, was the preferred theatre for dealings with these little tarts, and there was nothing the municipal police could do about it.

But it was the 'stars of elite prostitution'³⁵ – *demi-mondaines*, *grandes cocottes*, *grandes horizontales* and other lower-ranking society women – who electrified a clientele drawn from the upper echelons of politics, finance, industry, the military, and cultural circles, to which may be added the names of top members of the ruling families – starting with Emperor Napoleon himself – and cosmopolitan aristocracies. As an outward sign of both wealth and manliness, these dearly won conquests were paraded ostentatiously by the menfolk.³⁶ These 'upper-class' women possessed an erotic and social shareholding that they capitalised upon skilfully: a monthly income of 10,000 or more francs, not counting treats, from their fancy man of the moment was nothing unusual. During the 1860s, the well-known actress Blanche d'Antigny, whose father was a carpenter and mother a linen maid, living in the lap of luxury in her private mansion for an annual rent of over 15,000 francs, received a gift of 50,000 francs' worth of jewellery from the tsar's prefect of police, pocketed 300,000 francs of Paul de Turenne's money before leaving the young man without a penny, charged Prince Paul Demidoff an estimated 2,000 francs for a one-night stand, and would never agree to sex for under 500 francs.

Courtesans made their own contribution to the construction of Haussmannian Paris by treating themselves, or rather by getting treated to, an apartment, or, in the case of those who had climbed to the very top, a private mansion. Despite her hugely successful stage career, Sarah Bernhardt had no compunction in playing the high-class escort when she was having a little palace built for her in the smartest neighbourhood of the 17th *arrondissement*. Certain upper-crust icons like the future marquise de la Païva and marquise d'Orvault, focused on building up their capital in cash and movables, and operated like shrewd businesswomen. When they had piled up enough to cast a veil over where it came from, they would solicit a marriage union with a name liable to ensure for them the respectability that they otherwise lacked. Thus Louise Thomas left her job at a silk store to launch her successful career as a lady of the night. In 1873, as the owner of a *hôtel particulier* and a fortune worth some 800,000 francs, she married the vicomte d'Abzac, an impoverished heir to an old family from the Périgord, as a stepladder to an accomplished society life.³⁷

From these high-flying courtesans to those hiring themselves out just to survive, most of the *insoumises* would have at some stage encountered procuresses acting as go-betweens with customers. Within this ring, in contrast with the streetwalkers, most of those engaged in procuring were women.³⁸ Often drawn from the ranks of prostitution, they differed from the brothel madams, who had a more respectable profile, although they did operate on similar economic lines, ruthlessly exploiting the women by pocketing on average half of their takings for enlisting their help. Being careful to keep the customer satisfied, whatever his preferences, they had no compunction in hiring very young girls, whom they would take to a home, or would present in their house of assignment. In this connection, the press in the decade 1860–70 was full of reports of arrests, like that of widow Rondy in 1873. Everybody who was anybody in Paris was in a cold sweat after the police found at her home a notebook with names of potential clients and women of the *demi-monde*, and not just the '*demi-monde*' either. But, of course, what landed her with a two-year prison sentence was a charge of inciting minors to perform obscene acts.³⁹

[50]

[F. 36]

[F. x]

[F. x]

[F. x]

[F. 15]

³³ *Pages from the Goncourt Journal*. Edited, translated and introduced by Robert Baldick, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962. Cited in John Emerson, *The Sex Life of the Nineteenth Century*, Éditions le Réal, 2014, p.293.

³⁴ These places feature heavily in *Le Livre des courtisanes* and appear in the index of place names. For further details of such novelties at the end of the Belle Époque, see Levic-Torca, *op. cit.* (note 13), p.187ff.

