CLASSIFIED COMMERCE: GENDER, LABOR, AND PRINT CAPITALISM IN PARIS, 1881–1940

By

HANNAH CLARE FRYDMAN

A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in History

Written under the direction of

Judith Surkis

And approved by

_____________________________________

_____________________________________

_____________________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2020
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Classified Commerce: Gender, Labor, and Print Capitalism in Paris, 1881–1940

By HANNAH CLARE FRYDMAN

Dissertation Director:
Judith Surkis

“Classified Commerce: Gender, Labor, and Print Capitalism in Paris, 1881–1940” demonstrates how classified advertising and the livelihoods and lives it enabled were central to the development of a flexible service economy and to the long-term definition of what counts as labor and what (or whose) labor counts. At the turn of the twentieth century, women sold sex, read palms, birthed babies, performed abortions, and made matches in Parisian apartments. Cheap newspaper advertising brought customers for these petty entrepreneurs and revenue for the newspapers that were foundational to the project of the Third Republic (1870–1940), serving as the crucible of (male) citizenship and, as such, protected by press laws. Moralists, legislators, and law enforcers expressed concern and worked to fill in legal lacunae and stamp out the illicit economic possibilities of this democratic advertising space. Debates about these ads oscillated between lewd humor and elevated discourses about liberal politics and economics. Legislators were torn between safeguarding press freedom and finances and the perceived need to control the public actions of women and queer people. They struggled, that is, to maintain their own
economic, political, and sexual freedoms while regulating those of morally and sexually dubious others.

“Classified Commerce” reconstitutes the economic and social lives of suspect classified advertisers and the cultural discourses construing them as a “problem.” Part One outlines the establishment of the “immoral classifieds” as a discursive and legal problem, exploring the ways in which an image of the classifieds as a sexual space rather than a commercial one was constructed through popular culture and mass media (Chapter One), legislation and jurisprudence surrounding obscenity (Chapter Two), and narratives of so-called “white slavery” (Chapter Three). Throughout, I argue that moralizing responses to the classifieds and attempts to legislate the back page were simultaneously central to the construction of a secular democratic regime through law and its Achilles heel—the limits of the law’s reach made it possible for women and sexual “deviants” to evade social control and enjoy minimal sexual and economic autonomy. Part Two turns to prostitution (Chapter Four) and midwifery-abortion (Chapter Five) as case studies to explore how women and other minorities used the classifieds in spite of (and thanks to) these scandals, debates, and legislation.

Throughout these chapters, I draw on a broad range of archives—including police surveillance, legislative debates, pseudo-scientific treatises, court records, advertising, newspaper articles, and illustrations—to make three major arguments: (1) classified ads for women’s businesses posed a problem by giving women a space to act as economic agents, rather than as the dependent moral guardians of the republican family; (2) new projects to morally and sexually regulate the market in order to target this “problem” marginalized and
criminalized economically independent women; (3) male legislators’ attacks on “immoral” advertising thus laid bare how, while they paid lip service to abstract republican freedoms, they also benefited economically, politically, and sexually from a regime of gendered inequality.
Acknowledgments

It has become a commonplace to acknowledge how raising a dissertation takes a village, but it turns out it’s true. What follows is influenced, both tangibly and intangibly, by many people and places. It’s not something, that is, that I could have written in a room by myself.

At Smith College, Brigitte Buettner and Michael Gorra wisely told me to take a year to think hard about going to grad school and, even if they thought I was crazy to go, have given me intellectual and emotional support at every step of the way. Darcy Buerkle, Jennifer Hall-Witt, Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor, and Susan Van Dyne nurtured my interest in feminist history and writing, helped me develop a critical eye, and made me feel like I had something to say.

Even before I arrived, the Rutgers History department had an impact on me, shaping the boundaries of what was possible, and blazing the trail of my path as a gender historian. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to learn from and think with Belinda Davis, Leah DeVun, Paul Hanebrink, Jennifer Jones, and Jennifer Mittelstadt. My graduate student colleagues, and especially Rachel Bunker, Marlene Gaynair, Aries Li, Taylor Moore, Catherine Harris Naeve, Anna Nath, Sophie Ong, Marika Plater, Melissa Reynolds, Lauren Swift, Meagan Wierda, and Amy Zanoni, with some help from Elizabeth Guerette, made my time in New Brunswick fun and intellectually exciting. I am grateful for their continued friendship. Taylor Moore and I bonded fast and lastingly as intellectual and alimentary kindred spirits. I will always wish she still lived within walking distance but am glad we still read each other’s work from a distance.
Judith Surkis was that ideal advisor who never told me what to think, but instead helped me figure out how to think. She was always willing to read another draft and could always pinpoint what was missing or what, in the jumble of my thoughts on paper, was interesting. If nearly every page of this dissertation bears the trace of her work, it is a testament to the productive nature of her thought and the infectiousness of her intellectual excitement.

I have also been lucky to have a formidable dissertation committee. When I took classes with both Seth and Bonnie during my first year of grad school, I had some inkling of how lucky I was, but I didn’t know the half of it. Since the first, formative seminar in women’s and gender history I took with Seth, he has been a demanding interlocutor whose honest feedback always makes my work better and my ideas sharper. His belief in the relation between small actions and big changes has served as an inspiration for my work and a source of optimism in my life. In Bonnie’s class on comparative empires in global history, I had to think bigger, longer, and more synthetically than ever before. Bonnie’s continual questions about the big picture and her dissatisfaction with the overly neat answer kept me thinking hard. Her encouragement to keep going and her questions about when she would see the next chapter kept me transforming this hard thinking into words on the page. Dominique Kalifa has been the most generous of outside readers. During a year conducting research in Paris, he helped me find an apartment, welcomed me into his seminar at Paris I, which became my intellectual home for the year, and supported me and his student, Claire-Lise Gaillard, as we organized an international colloquium on the history of classified advertising. His wide-ranging thinking and knowledge about the history of the press, crime, sexuality, and urban space has been an incomparable resource and sounding board for me.
While in France, I also had the good fortune to befriend many young scholars of French history, art, and culture, including Maureen DeNino, Claire-Lise Gaillard, Sarah Grandin, Jamie Kwan, and Aicha Salmon. Paris has also been the site of many sustaining conversations with Alice Kaplan, Michèle Longino, Brian Martin, and Helen Solterer.

In writing the dissertation, the Boston French History Group, under the leadership of Jeff Ravel, has been a source of intellectual community. Jeff, Michèle Plott, Laura Frader, and Sara Kippur offered helpful feedback on Chapter Three. I am thankful for the invaluable advice and encouragement Janet Beizer, Virginie Greene, Alice Jardine, Françoise Lionnet, Christie McDonald, and Kathy Richman have offered me. Thanks to Durba Mitra for being a top-notch interlocutor and academic coach, and to Vivian Huang, Lauren Kaminsky, Kylie Sago, and Anna White-Nockleby for their friendship and solidarity. I have deep gratitude for the Rev. Candice Provey, who teaches everyone around her what love is, and for the Rev. Cody Sanders and the OCBC community, who have fed my sense of duty to the world. They have never held my agnosticism against me—if anything it just made them hold me tighter.

Many thanks are due to the archivists and librarians at the Archives de la Préfecture de Police (esp. Isabelle Rossez), the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (esp. Séverine Montigny), the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Archives nationales—Pierrefitte-sur-Seine (esp. Christophe Bouvier), the Archives de la Ville de Paris, Alexander Library at Rutgers University, and Widener Library at Harvard University. My time spent working in these archives and writing up what I found there was supported by Rutgers University, the Social Science Research Council’s Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship, a Chateaubriand Fellowship in Humanities and Social Sciences, a Mellon Foundation
Dissertation Completion Fellowship, a P.E.O. Scholar Award, and a Woodrow Wilson Foundation Dissertation Completion Fellowship in Women’s Studies.

A version of Chapter One has been published in Capitalism’s Hidden Worlds (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), edited by Ken Lipartito and Lisa Jacobson. It is much stronger for their incisive questions and careful editorial work.

Special thanks go to my mom, Amy Lee, whose feminism ignited and sustains my own, and to my dad, Rick Frydman, whose interest in history often manages to outpace mine. They, along with my sisters, have always believed in me to a frankly kind of annoying extent. They are never surprised when something goes well (although they were, perhaps, surprised it took me seven years to finish the PhD). Their high expectations, and those of my grandparents, have often carried me through self-doubt. Although three of my grandparents—Hazen, Paula, and Lou—died before they could jokingly ask me, a doctor, for my medical opinion, I know they’re all cheering me on, just like my grandma Jane, who will always be among my most devoted readers. I dedicate this dissertation to all of them.

As I write this, Annabel Kim is working beside me, and with me, as she always is. My intellectual and political visions have grown up with hers. She will never have patience for the work of wading through archival material, just as I will never have the patience to close-read Nathalie Sarraute by myself, but our project is nonetheless always a shared one. Daily thanks are due to her, and to our two cats, Minou and Zazie, who are the best writing companions and who remind us to be human.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Illustrations</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Sexing the Back Pages</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Freedom’s Sex Problem</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. The Trafficker’s Accomplice</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. The Rise of the Rendezvous</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. The “Midwife” and the Death of the “Race”</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1:</td>
<td>The <em>Figaro</em>'s Grand Hall (1893)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2:</td>
<td>“La Fallacieuse annonce”(1910). Illustration by Albert Guillaume</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3:</td>
<td>“Petites annonces”(1904). Illustration by Albert Guillaume</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.1:</td>
<td>“La Lecture des annonces”(1924). Illustration by Maurice Pépin</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.2:</td>
<td>Classified Section. <em>Paris-Soir</em>, December 3, 1924</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.3:</td>
<td>“Petite annonce” (c. 1908-1916). Illustration by Fabiano</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.4:</td>
<td>“Petites annonces par Les Veber’s,” <em>Gil Blas</em>, February 11, 1895</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1:</td>
<td>“Petites annonces: Dames seules”(1913). Illustration by L. Burrett</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2:</td>
<td>Midwife Ads, <em>Le Matin</em>, October 20, 1908</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1:</td>
<td>Film still from <em>Danseuses pour Buenos-Aires</em> (1932)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2:</td>
<td>Victor Flachon, Georgette Véron, and their accomplices in court (1911)</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.3:</td>
<td>Briand resting on the Riviera, <em>Excelsior</em>, January 2, 1911</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1:</td>
<td>Defendants and Witnesses in the Flachon Affair, 1911</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.2:</td>
<td>Ad for Mme Lacour, masseuse, 1895</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.3:</td>
<td>Sexual advertisements, <em>Le Rire rouge</em>, March 23, 1918</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1:</td>
<td>Albert Guillaume, “Petites annonces,” <em>Le Rire</em>, January 12, 1907</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.2:</td>
<td>Midwife ads in <em>Le Journal</em>, May 11, 1908</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.3:</td>
<td>Midwife ads in <em>Paris-Midi</em>, June 16, 1936</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.4:</td>
<td>Midwives denouncing midwives. Letter from “A Midwife” to the Minister of the Interior, January 19, 1917</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.5:</td>
<td>Ad for Mme Boulier, midwife, 1905</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.6:</td>
<td>The Alliance Nationale defending France’s children against abortionists. Fernand Boverat, “Le Massacre des Innocents,” c. 1939</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Classified advertising is hard to see. In cramped lines, riddled with abbreviations to bring cost—assessed per line—down, laid out in seemingly interminable and largely unillustrated columns, it’s all too easy to turn the page on the classifieds, quite literally. And yet, it was, in part, this quality that made them work at their height during the Belle Époque: they were hidden in plain sight and could be placed without the knowledge of one’s entourage. These laconic letters made it possible to reach out to an unprecedented scope of unknown others—millions of readers of the mass press. Through the classifieds, it was possible to create counterpublics within the public of the newspaper.¹ In addition, it was also the laconic nature of the ads that made them interesting to read; readers had to fill in their content with their imaginations. One popular novelist described the classifieds as “the newspaper column that [...] most solicits the imagination. It offers the unknown in abbreviated words...”² What is more, this imagined content had the excitement of (probably) being real.

This simultaneously real and imagined content often turned out to be sex work. In June 1898, a song entitled “Parisian Advertisements” was censored by the French government. In this send up of the contemporary culture of classified advertising, the singer narrates how he often, while smoking a post-meal cigar, reads the newspaper, Le Journal or L’Echo de Paris, savoring every passage until his attention is grabbed by the final pages and

their “amusing, curious, suggestive” classified ads, written in “discreet terms” for many different “vague professions.” He reveals what readers who respond to these ads will actually find behind their artifice; his puns intimate the secrets the ads are said to hide. For example, when he visits Madame Germaine, who “gravely” calls herself a professor of foreign languages, he finds a woman “with velvety eyes,” who presents no tongues [langues] but her own. Madame Germaine’s ad is joined by one for Madame de Zède, who sells oriental objects from a first-floor apartment on the Rue de Berne. In her shop, the narrator recounts, “they will present you with some beauty, supposedly from Asia Minor, but while the object is highly priced, she is neither from Asia, nor minor.”3 The classified content, hiding in plain sight, was a source of both titillation and amusement.

While the song pointed to sexual commerce in the classifieds with a wink and a smile, other readers—including moralists and feminists—saw the classifieds as connoting sexual deviancy and sexual danger. Anti-pornography activists raised concerns that “certain newspapers, which are not by nature pornographic, sometimes publish ads that are,” themselves, pornographic, thereby creating “veritable price lists for prostitution [de véritables mercuriales de la galanterie]” through which “women sell themselves and men buy them, unless it’s the sale of a woman to a woman, as happens sometimes.”4 And anti-trafficking activists raised the alarm that “white slave traders” used the classifieds, placing ads for “well-remunerated jobs abroad, want ads for governesses, lyric artists, shopgirls, schoolteachers,

3 F 18 1690, Archives nationales—Pierrefitte-sur-Seine (AN).
servants, or companions for single men” as so many “traps” to force women into lives of forced prostitution abroad.⁵ For these observers, newspaper directors “accepted to play the role of accomplice; they never refuse an ad of any kind, as long as it’s paid.”⁶

By contrast, the major newspapers—what we today might call media platforms—that hosted these ads offered a radically different interpretation: they presented the classifieds as a useful, honorable way to find work. Figure 1, an illustration of the Figaro’s grand hall on classified advertising day, clearly reflects this idea: it depicts honorable men and women of varying ages and walks of life congregating in a lofty, sumptuous space to find workers or to find work, studiously composing ads at the large central table, or placing them at the surrounding advertising counters, all the while under the watch of bourgeois men, who surveil the proceedings from the gallery. The classifieds here connected employer and employee for a distinctly non-sexual kind of work. The mass press and readers who saw sex lurking behind newsprint clearly had radically contrasting understandings of the producers and consumers of the classifieds: where the press saw all work and no play, others saw novelistic, erotically-charged content (to be entertained by or to moralize away).

---

⁵ Félix Regnault, L’Évolution de la prostitution (Paris: Flammarion, [1906]), 130.
⁶ Regnault, L’Évolution de la prostitution, 130.
Figure 1: “A view of the Figaro’s grand hall, a Tuesday afternoon, job ads day for the classifieds. - Original drawing by Félix Régamey.”

Neither understanding was wrong. The classifieds were filled with much more than sex. The jurist Roussignann Jamakorzian, examining advertising in the mass-circulation dailies *Le Journal* and *Le Petit Parisien* in 1910 found hundreds of ads for everything from offers of capital; sales of real estate, furniture, used goods, and businesses; jobs; apartment rentals; lessons and classes; lost objects; medical, legal, and architectural services; and marriage agencies. Quantitatively, in the vast majority of newspapers, “immoral” advertising was the exception, not the rule. But representations of the classifieds revealed just how hard the “immoral” was to quantify because it could be lurking behind even the most “honest-looking” ads. For example, in his criminological study of domestic servants, Belgian judge Raymond de Ryckère informed readers (in a chapter focused on the prevalence of prostitution among female servants) that there were many more “neutral” want ads in newspapers than “suspicious,” read sexual, ones, but, he warned, sex traffickers usually lured victims using “either neutral ads, or even serious ads” that purported to seek a servant with irreproachable morals. Often the best a newspaper could do was to hold the classifieds at arm’s length, arguing that “the leasing of a piece of paper, at so much per line” weighs less heavily on “the conscience of a director of a newspaper” than the hiring of the “eloquence of a lawyer for a bad cause engages [the conscience] of a defense attorney.” In short, newspaper directors and editors conceived of advertising as if the printed page was a wall

---

that could be posted on for a fee, but took no responsibility for the content of what was posted there.  

In spite of these protestations to the contrary, mainstream newspapers like the *Journal* and the *Figaro* had a lot riding on a “virtuous” representation of the classified marketplace. So did the politicians of France’s Third Republic, declared in 1870. This regime, committed to universal male suffrage and the virtues of a transparent public sphere, was both ideologically and literally aligned with the press, the fourth power that was, it was said, “about to become the first.” Everything, from politics, to entertainment, to commerce, was filtered through newsprint. Dailies, which sold in incredibly high numbers, were very affordable: from around 1870 through World War I, most high circulation daily papers sold for the incredibly low price of one sou (or five centimes). As the moralist priest Louis Bethléem put it, quoting the philosopher Alfred Fouillée’s *La France au point de vue moral* (1911), the newspaper was “the big elementary school” [*la grande école primaire*] of France. Bethléem wrote: “The newspaper, the daily paper appearing in the evening and in the morning, during the day and at night, the newspaper that is offered on every street corner, that peddlers make

---


11 Cour de Paris, Proposition de loi de Mr Jean Bon, Député, “Le Commerce de la Presse,” enregistré le 18 Mars 1918, No. 3837, Chambre des députés, onzième législature, session de 1917, annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 9 octobre 1917, 1–2. BB 18 6485, 57 BL 138, AN.


13 In the early twentieth century, for example, *Le Petit Parisien* boasted that its circulation, at over 1,300,000, was the highest in the world.
a racket selling on every street: that is the true democratic educator.”¹⁴ And everywhere newspapers traveled, everywhere they educated the masses, the classifieds went, too.

The widely held belief that classified advertising, which financially supported these symbolically important publications was, in fact, a thinly-veiled cover for private vice—and prostitution in particular—was deeply threatening to the image of journalistic and political virtue, an image that was already under siege due to the increasing commercialization of the press. The newspapers’ evolution was decried as the transformation of the “exercise of one of the essential freedoms of man and citizen” into “a machine of domination and profit.”¹⁵ Critics of the venality of the press said that the Press, in “her” search for money, had deformed her role as “institutrice de la démocratie,” seeking to draw in more “students” by enlisting “clowns, a little stock exchange, a gang of swindlers, and sometimes even a brothel.”¹⁶ The press was a very bad schoolmistress for the Third Republic’s democratic aspirations, teaching sexual debauchery, thoughtless pleasure, and financial interest rather than critical and informed thought.¹⁷

The commercialization of the press was not a new concern, it had been born with the mass press. When Émile de Girardin created a lower-cost newspaper, La Presse in 1836,

---


¹⁵ Cour de Paris, Proposition de loi de Mr Jean Bon, Député, “Le Commerce de la Presse,” enregistré le 18 Mars 1918, No. 3837, Chambre des députés, onzième législature, session de 1917, annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 9 octobre 1917, 1–2. BB 18 6485, 57 BL 138, AN.

¹⁶ Henri Vathelet, La Publicité dans le journalisme, thèse pour le doctorat (Paris: Albin Michel, s.d. [thesis defended on Dec. 4, 1911]), 204.

¹⁷ For Senator René Bérenger, the search for profit was behind the rising wave of pornography: newspapers, which reached a mass public, discovered that sex sells. “Discussion d’une interpellation,” Journal officiel de la République française: débats parlementaires, Sénat [JO Sénat], Apr. 8, 1897, 786.
using advertising revenue to halve the annual subscription cost, he was accused of welcoming charlatans into his pages, “industrializing” the newspaper, and giving the press a “uniquely commercial” raison d’être.\(^\text{18}\) It didn’t help that, since the creation of the classified ad in the seventeenth century, the French public had evinced extreme distrust of newspaper-based advertising, seeing it as little more than fertile ground for quacks and fraudsters. This was in large part because the Old Regime guild system made it such that only those outside of guilds could engage in “competitive forms of commercial relations,” or, to put it another way, guilds held monopolies and so their members had no reason to advertise.\(^\text{19}\) Historian of advertising Marc Martin has argued that, even after the dissolution of the guilds, throughout much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the classifieds remained a space into which only “marginal sectors of commerce,” and especially merchants selling “miracle drugs,” dared to venture.\(^\text{20}\) The classifieds were thus de facto sites of “illegitimate” or extralegal commerce.