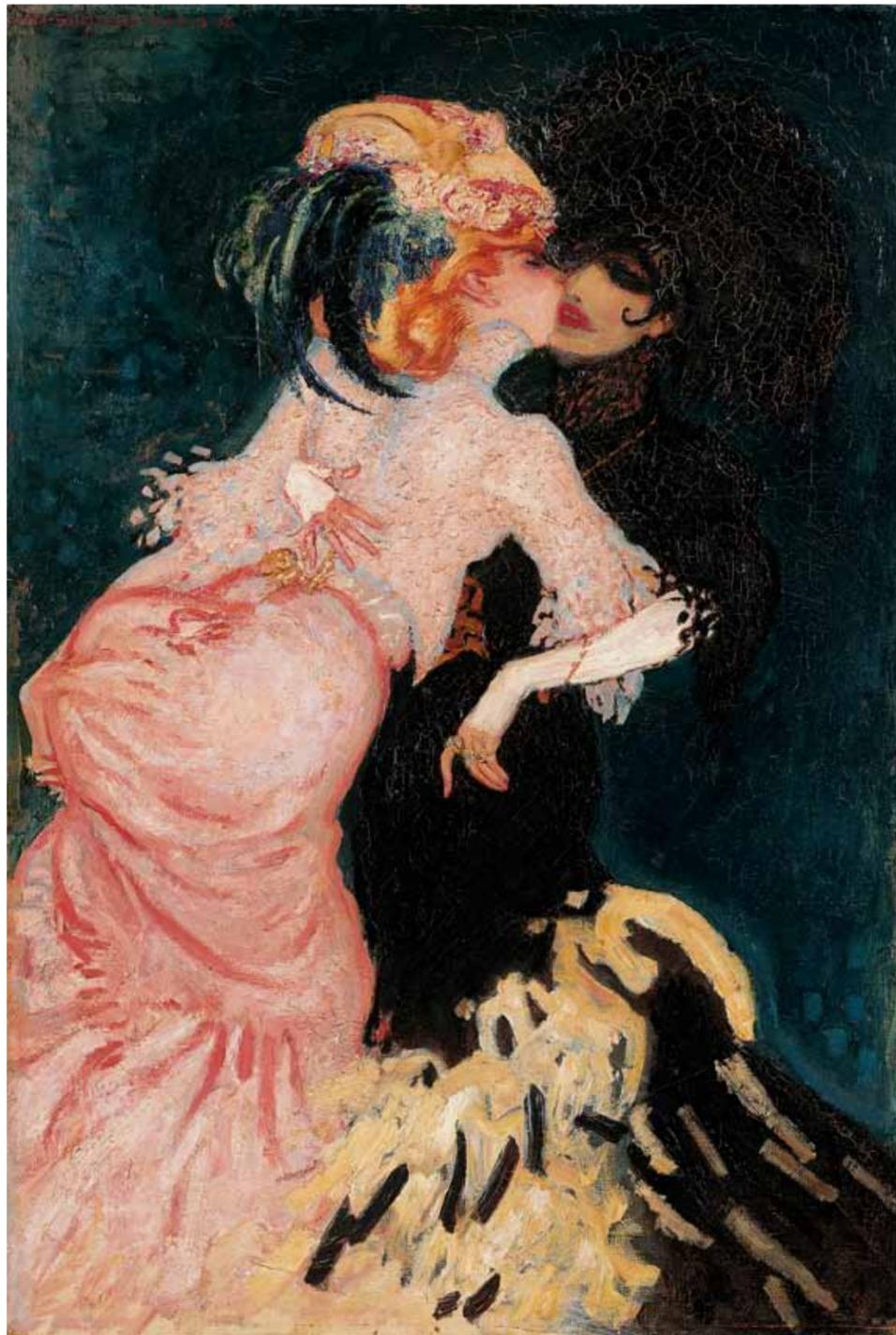
³⁵ Count Albert de Maugny (pseud. Zed), *Le Demi-Monde sous le Second Empire: souvenirs d'un sybarite*, Paris, Kolb, 1892, p.17.

³⁶ On customers and courtesans, see Gabrielle Houbre, introduction to *Le Livre des courtisanes*, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp.21–46, and the index of people.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.347–9; marriage contract, 1 July 1873, AN, MC/ET/LXXXVII/1759, and report of the furnished room department, 18 August 1873, APP, DA/389.

³⁸ *Le Livre des courtisanes* mentions fifty-five, for just two men.

³⁹ Tribunal de première instance de la Seine, 10^e chambre, police correctionnelle (county magistrates' court), hearings of 20 and 21 February 1873, AD, D1DU6/27.



155. Jan Sluijters, *Women Kissing*, 1906, oil on canvas, 56 ½ × 24 ½ in., Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum

Even more than the underaged, what most excited lusty males was virginity, or at least what was passed off as such, and it could command some very fancy prices: thus the Peruvian consul, at the head of a fortune valued at thirty-five million, forked out 30,000 francs, not including his tip to the two procurers, for a supposed virgin.⁴⁰ *Le Livre des courtisanes* highlights the role played by these procuresses with a difference in the illegal prostitution set-up, and in the rise of the *maisons de rendez-vous* (houses of assignation) beginning with the Second Empire.⁴¹ Preferred to the *maisons de tolérance* (conventional brothels) for their discreetness and catering to individual tastes, they attracted a clientele of gentlemen from the middle and élite classes, which was unfortunate for the police, for it made surveillance that much more difficult. Between 1900 and 1910, under the police prefect Lépine, the regulations were changed, rubber-stamping the decline of the brothels and legalising the houses of assignation.⁴²

Homosexuality, pornography

Only prostitution in the sense of paid sexual services provided by a woman to a man was covered by the official regulations. Heterosexuality was in fact just as consubstantial with the briefest prostitute–client relationship as it was to the long-term married couple. But while homosexuality was condemned socially no less with regard to paid sex as to disinterested practices, in both cases it was considered less unpalatable between women than between men. Venal lesbian sex acts featured among the topoi of male fantasies and talk about prostitutes.⁴³ A worried Parent-Duchâtelet counted one-quarter of ‘tribads’ among the prostitutes of Paris under the July Monarchy, while for the Belle Époque Léo Taxil voiced alarm at the ‘horrific advances’ of sapphism that had supposedly affected half of the prostitutes *filles à numéro* (with a number).⁴⁴ But, for a woman as for a man, paid sex could be arranged with a same-sex partner without it saying anything about one’s own sexual preferences.⁴⁵ ‘My [male] lover had me fixed up with a woman he brought me’, said one independent prostitute taken in for police questioning: ‘Women do it better than men. I prefer them.’⁴⁶

Such arrangements were by no means uncommon among the élites. Thus the comte de La Ferrière took advantage of the licence associated with the Opéra ball to persuade two society women to ‘come up to his box and abandon themselves to the attentions of his mistress’, a courtesan; meanwhile the prefect, Janvier de La Motte, set up assignations at a Paris hotel between ‘society ladies from the city of Évreux’ whom he had first masked, and ‘a girl tasked with initiating [them] into certain mysteries of love probably unknown [to them]’.⁴⁷ Lastly, some women responded to a specific request from society women, who adopted for the occasion behaviour similar to their male clients, if two anecdotes from the memorialist Viel-Castel are to be believed. The first is about the sister of a theatre director who, having only just come into some money, ‘rushed to Cico’s, flung herself into her arms and scattered on her bed the ten thousand-franc notes etc., etc., etc.’ The second one is a dig at the marquise de Beaumont, ‘caught last year in a whorehouse, in a compromising position with a *fricarelle*’, and noting that ‘this peccadillo does her no harm, she is accepted in society’.⁴⁸

Not only was prostitution not listed as a misdemeanour in the Napoleonic codes, neither was homosexuality.⁴⁹ The police only became involved when things spilled from a private setting over into the urban domain, as when Bordeaux was rocked by two cases of homosexual prostitution that hit the headlines twelve years apart. Not because the practice had died out during the intervening years, but because, the first time around, caught by surprise in the Place des Quinconces, some forty ‘worthy descendants of Sodom’ were committed for trial and handed stiff sentences.⁵⁰ The effect of the punishment and the local press coverage of the event was chiefly to send prostitution underground inside private homes, beyond the reach of the police and the courts. In 1878, some ‘newcomers’ ventured once more into the Place des Quinconces

⁴⁰ *Le Livre des courtisanes*, op. cit. (note 13), p. 206.

⁴¹ Charles Virmaître, *Trottoirs et lupanars*, Paris, Perrot, 1893, pp. 89–100.

⁴² Corbin, op. cit. (note 11), p. 472.

⁴³ *The Pretty Women of Paris*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1996 (1st edn 1883); Dr Alibert, *Tribadisme et saphisme*, Paris, Librairie de la Nouvelle France, c.1906; Dr Louis Martineau, *Leçons sur les déformations vulvaires et anales produites par la masturbation, le saphisme, la défloration et la sodomie*, Paris, Delahaye, 1884; Dr Rhazis, *Saphistes et tribades*, Paris, n.p., 1909.