This centuries-old suspicion of newspaper advertising was compounded when the classifieds emerged as a threat to sexual morality toward the end of the nineteenth century, in the same years that republican politicians were working to install a new, secular, republican morality to replace that of the church, working, that is, to prove that the advent of a secular regime did not spell the end of the family and the disintegration of the social fabric.\(^\text{21}\) This new morality was balanced in no small part on the democratic potential of the

---

\(^{18}\) Vathelet, La Publicité, 60–61.

\(^{19}\) Martin, Trois siècles de publicité, 35, 49.


\(^{21}\) For example, secular moral education became obligatory in primary schools with the passage of the law of Mar. 28, 1882. Laurence Loeffel, La Question du fondement de la morale laïque sous la IIIe
press. However, at the same moment that republicans were declaring the press “free” (press freedom was declared in 1881), newspapers were expanding to meet a mass readership with the financial support of a variety of advertising forms, including vastly expanded classified sections. Was this, some wondered jokingly, “French Républi...city” [Républi....cité Française]? While some cultural producers treated the classifieds as an occasion for comedy, for many contemporary moralists, who saw the expansive reach of the periodicals in which they ran, these small ads, were no laughing matter: selling sex as if it were any other good, the classifieds were accused of poisoning “Press and Patrie [homeland].”

Laughter and regulation, however, went hand in hand. Numerous satirical depictions of the classifieds during the Third Republic imagined women reading the classifieds together or behind husbands’ backs, seeking (male and female) lovers or sexual business opportunities. These images drew attention to the way that women’s sexuality, both among the working classes and the bourgeoisie, was freer (not merely imperiled) in the classifieds, as well as how the classifieds could distract women from their duties to husbands or to bosses [Fig. 2 and 3]. New efforts at press regulation aimed, at least in part, to put an end to this freedom.


22 “Les On-dit: Républi...cité Française,” La Vie parisienne, Jan. 5, 1907, 243.
24 Historian H.G. Cocks has argued that the classifieds were a “paradoxical space of liberty and constraint,” both the “location for meetings of diverse subcultures” that were hard to police and a site of increasing police surveillance and control. Cocks, “Peril in the Personals: The Dangers and Pleasures of Classified Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” Media History 10, no. 1 (2004): 4.
Figure 2: “‘Young painter offers, in exchange for stay in chateau or villa, to make a portrait of a woman or child.’ –Me, I would be too scared that he wouldn’t throw making me a child into the bargain!”


Source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France
Figure 3: “‘Seeking a very pretty woman...’ Hey! What if I presented myself?
—You can always try... After all, prettiness is a question of taste...”
Albert Guillaume, “Petites annonces,” Le Journal amusant, August 6, 1904, 16.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France
Regulatory efforts, however, as we will see throughout the following chapters, continually fell far short of expectations, allowing women not only increased sexual freedom or distractions from mindless and exploitative piece work, but also new economic opportunities. The intimate, sexualized service economy that took shape in the classifieds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as women placed ads for businesses run out of residential spaces, feels strikingly contemporary in our age of anonymous communication and the sale of intimacy, and, as such, fits only uncomfortably within historical narratives about the development of women’s labor. Historians have documented the importance of businesswomen in both the consumer and political revolutions of the eighteenth century. Accounts of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries trace women’s literal removal from entrepreneurial roles and the increasing tension within the idea of the “woman worker” at the same time that women gained increased economic importance and agency as consumers. Historians of eighteenth-century France have, nonetheless, shown how even in moments that have historically been understood to represent a contraction in women’s opportunities, women found new ways forward, new kinds of economic success (both in and outside of family structures) by working against the

25 On classified advertising’s transition from newspapers to online platforms, see Lingel, An Internet for the People, esp. ch. 2, “The Death and Life of Classified Ads: A Media History of craigslist.”
constraints set in their paths, such that they must be seen as central to the workings of the French economy.\textsuperscript{28}

The classifieds likewise show how, under the French Third Republic (1870–1940), hidden in plain sight, a world of canny businesswomen remained active even as women's rhetorical association with non-commercial domesticity seemed set in stone. Just as women were central to the economic modernization linked to the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, they were also central to the transition to a service economy around a century later.\textsuperscript{29} Through the classifieds, an important economic sector began to expand, peopled by women who did not necessarily work for a boss, who could set their own hours and engage in behaviors not officially sanctioned by society. This informal service economy looked quite different, however, from the much-better known tertiary sector that emerged simultaneously with it. The more common narrative of economic development in this period—a trajectory imagined to come into its own in the Postwar period—charts how the emergence of mass production in the late nineteenth century led to a new negotiation of the relationship between the ideas of “woman” and “work” as women rushed to fill newly feminized administrative, bureaucratic, and secretarial jobs, leaving the factory, the field, and domestic service or production for “modern,” white-collar office work.\textsuperscript{30}


Attending to the history of the classifieds reveals another history of a supposedly less “honorable” service economy, one run out of apartments and without the oversight of men (even if men were often present as clients). The absence of women’s classified entrepreneurship from even feminist interpretations of history—and the fact that scholarship on the classifieds more generally has rightly been described as “sparse”\(^{31}\)—has much to teach us about the powerful rhetoric of gender and sexual normativity in capitalist development. Fears of women’s freedom, couched as a crusade to protect women’s virtue, led to the rhetorical creation of the “immoral classifieds,” and thus to forms of labor that could not be seen as labor. To be legitimate laborers, women had to be under male control.

Accounting for these women and their classified commerce, and understanding why it has been so hard to see, requires looking outside the traditional bounds of labor history, outside even the bounds of the unusual physical spaces of classified labor, and to the printed page. If these advertising women were discussed, if they show up in the archives, it is as a problem with media or of sexuality more than one of labor per se. As such, in what follows, I work to solder the history of labor back to these other histories, to show how media and sexuality have much to tell us about the shape of labor history (and vice versa). Taking this as its starting point, *Classified Commerce* draws on a broad range of archives—including police surveillance, legislative debates, pseudo-scientific treatises, court records, advertising, newspaper articles, and satirical illustrations. The Bibliothèque nationale de France’s digitization project, Gallica, and its enhanced OCR search functionalities have made it possible to find the many venues in which the problem of the classifieds was confronted.

\(^{31}\) Lingel, *An Internet for the People*, 41.
Transformed from a labor problem into an almost intangible moral problem, it is this new technology that makes it possible to pin this previously overlooked story of unconventional economic activity down, triangulating between disparate sources in police, city, and national archives to weave them into a single story with vanishingly small and ephemeral but omnipresent advertisements at its heart.

And so, while I treat classified commerce as an important component of labor history, my arguments are generally about the way this labor was conceived of within other domains, by other means, and particularly for the problems it posed within the domain of republican morality and governance (especially surrounding sexuality). To do this, I return to the insights of early feminist cultural history that made clear that the solidity of the ground social history had long walked on—seen as economic structure—could no longer be taken for granted and could no longer be seen as pre-existing, as prior to ideology, value systems, representation, or culture broadly conceived. Scholars such as Joan Scott, in her groundbreaking *Gender and the Politics of History* revealed that the ground itself had—at least in part—been constructed by historians, and that the terms and categories that pre-existed the historian’s intervention were nonetheless man-made, constructed in conversation with politics.\(^{32}\) She showed, that is, how gendered discourse shaped the terms—labor, economy, and capitalism—we use to think this history.

---

It’s already been more than twenty years since scholars began to describe the field as moving “beyond the cultural turn.”\textsuperscript{33} For William Sewell, this “turning” away could be explained by the fact that linguistic and cultural models were inadequate to analyze the present, marked by global economic restructuring and neoliberalism, a fact that has only become all the more obvious since the recession of the late aughts.\textsuperscript{34} As Sewell imagined it in 2005, new historical work would “regain a more robust sense of the social, but [would] do so precisely on the richer and more supple epistemological terrain opened up by the cultural turn.”\textsuperscript{35}

In the wake of the 2008 recession and in the midst of a post-truth turn in Trump’s America, however, the humanities has turned to a “new materialism” interested in matter, economy, and the “real” rather than in signification, with scholars rallying around the “truth” of historical objectivity. Decades of living with a discursive construction of our present as coming “after” the cultural turn, has, to some extent, rendered cultural analyses—closely aligned with and animated by gender and by feminism itself—as something dated that we should already have moved beyond.\textsuperscript{36}

The consensus is not complete, however, and recent years have also seen some historians interested, not merely in moving beyond a seemingly failed cultural history, but

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{33} Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{34} William H. Sewell, Jr., Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 53–62.
\textsuperscript{35} Sewell, Jr., Logics of History, 80.
\textsuperscript{36} Judith Surkis explains how the meta-disciplinary language of “turns” and the narrative of “turning” away from the linguistic turn have “consign[ed] the critical resources of feminism to a chronologically and politically exhausted moment.” Judith Surkis, “When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy,” The American Historical Review 117, no. 3 (June 2012), 718.
\end{flushleft}
in moving forward by reinvigorating cultural analysis through new hybrid methodologies.

In a 2016 review essay, Kenneth Lipartito described a new body of literature that is attempting to do just this, to “reassemble” the economic in history by placing the hard work of “understanding the interconnections between material and symbolic life” at its heart.\(^{37}\) *Classified Commerce* follows Ken Lipartito’s call for “tearing down the walls between economic, social, and cultural history” and in so doing brings gender and sexuality back in as crucial categories of analysis for history, and especially for the new history of capitalism, which has, perhaps unwittingly, sidelined these issues, even as poverty remains starkly feminized and sexualized across the globe.\(^{38}\)

This economic, social, and cultural history of the classifieds reveals the central importance of this other turn-of-the-century moment for a more capacious labor history inspired by our present situation. Understanding the emergence, explosion, and attempts at containment of the varied forms of correspondence, communication, and exchange in the classifieds from the 1880s to the 1930s is crucial to understanding our own twenty-first century globalized and connected world, a world embodied (and disembodied) by complex cyber-media-based social and economic networks, such as those created in the 1990s and 2000s by chat rooms and in the 2010s by social media. With this in mind, I treat the history of the classifieds as a history of the present, a history of the social and economic life of media, and as a first step in the direction of a labor history that is still largely unwritten, but (or perhaps because of the ways) in which women and sexual minorities play an important role.

---


\(^{38}\) Lipartito, “Reassembling the Economic,” 102.
This story is, at its core, one about the relationship between the emergence of mass print media and the development of a flexible service economy. To tell it, I reconstitute classified advertisers’ economic and sexual lives alongside state and social efforts to control them, as well as the political context of these efforts at censorship and juridical oversight. Part One outlines the establishment of the “immoral classifieds” as a discursive and legal problem, exploring the ways in which an image of the classifieds as a sexual space, rather than a commercial one, was constructed through popular culture and mass media; legislation and jurisprudence surrounding obscenity and women’s sexual autonomy; and narratives of white slavery that attempted, with uneven results, to empower the state as a protector of women’s virtue. Chapter One, “Sexing the Back Pages,” sets the groundwork, examining the mechanisms by which the classifieds became associated with dangerous sexuality and how this worked both to facilitate women’s sexual labor and to delegitimate new forms of female entrepreneurship. In it, I argue that understanding capitalism requires looking to the margins and thus into forms of business that evaded inscription in the traditional sources of capitalism’s history, many of which were created by and for men. In Chapter Two, “Freedom’s Sex Problem,” I examine one strand of this discursive sexualization in greater detail, looking closely at the legal genealogy of French obscenity law (outrages aux bonnes moeurs) regarding classified advertising. In doing so, I argue that such moral legislation and its vexed enforcement were both central to the construction of a secular democratic regime and its Achilles heel—the limits of its reach made it possible for women and sexual “deviants” to evade social control and enjoy minimal sexual and economic autonomy, if often at the expense of other women (e.g. as their pimps and blackmailers or through the sale of fake
and/or dangerous abortive goods/services). Chapter Three, “The Trafficker’s Accomplice,”
turns to another strand of the sexualization of the classifieds: the discourse of white slavery.
It uses a Belle Epoque scandal regarding a child prostitution ring—run through the classifieds
by an ex-schoolteacher and compromising newspaper editors and prominent politicians—to
rethink contemporary narratives of “white slavery.” I argue that this narrative of foreign
threat, a threat that was widely seen as operating through the classifieds in ads for well-paying
jobs abroad, helped to stabilize what was in fact a deep-seated domestic ambivalence regarding
the sexual exploitation of women, girls, and boys, as well as the republican press’s ambivalent
involvement in this commerce.

In Part Two, I heed Andrew Israel Ross’s assertion that “the use of public space for
sex should not be seen only in terms of anxiety by regulators and Parisians, but also as a
practice that actively shaped the ways people encountered urban space.”39 To do so, I turn
to two case studies, small service businesses/prostitution and midwifery/aborti-
on, to explore
how women used the classifieds to usher in a new, intimate service economy in spite of,
thanks to, and in conversation with the scandals, debates, and legislation discussed in Part
One. Chapter Four, “The Rise of the Rendez-Vous,” examines how advertising enabled
women to hasten the transition from brothel-based prostitution to prostitution in private
apartments. Historian Alain Corbin’s field-defining history of French prostitution, Women
for Hire, explained this transformation as an evolution in men’s desires. However, an analysis
of police reports and classified advertisements shows how these transformations had as much

39 Andrew Israel Ross, Public City/Public Sex: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and Urban Culture in
(if not more) to do with technological changes that made it possible for women to adjust their work lives to their own needs, schedules, and preferences via inexpensive newspaper advertising that transformed any address into a place of business. In Chapter Five, “Midwives’ and the Death of the ‘Race,’” I analyze the complications that arose from the association of ads for midwives with abortion, an association that many saw as stemming from midwives’ insufficient earning power and the lucrative nature of abortion. This association was particularly problematic given that it implicated the press in the problem of depopulation and women’s revolt from their reproductive duties while midwives’ services were increasingly professionalized and seen as a crucial component of national health. I show how, faced with this problem, some midwives began to fight against their own right to advertise, leading to a clash with their colleagues who preferred survival to honor.

However tainted with immoral associations, the press, simply by offering affordable, anonymous advertising, opened up possibilities for people who had few. In ways that could not be predicted or controlled by anyone involved, these ads, seemingly small, nonetheless changed the world. To this day, classified advertising, now online, offers opportunities for women’s independent, if marginalized, work, while it also fuels increasingly undemocratic attempts to foreclose the possibilities offered by this simple, low-tech communication medium.40 It is the creation and negotiation of this world through yesterday’s new media that I chart in what follows.

40 Jessa Lingel explores the continued promise of craigslist and the internet 1.0 and uses her conclusion to argue for “keeping the internet weird” in the face of what she sees as the “gentrification” of the internet. Lingel, An Internet for the People.
Chapter One: Sexing the Back Pages

Classified advertising in the age of the mass press has been treated as an object of curiosity, the stuff of fluffy novels—missed connections and covert trysts—rather than as worthy of sustained analysis. An incomparable window onto the workings of capitalism on a human level, this heterogeneous form of advertising has been consistently overlooked by historians.\(^1\) The classifieds seem too sexual, too textual, too marginal, for some, and too transactional, too abbreviated, too money-driven for others. In short, they seem to be an *improper* object of study.\(^2\) Moreover, the mass press’s classifieds have failed to spark scholarly interest, given that these ads look much like those printed in the seventeenth century, making them seem stagnant and distinctly less dynamic than the papers in which they circulated.

\(^1\) There has been more interest in an earlier history of classified advertising, when a small, text-based ad was not yet a sign of backwardness (and, perhaps, before this advertising was linked to illicit sex). See Gilles Feyel, *L’Annonce et la Nouvelle: la presse d’information en France sous l’ancien régime (1630-1788)* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2000). In the modern period, the classifieds are more often referred to as a footnote in histories about other things or explored through the prism of a single type of ad, especially personal or matrimonial ads. For example, see Morag Martin, *Selling Beauty: Cosmetics, Commerce, and French Society, 1750–1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Pamela Epstein, “Selling Love: The Commercialization of Intimacy in America, 1860s–1900s,” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2010); H. G. Cocks, “Peril in the Personals: The Dangers and Pleasures of Classified Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” *Media History* 10, no. 1 (April 2004): 3–16; Marc Martin, “Images du mari et de la femme au XXe siècle, les annonces de mariage du ‘Chasseur Français,’” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 27, no. 2 (June 1980): 295–311. Even Philippe Artières, who asks us to pay close attention to classified advertising, does so precisely because he sees it as banal. Philippe Artières, *Miettes: éléments pour une histoire infra-ordinaire de l’année 1980* (Paris: verticales, 2016).

\(^2\) Popular interest in classified advertising as a diverting window onto past (proto-online) dating practices may also have rendered the subject less than proper. This interest is itself likely an offshoot of the discursive sexualization I trace in this chapter. For examples of popular studies of the classifieds, see Marc Schlicklin, *Les Petites annonces du Chasseur Français* (Paris: Solar, 2014); *Les Perles des petites annonces* (Paris: Larousse, 2014).
Much, however, was happening through—and between—the banal lines on the newspapers’ back pages. In *L’Ile aux dames*, an erotic novel likely composed between 1911 and 1914, Pierre Louÿs describes his “ideal world,” one “governed entirely by sexuality,” in which explicit ads were an important method of communication. He gave many examples: “F.L.S. [Fellatrice, Lesbienne, Sodomite] schoolteacher, 21 years old, advanced certificate [brevet supérieur], ex-resident of several brothels, seeks position with an honest family. Would sleep with the children.” At this time, within the classifieds, sex and sexuality really did undergird new, intimate forms of entrepreneurship—omnipresent but hard for scholars of “legitimate” commerce to see, and not only because most of the ads, unlike those in Louÿs’s novel, were written entirely in code. The sexual, “private,” or illicit nature of work done by prostitutes, abortionists, and fortune tellers has made it all too easy to disconnect the ads from their economic foundations and import. The classifieds show how ideas of legitimacy and formality have shaped (or skewed) histories of capitalism, both global and local, and have masked the importance of women’s labor in the process.

Paying attention to the classifieds and their sexualization is crucial for understanding the (capitalist) civilization the newspaper made in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century

---

5 Global capitalism has been constructed through a multiplication of local processes combining marginalization and legitimization. For another example of this process, see Johan Mathew’s analysis of the relationship between trafficking and free trade (the market and its so-called margins) in the Arabian Sea. Johan Mathew, *Margins of the Market: Trafficking and Capitalism Across the Arabian Sea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).
France. In this chapter, I perform a careful reading of the discursive making and unmaking of the sexual classifieds from the fin de siècle to the interwar period, focusing on the constitution and deconstruction of markets through binary distinctions—such as center and margin, moral and immoral, licit and illicit, formal and informal. Before considering how classified advertising might serve as the basis for a different history of capitalism, one that confronts the historical functionality of these binaries instead of using them as transparent categories of historical analysis, let’s first take a closer look at the previously untold history of France’s sexual classifieds and their promising and problematic place in the French Republic.

Sex in the Classifieds

In 1880, an article by Jean Frollo in the mass-circulation daily newspaper Le Petit Parisien lamented that many women who supported themselves by engaging in wage labor ended up with nothing but “the opportunities that present themselves—once night falls—to avoid dying of hunger.” Even those who had not yet succumbed to prostitution had to brave

---

6 In La Civilisation du journal, a literary and cultural history of the French press in the long nineteenth century, contributors argue that the newspaper transformed French society into a “civilization of the newspaper.” The classifieds, however, barely cause a ripple in the volume’s 1600-page analysis of the world the press made, despite the fact that small ads often covered anywhere from a sixth to a third (or more!) of a newspaper’s surface at regularly determined intervals by the early twentieth century. The newspaper marketplace, with its apartments for rent, used furniture for sale, marriage agencies, massage parlors, and personal exchanges—each one licit or illicit, depending on how you look at it—is nowhere to be found. While Arina Makarova, a specialist on death notices in the press, discusses the classifieds in her brief contribution to the volume, “Le carnet et les petites annonces,” she minimizes their status as a print marketplace by bundling them with gossip columns and notices of death, birth, engagements, and marriage. In this entry, and in Marc Martin’s on advertising, the commercial nature of the classifieds is minimized. Dominique Kalifa, Philippe Régnier, Marie-Ève Thérény, and Alain Vaillant, eds., La Civilisation du journal: une histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2011), 1041-1058.