⁴⁴ *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, op. cit. (note 8), I, p. 171, and Léo Taxil, *La Corruption fin-de-siècle*, Paris, G. Carré, 1894, p. 253.

⁴⁵ A vice squad officer notes in connection with one Givet: ‘He engages in prostitution with pederasts but without being a pederast himself. He likes women.’ Jean-Claude Féray, *Le Registre infamant*, Paris, Quintes-feuilles, 2012, p. 50.

⁴⁶ *Le Livre des courtisanes*, op. cit. (note 13), p. 400.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59 (1874 report) and 96 (report dated 22 February 1872).

⁴⁸ Horace de Viel Castel, *Mémoires sur le règne de Napoléon III*, Paris, Chez tous les libraires, 1883–4, II, p. 129: this is likely the actress Pauline Cico, who was playing at the Vaudeville at that date, rather than her younger sister Marie, who was a singer; III, p. 104: Geneviève Adeline Dupuytren, the daughter of the well-known surgeon, in 1832 married Count Louis Robert de Beaumont, with whom she had three sons. *Fricarelle* is a slang term for both a courtesan and a lesbian.

⁴⁹ William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, New York, London and Oxford, Harrington Park Press, 2004.

⁵⁰ *La Victoire de la démocratie*, 11 December 1878.

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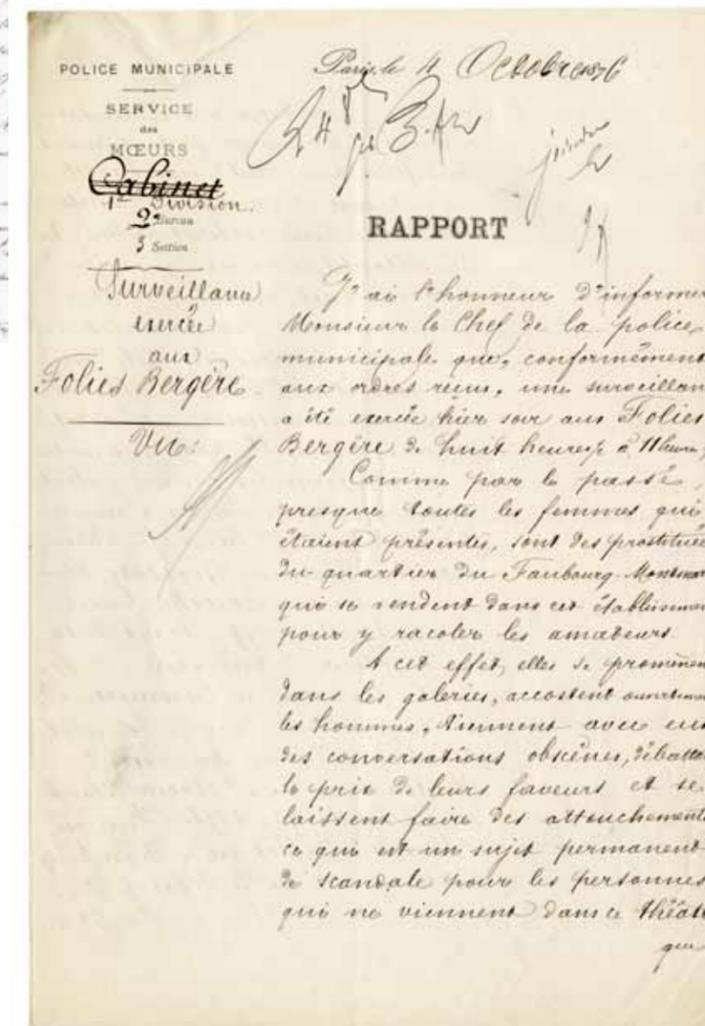
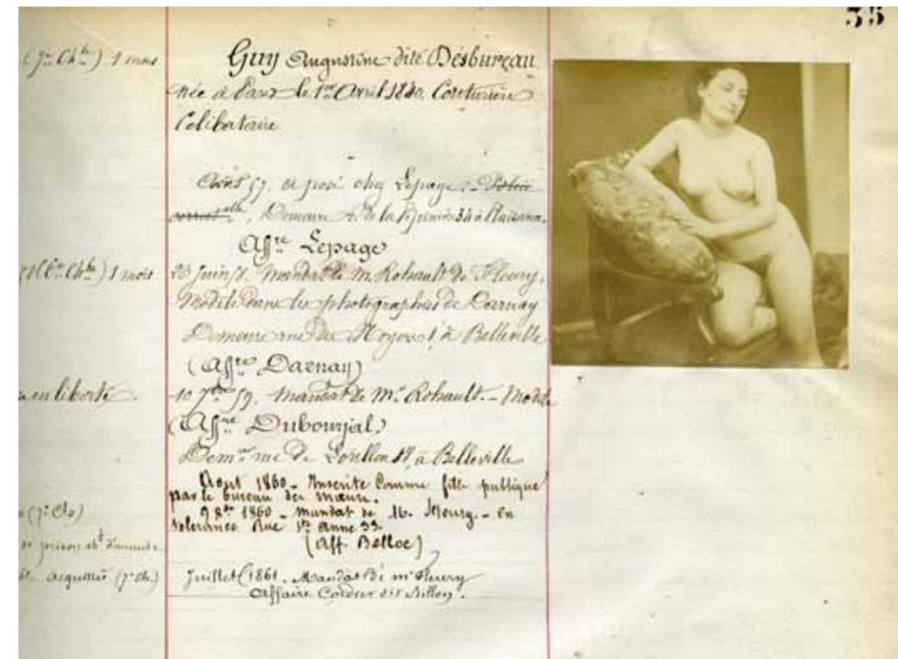
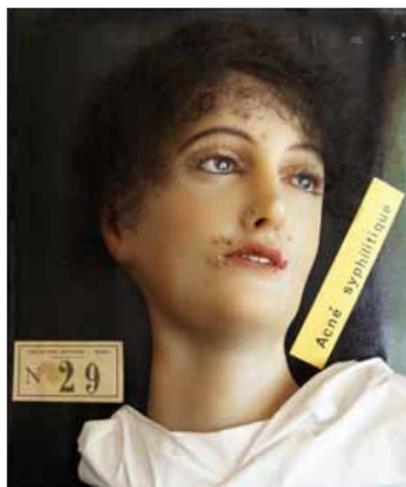


190. Jean Béraud, *Prostitutes' Charge Room at the Police Headquarters*, 1886, oil on canvas, 56 3/4 x 45 1/2 in., Texas, private collection

405. Albert Brichaut, *Saint-Lazare: Visiting Room. Inmates to the left. Family to the Right. Guards in the Middle*, c.1898, photograph taken from a collection of photographs on Parisian brothels, aristotype, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 in., Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France

451. Collection Spitzner, *Female Face with Syphilitic Acne*, wax, 10 3/4 x 13 1/2 x 4 in., University of Montpellier

441. Dr Léon Charles Jolivet, *Victim of Syphilis*, c.1913, gelatin silver print, 6 1/2 x 4 1/2 in., Paris, Collection Gérard Lévy



1127. *Registre BB5 / BB5 Register: Guy Augustine, dite Debureau / Augustine Guy, known as Debureau*, c.1861, Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police

1128. *Anonymous, Register of Kept Women (BB/1): Blanche d'antigny*, 11 February 1873, Paris, Archives de la Préfecture de Police

1126. *Surveillance carried out at the Folies-Bergère, municipal police report*, 4 October 1876, Paris, Préfecture de Police

to engage in 'obscene unnatural acts or indecent fondling in public places'⁵¹. Since their rallying sign was a handkerchief around the neck or sticking out of a pocket, they were easily picked out by the Bordeaux police, who brought twenty-four of them before a court judge. Seventeen were minors aged from thirteen to twenty and from a broad range of backgrounds. The youngest were charged with 'obscenities' with gentlemen in urinals, the standard venue for male prostitution.⁵² Two were sent or sent back to a reformatory. Another doubtless owed his acquittal to the savoir-faire of his father, an industrialist who came up to the witness stand to reassure the judges that his paternal authority was about to make an example of the boy. Several were categorised by the press as being of the 'feminine type and manners', or even a 'fairy', themselves readily using feminine nicknames – 'la Boîteuse', 'la Belle Charcutière', 'la Cantinière' – or feminine ones – 'Eugénie', 'Marguerite' – much as some Parisian male prostitutes borrowed the names of leading courtesans.⁵³ Most, even those reportedly from 'honourable' families, were sentenced to six months in prison and a sixteen franc fine.