7 Jean Frollo was a collective pseudonym used to sign Le Petit Parisien’s lead articles.
the streets all the same in order to find employment because job postings were often found in dark corners of the city and, even worse, on or near urinals. One woman had complained to Frollo that if she stopped in these places, for even two seconds, she would find herself accosted by men and their “obscene propositions.” She and other women workers demanded a safer way to learn about job openings—their survival (and, even more importantly to some, their morality) hung in the balance.

*Le Petit Parisien* presented an elegant solution to their problem. They created a “work column” in which bosses and foremen who employed women could publish free want ads in the back pages of the newspaper. This scheme would simultaneously benefit employers and save women workers from the necessity of wandering the streets, where they were easy prey for men who exploited their economic precarity. Advertising columns were productive for newspapers as well. In late 1883, a more capacious classified section joined this philanthropic “work column,” supposedly at the readers’ request. “Employee wanted” ads remained free, but readers could now pay 1.50 francs per line of 45 letters to place any other kind of ad. According to the newspaper’s editors, these ads were simply too numerous to be printed for free. After February 1884, the free column disappeared altogether, leaving only the venal marketplace behind. The drive for money won out over the “useful and good work” of helping women find employment safely. Employers could still post want ads, but they would now have to pay.

*Le Petit Parisien* was in good company in its search for new forms of advertising revenue. During the 1880s and 1890s, the majority of periodicals—including each of the four

---

giants of this golden age of the press (*Le Journal*, *Le Matin*, *Le Petit Journal*, and, of course, *Le Petit Parisien*)—created weekly or semi-weekly paid classified advertising sections [*petites annonces*] on their back pages, which were thought to help “readers address themselves directly to the public for any communication, for any purchase, sale, or rental, or to display or offer a job or position.” With Parisian dailies reaching a circulation of two million copies around 1880, the development and spread of the classifieds through the mass press led to a spectacular renaissance of the small ad format at a moment when newspapers sorely needed the revenue. By 1900, across popular columns with titles such as help wanted, position sought, classes and lessons, agencies, capital loans, used goods, property for rent or sale, wellness, and marriages, daily newspapers were each receiving dozens—and in many cases hundreds—of ads each week, which brought in a relatively small but steady stream of revenue at a franc or two per line.

But what exactly was being advertised on these large, densely-printed pages? What were newspapers helping to sell? Frollo originally introduced *Le Petit Parisien*’s back-page

---

10 A note on terminology: I translate *petites annonces*, literally “small ads,” as “classifieds.” In the interwar period, it became common to refer to them as *petites annonces classées*, thereby integrating the idea of classification into their name, which had previously referred solely to their size.


12 Newspaper advertising, invented in the seventeenth century, had been an important source of income for the press since the late 1820s. Advertising revenues rose from this moment through the Second Empire (1852–1870) before falling drastically during the early Third Republic to take up three times less place in 1885 than in 1865. As the number of newspaper titles proliferated following the liberalization (1868) and subsequent freedom of the press (1881), the commercial advertising pie was continually being divided into ever smaller pieces. In 1867, there were 21 daily newspapers printed in Paris, in 1880 there were 60, and in 1914, 57. Marc Martin, *Trois siècles de publicité en France* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1992), 90-92. For circulation figures, see Kalifa et al., eds., *La Civilisation du journal*, 264.

13 To take a particularly successful example, in 1900, the Saturday edition of *Le Journal* ran on six pages instead of the more traditional four, making space for between one, two, and sometimes nearly three pages of classified advertising.
advertising as a force for good, helping to clear a moral space for affordable, personal advertising in the newspaper. This battle, however, was an uphill one. Despite such claims to moralization, these ads were known to promote immoral commerce. Indeed, the best-known small advertising at the time, the personal petite correspondence column of the Figaro, was, from its inception in 1875, widely decried as a site of prostitution and described by one early opponent as “amorous, libertine, [and] adulterous.” For this very reason, readers avidly combed the column, eager to find or imagine “real” sexual intrigues between the lines.¹⁴ Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the number of personal ads in Parisian newspapers steadily rose. Although most were less sexual—explicitly or implicitly—and, at least initially, written in clearer prose than those in Le Figaro, critics increasingly decried the sexual content encrypted in the back pages.¹⁵

As the number of ads rose, pro-natalists, moralists, and feminist activists expressed concern that the mass press’s back pages corrupted the marketplace and made it dangerous for women. They claimed that these pages encouraged prostitution and exposed even the most honest men, women, and children to commercial sex, turning the act of reading the classifieds into a sexual one. Given the anonymity and paradoxical privacy of this very public medium, critics worried that classified exchanges would be conducted from a woman’s boudoir. By the interwar period, this concern had become an erotic and satirical commonplace [Fig. 1.1]. Featured on the back cover of a July 1924 issue of the illustrated magazine Le Sourire, the image “La Lecture des annonces”—depicting a scantily dressed pinup

¹⁵ Figaro published cryptic ads such as “M. oe. de Paq. en témoin de m.e.attach. à qd.16.G.E.” or “A+B=X;Z=23.” “Petite correspondance,” Le Figaro, Apr. 13, 1879.
“reading the advertisements”—makes plain that the flipside of moral concern is always erotic fantasy.¹⁶

Figure 1.1: Reading the advertisements.
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France

This pinup would have been at home among Le Sourire’s more or less overtly sexual advertisements, a small portion of which were accompanied by similar illustrations of semi-

¹⁶ This relationship was also made clear when Senate debates on the inclusion of sexual classified advertising within the law on immorality in the press descended into uncontrollable laughter. Moral concern and erotic fantasy were intimately connected where sexuality in the classifieds was concerned. “Discussion d’une interpellation,” JO Sénat, Apr. 8, 1897, 786–787.
nude women. The newspaper she holds, however, is not an illustrated magazine, but rather resembles a mass-circulation daily.

While mass-circulation dailies were less overtly sexual than the average illustrated weekly, many, including _Paris-Soir_, nonetheless made use of the principle that sex sells, just in a less immediately visible way. _Paris-Soir’s_ writers knew that, at first glance, the classifieds could seem boring, like a “drab desert” dominated by apartments for rent, job openings, and cars for sale [Fig. 1.2]. In February 1924, to whet their readers’ appetites and keep them from putting their papers down when they got to the classified page, the editors ran a narrative advertisement among the classifieds in which the narrator convinced a fictional newspaper reader, M. Gobineau, of the (erotic) interest of _Paris-Soir’s_ back page. “To read the Classifieds,” they argued, was to “psychologically probe all of these hearts [of people who cross each other on the boulevards]...to discover a sort of summary of social life. What dramas are not revealed within certain appeals in the _Personals_ or in the _Marriages_ section?”

In this argument, sex was presented as a—or perhaps the—reason the classifieds were worth reading. By the 1920s, the ubiquitous marketplace of classified advertising, which in _Paris-Soir’s_ own language “penetrate[d] everywhere” and was “read by all,” was so thoroughly associated with (extra)conjugal intrigue that less intimate ads were described as the chaff to be separated from the wheat. Frollo’s fleeting dream of recreating the classifieds as a safe haven for honest working women had not come to fruition. They instead remained a site of

---

17 _Paris-Soir_, Feb. 3, 1924.
18 _Paris-Soir_, Feb. 3, 1924.
imagined sexual maneuvering, even in papers like *Paris Soir* where looking for sex was more or less akin to looking for a needle in a haystack. What mattered was that people were *looking*.

Figure 1.2: Classified Section.  
*Paris Soir*, December 3, 1924

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France
Such accounts of a sexually saturated marketplace were not unrelated to the ways in which these ads created economic opportunities for women on the ground—ostensibly one of the moralizing possibilities of the classifieds (at least for Le Petit Parisien). From the late nineteenth century onward, these affordable annonces were an important technology for women’s economic independence. The classifieds made it possible for women to quietly and privately overcome a well-entrenched, gendered division of labor, a division that, across the nineteenth century, had made the (overdetermined) idea of the “woman worker” a paradox in terms. By the end of the nineteenth century, the “woman worker” was a morally-suspect category that represented first and foremost the unwelcome effects of industrial capitalism, namely the moral degradation of France’s women. According to this discourse, there was no such thing as a “moral woman worker” in the urban marketplace. By the late nineteenth century, the “virtuous woman” was firmly associated with consumption, reproduction, and the home.


21 Sylvia Schaefer has shown how the idea of the “woman worker” was so thoroughly considered to be immoral that the state itself was seen as morally compromised by its implementation, in the late nineteenth century, of a vocational program to train female wards of the state to be skilled needleworkers. See Sylvia Schaefer, “When the Child Is the Father of the Man: Work, Sexual Difference and the Guardian-State in Third Republic France,” History and Theory 31, no. 4 (Dec. 1992): 98–115.

In the space between the immoral woman worker and the moral homemaker, however, much was conspiring. Early twentieth-century newspapers offer evidence of the emergence of new forms of entrepreneurship undertaken by women on the edges of these apparently opposed domains. This work could not easily be categorized as industrial or domestic, and thus as immoral or moral. Through small ads, women asked for loans when in need, looked for well-paying work from the safety of their own homes, and ran lucrative businesses from their apartments, locations that allowed them to mix the commercial with the domestic and make ends meet, often without boss or pimp (or perhaps by taking up these roles for themselves). Women advertised a variety of services, such as language lessons, massages, fortune telling, midwifery, marriage brokerage, etc. Unsurprisingly, as was the case with industrial labor, the mere mention of women in the marketplace was enough to render an ad questionable, if not clearly condemnable. Cultural commentators wielded sexual morality as a weapon against women who entered the marketplace, rendering them suspicious and their expulsion a convenient means of making market society “virtuous”—discursively speaking, at least. As such, it didn’t take long for ads for “massage” to be called out as prostitution or “midwifery” as abortion.

Ironically, the discourse that sought to exclude women from the classified marketplace because they might be selling their bodies alongside market goods also made it possible for more or less invisible, illicit markets to flourish in plain sight. Driven out of “licit” markets-in-formation by the specter of the prostitute, the woman-as-commodity, many

---

women used advertising to earn a living wage. Only this time, they did so in a murky market of their own creation, away from urinals but not at all in the “moral,” paternalistic way Jean Frollo had imagined. For some, the individualized, independent indoor sexual labor they pioneered by means of the classifieds paid better than almost any other work a lower or middle-class woman could find.

A Republican Conundrum: Money and Definitions of Freedom in the Mass Press

To account for how the lucrative “immoral” classified marketplace was used to create the boundaries of the “visible” market, we need to zoom out and locate the newspaper, which housed and disseminated it, within a broader economic and political field. More specifically, we must analyze the conflictual relationship between the idea of the (financially disinterested) press as democratic technology and the (financially interested) press as capitalist business par excellence, using the classifieds to engage and complicate Habermas’s classic narrative of the corruption of the high-minded public sphere by mass media.24 In the next section, we will examine how the stabilization of the French Third Republic (1870-1940) in the 1880s changed the symbolic power of the press and made its venality—represented most visibly by newspaper advertising and understood through the metaphor of prostitution—all the more problematic.

***

After a decade of turbulence marked by attempts to instate a conservative politics of “moral order” following the fall of the Second Empire (1852-1870), republicans solidified their power and stabilized the fledgling Third Republic in the early 1880s. Their victory was crowned by the passage of the law declaring the Freedom of the Press on July 29, 1881. For republican legislators, this law was the central pillar of the new regime, a symbol of the Republic itself. The press was imagined as a mobile, moralizing force that would educate men to be good, informed citizens and stand as a safeguard for all other republican freedoms, as a place to speak truth to power. 1881, however, was already forty-five years after the first media revolution, crowned by Émile de Girardin in 1836 when, thanks to extensive advertising revenues, he created *La Presse* at a subscription price of forty francs instead of the traditional eighty. A second media revolution came with the launch of the French penny press by Moïse Millaud and his *Le Petit Journal* (1863), which made the press even more dependent on advertising. Mass-circulation dailies all soon adopted the affordable price of one sou. When paired with improvements in train travel and literacy, Parisian newspapers became national: they reached the majority of French citizens in a timely manner and made it possible to imagine the newspaper as knitting the Republic together into a democratic community. While they could serve this political function, these same newspapers were, more than ever before, commercial objects. Their owners were industrialists, and the system ran on advertising revenues of all kinds. Speaking truth to power or diffusing moral ideas might happen in the mass press, but only if it was good for the bottom line. Their publishers realized that disseminating what many described as “vice” was more lucrative than high-minded politics. Was this still freedom? What kind?
In the decades following the 1881 law, advocates of press freedom began to lament that, in spite of the fact that the press appeared to “enjoy unlimited freedom,” it was “not genuinely free.”

In 1897, in response to a survey on “The Responsibilities of the Press,” created by ambitious author and literary critic Henry Bérenger, the weekly *Revue bleue* published letters from government officials, sociologists, and journalists concerning the relationship between money and the freedom of the press. Maurice Talmeyr, a journalist for *Le Figaro*, responded that the problem was that the press was ruled by money, and therefore interested in pleasing the largest number of readers in order to do the most business possible. “Money being the goal,” he wrote, “everything will necessarily be sacrificed to money. Go to the most honest or even the most literary newspaper; give it a choice between a nice little page of content and a good advertisement, and it certainly won’t take the nice page.” Talmeyr saw no way out of this situation under a democratic regime (many of the survey responses were unabashedly elitist) and told his readers that they needed to resign themselves to the spread of “demagogic enthusiasm and pornography” throughout the populace “because you will never stop a carnival barker [un barnum] from speculating on desire or vice [....].” Deputy Jean Jaurès likewise responded that “the press is deplorably pornographic. It solicits [racole] imaginations, and public corruption has become a source of

---

That is to say that, far from moralizing the public, the newspaper, under the influence of money, was seen as a vector for immorality, like pornography or prostitution. If the dreams of the legislators behind the law on the freedom of the press were naïve, based on a press that had never existed outside of philosophers’ minds, the newspaper was nonetheless endowed with new symbolic weight in response to their actions. Advertising, long a target of critique and cause of suspicion, now seemed even more dangerous. The questions that underlay everything in Bérenger’s survey are “how much freedom is too much?” and “what is the moral responsibility of the press?” Both of these questions implicitly called attention to the propagation of sexual content in the press and the profitability of this content, which ran counter to the republican desire to see the newspaper as a bulwark against the spread of vice of all kinds. Talmeyr and Jaurès both made clear that sex sells and that this fact corrupts the newspaper, which, in turn, corrupts society. They also argued that, like it or not, this is part of what the freedom of the press allows for.

Survey participants agreed that, in a society increasingly concerned about the sneaking spread of sexual texts and images that it named “pornography,” the newspaper was problematic. It was unbelievably affordable and reached a widely literate audience across the country. Censorship, which had been concerned with politics for most of the nineteenth century, newspaper advertising, especially for medical services and goods, was seen as the domain of charlatans. See chapter 10 of Laurence Brockliss and Colin Jones, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

---

29 This charge had already been made earlier in the century, for example in Honoré de Balzac’s novel about the Parisian newspaper, *Illusions perdues* (1837–1843). It took on new importance, however, due to the imbrication between the press and the Third Republic.
30 Beginning in the seventeenth century, newspaper advertising, especially for medical services and goods, was seen as the domain of charlatans. See chapter 10 of Laurence Brockliss and Colin Jones, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
century, began, under the Third Republic, to see immoral sexuality as its primary target.\textsuperscript{31} Likewise, the coded, often literary or humorous language—a hallmark of French journalism—that had allowed newspapers to avoid the heavy tax on political newspapers under less democratic regimes was reworked for this new situation in which the press was free except where sexual morality was concerned.\textsuperscript{32} In the classifieds, however, more than ideological and discursive dangers to the social body lurked. The presence of coded ads for sexual objects, sexual images, and sexual services led to an embodied, as well as discursive, association between print and sexual immorality. Censors and moralists could not stop this, however loudly they might cry “pornography” or “prostitution,” because newspaper administrators were willing to accept advertisements with little regard for their provenance. Many advertising directors did not care whether ad revenue came from old family wealth, speculation on the stock market, factory wages, or prostitution—in their opinion, at least according to their critics, “money has no smell.”\textsuperscript{33} And if it was written in code, how could the transaction hurt a simple reader, anyway? How could anyone say that there was anything immoral in the simple text of an ad placed by a matrimonial agency, a massage parlor, or a woman in dire need of a loan?

As the knowledge spread that code was used in the classifieds, that there was something potentially immoral about these ads, the average reader became adept at code


\textsuperscript{32} On earlier uses of coded language to get around political censorship, see Kalifa et al., eds., \textit{La Civilisation du journal}, 301, 326.

\textsuperscript{33} Henri Vathelet, \textit{La Publicité dans le journalisme} (Paris: Albin Michel, s.d. [1911]), 160.
breaking. For the millions of people that frequently perused these marketplaces while reading their daily papers, the classifieds inspired a new, widely-disseminated form of reading—a suspicious one. When readers (browsers, clients, and censors alike) confronted classified pages in their daily paper, they asked themselves whether any ad could be taken at face value. Suspicious readers of all kinds worked to determine the existence of hidden meanings to such an extent that a surface reading was often assumed to be an incorrect one. In the eyes and imaginations of newspaper readers, the “underworld” and its “immoral” and “informal” labor left the margins to hide itself very much in plain sight, marking popular understandings of the classified marketplace and what could be found there. In the next section, we will see the mechanisms by which this took place.

**Working Women, Back-Page Trade, and the Construction of Sexual Space**

In the early twentieth century, the well-worn critique equating the press with prostitution developed into a critique of the press as literal pimp/madame, as a purveyor of female flesh. Henry Bérenger did not miss the opportunity to decry this new danger. In 1905, his new republican, socialist, and anti-clerical newspaper *L’Action* (founded in 1903) published a series of articles arguing “For the race, for the press” and against “prostitution by ‘Classifieds’” as part of a campaign against *Le Journal*.34 Bérenger found an odd ally in anti-republican Paul de Cassagnac and his Bonapartist paper *L’Autorité* (whose motto was “For God, for France”). Social morality, Bérenger mused, trumps political differences.35 While

Bérenger took his agreement with his erstwhile enemy to mean that some questions only had one clear answer, in fact, controlling prostitution in the press proved to be a minefield for those invested in both freedom and morality.

Feminist responses to the issue are a good case in point. In a 1903 article entitled “The White Slave Trade” in Le Matin, feminist journalist Séverine strongly condemned “the Press, procuress” for the complicit role it played in the prostitution of women, sacrificing its honor for questionable advertising revenue (and lots of it). In this article, she describes how the advertising pages of mass-circulation Parisian newspapers were, contrary to the earlier dreams of Le Petit Parisien, a crucial technology for the “white slave trade.” They allowed (or, more accurately, were imagined to allow) traffickers to lure poor, honest women into prostitution with promises of well-paying jobs abroad. Séverine reported that Avril de Sainte-Croix, a feminist and prominent leader in the campaign against regulated prostitution, had told her that many of the women she had saved from this “abyss” had, “in the pocket of their short dress, the advertisement that is a trap. They believe it: it’s in print!”

For Séverine and Avril de Sainte-Croix, the worst part of all of this was that it was women in


financial trouble, trying to support themselves through honest labor, who were being preyed on. Or, in the words of another contemporary critic, the ads were used to “speculate on the misery of women who had been skillfully deceived.”