The seven adults were aged from twenty-four to fifty-one, and among them the clients were identified; they included three married family men, which raises the question of their bisexuality as much as their homosexuality. A manservant prosecuted for inciting minors to commit obscene acts, in addition to the standard public offence against decency, was given the heaviest sentence, namely two years' imprisonment and a fifty franc fine, and was additionally stripped of his civil rights for five years. This was because he faced the serious charge of having 'sullied' the home by taking in young boys in the absence of his master, who was none other than Senator Charles de Pelleport-Burète, a former mayor of Bordeaux.⁵⁴ We should therefore not be surprised to see the Parisian daily *Le Temps*, in its issue dated 12 December 1878, reporting on the 'emotion' felt at the prefecture of the Gironde and putting it down to the number of people mixed up in the affair, either directly or indirectly. One, a pharmacist from Marmande, saw the love letters he had been exchanging with one of the young suspects publicly disclosed at the hearing.⁵⁵ So what came in for popular disapproval here was the male homosexuality rather than the prostitution. According to *La Victoire de la démocratie*, the crowds gathered around the court building reportedly booed these 'disgusting characters';⁵⁶ The reporter, expressing the wish that the city now be rid of such 'base acts', nonetheless ends his article with a question: 'When is it going to be the turn of the bedroom workers?', which amounted to a call for full criminalisation of all male prostitution.

From mid-century on, surveillance of what were considered deviant illegal sexual practices was in place and further tightened during the decade 1860–70, targeting not just the *insoumises*, but also 'pederasts' and leading players in the pornography industry.⁵⁷ The register devoted to countering pornography showed, above and beyond the etymology of the word, the material interconnections between prostitution and photographic pornography.⁵⁸ Nearly fifteen per cent of women posing in front of a camera lens were described by vice squad officers as *filles publiques* (streetwalkers), although the actual figure was higher.⁵⁹ And a sitter could so easily slip into prostitution and the ambiguity turned into a generalisation given currency by the *Grande Encyclopédie*, which conflated the two: 'Pornography makes public, as does a *fille publique* who exhibits and offers her intimacy to all, that which essentially must be reserved.'⁶⁰ Thus Augustine Guy, a young seventeen-year-old model and needle-worker, had this change of status forced upon her in August 1860. Arrested three times and jailed for a month, she was automatically registered by the vice office as a *fille en tolérance*, a licensed prostitute, furthermore an underage one, and therefore in breach of the regulation.⁶¹ The mugshot attached to her file shows her alone, in what is a perfectly ordinary pose for a painting. Unlike the women's pictures, those of the men listed on the register do not uncover their nakedness, except as 'polka' actors, i.e. in explicit sex scenes, together with one or more female partners. On the

⁵¹ Judgement of the Tribunal de Première Instance de Bordeaux, police correctionnelle (Bordeaux magistrates' court), 9–10 December 1878, Archives Départementales de la Gironde, 3U/5003.

⁵² Régis Revenin, *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines à Paris, 1870–1918*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005, pp. 36–41.

⁵³ Judgement of the Tribunal de Première Instance, police correctionnelle (county magistrates' court), 9–10 December 1878, Archives Départementales de la Gironde, 3U/5003. On the vocabulary of male homosexuality and its uses, see Laure Murat, *La Loi du genre: une histoire culturelle du troisième sexe*, Paris, Fayard, 2006, pp. 27–65. On nicknames, see Jane Avril, *Mes Mémoires*, Paris, Phébus, 2005, p. 71; William A. Peniston and Nancy Erber, *Bougres de vies (Queer Lives): huit homosexuels du XIX^e siècle se racontent*, Paris, ErosOnyx, 2012, p. 163. (This book was originally published in English as *Queer Lives: Men's Autobiographies from Nineteenth-Century France*, Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 2008.)

⁵⁴ *La Victoire de la démocratie*, 11 December 1878.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ 12 December 1878.