How were women to tell the difference between a legitimate job opportunity and a “trap”? In a variety of sources, women were warned against ads that promised well-paying jobs, often in foreign places, including those “seeking governesses, servants, shop girls, instructors.” At a meeting held by various performance artists’ unions at the Labor Exchange in Paris on November 18, 1903, a representative for the union of lyric artists signaled the prevalence of ads for jobs in brothels mixed in undercover with theatrical jobs. Other critics underlined the danger of matrimonial ads. Most troublingly, one author emphasized that, while some ads made their authors’ goals rather clear, the majority of “traffickers” prefer to use “either neutral or even serious advertisements” in order to “attract their victims.” In a society gripped by fear of the supposed sexual trafficking of “honest” white women, looking for lucrative work was starting to seem like a dangerous business, at least where one’s morality was concerned.

This was, scholars have argued, by design. Narratives of trafficking in white women served to curtail women’s increased economic and sexual independence, freedom of

38 Paul Appleton, La Traite des blanches: thèse pour le doctorat (Université de Lyon, faculté de droit), (Paris: Arthur Rousseau, 1903), 26.
39 Appleton, La Traite des blanches, 27. Séverine discusses the following ad: “In a hurry. Seek. yng. girls for tableaux vivants. Office central Concerts, 55, Fbg-St-Martin, 10 to 12.” Séverine, “La Traite des blanches: la presse entremetteuse ”
40 “Bureaux de placement,” BB 18 6806, AN.
41 The highly mediatized trial of the serial killer Landru, who found many of his victims through the personals, likely intensified this fear after World War I.
42 Raymond de Ryckère, La Servante criminelle: étude de criminologie professionnelle (Paris: Maloine, 1908), 305.
movement, access to public space, etc. Independence broadly conceived was thus next door to harlotry in the imaginary of the “white slave trade.” Warning women away from the classifieds rather than calling for their reform, however, had unintended consequences. Those who, like Séverine, advocated for the rights of women workers while railing against the sexual dangers lurking in the classifieds perversely helped discredit one of few avenues available to women in the early twentieth century that offered them the chance to work for themselves, set their own hours, and earn a living wage. Frollo’s dream of the classifieds as a safe, non-sexual space for honest women to find work had been turned completely on its head.

In spite of this, not all women were (or could afford to be) put off by the sexualization of the classifieds. In many cases, they were conscious actors in the encoding and decoding of advertising, and their advertisements for sexual services—like the want ads decried above—likewise ranged from the “rather clear” to the seemingly “neutral or even serious.” The intentional, encrypted presence of sex in classified ads written by women became a popular trope in satirical images in the early twentieth century [Fig. 1.3]. It was vividly illustrated as early as 1895 in a series by the Veber brothers (text by novelist Pierre, and drawings by satirical illustrator Jean) that was reproduced in excerpt in the literary (and sometimes salacious) daily, Gil Blas, known for its publication of work by literary icons such as Émile

---


44 On the construction of the discourse of the “white slave trade” and the social, political, and cultural uses to which it was put in early twentieth-century France, see Molly McGregor Watson, “The Trade in Women: ‘White Slavery’ and the French Nation, 1899-1939” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2000).
Zola and Guy de Maupassant. In this illustration [Fig. 1.4], the Vebers produced an image of a “more attractive, explicit, and sincere” classified page by inserting, literally between the lines of classified ads, illustrations of what ads for jobs, loans, marriages, or recommended businesses—the vast majority of which were placed by women—were really advertising.\(^\text{45}\) In many of the cases, these “more sincere” images depicted prostitution or sexual deviance (especially flagellation). This satirical cartoon, published on the front page of *Gil Blas*, performed a visual pastiche of the “real” classifieds on the back page, undoubtedly making the unillustrated, seemingly tame version much more stimulating reading.\(^\text{46}\) Was the back-page ad looking for trustworthy men and women to engage in charity work really what it seemed? What about the “stylish [coquet]” apartment for rent? Read alone, these ads seem straightforward, unobjectionable, but the Vebers’ cartoon made it difficult not to wonder if one advertiser’s looking for people of both sexes was a code and if the opaque and gratuitous “etc., etc.” that makes up the bulk of the description of the stylish apartment was as well.


Figure 1.3: “Classified Ad: For sale or for rent, charming little property for pleasure and relations: fruit garden (strawberries, cherries, apricots); hilly areas; enchanting viewpoints. Enjoy possession immediately. Write to Mr. Cupid, attorney, 18 Ardent-Heart Street.”


Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

47 There is a lot of double entendre in this ad that is difficult to translate. I have chosen to emphasize the sexual underpinnings, but a surface reading within the context of an ad for real estate would read “for leisure and investment” rather than for “pleasure and relations.” In French, the ad reads: “A vendre ou à louer, ravissante petite propriété de plaisance et de rapport: jardin fruitier (fraises, cerises, abricots); sites accidentées; points de vue enchanteurs. – Entrée en jouissance de suite. – S’adresser à Me Cupidon, notaire, rue Cœur-Ardent, 18.” Another caricature took up the same conceit years later, using a very similar ad as a caption for an illustration of a naked woman posed outside a country house. See Jean Chaperon, “Coqs, poules et poulettes,” Le Journal amusant, Sept. 9, 1922.
Figure 1.4: Illustrating the classifieds.


Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

The hidden sexual reality of the classifieds was also illuminated by symbolist writer and journalist Maurice Schwob, who used real ads to make his point. He told his readers that the morality present on the first page of a newspaper (he obviously wasn’t thinking of Gil Blas), in the form, for example, of a screed against the white slave trade, was totally absent—to the profit of its owners—on the last page. Its disappearance, however, had to be discreet so as not to shock prudish readers. To this end, easy-to-decode cryptograms were one way in which advertisers and newspapers managed to compromise. Schwob gives an example
of an ad that ran in the extensive classifieds of *Le Journal* on December 6, 1902, which read, seemingly nonsensically: “BÉBÉ. Xjot xjuf nfodvmfs. Bj tpjg ef upo gpvusf. Ub rvvf ebot nb cpvdif. Ub mboh. fo npo dvm.” In order to protest the immorality of such an ad, Schwob points out, its readers would have to know what sexually-explicit content this gibberish had the power to communicate. To do this, the reader would first have to take “the trouble to satisfy his curiosity by going back a letter in the alphabet.” Meaningless text also turned out to have meaning, if only suspicious readers could break the code, and to break the code was to be drawn into the sexual economy of the classifieds and the newspapers that housed them.

How, though, did readers know how to decode encrypted ads in papers like *Gil Blas* and *Le Journal* in the absence of the help of a Séverine, Veber, or Schwob? How, in other words, did knowledge of the hidden sexual market in the classifieds become widespread? One writer insisted that, even if this advertising was discreet, “smiles, kisses, and the rest have need of advertising just as much as comestibles, typewriters, and tailors” and “initiates

---


49 Schwob does not decode this sexually explicit ad for his reader. He instead provides them with the key to decrypt it themselves, thereby inciting them to undergo the same process as readers of *Le Journal*. It decodes to read: “Wiens wite menculer. Ai soif de ton foutre. Ta queue dans ma bouche. Ta lang. en mon cul.” This ad and the subsequent announcement that *Le Journal* would no longer print ads “made up of words with no apparent meaning or combinations of inverted letters” did in fact run on the dates Schwob indicates.


51 The police were among those who knew how to crack the code (at least with Schwob’s help). The prosecutor general at the court of appeals in Paris ordered an investigation into the ad analyzed by Schwob. Letter from the Prosecutor General to the Minister of Justice, Dec. 27, 1902, BB 18 6167, 44 BL 21, AN.
understand all of the double-entendres.” Who were the initiates? At first, the number of those able to successfully decode the ads was likely quite small, greatly restricting the efficacy of these ads for “smiles, kisses, and the rest.” Over time, however, this number grew exponentially, thanks to information provided by the newspapers, which profited directly from this advertising, as well as indirectly from advertisers’ ability to successfully communicate the existence of hidden sexual commerce to readers.

From the 1890s to the eve of World War I, the newspaper-reading public repeatedly learned from sensational reporting on a number of criminal cases what the Vebers’ series made so perfectly clear and visible: that ads were sometimes not what they seemed to be. Let’s look at a couple of examples. As early as 1892, readers learned that those who went to the address given by ads printed in *Gil Blas* that read “Mme Denize, Massage with students, 9, rue Léonie, 3rd [floor] on the left” or simply “Mme Denize and Co., Massage” would find “Mme Paganelli and a few young students of the female sex [including Paganelli’s underage daughter] who had instructions to please the clients.” If *Gil Blas* took some heat for its complicit role in this case, which was made public after a police officer had gone to the address out of uniform and been offered much more than massage, just a few years later, the heat seemed to be gone. On November 3, 1900, *Gil Blas* printed a humorous short story called “La Masseuse” by widely-published popular novelist Guy de Téramond, in which a

---


53 Andrew Israel Ross describes a similar process in the second half of the nineteenth century in which the public learned to recognize men who sought sex with other men and the “supposedly hidden signs of public sex” by reading texts that warned of the dangers of pederasty. Ross, *Public City/Public Sex*, 145–146.

54 “La Traite des blanches – le salon de massage de la rue Léonie,” *Le Matin*, Feb. 9, 1892.
provincial man who goes up to Paris for a few days reads an ad for “Indian massage,” goes in search of an arm massage, and is laughed at for his naïveté by the woman who placed the ad.\footnote{Guy de Téramond, “La Masseuse,” \textit{Gil Blas}, Nov. 3, 1900.} As was the case with the Vebers’ cartoon, anyone who read this story would find themselves reading the ads for massage in \textit{Gil Blas}’s classifieds, printed a few pages later, with suspicion. But it wasn’t just massage. In 1904, for example, the column “Offers and requests for capital” was also called into question when it was found that an ad requesting a loan had been used by two mothers to prostitute their daughters.\footnote{“Nouvelles diverses à Paris: une affaire de mœurs,” \textit{Le Figaro}, June 10, 1904.}

Over time, readers couldn’t help but imagine sexual commerce everywhere in the back-page marketplace. In 1911, following an incredibly high-profile case involving ads for prostitution,\footnote{Victor Flachon, erstwhile director of \textit{La Lanterne}, was found guilty of frequenting underage prostitutes who were trafficked by a ring of women that drummed up business through advertisements for many different things in a variety of columns in the classifieds of \textit{Le Supplément}. Rumor had it that the prime minister, who was a friend of Flachon’s, was also somehow involved in the affair, but this never came to light. For an analysis of this case, see Chapter Three.} an article in \textit{Le Rire} humorously informed its readers: “Professors of languages, Swedish gymnastics, mandolin, bridge, [...] sellers of art objects and curiosities, etc., etc., all of this is the same commerce, the same stuff [...] The clients enter here as if into a department store: –I would like a little blond woman, rather plump, wearing a suit.”\footnote{Pick-Me-Up, “Le Rire de la semaine,” \textit{Le Rire}, Dec. 2, 1911.} While \textit{Le Rire} traded in comic exaggeration, the news had shown that this was not all that far from the truth. The classified marketplace was increasingly associated with the kind of business one might expect to find in an illicit underworld than in the parlor of a bourgeois home, even as it continued to travel unhindered into this space.
In response to these spectacular stories in the mass press, which made clear that ads for marriage, language lessons, massage, and even furnished apartments could all mask various forms of sexual commerce, moralists raised their voices in concern.\textsuperscript{59} In the short term, this did more to render this market decode-able, and thus visible, than to stop this commerce. In some cases, this was arguably intentional. For example, in 1911, the “classes and lessons” column in the classifieds of the literary journal \textit{Le Supplément} proclaimed: “We remind [our readers] that the administration of the SUPPLEMENT refuses any ad of an equivocal nature. Do not simply give a first name to indicate the professor.” Many ads in this column, however, did just this, which inevitably raised questions about the lessons given by Daisy, Mary, Sarita, etc.\textsuperscript{60} Thanks to the paratext provided by \textit{Le Supplément} (not to mention the years of informative reporting on criminal cases regarding the classifieds), many readers had the information needed to successfully decode this textual interplay, or at least to understand that these were indeed “equivocal” ads. In other words, the newspaper itself, under the guise of a moralizing gesture, played a role in raising the suspicion necessary to their advertisers’ business ventures, reinforcing the sexual nature of the classified genre in the process.\textsuperscript{61} And it makes sense that it would have an interest in doing so—prostitution was

\textsuperscript{59} Sex workers used many of these same codes in the German press. Laurie Marhoefer, \textit{Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 46.

\textsuperscript{60} “Petites annonces: cours et leçons,” \textit{Le Supplément}, May 23, 1911, 3.

\textsuperscript{61} This pseudo-moralizing stance was a productive one. It is reminiscent of tactics used in New York in the 1840s by “flash” papers that posed as moral reform organs while providing their readers with insider information about brothels. On the flash press, see Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, \textit{The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008). Journalist Georges-Anquetil also used a similar tactic in 1925 when he published a scathing denunciation of the presence of hundreds of ads in newspapers placed by prostitutes who “solicit[ed] publicly and officially,” followed by nine pages of reproductions of
more likely to produce the money required to advertise frequently than hygienic massage ever could.

In a world in which the number of newspapers was growing exponentially and commercial advertisers were hard to come by, newspaper directors were loath to pass up any source of revenue. Code provided plausible deniability in most cases, and the revenue was more than enough to make up for the occasional fines. The self-referentiality of newspapers’ reports on criminal cases involving the classifieds, the way in which they brought attention to the classifieds as a spectacular site of intrigue and interest, wasn’t so bad for business either—editors knew that the frisson of “real” sex could only help sales. For example, on February 18, 1908, *Gil Blas* ran a short article on their third page about a case against twelve masseuses whose advertised “massages were not at all medical.” All of the women acknowledged—with what the author described as a “very praiseworthy candidness”—that “real medical massage was in fact of little interest to them and especially to their clientele.”

After reading this article that informed them that the “ads for massage, American massage, English massage, Egyptian massage, even French massage” found on the fourth pages of newspapers, “even serious ones” were not exactly ads for massage, readers could then turn the page to find *Gil Blas*’s own fourth-page “Health—Massage” column, complete with 23 advertisements for sex workers and other sexual goods. Georges-Anquetil, “C’en est trop!: la publicité des masseurs et des masseuses devient un scandale et un danger,” *Grand guignol*, Mar. 1925, 8. An article in a more sexually-explicit magazine—which also printed such advertising—described Anquetil’s article as a very complete “brothel guide” and argued that it was “one of the biggest advertising stunts of 1925.” “A Grand Guignol Comedy,” *Jazz*, Mar. 15, 1925, 8.

such ads. In this way, newspapers insured that each new scandal would further feed the will to decode, leaving every ad potentially pregnant with sexual meanings. Sex and classified advertising had come to seem as inseparable as salt and pepper.

**Capitalist Morality**

If many newspaper administrators were happy to cash in on advertising revenues without looking too hard at where the money was coming from, not everyone was happy to see this reader-driven, person-to-person marketplace transform into a spectacularly ambivalent one, in which sex lurked everywhere, enticing and endangering the defenseless—young women, who were said to be voracious readers of *Le Supplément*, in particular. Certain newspapers chose to fight back, for real this time. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Catholic fashion journal *Le Petit Écho de la Mode* proclaimed its refusal to print any advertisements that it considered as “immoral or dangerous for its young female readers.” Catholic daily *La Croix* also rejected any ads it saw as questionable, making it very popular with advertisers: its self-proclaimed morality removed some of the taint associated with the

---

63 “Hygiène—massage,” *Gil Blas*, Feb. 18, 1908. The first ad in the column was for massage by “Mme Dorinval,” one of the aliases of Eugénie Guillou, whose career in sex work is discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

64 *Le Supplément*, well-known for the sexual nature of its classifieds, was a big hit with young women in French cities. For one characterization of the reader of *Le Supplément* as a young milliner or needleworker, see André Hofgaard, “Le journal et le journalisme,” *Recueil des publications de la Société havraise d’études diverses* (Le Havre: H. Micaux, 1901), 335. Another source stated that, in an unnamed French industrial city, a newspaper salesman was said to have sold three fourths of his copies of *Le Supplément*, described elsewhere as a “broker of unnamable industries,” to young women workers. Tommy Fallot, *Communication sur l’organisation de la lutte contre la pornographie faite au Congrès de l’association protestante pour l’Étude pratique des questions sociales*, Marseille, 28 et 29 Octobre 1891 (Nice: V.-Eug. Gauthier, 1891), 13, 20.

print marketplace more generally.\textsuperscript{66} The Catholic press pioneered an effective way to moralize the back pages.\textsuperscript{67}

They were not alone in this fight. In the 1920s and 1930s, as during the Belle Epoque, anti-vice officers kept a vigilant watch on “licentious” advertising in the back pages.\textsuperscript{68} Their attention in the Interwar period was trained especially on illustrated weeklies such as \textit{Le Rire}, \textit{Le Sourire}, and \textit{La Vie Parisienne}. These illustrated journals, euphemistically described as “gallant,” were filled with risqué humor and, according to the police, completely unveiled ads for all kinds of sexual commerce, which openly called attention to services ranging from flagellation and pederasty to group sex. If the ads drew interested clients (and they did: certain of these clandestine prostitution agencies had sumptuously furnished branch locations and extensive advertising budgets), they also made the work of the police that much easier. Raids were frequent for ads placed by women for “matrimonial agencies,” “massage parlors,” and “pieds-à-terre.” The revenue from these same ads lined the pockets of the newspaper owners. The police frequently warned newspaper directors to cease and desist, and the newspapers grudgingly obliged....but only for a little while, before picking right back

\textsuperscript{66} Martin, \textit{Trois siècles de publicité}, 173.
\textsuperscript{67} Other Catholic figures would pioneer more spectacular forms of protest. On December 27, 1929, the priest Louis Bethléem publicly ripped up a copy of the illustrated \textit{Journal amusant} on the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle to protest the fact that the journal contained ads for prostitutes. “Le 'Journal amusant’ a été condamné et flétri par les tribunaux, il faut qu’il disparaisse,” \textit{Revue des lectures}, Feb. 15, 1930, 145–146.
up where they left off: with their openly “licentious, provocative character.” Police just couldn’t keep up. As we will see in the following chapter, even judicial decisions that found that thinly-veiled sexual advertising was immoral in legal terms (and not just social ones) failed to put a stop to their proliferation in the illustrated press.

While it’s clear that Le Rire and Le Sourire were not the “serious” journals that had so concerned Sèverine and others (as their names, “The Laugh” and “The Smile,” imply), their advertising nonetheless tainted the name of classifieds everywhere. As owners of illustrated newspapers flaunted police directives, taking money from clandestine prostitutes in order to pay their artists and keep their presses running, the mainstream media joined the fight against suspicious sexual advertising. This development is clearest in the rise of Paris-Soir to the position of most important daily paper in France in the 1930s (replacing the four giants of the pre-World War I Belle Époque). Its director, businessman Jean Prouvost, was determined to reform advertising and recode it in the mind of the French people by policing it and detaching it from its associations with immorality—to finally give it, in the telling words of historian of advertising Marc Martin, “the face of an honest young girl [le visage d’une fille honnête],” rather than, this formulation implies, the face of a prostitute [fille publique]. In other words, Prouvost wanted to scrub newspaper advertising of its associations with illustrated journals, which consciously proliferated the association between the classifieds and illicit sex.

---

69 Report, Priolet to the public prosecutor [procureur de la République], Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
70 For one particularly important decision that, contrary to moralists’ high hopes, did very little to stem the tide of immoral advertising during the interwar period, see “Cour de cassation: CRIM. 23 juin et 21 juill. 1928,” Dalloz: Recueil périodique et critique, 1928, Part 1: Cour de cassation, 161–163.
71 Martin, Trois siècles de publicité, 232.
The fight to legitimate newspaper advertising by promising “truth in advertising” was led in the name of a morality that encompassed both ethical business practices and sexual purity, and whose goal was to chase hidden meaning (both sexual and fraudulent) from the classifieds. Following Prouvost’s innovation, a corporation of admen put into place an Office for the Control of Advertising [l’Office de contrôle des annonces], which began its work in 1935. Slowly but surely, this new bureau contributed to the creation of a climate in which advertising was not a shameful profession, precisely because advertisements had been purged, purified, decontaminated.\(^{72}\)

In the classifieds, during the golden age of the press, anonymity and accessibility meant that the boundaries between trained and untrained, men and women, moral and immoral all but dissolved. It was never clear who was writing or who was telling the truth. The response, even by free market proponents, was to advocate for the reinstatement of boundaries that would reform this heterogeneous, nearly lawless bazaar into a hierarchized, moralized market. The argument went that, to be free, the press (and its marketplace) had to be “responsible,” or rather, either had to do the work of determining boundaries between formal and informal, legitimate and illegitimate, or stand the legal and social consequences of disseminating corruption and crime.

In the history of the business of French advertising as it has been written, this moralization is a story of triumph. In it, French advertising crawls out of the economic

\(^{72}\) Marc Martin, *Histoire de la publicité en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2012), 141-147. In the 1940s, Prouvost and *Paris-Soir* were purged for collaborating with the Vichy regime, but the mark Prouvost had on advertising was long-lasting. A sanitized and “legitimate” form of advertising (sexual in form but not in content) would take off in France in the postwar decades. Article 120 of the 1939 *Code de la famille* would also aid in this postwar moralization, as it rendered illegal any advertisement that “publicly attracts attention to an opportunity for debauchery.”
backwaters, inhabited by charlatans, crooks, pornographers, and pimps, toward specifically French forms of advertising exemplified by the artist-designed poster, which have been exported around the world. This narrative makes sense for a field that has struggled for decades for recognition as a serious object of historical study, fighting against the aftereffects of French suspicion and derision of advertising and advertisers. To allow this to be the only way the story is told, to render this period as something less than or outside of economic “progress,” however, is to efface the history of the decades in which the mass press supported the mass classifieds (and vice versa). It renders invisible the making and unmaking of the sexual classifieds.

In this chapter, I have read these processes closely, drawing them out to show how gender and sexuality have determined what is in/visible, in/formal, and im/moral so that we might better account for how these terms have shaped our understandings of what and where the market is and how it works, as well as their role in the concrete creation of hidden markets intertwined with visible ones. Acknowledging that what we see as illicit activity contributed to the licit business of running a newspaper is only part of the story. I also want to emphasize that this categorization is not innocent: it was used to contain, restrain, and stymie just as much as it was played against itself to become a source of commercial innovation and opportunities (coded as immoral or not).

To take the invisibility, unimportance, or illicitness of the classifieds at face value is to reproduce the discourses of domination that have grown out of the twinned structures of capitalism and patriarchy, which made it difficult for women to take part in the market on an equal footing. The U.S. historian Amy Dru Stanley has forcefully critiqued the way in
which the “new” history of capitalism has failed to grapple with important feminist work that argued that any narrative of economic transformation must account for sex difference or risk obscuring the gendered nature of capitalist development, its “logic of sex.”73 This logic embedded itself in numerous discourses and accrued power in a dense web of connected spaces. In the next chapter, we turn from the pages of the mass press to the domain of law to see how obscenity law was used to police the bounds of legitimate commerce by policing women’s place in the back pages of mass media.

Chapter Two: Freedom’s Sex Problem

“The most interesting things are not printed, they are left to the more or less contaminated imagination of the reader, which is aroused by the ambiguity of the sentences.”


The French Third Republic’s secular democratic regime was built on law. Republican lawmakers used law to create balance between freedom and morality. As historian Sylvia Schafer puts it, law served as a “primary medium for the public regulation of individual and collective moral life.” It provided “a critical counterweight to the freedoms created by the regime’s attempts to loosen restrictions on free expression and association,” including the foundational law of July 29, 1881 that instituted the freedom of the press. Little surprise, then, that legal efforts to censor printed materials and images, especially those created for mass audiences, followed closely on the heels of press freedom. The law of 1882 on outrages aux bonnes moeurs—roughly translatable as “offenses against good morals”—prohibited the “public sale, offer, exhibition, posting or free distribution of obscene writings, printed documents (other than books), posters, drawings, engravings, paintings, emblems, or images.” Jurists used this law to prosecute “pornography” and representations of sex in articles, pamphlets, images, and neo-Malthusian literature; the “pornographic spirit” (which

fear of pregnancy supposedly helped keep in check) was antithetical to the normative sexuality that undergirded republican society and social order. The problem of obscenity and belief in legal solutions ushered in the age of morality leagues, dedicated, in large part, to fighting for this foundational sexual morality through the propagation and enforcement of laws—all in the name of democracy. These leagues were watching mass culture closely.

As we have seen, cheap classified advertising erupted into the incredibly affordable mass press in the late nineteenth century. The 1880s and 1890s saw a wave of papers, large and small, new and old, institute classified sections, intended to facilitate direct communication between reader and public (e.g. Gil Blas in 1884, La Presse in 1889, and Le Journal shortly after its creation in 1892). Le Matin, which had inaugurated its own classified column in 1888, argued on June 4, 1906 that “it’s not enough to have read last week’s ads or to intend to take a look next week. If you want to keep up with what’s going on, reading the ads is as important as reading the daily news.” Classified advertising was widely promoted

---

7 “Nos petites annonces,” Gil Blas, May 15, 1884; “Avis, offres et demandes,” La Presse, Aug. 1, 1889; Le Journal, Nov. 7, 1892. This was not the first attempt at affordable advertising in the pages of La Presse. The annonces-omnibus had emerged in its pages (and those of the Journal des débats and the Constitutionnel) in 1845 as part of an effort by the Société Générale des Annonces (led by Charles Duveyrier) to popularize and democratize the usage of classified advertising. However, in 1845, newspapers were much less affordable—this was before the invention of the journal à un sou (1863)—and so the idea did not have the same audience and did not catch on as it would at the fin de siècle. Marc Martin, Trois siècles de publicité en France (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1992), 75; “Société Générale des Annonces,” La Presse, June 24, 1845; Gérard Lagneau, “La Société Générale des Annonces, 1845–1865,” Le Mouvement social no. 146 (1989): 5–26.
as a convenient way to buy and sell goods and services among strangers, a person-to-person marketplace with great utility and potential, both for the public that used them and for the newspapers who profited financially from them.

But this potential extended beyond men and women looking for lost dogs or for (honest?) jobs as factory laborers and domestic workers to pornographers, prostitutes, abortionists, lesbians, and other supposedly marginal characters, who could likewise advertise using coded language to a broad audience. Moral reformers and the police watched the classifieds as if they were a “living body” that “acts, transforms and reproduces itself, gathers together, circulates, proliferates, and diffuses itself,” but which, unlike a human body, can “live everywhere,” has no need for sleep, can fly, and “pass through walls and borders.”

Both a text and more than a text, classified advertising placed the republican morality taught in public schools at odds with the republican free press embodied by the “big four” mass-circulation newspapers of the pre-World War I era: *Le Petit Parisien, Le Petit Journal, Le Matin*, and *Le Journal*. For the symbolic and literal stability of the state and the social order on which it was based, the press needed to be brought under moral control. One critic addressed newspapermen to tell them to “look at your columns, look at your profits. You are public poisoners, in a continuous spray, that the prosecutor should subject to the law.” This was

---


more easily said than done. If “obscenity” and “bonnes moeurs” have always been notoriously difficult to define, the application of these terms to the classifieds raised a specific set of problems linked to their status as vectors of person-to-person and often anonymous communication. Through their entrance into the classifieds via unassuming ads for furnished rooms, English lessons, same-sex friendships, and more, society’s marginals effectively jammed the machinery of the law.

In this chapter, I trace the contours and chronology of the career of “immoral advertising” in French legislation, from its spectral presence at the emergence of “freedom’s sex problem” in the law granting the freedom of the press in 1881, to its inscription in law in the 1898 law on outrages aux bonnes moeurs, through decades of reform and jurisprudence that grappled with how to close loopholes opened by advertisers. I argue that these efforts to control ads through legislation and judicial action laid an important piece of the cultural and legal groundwork for the restrictive 1920 law that rendered any incitation to abortion or propaganda for contraceptives illegal, and eventually, the 1939 Family Code, which aimed to control and manage women’s reproductive lives in an even more totalizing manner. Classified advertisers, by so cunningly eluding the law, created the condition of possibility for and necessity of laws that privileged reproductive and moral control over press freedom.

**Sex in the Public Sphere?**

Sex was always a problem for the Third Republic’s all-important print freedom. For politicians, the law granting freedom of the press (July 29, 1881) marked the recent republican rise to power and complemented the Republic’s commitment to universal manhood suffrage. Eugène Pellatan told his fellow senators that the free press would have
the power to “hold all of France assembled as if in a town square.” In this way, “man by man and day by day,” through newspapers, “universal suffrage forms a vast, invisible audience that attends our debates, hears our words, watches the acts of Government and weighs them in their conscience.”11 The newspaper formed moral, educated male voters.

Republican lawmakers were idealistic, but they also realized that the relationship between press and Republic could be uneasy. Assembling their new law out of older press regulations, they eliminated the repression of outrages à la morale publique et religieuse [affronts to public and religious morality] but retained outrages aux bonnes moeurs.12 They took distance from their non-democratic predecessors, but also felt that the free press required moral boundaries to guard against the obscenity that unbridled freedom would authorize.

But what counted as a violation of good morals? Since its foundation in 1894, members of the anti-vice Société de protestation contre la licence des rues, presided over by center-left Senator René Bérenger (derisively referred to as Father Modesty), denounced press immorality, including illustrations of nude women by popular artists such as Willette and Steinlen.13 Bérenger’s campaign—one piece of his larger project of using law to create a moral, secular, republican society—irritated not only artists and writers, but also the newspaper owners who published their work.14 His critics founded a counter-organization in 1905, the

---

12 Stora-Lamarre, L’Enfer de la IIIe République, 247.
13 For examples of the League’s (and especially Bérenger’s) innumerable denunciations of “obscene” texts, images, and advertisements, see BB 18 6165; BB 18 6166; BB 18 6167; BB 18 6168, AN.
League for Artistic Freedom. Rather than seeking to do away with limits altogether, this association, as its name suggests, sought to legally distinguish between art and obscenity.15

For the League, obscenity law was “odious” in its failure to differentiate “the publication of a drawing by Willette and the sale of certain rubber articles.”16 Artistic representation of erotic subjects, including prostitution, was distinct from “commerce in smut,” like condom sales.17 The League’s manifesto drew a stark division between (textual or visual) representation and (physical, embodied) objects and practices.18 They claimed that because art, through a sort of alchemy, turned the city’s dirt into valuable culture, it should not be subject to the same laws as crude photographs, condoms, and dildos.

At the same time, the League expressed explicit concern over the arbitrary prosecution of advertisements. Despite their ambivalent relationship to artistic freedom, advertisements were made of a creative medium—text—in a language—French—that Balzac once described as “lend[ing] itself admirably to allusion, to double entendre,” part and parcel of a French “genius” that could only be strengthened by repressive laws.19 These ads made use of a “richly ambiguous, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent” discourse that William Cohen

16 L’Outrage aux bonnes mœurs devant la loi, 13.
argues was inspired by “sexual unspeakability.” In their manifesto, the League cited the prosecution of Mme E. (Mme Erzsy, a pseudonym for a woman named Eugénie Guillou, who was known to the police for her role in the sex trade) for placing an ad for a furnished room in a newspaper.

They realized that her conviction for placing an advertisement that was, on its surface, harmless endangered everyone’s freedom, even if the ad was not exactly “art.” An ad for a furnished room was not, they implied, what legislators had imagined when creating a law that would regulate those things that “by their nature pervert morality when they appear in public [par la publicité est de nature à pervertir les moeurs].” Ads like “Mme E’s” existed in an interstitial space because they publicly advertised sex, but without explicitly showing or stating it. Guillou’s ad read “Elegant furnished rooms, shown 10 in the morning to 10 at

---

21 For more on Eugénie Guillou, see Chapter Four.
22 L’Outrage aux bonnes moeurs devant la loi, 5.
23 Contre la licence des rues (loi du 16 mars 1898) (Orléans: Auguste Gout, 1906), 7. The uncertainty surrounding legislative intent resulted from the fact that “bonnes moeurs” were never positively defined in Republican law given the impossibility under a democratic system of giving “legal substance to a moral norm.” The content of that which is contraire aux bonnes moeurs could only be decided in courtrooms with attention to what is deemed immoral in a specific place and time. Bénédicte Lavaud-Legendre, Où sont passées les bonnes moeurs? (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2005), 11–12.
24 Outrages aux bonnes moeurs were immoral representations, not immoral acts. It was article 330 of the Penal Code of 1810, governing outrage public à la pudeur—the equivalent of indecent exposure—that targeted the sexually offensive body. Andrew Israel Ross has shown how usage of outrage public à la pudeur to curtail same-sex sexual activity in public encountered some of the same regulatory problems in the mid-nineteenth century. As he writes, “solicitation [by men of other men] may have been public, but it was often not indecent enough to justify an arrest”(103). As time wore on, the desire to render the public existence of men seeking sex with another man (even if acts took place in private) illegal “justified greater police intervention in the lives of men”(118). In the classifieds, as on the streets, it was hard to constrain public sexuality without infringing on (heterosexual) men’s rights, too. Ross, Public City/Public Sex.
night, weekdays and Sunday. Mme ERZSY, 54, rue de la Victoire (2nd floor).” If the courts could find this obscene, was any text safe from prosecution? For the League, protecting artistic freedom entailed standing behind the right of a prostitute to place coded ads for her services.

**Legislative Limits: Parliamentary Efforts to Stop Sexual Commerce in Print**

The high visibility of sexual commerce in personal ads dated to the early days of the Republic. In 1875, *Le Figaro* created a salacious personals section [*petite correspondance*] in order to draw in readers and revenue with tantalizing messages between lovers. Criticism rained down on the ads, condemning *Le Figaro* as a place where sex was bought and sold. A journalist at *Le Tintamarre* cried “close your shutters then, whore!...,” while another at *Gil Blas* called the *Figaro* a veritable “Trading Post of ‘paid companionship.’” Once the furor died down, however, the sexual personal advertising content *Figaro* had pioneered spread with more subtlety into other titles and was joined by a broad swathe of less personal advertising content related to illicit service work, including abortion services. The furor would return as mass-circulation titles such as *Le Journal* made significant space available for this type of advertising beginning in the 1890s.

---

Senator Bérenger and his new morality league responded to these developments by introducing a bill that brought “advertisements of a special nature” within the purview of obscenity law. An early, failed incarnation of the law, in 1894 and 1895, took aim at “correspondence and advertisements published with the intention to provoke debauchery.”

Like this unsuccessful precursor, the version of the law that passed the Senate in 1897 targeted ads that were “licentious or of a nature to provoke debauchery.” However, the ensuing law, passed on March 16, 1898, targeted that which is “contrary to bonnes moeurs”—a phrasing considered “larger,” “more general” and “more juridical,” than the specific language of provoking debauchery used by the Senate. This change simultaneously broadened the scope of the law and made its purview more vague. Although the explicit reference to sexual debauchery disappeared, sexual commerce nonetheless remained a primary concern. This print regulation would effectively regulate real bodies. Because, as Bérenger explained, “the press, which travels everywhere, was naturally used for the purpose of soliciting,” controlling advertising would also control the advertisers who “work the streets on the back page of newspapers.”

While Bérenger’s proposition regarding the classifieds was initially met with uproarious laughter—his fellow Senators begged him to read examples of immoral ads aloud—
his bill ultimately faced no opposition.\textsuperscript{34} Why were sexual ads simultaneously thigh-slappingly funny and in need of legislative control? One answer is that obscenity laws under the Third Republic were structured by class. The 1882 law made a distinction between books and cheaper print that protected elite men’s access to pornography while keeping it out of the “wrong” sorts of hands—those of women, children, and working-class men. Another explanation is that sex makes men laugh when it remains under their control, but legislation was necessary to make sure it stayed there. Powerful men were not simply concerned that advertising language was sexual (or could be inferred to be sexual) and might thus be dangerous to impressionable readers. Unlike pornographic images, these ads also had anonymous, non-monogamous women among their central agents. Cheap advertising allowed women to evade social control.

It is no coincidence that the first effort to deploy the law of 1898’s inclusion of classified advertising targeted an ad that read: “Ladies: Free love for all [toutes], no more worries, the ideal! Write Rio, 1, r. Jeanne-d’Arc, Rouen.”\textsuperscript{35} Such ads encouraged women to circumnavigate sexual propriety and patriarchal control, to exist outside of the reproductive model prescribed for them. In this way, back-page advertising—first rather explicitly with Rio’s call for free love, and then more implicitly with ads for remedies for “lateness” and offers of “furnished rooms” or female friendship—troubled republican social and sexual

\textsuperscript{34} “Discussion d’une interpellation,” \textit{JO Sénat}, Apr. 8, 1897, 786–787.

\textsuperscript{35} “Annonce parue dans ‘La Presse’ (1898),” BB/18/6165, 44 BL, AN. This was not the first case involving “immoral” ads, but merely the first one to attempt to use obscenity law to target the legality of the ad itself, rather than the illegal actions it facilitated. For an earlier case involving ads for massage, see “La traite des blanches—le salon de massage de la rue Léonie,” \textit{Le Matin}, Feb. 9, 1892.
order as so many alternatives to maternity, the regulated brothel, or the bonds of matrimony and heterosexuality.

Law or no law, the trouble only grew, largely unchecked by the judicial system. Bérenger’s extensive efforts to bring the persistent menace to the attention of the Minister of Justice—including by sending ad columns marked up in blue pencil—failed. Frustrated, he pushed for yet another legal amendment to fill the gaps left by the last, which had made the judiciary hesitant to act. On March 26, 1904, Bérenger was again before the Senate, alerting his audience to an ad reading: “young Claudine seeks Rézi to come to her aid.” Bérenger was sure that for anyone who “knew the notorious novels published under this name of Claudine, the meaning is clear” (in Colette and Willy’s wildly popular Claudine novels, Claudine had an adulterous affair with a woman named Rézi). Readers of Le

---

36 “Délibération sur le projet de loi ayant pour objet la répression des outrages aux bonnes mœurs,” JO Sénat, Mar. 25, 1904, 379.
38 BB 18 6167, 44 BL 21 and 44 BL 34, AN.
39 Bérenger had already written to the Ministry of Justice on Jan. 1, 1903 to express concern about the use of the Claudine code in ads in the Le Journal’s matrimonial column. BB 18 6167, 44 BL 21, AN. As he puts it in this letter, “under pretext of marriage,” the classifieds were operating a “petite bourse de la galanterie.”
40 “Délibération sur le projet de loi ayant pour objet la répression des outrages aux bonnes mœurs,” JO Sénat, Mar. 25, 1904, 380. H.G. Cocks has shown how, in British classified advertising, “a list of authors, playwrights and composers who belonged to a sort of queer artistic canon could be cited in the ads to act as clear statements of intent.” Names like Edward Carpenter, Walt Whitman, and especially Oscar Wilde expressed “homosexual interest.” Cocks, Classified: The Secret History of the Personal Column (London: Arrow, 2009), 8.
Supplément—which, along with Le Journal, ran ads using this code—would have understood this reference: several of the Claudine novels were serialized in its pages in 1902 and 1903.\textsuperscript{41}

Women were not only reading papers whose sexual content was ostensibly aimed at men, they used the advertisements to establish sexual connections with each other—the ultimate form of non-reproductive sex, one (ostensibly) outside the control of men.\textsuperscript{42} The novel Claudine en ménage, translated as Claudine Married, actually alludes to how women could use advertising to pursue their own affairs. When Claudine asks Rézi: “Should we pick up Saturday’s Journal and find a room for rent by the day?,” Rézi sighs in response that she wishes they could, “but all those places are surveilled by the police. Someone… told me that.”\textsuperscript{43} As a result, Claudine and Rézi must rely on Claudine’s husband for access to their fillonière, their female bachelor pad.

But not all women were as careful (or as open about their activities with their husbands) as Claudine, and the classifieds opened up an unprecedented resource. As Dr. Serge Paul put it: “Sapphists enter into romantic relationships using the newspaper as intermediary. Each time one reads an ad in the classifieds for a woman looking for a female friend for walks, conversations, etc., one can be sure that this woman is an invert looking for

\textsuperscript{41} I have found a number of ads using similar codes in Le Supplément. For example: “I am blond, tall, pretty like Willy’s Rézi, rich enough to finance all of my impulses [fantaisies]; my twenty years of age are bored with a sexagenarian, grumpy husband. Will I find a cute Claudine to shower with presents? Write Andrée Lenat, 11 avenue Barrière, Bois-Colombes.” Le Supplément, Jan. 7, 1904.