⁵⁷ The Paris Prefecture of Police possesses six invaluable registers devoted to illegal sexual practices: BB/1, the most complete one, is the one published as *Le Livre des courtisanes*, op. cit. (note 13). BB/2, entitled 'Femmes galantes 1859', catalogues succinctly and inaccurately 292 women, put on file in late 1859 or early 1860. BB/3, dated 1855 to 1868, is devoted to the fight against pornography, particularly photographic. The last three, BB/4, BB/5 and BB/6, devoted to homosexuals, extend from the Second Republic to the early years of the Third; BB/4 was recently published as *Le Registre infamant*, op. cit. (note 45).

⁵⁸ Etymologically, 'pornography' does indeed mean 'writing about the prostitute'. The word was coined by Restif de La Bretonne in his 1769 book *Le Pornographe ou La Prostitution réformée*.



191. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *At Saint-Lazare*, 1886, oil on cardboard, 27 ¼ × 20 ½ in., Wuustwezel, Triton Collection Foundation

384. Théophile Steinlen, *Poster for 'The White Slave Trade'*, 1896, colour lithograph, 51 ½ × 25 ½ in., Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France



434. Théophile Steinlen, *The Round-up for Gil-Blas illustré*, 6 December 1891, 11 × 16 ¼ in., Paris, Association Le Vieux Montmartre – Musée de Montmartre

432. Théophile Steinlen, *At Saint-Lazare for Gil-Blas illustré*, 9 August 1891, 11 × 16 ¼ in., Paris, Le Vieux Montmartre collection – Musée de Montmartre

other hand, none of these twenty-four polkas features a woman frolicking with two male partners. And while ten prints offer sapphic sequences, none suggests pederasty in any shape or form. While these pornographic photographs are intended for a huge male audience, others, in calling-card format and dedicated to cross-dressing prostitutes, are kept at the Prefecture of Police or by collectors. This is proof of the fact that, like prostitution, the pornography industry did also cater for a male homosexual clientele.⁶²

Whether a disavowal, in a sense, of unsatisfactory sex within marriage or a convenient palliative to male celibacy, prostitution crudely underlined the structural inequalities of gender and wealth in nineteenth-century French society. From its female population of sex workers to its mediatised élite, extreme mobility was still the rule, and upward mobility could be just as sudden as a sharp fall from grace. From this standpoint, prostitution takes on all its meaning in its plurality. As they literally careered through life, these women would change customers, sexual practices, fortunes, housing, cities and even countries. At this time that saw the growth of transport, those who were able willingly took off to try their luck in the other capitals of prostitution such as London or Brussels, but they also ventured much further afield to places like Russia, America, Egypt or Turkey. Their unstable and precarious lifestyle was also much more exposed than others to the risks of illness, abortion, incest, violence, madness and suicide.⁶³ Between living on the fringes of society and gender subversion, between reprobation and seduction, they either put up with or made the best of a prostitional activity that was both tough and exhilarating.

36. Jean Béraud, *The Proposition or The Assignment in the Rue Chateaubriand*, c.1885, oil on panel, 21 3/4 x 15 in., Paris, Les Arts Décoratifs, Musée des Arts Décoratifs

⁵⁹ Sixteen out of 108. It is likely that among those declaring themselves to be florists (nineteen) or linen maids (fourteen), a few resorted to some degree to prostitution. On the rise of pornographic photography and the permeable boundary between the academic nude and the so-called 'obscene' nude, see Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris 1848–1871*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1994; Sylvie Aubenas and Philippe Comar, *Obscénités: photographies interdites d'Auguste Belloc*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2001.

⁶⁰ 'Pornographie', *La Grande Encyclopédie*, Paris, Lamirault, 1885–1902, XXVII, p. 321. Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000. Thus in *Paris noceur*, Levic-Torca (an anagram of Victor Leca) relates the career of a female worker who became a sitter before moving into prostitution, *op. cit.* (note 13), pp. 45–8.

⁶¹ Register BB/3, fol. 35.

⁶² Nicole Canet, *Hôtels garnis, garçons de joie, prostitution masculine: lieux et fantasmes à Paris de 1860 à 1960*, Paris, Galerie Au Bonheur du Jour, 2012, and *Maisons closes 1860–1946: bordels de femmes, bordels d'hommes*, Paris, Galerie Au Bonheur du Jour, 2009.

⁶³ *Le Livre des courtisanes*, *op. cit.* (note 13), p. 44.