\textsuperscript{42} It is possible that these ads were promoting a sapphic spectacle for male consumption, but it is sex between women in the absence of men that is at the root of Bérenger’s concern. One example of an ad in which a man, who called himself Renaud, the name of Claudine’s husband, sought this kind of entertainment using the same code read: “Young, well-off Claud. and Renaud, bored, want to meet young Rézy for chats and walks. Respond within the week.” Le Supplément, Jan. 9, 1904.

\textsuperscript{43} Willy and Colette, Claudine en ménage (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), 164.
her soulmate.” A caricature representing the hidden content of an ad for “dames seules” seeking young, well-educated and refined women as “students” in La Vie parisienne made the same point visually in 1913 [Fig. 2.1].

![Caricature of a woman and a man in a garden setting]

**Figure 2.1:** “Distinguished women, by themselves, speaking several languages, living in a castle with shady grounds, would take educated, sophisticated girls [demoiselles du monde] with refined tastes as students.”

L. Burrett, “Petites annonces,” La Vie parisienne, August 2, 1913, 553.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

These queer ads were one of many encrypted problems for defenders of republican morality. Bérenger also lamented the proliferation of “ads for massage parlors,” stating that “we know what this term generally hides.” A prosecutor had told him that “it’s through

---

these ads that we know all of the houses of clandestine prostitution.” And yet, this knowledge was not enough. A stumbling block remained: the explicit meaning was indeed hiding—under legal cover. Literature, medicine, want ads, and beauty provided not-so-secret codes for conveying socially or legally unacceptable things in simultaneously masked and startlingly clear terms.

The unstable relationship between the implicit and the explicit in so-called immoral classified ads illuminates how visually banal texts were imagined to hide sexual threats to the social order, a serious problem in a period in European history that was particularly concerned about what Erin Carlston has referred to as the “legibility of difference.” As Carolyn Dean puts it, pornography, in the twentieth century, had become “simultaneously pervasive and opaque,” marked by an “invisible circulation” that was paradoxically “increasingly visible.” Such a description could also apply to women in this period, when clandestine prostitution and lesbianism incited regulation precisely because prostitutes and lesbians were indistinguishable from “honest” women. As Alain Corbin has argued, “if the clandestine prostitute inspired such terror in the specialists, it was because she only appeared

46 “Délibération sur le projet de loi ayant pour objet la répression des outrages aux bonnes moeurs,” JO Sénat, Mar. 25, 1904, 380.
48 Dean, The Frail Social Body, 47.
49 It is interesting to note that scholars such as Morris Kaplan have also shown how, in this moment punctuated by the Dreyfus Affair, there was analogous concern about Jewish and homosexual invisibility; both could, as Eve Sedgwick has put it, be in the closet. Kaplan, “Refiguring the Jewish Question,” 111–112.
to be like other women, while moving through society and thus presenting an increased risk of moral and physical contagion."\(^{50}\) This threat became increasingly palpable in the first half of the twentieth century, as social critics, legislators, and ordinary people alike learned that to read the world correctly was to read between the lines.

Bérenger assumed that if the average reader could decode these ads, the law could, too. In his view, the lesbianism promised by Claudine’s ads and the prostitution (perhaps likewise offered to women as well as men) offered via advertisements for “masseuses, manicurists, models, and doctoresses in all sorts of more or less living languages” was clear as day.\(^{51}\) But, in the absence of explanatory drawings by artists such as Steinlen or Caran d’Ache, the courts would not act.\(^{52}\) While these ads facilitated “anti-social” sex, they remained innocent on the surface and hence could not be legally condemned. How could this problem be solved?

Public indecency laws were no help, because the sexual acts facilitated by the classifieds happened in private. *Outrage aux bonnes moeurs* was inconvenient, but the best option for eliminating public advertisements. The Senate created a special commission on the issue with Bérenger at the helm. The resulting bill proposed to punish “ads or public correspondence placed with obscene intentions or contraire aux bonnes moeurs.”\(^{53}\) In his introduction of the bill on February 25, 1904, republican Senator Pierre-Ernest Guillier

---


\(^{51}\) Mouthon, “La Croisade contre le vice.”

\(^{52}\) Mouthon, “La Croisade contre le vice.”

argued that “until today, advertisements or correspondence could not be incriminated” because they were “innocent in appearance.” Without legislation explicitly allowing them to do so, jurists were unwilling to police hidden intentions. The new law would extend their jurisdiction, ensuring that “all public ads and correspondence placed with manifestly obscene intentions,” but without an obscene appearance, would constitute an offense.54 The law, if passed, would allow the courts to become codebreakers, to police inferred obscenity, to “see the ensemble, the system, the series, the custom of sentences with double meaning,” rather than “accept[ing] by itself and in isolation an interpretation that might be technically admissible.”55

While passed by the Senate, the bill frightened many deputies who remained wary of other provisions, notably regarding the possession of obscene materials with intent to sell, which, they worried, would make it possible to curtail (deputies’ own) individual liberties by justifying police searches of the homes of “honorable” men. Center-right Catholic deputy Léonce de Castelnau56 interpellated another deputy, acting out the role of law enforcement to show the personal nature of the danger: “You, monsieur Lasies,” he said, “you are a man of good morals, but I suspect you own obscene objects [...] I will search your house, because you must intend to sell these objects.” Deputies across the political spectrum echoed these fears. Independent socialist deputy Victor Dejeante voiced concern over the fact that “we

55 Lucifer, “Pour la race, pour la Presse!,” L’Action, July 2, 1905.
56 Castelnau was affiliated with the Action Libérale, which was founded in 1901 by Catholic supporters of the Republic to combat the political power of the Left. See Benjamin F. Martin, “The Creation of the Action Libérale Populaire: An Example of Party Formation in Third Republic France,” French Historical Studies 9, no. 4 (1976): 660–689.
have amusing, satirical journals in the Chamber’s library that could be considered pornographic [...] so that deputies can read these satirical journals.”

Under the new law, he cried, “those who would possess these same papers would be prosecuted and convicted!”

These elected officials, no matter their party affiliation, shared a sexual politics: they wanted to make sure that their own “pornographic” reading, either at home or in the library of the Chamber of Deputies, would remain legally protected. The law was rejected by the Chamber of Deputies on February 21, 1907 and sent back to Bérenger and Guillier’s commission for revision. When the law was finally adopted on April 7, 1908, the clause “placed with obscene intentions” had been excised. The final text of the law targeted “writings, printed materials other than books, posters, drawings, engravings, paintings, emblems, objects or images” that were “obscene or contraire aux bonnes moeurs.”

This formulation was again assumed to be large enough to encompass obscene intentions without its needing to be stated explicitly. The impetus behind the idea of writing the repression of “obscene goals” into the law had not been called into question. In the

60 The only mention of the addition of “obscene intentions” to the legislation in this instance was from Castelnau who cited the necessity of including ads placed “with obscene goals” within the purview of the law. “Discussion du projet de loi ayant pour objet la répression des outrages aux bonnes moeurs,” JO Chambre, Feb. 21, 1907, 424. The legislative logic that assumed that the phrase “contraire aux bonnes moeurs” was large enough to encompass that which was obscene in its intentions failed; the absence of this language of intention or of the phrase “of a nature to provoke debauchery” in the law made the judiciary unsure about whether such ads fell under the law’s jurisdiction. “Paris, 13 juillet 1908,” Pandectes françaises périodiques, 1910, 69.
first decade of the twentieth century, legislators across the political spectrum were willing to police the intentions of advertisements, especially when these were related to “deviant” sexuality. Coincident with this parliamentary consensus, advertisements written in sexual code would make their way before the courts in greater numbers, putting the capaciousness of the new law to the test.

The Woman Problem in Print

For obvious reasons, scholarship on pornography and obscenity has focused primarily on representations of bodies and sexual acts. In this instance, legislators revising the law on outrage aux bonnes moeurs focused not on explicit images of women’s bodies, but on women’s actions and transactions made possible by the press. Their campaign channeled contemporary fears about women’s autonomy. The politically turbulent 1890s, marked notably by working-class organizing, terrorist attacks including a presidential assassination, and the polarizing Dreyfus Affair—so many deeply destabilizing events—had also seen the expansion of movements that questioned traditional gender roles. Marie Huot’s call for a womb strike catapulted the French neo-Malthusian movement onto the public stage in 1892.61 Feminist congresses took place in Paris in 1892 and 1896. 1896 was also the year that Paul Robin founded the Ligue de la régénéración humaine, the first French neo-Malthusian association, in the interest of

---

61 Francis Ronsin, La Grève des ventres: propagande néo-malthusienne et baisse de la natalité française, XIXe–XXe siècles (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1980), 44.
working toward “the liberty of the woman” (a liberty most feminists would, admittedly, disavow).62

Imagined as a threat to sexual difference, republican thinkers encountered feminism and neo-Malthusianism as “signs of atavism or decadence,” acting counter to “civilizational and moral progress” and undermining a social order founded on and through marriage.63 Pro-natalists had been stoking fears about depopulation, emasculation, and decadence since France’s crushing defeat by Prussia in 1871, thereby rendering advocacy for women’s rights and sexual liberty that much more problematic and that much more powerful as an incitement to police gender norms.64 By the 1890s, populationists held real power. The Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, founded in 1896 by doctor and demographer Jacques Bertillon (seven months prior to Robin’s founding of the French neo-

---

62 Anne Cova, Féminismes et néo-malthusianismes sous la IIIe République: la liberté de la maternité (Paris: Harmattan, 2011), 19, 38. Elinor Accampo, Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit: Nelly Roussel and the Politics of Female Pain in Third Republic France (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 42 (quote). When Paul Robin attended the 1896 feminist congress, his assertion that marriage was prostitution and the remedy was free love and contraception led feminists to publicly shun him. The majority of feminists were hostile to neo-Malthusianism, arguing for women’s rights within a frame of republican motherhood and sexual complementarity deeply influenced by populationist rhetoric. Despite these tensions between the movements, both were perceived as threats to traditional social order, as advocating gender and/or sexual inversion. On Paul Robin’s attendance at the 1896 congress, see Accampo, Blessed Motherhood, Bitter Fruit, 43. See also Karen Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,” The American Historical Review 89, no. 3 (June 1984): 648–676; Anne Cova, Maternité et droits des femmes en France: XIXe–XXe siècles (Paris: Anthropos, 1997); Debra L. Silverman, Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), ch. 4, “Amazone, Femme Nouvelle, and the Threat to the Bourgeois Family.”

63 Surkis, Sexing the Citizen, 1.

64 On “crisis” and “deviancy” as forms of rhetoric that fueled regulation and enforcement of normative behavior and hierarchy, rather than undermining their power, see Surkis, Sexing the Citizen, 10–12. According to Stora-Lamarre, René Bérenger’s participation in the Franco-Prussian War (he volunteered to fight) “structured his work as a moralist and fed his obsessions about France’s decadence.” Stora-Lamarre, La République des faibles, 58.
Malthusian movement), exerted influence in Parliament. In 1902, pro-natalists created an extraparliamentary commission—composed primarily of (male) members of parliament, senior civil servants, and doctors—to combat depopulation: the availability of contraceptives and abortions was a central concern. Pro-natalists feared that if maternity became something a woman could choose (or not), then society, and French civilization itself, would be fatally destabilized.

Despite these pervasive natalist concerns, as Bérenger noted in his practical manual for fighting pornography, some newspapers—“among the most serious”—found great profit in publishing ads “in hardly veiled terms” for clandestine prostitutes, sexual propositions, romantic correspondence (facilitating adultery and juvenile debauchery), and the “means to avoid the dangers of libertinism, even the burden of legitimate motherhood.” Indeed, women’s commercial, non-monogamous, and non-reproductive sexuality and commodified methods for its control could be found in even the most respectable, widely-read newspapers, using coded but legible terms. For example, in October 1908, around 15% of advertising in the nationalist Le Matin—one of the highest-circulation daily newspapers at the time—comprised ads for pharmacies offering variations on a “precious formula for the arrival of menstruation” and for midwives offering discreet services for women whose periods were

---

68 On average 20 to 21 ads per day.
late (many marked by the word lateness [retards]) [Fig. 2.2]. Such ads were so visible that Marie Roger, president of the Midwives’ General Trade Union, felt the need to defend the profession against “unflattering suppositions.” Under Roger’s direction, the union pledged to eliminate these ads and restore honor to the name of the profession.\footnote{See Marie Roger, “Honorons notre profession,” La Sage-femme, Oct. 5, 1908, 150–151.}

\textbf{Figure 2.2:} Midwife and Pharmaceutical Ads.  
\textit{Le Matin}, October 20, 1908  
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Advertisements assumed to mask the sale of abortifacients and abortion services shared back-page space with the coded language of the sexual classifieds.\footnote{Unlike in English newspapers, advertising (both classified and unclassified) in France was largely relegated to the back pages of the newspaper, which were treated as a “wall” where advertisers could
October 6, 1908 in *Le Supplément*, alongside ten larger ads for midwives and pharmacists offering solutions for “lateness,” eight for sex toys and/or condoms, and a handful each for sexually-themed books and cures for venereal disease, there were over eighty classified ads offering courses or lessons, forty-three of which were for English lessons (compared with only thirteen people offering jobs or looking for work). While English teachers and tutors may have placed some of these ads, prostitutes likely placed the grand majority. The author of a pseudo-scientific work on the psychology of flagellation argued that “dames, masseuses, professors, [and] female private tutors,” who worked outside the authorized brothels, were known to “make themselves known to the public through advertisements, which the initiated decipher with no difficulty.”

The key? The word English, which was meant to conjure up the practice of whipping in the English education system. With this key in hand and the sexual tinge of the bigger ads at the bottom of the page, these eighty ads begin to look much less innocent, especially those that offered a “strict method, unique in Paris” or promised instruction by a “strict lady.”

In the back pages—as we saw above in the case of Colette’s Claudine novels—language was eroticized and given multiple meanings so that nothing was as it seemed; any sexual inclination could be satisfied and the fruit of any transgression easily disposed of if one but

---


73 *Gil Blas*, Mar. 27, 1908.
knew the code (and had the cash). With the newspaper as vector, commercialized vice seemed to be spreading across the social body.

**Back Page Ads, Code, and Disorder in the Courts**

By the first decade of the twentieth century, judges had begun to learn the codes. While mass circulation newspapers like *Le Journal* were called out by legislators like Bérenger, illustrated journals—often described as humorous, pornographic, or *légers*, as if they were women of easy virtue—bore the brunt of the crackdown. The bourgeois man or woman, the midwife, and the high-circulation newspaper were largely spared embarrassing court cases, not least because they could afford to settle (or, according to some, bribe their way) out of court. The prostitute and the pornographer were easier targets and their trials could teach others a lesson without drawing them into the limelight. One of these “easier” targets, brothel madame (and former private teacher and nun) Eugénie Guillou was found guilty in 1906 for placing an ad for a furnished room in an illustrated journal (her ads in the daily press were not prosecuted). However, as we saw above, the case against Guillou nonetheless raised serious concerns among artists and other cultural critics, and, to a lesser extent, jurists themselves who were careful to insist on the necessity of acting with caution so as “not to stifle the French—if not *gauleois* [meaning both Gaulish and bawdy]—spirit through excessive

---

74 For an example of the classification of illustrated journals as “légers,” see San Yago, *La Flagellation telle qu’elle est*, 49. In the 1920s, *Frou-frou* took up this description, calling itself “le plus léger des journaux gais et le plus gai des journaux légers.” *Nomenclature des journaux, revues, périodiques français* (Paris: L’Argus de la presse, 1926–1927), 113.

75 I have found records that suggest that higher circulation newspapers were more likely to settle things outside of court. See BB 18 6167, 44 BL 34; AN BB 18 6167, 44 BL 21, AN.

rigor, while still sufficiently protecting morality against excesses of the pen or the pencil.”77
In 1908, another case provided an opportunity to reinforce this shaky precedent—with its uncertain distinction between the sex that defined Frenchness and that which undermined it—and to facilitate the enforcement of the 1898 law.

Anyone perusing the illustrated Le Frou-Frou on June 1, 1907 might have passed over a small ad that read: “English and Persian massage, Demarcy, 23, rue Richer, staircase on left, 1st floor.”78 Likewise for ads that ran in Vieux Marcheur on June 7, 1907 promising that “no case resists the treatment of Dr. Jefson, infallible against all lateness or suppression of the period [...] no matter what caused the suppression” and offering a “new method of intimate protection [préervation] for use by both sexes.”79 Officials did not ignore them, and, on March 21, 1908, the question of these advertisements’ moral transgression was put before the Criminal Court of First Instance of the Seine, a misdemeanor court. In this trial, the manager and the director of L’Amour, Frou Frou and other illustrated journals—54 year-old Eugène Victor and 45 year-old Henri Bachmann respectively—were joined on the defendants’ bench by a number of women who had played a part in the circulation of potentially immoral advertising, including Jeanne Demarest, a 37 year-old landlady who lived at the address advertised by “Demarcy”; Clotilde Demaret Charpentier, a 35 year-old tenancière of an apartment-based brothel who had placed the Demarcy ad; and ten other women, including

77 D1U6 935, July 31, 1906, Archives de Paris (AP); Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 133–135. On the relationship between galanterie and French national identity, or “French spirit” as it is put here, see Viala, La Galanterie, 25, 374–375.
79 D1U6 995, Tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, Mar. 21, 1908, AP.
Georgette Caqué, a 27 year-old seamstress and mother of two, Marie Barre, a 44 year-old registered prostitute, and Marguerite Montague, a 34 year-old masseuse. In this case, moral reformers like Senator Bérénger did not get the clear-cut legal reinforcement they hoped for. During the proceedings, many of the women—more than half of whom were registered participants in the sex trade, either as prostitutes or madams—confessed to placing ads with the intention of “attracting to [their] apartment a clientele looking for debauchery.” Nonetheless, the accused were liberated from custody because, as the court put it, even if these ads were, “in their pursued intention, contrary to bonnes moeurs, given that this was [corroborated by] information and confessions from most of the accused,” the ads were not immoral “in text or form and thus do not violate the law as it currently stands.” The ads manifestly facilitated prostitution, but this did not make them obscene in the eyes of the law. The court did recognize that these were precisely the kind of ads that Bérénger lamented were falling through the cracks in the law. Ironically, they used his 1904 speech to the Senate to argue that prosecution of such ads, which were not obscene in their text or form, would have to wait for the passage of a new law rectifying this legal lacuna.

Likewise, the court argued that if the ads for abortion and contraceptive devices, judged separately from the ads for massage at the prosecutor’s request, could “offend certain sensitivities and suggest appalling ideas, they are nonetheless of a hygienic and medical character” and as such could not be seen as contrary to bonnes moeurs. In both instances,
the prosecutor, who decided to try the previously separated cases together when bringing them before the Court of Appeals, contested the idea that such ads were “hygienic or medical” in nature.\textsuperscript{85} The illegality of non-obscene and non-explicit advertisements for prostitution and for contraceptive and abortive goods—all related to women’s sexuality outside of prescribed conjugal or maternal roles—would be decided together.

On July 13, 1908, Paris’s Court of Appeals reversed both of the earlier judgments, finding the ads to violate the law, but not without a caveat: they stated that advertisements “inserted in newspapers cannot be considered criminal, no matter what their immoral intention might be, if nothing in their composition indicates this goal or awakens debauched ideas.” In other words, the appellate court agreed with the lower court’s reasoning, but found that a guilty verdict was nonetheless justified in this case because the advertisements under consideration were of a nature such that it was “impossible to be mistaken about the character of licentious provocation which a simple reading of the text reveals to the esprit of the public.”\textsuperscript{86} More specifically, in the first decision, the judges ruled that ads for “Persian and English massage” were not hygienic ventures, but rather promoted “immoral distractions” through prostitution. The newspaper’s staff, the judgement asserted, was conscious of the true nature of these advertisements when they accepted them for publication. The second decision argued that: 1) ads for “infallible” treatments for late periods were in fact an “undisguised provocation to perform abortive maneuvers”; 2) an ad for a device that protects against the consequences of sexual intercourse “constitutes an encouragement of immoral practices”; and 3) all the ads under consideration intended to “awaken unhealthy ideas in

\textsuperscript{85} “Paris, 13 juill. 1908,” Dalloz, 1908, 277.

\textsuperscript{86} “Paris, 13 juill. 1908,” Dalloz, 1908, 275.
the public’s imagination and to encourage l’esprit de débauche.” According to the court, these ads could “awaken debauched ideas” simply by being read.

Proving this, however, required different strategies for the different ads. The judge argued that ads for remedies for late periods were written clearly enough that everyone would know that they were in fact offering abortion services. But in the case of ads for massage—a practice that was, in other settings, a legitimate, therapeutic one—a close reading of the context was required to “prove” their immoral nature. It was not enough to rely on the fact that, for many contemporaries, a maison de massage was a “synonym for a maison d’immoralité” (an idea that was a source of great frustration for practitioners and proponents of medical massage, whose numbers were increasing in precisely this moment).

Nor was the fact that prostitutes and madams had been using “massage” as a code since the early 1890s enough to prove the immorality of an ad for massage.

While it could not on its own serve as legal proof, the very act of advertising massage services seemed to be enough to arouse suspicion. Even the promise of “licensed” massage services did not render an ad legitimate: Nelly Maulleau’s mention of her diploma in her ad for “mass. arabe p.j.d. dipl.” or “Arab massage by licensed young woman,” did not render her ad above suspicion.

It certainly didn’t help any masseuse’s argument for legitimacy that massage was not state-regulated until 1946, in response to the presence of clandestine

---

89 For one early example, see “La traite des blanches — le salon de massage de la rue Léonie,” Le Matin, Feb. 9, 1892.
90 Mar. 21, 1908, D1U6 995, AP.
prostitutes operating as massage practitioners, the number of which seemed likely to swell with the closure of state-regulated brothels that same year. Before 1946, then, diplomas were solely issued by “shrewd industrialists” taking advantage of the situation to make money through diploma mills or by savvy doctors looking to exercise some control over this virgin territory. It was thus easy enough for women selling sex to obtain a diploma as a way to cover and facilitate their activities. Legitimacy and respectability were elusive for any woman looking to make a living as a (medical or hygienic) masseuse.

Strengthened by the ambivalent moral status of massage, the judge supported his argument that the advertised massage was not “hygienic” by presenting as evidence 1) the masseuses’ confessions of their debauched intentions; 2) the choice to place the ads in “notoriously licentious” papers, which indicated that the ads were not addressed to readers who were interested in medicine or health; 3) the fact that the ads were “sufficiently explicit”

---


93 A few decades later, the police noted that “if the (female) employees generally have some kind of diploma obtained from an unqualified institute, it isn’t rare to also find them registered” as prostitutes. Report re: annonces des journaux, Le Commissaire de Police Priolet à Monsieur le Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP. Having such a diploma made it possible to advertise in certain classified sections. For example, Le Supplément inserted a notice that they reserved the right to refuse to publish any ad for massage that wasn’t accompanied by a diploma. Le Supplément, Nov. 30, 1911.

to disabuse readers of the idea that the massage was of a “therapeutic nature,” manifested in the care taken, “in accordance with the customs of courtesans [femmes galantes], to specify the location of her apartment.”

In this way, the judge argued that contextual analysis allowed the law to read between the lines, although he does not discuss how such a practice would actually fit into the terms of the law. Moving quickly between this enumeration of contextual clues and an insistence on the fact that a “simple reading” of the ads spread immorality, the judge overstated this advertising’s legibility, ignoring its use of code and papering over the interpretive problems reading them presented. It was not the supposed immoral thoughts inspired by ads for “massage” or “lateness,” but rather women’s bodies and their “immoral acts” that made this judgment, which flirted with an impingement on press freedom, necessary.

**From Imagination to Flesh**

Some judges nonetheless thought that this interpretation of the law was not expansive enough. In early 1911, newspapers reported on an important judgment—against ads placed in a catalogue by the neo-Malthusian Dr. Alberto Liptay—that “could restrain the flood of anti-conceptional propaganda.” The Criminal Court of First Instance of the Seine ruled that “by suppression of the risk of pregnancy, anti-conceptional advertising leads to libertinism and debauchery; and that is why it is contraire aux bonnes moeurs.” The law, they argued, “did not solely want to reach the obscene text, the expression, that is to say the form;

---

95 Cour de Paris, chambre correctionnelle, July 13, 1908, D3U9 258, AP.
[...] it also wanted to reach the results, that is to say, the content.”98 Unlike the earlier decisions, this verdict did not argue that coded ads were textually obscene or immoral. The court instead argued explicitly that the ads would “break the last resistances of the young girl, still held back by the fear of becoming a mother, [and that, as such,] anti-conceptional propaganda, no matter what its form and no matter what its pretexts, clearly constitutes an offense.”99 Here, the immorality of the ad lay in the “libertinism and debauchery” that reproductive freedom facilitated. The judgment clearly condemned women’s sexuality untethered from reproduction. It conjured sexually free female bodies and found that the “results” of the non-obscene ads were reason enough to prosecute them using obscenity laws.

Dr. Liptay, meanwhile, was outraged by the conflation of his neo-Malthusian politics with pornography and prostitution, a position that won him defenders in the House of Deputies.100 Like other neo-Malthusians, Liptay insisted that, far from leading to sexual anarchy and social disintegration, the promotion of reproductive choice would allow the working poor to shape their socio-economic destinies, thereby strengthening France over the course of generations. In the face of his conviction, he released a book entitled Pour et contre Malthus that asked the “Holy Bérengist Inquisition” whether “Liberty of the Press exist[s] under the free, egalitarian, fraternal Third Republic.”101 Liptay’s pointed question explains why policing advertising proved to be so difficult. Many politicians and moralists argued that

100 Socialist Deputy Anatole Sixte-Quenin argued that the courts should wait until there was a law against neo-Malthusian propaganda to convict men like Liptay rather than going after them on charges of pornography. See “Reprise de la discussion du projet de loi relatif à l’amnistie,” JO Chambre, Mar. 28, 1913, 1258–1259. For a discussion of neo-Malthusian outrage over the association of their ideas with prostitution, see Cova, Féminismes et néo-malthusianismes, 77–78.
press advertisements—and especially ads for prostitution and abortion—were evidence that there was an excess of freedom during the Belle Epoque. But would advertising’s repression in the absence of explicit immorality endanger press freedom? Jurists, alongside newspaper editors and advertisers, remained concerned that it might.

This hesitancy was on display in a series of unexpected decisions in 1910 and 1911 delivered by the Cour de cassation. In these cases, France’s highest court decided that the judiciary could not police the goals, intentions, or potential results of an advertisement, even when the advertisement explicitly explained how to insert a contraceptive device into a woman’s body. Between November 1910 and November 1911 (both before and after the lower court’s decision against Liptay) the Cour de cassation struck down four convictions charging neo-Malthusian writings and advertisements for contraceptive devices or abortifacients—which included no “obscene descriptions”—with illegal immorality. The court ruled that “advertising substances, medicine, remedies, or instruments destined either to procure an abortion or to protect from fecundation does not in itself constitute the crime of outrage aux bonnes moeurs.” After much equivocation, this seemed to be a firm decision that advertisements had to be manifestly obscene to be legally immoral. These decisions were unexpected and out of step with their moment. The immediate pre-war years, marked by rising political tensions within Europe, and especially between France and Germany, nonetheless saw widespread international agreement where sexual morality was concerned.

102 Ronsin, La Grève des ventres, 139–140.
In May 1910, two multilateral treaties were signed in Paris: the Agreement for the Suppression of the Circulation of Obscene Publications and the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic.¹⁰⁴ Starting that same year, France witnessed an exponential increase in the prosecution of obscene literature.¹⁰⁵

Gustave le Poittevin, a Paris Court of Appeals counselor and historian of the free press, provides one possible way to understand the Cour de cassation’s decisions. He wrote that the various judgements since 1908, which had determined that ads for contraceptives were immoral, represented a confusion between outrage aux bonnes moeurs and outrage à la morale publique. An ad for contraceptives “can indirectly provoke debauchery, but this is only the implementation of a theory that is contrary to public morality,” not an outrage aux bonnes moeurs.¹⁰⁶ This was a problem for republican jurists, given that outrage à la morale publique was associated with authoritarian press legislation: it had consciously been excluded from the press law of 1881. The Cour de cassation’s decisions thus attempted to reinstate the division between the two. Le Poittevin did not say this lightly. He was not a proponent of abortion: the same year this case note appeared, he co-authored a work about criminal abortion called A Social Wound.¹⁰⁷ Nor did he support press advertising. In 1901, he had argued that the press was not free because newspapers depended on outside revenue.¹⁰⁸ He nonetheless recognized the danger posed by the prosecution of ads that were only immoral in the sense

---

¹⁰⁵ Stora-Lamarre, L’Enfer de la IIIe République, 203, 206.
¹⁰⁸ Le Poittevin, La Liberté de la presse depuis la Révolution. See also Baker, Advertising and a Democratic Press.
that they were contrary to social interests.\textsuperscript{109} While abortion and immoral advertising were a problem for republican morality, undue repression (even when it involved women’s sexuality) might just be worse. On the cusp of the Great War, the highest court of the Republic ruled that individual liberty applied, even when women’s sexuality was involved.

In this they were out of step with their time. The backlash came quickly, in word if not always in deed. On April 4, 1912, Prefect of Police Louis Lépine signed a regulation forbidding apartment-based brothels from engaging in any form of advertising.\textsuperscript{110} Also in the early 1910s, a bill to “combat depopulation,” which took direct aim at advertisements for abortion services, was under discussion in the Senate.\textsuperscript{111} These provisions eventually found their way into the infamous law of July 31, 1920, which prohibited incitement to abortion and propaganda for contraceptives, thereby making it illegal to advertise or otherwise promote (female) birth control and abortion.\textsuperscript{112} Where advertising was concerned, the law punished both “incitement to abortion in all of its forms and notably via advertising, which makes it possible to attract clients to back-room abortionists [les officines d’avortement]” and “the sale or placement for sale of secret remedies [remèdes secrets], designated by their labels

\textsuperscript{110} “Règlement du 4 avril 1912 concernant les maisons de rendez-vous,” DB 408, APP.
\textsuperscript{111} It was once again Senator Bérenger who insisted on the addition of advertising to the bill. “Suite de la 1re délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 8, 1913, 57. For a report on the continuing discussion of this bill, see Le Figaro, “La Dépopulation,” Oct. 12, 1916.
\textsuperscript{112} Bérenger died in 1915, never to see the passage of the law he helped engineer. On the passage of this law and post-war fears about depopulation, see Marie Louise Roberts, Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 93–119.
or by advertisements as possessing specific properties that prevent pregnancy.”113 Whether
the ad was “obscene” or strictly medical no longer mattered, it just had to relate to women’s
reproductive freedom.114 The natalists, at their height following the horrific loss of life during
World War I, bypassed arguments of obscenity and found a way to police women’s bodies
that had fewer repercussions for the individual rights of the (male) citizen.

**Authoritarian Drift: Toward the Code de la famille**

The repressive law of 1920 silenced the neo-Malthusian movement (for a few years at least),
but the question of the control of immoral advertising raged on around the figure of the
“prostitute,” and, to a lesser extent, the “homosexual.”115 During World War I, the military
government had instituted a regime of police censorship in the classifieds, citing how the use
of code could make it a haven for espionage.116 Many “immoral” ads could not pass new
standards of verification and *Le Journal* eliminated its “marriages” and “personal
correspondence” columns entirely.117 Once the visa requirement was lifted, however,
questionable ads returned in force, especially in illustrated weeklies, which managed to

---

113 Guillaume Poulle, “Rapport fait au nom de la Commission chargée d’examiner la proposition
de loi, adoptée par la Chambre des Députés, tendant à réprimer la provocation à l’avortement et la
propagande anticonceptionnelle,” *Impressions* 397, Sénat, Annexe au procès-verbal de la 2e séance
du 29 juillet 1920, 2.

114 Male condoms remained legal, ostensibly to prevent venereal disease, while women’s contraceptive
products such as diaphragms and contraceptive sponges were illegal. Cova, *Féminismes et néo-
malthusianismes*, 132.

115 For example, new concerns arose about ads for male masseurs, which were assumed to be cover
for homosexual prostitutes, alongside the older concern for ads for female masseuses (female
prostitutes). For example, see Georges-Anquetil, “C’en est trop!: la publicité des masseurs et des

116 Note, Ministère de la guerre, Cabinet du Ministre, Section Presse, Feb. 25, 1917, BA 1712, APP.

117 “Au Conseil de guerre: une déposition mouvementée du colonel Goubet, les petites annonces et
le cryptogramme,” *Le Journal*, Apr. 20, 1919. On the formalities required to obtain a visa, see BA
1712, APP.
weather the storm of war better than the great Belle Époque dailies.\textsuperscript{118} In response to this return, and empowered by the advertisements’ concentration in more explicitly sexual periodicals rather than symbolically important mass dailies, new regulations were put into place. On March 23, 1926, the Paris police prefect issued an order prohibiting houses of prostitution from placing “\textit{advertising of any kind}.”\textsuperscript{119} The most blatant ads disappeared, but coded ones remained.

And so, the crusade to combat them continued. Between 1926 and 1931, new jurisprudence reversed prewar decisions that privileged press freedom over press morality. In response to the sexual liberalization of the postwar \textit{années folles}, embodied in the sexualized and scantily clad music hall performances of Kiki de Montparnasse and Josephine Baker, morality was increasingly upheld in court. In 1926, the editors of one of the first gay journals in France—dedicated to defending “the homosexual” and to showing “inverts” that they are healthy and normal and need not “repress their desires” to conform to a “morality created by heterosexuals”—were convicted for \textit{outrage aux bonnes moeurs} by the Parisian Court of Appeals and sentenced to three months in prison.\textsuperscript{120} Under the shadow of these legal


\textsuperscript{119} “Question des annonces licencieuses de certains journaux et publications,” BA 2242, APP. For the text of the Mar. 23, 1926 decree “concerning \textit{maisons de tolérance},” see DB 851, APP. For the decree, issued on the same date, imposing these restrictions on \textit{maisons de rendez-vous}, see DB 408, APP.

proceedings, personal ads, such as one for a man looking to “get in touch with a young man, 20 to 30 years old, who loves literature, for strolls,” had completely disappeared from this short-lived journal by the second issue.121 Everyone agreed that there was nothing about Inversions, from its articles to its personals, that could be considered “obscene” and Paris’s public prosecutor’s report on the question stated that “a strict application of the jurisprudence set by the Cour de cassation would not authorize charging anyone.” And yet, the prosecutor considered that “the publication of this justification [apologie] of homosexuality is so ‘scandalous and dangerous’ that it ‘is suitable to again call on the jurisprudence to come down’ on this question.”122 And come down they did. This journal, which, by its own declaration endeavored to connect “homosexuals in every country,” was declared “an agent of active propaganda for the development of pederasty” and as such was “not only an affront to morality” but also deemed to be “propaganda susceptible to compromise, by its neo-Malthusian tendencies, the future of the race.”123 Men too could be sanctioned if they did not direct their sexual impulses in heterosexual, reproductive directions.

Camille Spiess, a right-wing anarchist sexologist, asserted that what had happened to Inversions was “a serious infringement on human dignity, the freedom of the press and of

---

121 Oct. 27, 1926, D3U9 465, AP.
122 Note, Ministry of Justice, Dec. 24, 1924, BB 18 6174, 44 BL 303, AN.
thought,” but this critique fell on deaf ears. In 1928, the Cour de cassation itself overturned a case against coded ads for prostitution whose verdict rested on its own earlier finding that such ads, if devoid of obscenity, remained legal. According to this new interpretation, ads could violate anti-pornography laws “even if said texts [...] present no character of obscenity.” Ads no longer had to be obscene to qualify as an outrage aux bonnes moeurs: immoral intention sufficed. After this long-awaited reversal, moralists celebrated how “all ambiguity disappeared” from the legislation of public morality: “immoral classified ads” and advertisements for apartment-based brothels were “definitively forbidden.”

In his analysis of the decision, René Savatier, a jurist and professor of law in Poitiers, applauded the Cour de cassation for this “important” and “justified” solution, which he credited with building something “new in jurisprudence and undoubtedly larger in scope” than anything that had come before. After many years of equivocation, immoral ads “of a


126 Minutes of the General Assembly of the Société d’action contre la licence des rues, Dec. 28, 1928, Documents éphémères, Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris; “Ce que disent les journaux: lutte pour la moralité,” *La Croix*, Apr. 26, 1930. Carolyn Dean reads a similar case against obscene classifieds from 1929 to argue that “the criterion for pornography’s solidity was less the publicity given to sexuality in general than ‘unnatural’ public sex and prostitution (here, in classified ads).” This, however, raises questions that cannot be answered through her sole focus on pornography and homosexuality, namely about how the definition of natural (hetero)sexuality necessary to national vitality that she defines as emerging in this moment (in contradistinction to perverse sexuality) is a very restricted one that no longer includes men’s recourse to prostitution. If “pornography” includes all sexual relationships besides “married heterosexuality” then the (hetero) “sexual liberation” she charts seems to do more to restrict male sexuality in the name of “sustaining the social body’s integrity” than she accounts for, in part, due to the lack of sustained engagement with the history of prostitution. Dean, *The Frail Social Body*, 58–59, 218–219.
nature to provoke debauchery” were firmly included in obscenity law. Together with the law of 1920, the judiciary could now legitimately expulse any ad facilitating autonomy from sexual norms from the press, no matter how coded it might be and no matter how much this would hurt small newspapers (observers estimated that these papers would lose over a million francs in revenues each year, with one journal alone losing more than 500,000 francs—more than half of its advertising revenue—per year). A number of papers quickly went under.

Unsurprisingly, given how much money was at stake, this censorship was only partially successful. Coded ads could never completely be rooted out and the Brigade mondaine (the vice squad) also undertook raids of businesses that placed “suspicious” classified advertisements. In one case, ads for a supposed “fashion house” led readers to an apartment at which a made-up woman opened the door, asked no questions, and ushered the undercover investigator in, past a pseudo-workshop, to a room where “a single bed served as a refuge for the movements of two women and four men, all naked.” The police were working overtime to find clandestine sex through the classifieds—to prove sex was still hiding there.

---

127 “CRIM. 23 juin et 21 juill. 1928,” Dalloz, 162. This language of advertisements “provoking debauchery” had first been proposed in Bérenger’s unsuccessful bill on prostitution and outrages aux bonnes moeurs in 1895. “Délibération sur la proposition de loi relative à la prostitution et aux outrages aux bonnes moeurs,” JO Sénat, June 18, 1895, 690.

128 In his analysis, Savatier explains how the new interpretation of the laws of 1882/1898/1907 regarding outrages aux bonnes moeurs will work together with the law of 1920. “CRIM. 23 juin et 21 juill. 1928,” Dalloz, 161-163.

129 “Ce que disent les journaux: lutte pour la moralité,” La Croix, Apr. 26, 1930.

130 Report, Priolet to the director of the Police Judiciaire, Oct. 16, 1929, BA 1690, APP.

131 Pro-natalists also developed plans to create a police brigade that would control illegal abortionists by finding their addresses in the back pages. “Le Péril de la dénatalité et la répression de l’avortement,
As administrative powers worked together to eject sex from the back pages, the executive branch was preparing a new code that would solidify the new jurisprudence. Fifty-eight years to the day after the passage of freedom of the press, the Code de la famille (decree-law of July 29, 1939) was proclaimed in the name of repopulating France. It fixed women to their place in the heterosexual family by promoting stay-at-home motherhood and large families. The Code implemented its goals using the carrot of financial incentives and bonuses as well as using the stick of legal repression. More specifically, it built on the laws of 1882 (on outrage aux bonnes moeurs) and 1920 (on contraceptive and abortive propaganda) in a manner that had not previously been possible, aiming to eliminate advertisements placed by abortionists and people offering sexual services (paid or unpaid). 132 Article 96 of the Family Code stated that all “commercial advertising, in whatever form it takes, concerning pregnancy or childbirth, either overtly or in a disguised manner, is forbidden.” And article 120 punished “whoever will have publicly called attention to an occasion for debauchery or will have published an ad or a correspondence of this kind, whatever the terms.” And article 120 punished “whoever will have publicly called attention to an occasion for debauchery or will have published an ad or a correspondence of this kind, whatever the terms.” 133 As contemporary legal scholar Jacques Grumbach put it, the goal was to “put a stop to the publication of advertisements with multiple meanings and to legally control, at the same time, prostitutes’ activities.” 134

exposé fait le 7 Janvier 1939 à la 1re brigade régionale de police mobile par Fernand Boverat,” (Paris: Éditions de l’Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation), BB 18 6176, AN.
132 This legal lacuna, allowing “midwife” ads to fall through the cracks of both obscenity law and the law of 1920, was lamented by the Procureur de la République in a letter to the Procureur Général, Dec. 1, 1936, BB 18 6176, AN.
134 Jacques Grumbach, La Répression de la traite des femmes: étude du droit français et des accords internationaux (Lyon: M. Audin, 1940), 155.
In the summer of 1940, the director of the Brigade mondaine boasted that the article of the Family Code concerning immoral advertising had been followed to the letter, that “there is no doubt that the results obtained have been considerable,” to the clear financial detriment of mass dailies (such as Le Journal, Paris-Soir, and L’Intransigeant) and illustrated weeklies alike—not to mention the women who had depended on these ads. However, like every measure discussed thus far, it did not resolve the central ambiguity of coded advertising: namely, that investigation was required to know when an ad masked an “occasion for debauchery.” It merely reinforced the pertinence of police intelligence to legal decisions about the immorality of a text.

The police could not follow up on every ad. Republican legislators, prosecutors, and jurists never figured out how to use obscenity law to put an end to the problem posed by encrypted ads. The Family Code was a blunt instrument for a complex problem—a rhetorical and ideological instantiation of the power to reach obscene bodies through non-obscene texts. It created a situation in which newspapers could either refuse crucial advertising revenue from “questionable” sources and risk going into the red or accept the advertisements and run the risk of conviction, with its attendant prison sentence and fine. But the dividing line between the questionable and the legitimate was never fixed. In the virtually un-closable gaps in the laws regulating morality in the press, illicit entrepreneurship and interaction continued to evolve in the black and white columns of the newspapers’ back pages. Newspaper advertising made it exceedingly hard to control “anti-social” bodies. Nearly everyone was willing to voice disapproval of the widespread use of classified advertisements

---

135 Report, Police Commissioner, Head of the Brigade Mondaine, to the Director of the Police Judiciaire, May 1, 1940, BA 2244, APP.
to promote commercial sex, but the interstitial nature of these ads—between public and private, text and flesh—made it possible for advertisers to continue to evade the law despite concerted efforts to close loopholes.

The importance of the newspaper in a democratic context long served as a stumbling block for attempts to regulate individual readers’ uses of the back pages. In the classifieds, sexual advertising—at once disembodied and inappropriately embodied, saying nothing and saying too much—jammed the machinery of the law, leading to decades of legislative and judicial equivocation about how to respond. The enduring loopholes left in legislation intended to fence in the lawless frontier of coded advertising can be seen as protecting press freedom and access to the classifieds. It was precisely in the space of possibility opened up by these loopholes that people carved out precarious, independent lives outside of, parallel to, or in tandem with dominant forms of social control, including the brothel system, heterosexuality, reproductivity, and monogamy.

In the next chapter we will turn from legal codes and their loopholes to the emergence and proliferation of narratives about the “white slave trade,” looking at the problem posed by the fact that the classifieds were imagined as a central site of danger. If the idea of the “white slave trade” empowered the state as a protector of women (with restrictive effects for women’s mobility and economic opportunities), it also rendered it vulnerable to the critique that the republican free press was a threat to French morality. As we will see, the government’s alliance with and imbrication in the culture of the press left open certain avenues for maneuver in the pages of the mass press, which benefited from occult government protection. Whether used by or against republican officials, the association of sex trafficking with classified advertising
contributed yet another building block to the creation of the immoral classifieds and the delegitimization of women’s classified commerce.
Chapter Three: The Trafficker’s Accomplice

In 1903, feminist journalist Séverine imagined a new allegory of the press, that pillar of the Third Republican project. This allegory was not, she was careful to explain, a Marianne, not a symbol of the ideal Republic—she wore no Phrygian cap or antique clothes, sang no revolutionary songs.¹ Instead, this was a symbol of a debased Republic, taking the form of the deceptively sweet-faced old woman Breton, the only woman convicted in the big white slavery trial of that year, who had procured women by looking after sick orphans in the hospital and then finding them “work” once they were well enough to leave.² She was dressed in a modern style, with “pockets full of gold, a pile of gold under her feet, nails stained with ink, and a pen between her fingers.” This press, “la Presse entremetteuse,” or the Press Procuress, shamelessly completed and profited from the machinations of sex traffickers.³

From the 1880s through at least the 1930s, stories about the so-called “white slave trade” frequently rocked Europe with fears that were increasingly centered on white women trafficked against their will (by swarthy men more often than sweet-faced old ladies) to lives of sexual slavery in brothels in cities as far-flung as Constantinople, Shanghai, or Buenos Aires, where they were forced to service men of color.⁴ In light of renewed fears about sex trafficking in the twenty-first century, there has been a rise in interest in these early twentieth-

¹ On the figure of Marianne in the republican imaginary, see Maurice Agulhon, Marianne au combat: l’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880 (Paris, Flammarion, 1979).
⁴ For a discussion of this racial dynamic, see Camiscioli, Reproducing the French Race, esp. ch. 4.
century “white slave crusades.” For many scholars, the newspaper and its sensational reporting on abducted, tricked, and seduced women lies at the heart of historical discussions and occupies a central role as medium for the proliferation of this social imaginary.

While newspapers were undoubtedly central to the dispersion of this sensational narrative, and certainly profited from it, this is not why Séverine described the press as a procurer or pimp—she was, after all, helping to build the lucrative myth of trafficking. Instead, she was more concerned with the newspapers’ back page and with the role newspaper advertising, and want ads in particular, played as bait in trafficking schemes. If the press had pockets full of gold, it was because it was literally acting as a procurer by placing the classified ads that traffickers used to target vulnerable female readers.

The classifieds were not the only way that traffickers were imagined to find their “victims.” Just as frequently, dangerous men were feared to operate around bureaux de

---


6 Concern about international trafficking organizations using advertising to trick women and girls into prostitution started early, even predating the first international congress on the white slave trade, which took place in London in 1899. The Ve Congrès pénitentiaire international, held in Paris in 1895, adopted the following resolution proposed by Senator René Bérenger: “L’embauchage par réclame ou par fraude pour la prostitution, l’emploi des mêmes moyens pour contraindre une personne même majeure à se livrer à la prostitution doivent être sévèrement réprimés, avec aggravation de la peine en cas de récidive.” Louis Layrac, “De l’excitation à la débauche (Loi du 3 Avril 1903), Thèse pour le doctorat,” (Bordeaux: Imprimerie commerciale et industrielle, 1904), 27.
placement, where they would target women desperate for any kind of work; at train stations, where they would “help” young provincial women new to the city; or in dance halls, where they would exploit their charms to seduce women.\(^7\) The classifieds, however, differed from these other methods in at least two important ways. First, in each of these other cases, the endangered woman had already left the safety of her father’s house and taken her chances in the public sphere. As Elisa Camiscioli has shown, stories about the white slave trade and the national and international trafficking of women (many of which ran in popular newspapers) presented “public space as treacherous and corrupting,” a depiction that sought to “return [women’s] reproductive capital and affective labor to the family and the nation.”\(^8\)

The newspaper, however, was, somewhat ironically, a “public space” that could quietly make its way into the paternal home, into the hands of even the most innocent, honest, non-public women [Fig. 3.1].\(^9\) Intent as it was on enforcing somatic discipline and immobilization, the system of “preserving” these young women in danger—which historian Alain Corbin has aptly described as “halfway between carceral theory and educational theory”—could not successfully guard against the mobility of the newspaper.\(^10\)

---

\(^7\) *La Traite des blanches et prostitution*, Temoignages de notre temps, no 4, publication bimestrielle, édité par la société anonyme ‘les illustrés français,’ Dec. 1933, 69, BA 1689, APP.

\(^8\) Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, 100.

\(^9\) It is worth mentioning that this argument is at odds with Molly McGregor Watson’s assertion that white slavery narratives portray women who meet traffickers on the street as more innocent than girls who responded to false ads, “who did not have to be coerced or tricked into leaving France, but who left of their own desire.” While William Monarchville, whom she cites on this question, certainly made this distinction in his *La Traite des blanches et le Congrès de Londres* (1900), I am not convinced this was a widely-held belief. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case. Watson, “The Trade in Women,” 46–47.

Second, and perhaps even more disturbingly, the classifieds complicated the stakes of the white slavery narrative, calling into question the foreignness, seediness, and general other-ness of the purported danger. As we have seen, the free press was imagined to be a pillar of the Third Republic. It was thus very grave indeed if it was a primary tool for the international traffic in women, seen to be a stain on France’s honor and a drain on her national vigor. It was a significant rhetorical problem if (white) Frenchmen—and not just any

**Figure 3.1:** “—What if something terrible happens in this far-off place? asked the poor, worried mother.” Still from the 1932 film, *Danseuses pour Buenos Aires.* Pierre Morlème, “Danseuses pour Buenos Aires avec Dita Parlo,” *Le Film Complet du Jeudi,* Oct. 6, 1932, 3.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France
Frenchmen, but the popular-opinion-driving newspaper owners and editors—were decrying the white slave trade on their front pages while enabling and profiting (economically and in some cases sexually) from French women’s and girls’ purported sexual exploitation on the last. The stated moral economy of the press operated at cross purposes with its economic interests.

In this chapter, I argue that the inclusion of classified ads in narratives about women and girls in sexual danger meant that the “white slave trade,” while successfully bolstering republican control over and domestication of women, nonetheless became a liability for an idealized image of the French Republic. Because the Republic was so closely aligned with the press (both ideologically and, as we will see, literally, with many republican officials working their way up through the ranks of the press), any critique of the morality of the press could potentially harm faith in the morality of the Republic, giving the Republic’s enemies a powerful weapon. The press had long been figuratively associated with prostitution, as exemplified through Balzac’s Illusions Perdues (1837-1843), which describes newspapers as “thought brothels,” lupanars de la pensée, and in which the main character, Lucien de Rubempré, enters into a newspaper’s offices as if entering into a house of prostitution: as a journalist, he prostitutes his poetic talent for money. Classified advertising, however, was more than a metaphor: it was a physical and moral threat. The press of the Belle Époque was the trafficker’s accomplice.

---

12 See the Conclusion for an analysis of the way in which the press (through the persons of newspaper owners and editors) began to be prosecuted in France on pimping charges in the 1990s.
I begin by looking at the role given to classified advertisements in oft-repeated sexual trafficking narratives at the turn of the twentieth century, which ostensibly present the threat as a foreign one. Scholars have shown how these narratives were, in part, a response to European economic expansion, to the importance of waves of predominately male migration out of Eastern Europe (which gave rise to fears that women’s migration was of a prostitutional nature), and to the decline of the brothel (leading pimps to tap into international markets). What has been less clear, however, is how, in France, which was not a significant source of emigrants and had no shortage of women, these stories worked to stabilize what was in fact a deep-seated domestic ambivalence regarding the sexual exploitation of women, girls, and boys, as well as the republican press’s involvement in this commerce. My analysis shows how the domestic nature of the threat to women’s sexual purity haunted these narratives, as the place of the classified ad in popular stories in the press about sex trafficking brought the threat closer to home. As such, these stories served both 1) to alienate women from the work, travel, and other promises inherent in the public square taking shape on the classified page (an arguably intended consequence) and 2) to raise new concerns about the press as corrupting force, a minefield of traps set to lure women from their homes into lives of debauchery (a largely unintended consequence).

If the narrative of the white slave trade as told by republicans already contained within it the building blocks for an anti-republican reading, the Flachon affair, a sensational Belle Époque trial, brought the problem home, both literally and metaphorically. In this scandal, which unfurled in 1911 and 1912, Victor Flachon—the director of the republican,

anti-clerical newspaper *La Lanterne*—and his girlfriend were convicted of purchasing sex from underage girls from a ring of madams and mothers, who, with the help of a republican schoolteacher, operated their racket (referred to by right-wing critics as a form of white slave trade) through the classified pages. In addition to Flachon, who seemed destined for a brilliant career in politics, a prime minister and deputy were also implicated in the case, although they were never called before the court. If they had been, they too would have been prosecuted using the first and second paragraphs of article 334 of the penal code, an article aimed at pimping that had been amended by the law of April 3, 1903 to better confront the “crisis” of white slavery. With the Affaire Flachon, it would be used to protect girls and boys against important republican men, white women pimps, and the children’s own mothers.¹⁴

The Flachon Affair made clear that the ads that mask the most (sexual) danger for women and children were not those at the center of fears about white slavery, targeting naïve women in search of well-paying employment, but were rather those aimed at men and their sexual urges. Danger changed camp, causing the discourse about the classifieds as a site of sexual danger to escape the control of those who sought to wield it for the Republic. Instead, at least for the length of the trial, white slavery became a weapon in the hands of royalist nationalists who, a decade after the Dreyfus Affair, used it to cast the Republic as whore, pimp, homosexual, and Jew, and thus as a sterile, perverting, capitalist threat to the French nation.

---

¹⁴ Responding to an international congress on the white slave trade that took place in Paris in 1902, the law of Apr. 3, 1903 made the recruitment of women into prostitution illegal for all female minors and for non-consenting female adults. René Bérenger, “La Traite des blanches et le commerce de l’obscénité,” *Revue des deux mondes* T58 (July 1910): 82.
Danger Starts at Home

Moral reformers and feminist activists targeted advertising as an insidious threat to domestic virtue because it could so easily penetrate the boundaries of the home. The daily newspaper, as we have seen in previous chapters, was a particularly ubiquitous object, one saturated with symbolic meaning for democracy and generally allowed to pass everywhere, into any hands. While many feared the newspaper as a vector of immorality given its sensational reporting of violent crime in *faits divers*, Senator René Bérenger, the leading campaigner for moral reform at the turn of the century, was convinced that it was in fact the apparent propriety of these inexpensive journals that made them particularly dangerous. Unlike erotic magazines, such newspapers were often carelessly left “lying around the house” such that “its poison can [...] reach even the most attentively preserved innocents.” Séverine agreed: while pure and well-informed women would balk at being approached in the street by a strange man, the newspaper had the power to go where traffickers could not physically go, to slip into the family home and onto the “paternal table,” where it could discreetly target its “virginal prey” with the bait of the “colorless petite annonce.”

Its operation was so quiet that families rarely knew until it was too late. In the course of Séverine’s investigation, distraught parents all found the same thing in the bedrooms of their missing daughters: “a newspaper proposing a brilliant situation in the provinces or abroad.” The feminist and anti-prostitution activist Avril de Sainte-Croix recalled a mother

---

coming to her, asking for help because her daughter had disappeared. Together, they searched her child’s room, where they found an advertisement that had been cut out of a newspaper. “Oh!” Sainte-Croix cried, “those ads, those criminal ads, the damage they do! It’s the trap, it’s the lure; we find them at the origin of almost all of these tragedies!”

Throughout Sèverine’s series of articles on the white slave trade that ran in Le Matin in the first half of 1903—sparked by a campaign in the mass press on the question that was financed by the French Committee to prepare the way for the International Conference for the Repression of the White Slave Trade held in Paris in July 1902—the ads that lead girls to perdition do so by finding their way into the most intimate private spaces. They make their way into girls’ bedrooms in their parents’ homes and into pockets where, we can imagine, they were worried with excited fingers, as the young girls dreamed about what they would do with the easy money promised by the ad.

Sèverine recounted that five young girls caught up in a sex trafficking scheme sending women to brothels in Capetown were all drawn toward danger by the following ad:

“IN A HURRY. Seek. yng. girls for tableaux vivants. Office central Concerts, 55 Fbg-St-Martin, 10 to 12.” How could poor young women help but be drawn in by the promise of fantastic pay for singing or dancing in a music hall in Capetown? Adventure and wealth rolled into one. When the magistrate interrogated an 18-year-old milliner, Henriette V., about how she had learned about the job at the theater in Capetown, she was able to produce the ad, cut from a newspaper. She had already gotten the job, and ostensibly had no need to continue

---

20 Corbin, Women for Hire, 290.
22 “Un infame trafic,” Le Rappel, May 31, 1902, BA 1689, APP.
to carry it around. Perhaps it seemed like a kind of talisman, proof that her life, up to then marked by poverty, was about to change. Her excitement would not necessarily have been diminished had she known that the theater didn’t really exist. Despite efforts to paint her as innocent, as an “unfortunate dupe,” it is hard to believe that there was any confusion about where she was really going and what kind of work she would be expected to perform, given that the traffickers, M. Hayum and M. de Beaucourt, whom she met at the advertised address, took her to a hotel and undressed her to see if she was “well-formed for dancing” and then took her to a doctor who gave her a certificate declaring her free of venereal disease.

The space between the father’s home and the foreign brothel was disturbingly easy to traverse. Even the most protective fathers had trouble guarding against such an easily-overlooked danger. And in some cases, it was even the (supposedly unsuspecting) families themselves that pushed their daughters toward employment via the classifieds; they too were lured by the promise of well-paying work, no matter how many articles warned against ads promising a “brilliant job” abroad.

_Bamboozled?_

Were Henriette V. and other women engaged in transnational channels of sex work really duped? Much recent work on the history of the white slave trade, like critical studies of sex trafficking scares today, has shown that many women were aware that they would be engaging in prostitution at the end of their journey, and that many “trafficked” women had

---

23 H.R., “Au café concert: la traite des blanches (1),” _La Lanterne_, Apr. 27, 1902, BA 1689, APP.
24 “Un infame traffic,” _Le Rappel_, May 31, 1902.
in fact already engaged in sex work before leaving France. They may not have known the conditions in which they would be working and they may not have been as free as they thought they would be upon arrival, but the fact that sexual labor was involved was not part of the surprise. The insistence on innocence, on the effectively illiterate, gullible reader, is, however, interesting, when analyzed alongside the legal rhetoric about reading classified advertising examined in the previous chapter. In the case of ads placed by prostitutes or abortionists, it was assumed that a straightforward reading of a non-obscene text was enough to seize its unspoken or encrypted immoral contents. The intended dupe was not the reader, but rather the law itself, which could not keep up with the innovations of advertisers and their clients.

In the case of sex trafficking as imagined by journalists in the early twentieth century, the advertisement was intended to dupe female readers in order to trick them into willingly walking into the trap of a life of sexual slavery. Faced with veiled ads for prostitution aimed at (presumably male) clients, judges had discovered the key to certain codes, which worked some of the time: women’s first names and the word “unions” were suspicious, so were massages more or less generally, as were “elegantly furnished” pieds-à-terre, especially when rented by the hour. In these cases, though, judicial codebreaking simply made these ads more legible to those who wanted to find such services. The ad as trap would not work the

---

27 Classified advertising was also seen as a conduit for the white slave trade in Britain. See H.G. Cocks, “Peril in the Personals: The Dangers and Pleasures of Classified Advertising in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” Media History 10, no. 1 (2004): 10–14.
28 Séverine, “La Traite des blanches: la presse entremetteuse.”
same way. But how did it work? Did these ads have any giveaways? How could a well-informed reader protect herself from a terrible fate hidden like a mine within an offer for a good job?

As we saw in the case of Henriette V., the heart of narratives about the white slave trade was the fraudulent promise of work as a performer—a singer, dancer, or actress abroad—in the provinces, or further afield, in South America or Africa. Anyone who read the news would have known to watch out for such ads promising easy work and high pay. Unsurprisingly, many ads were nonetheless quite alluring for the thousands of impoverished, unemployed, and undernourished young women, who had spent the last of their money on the purchase of a newspaper and who “each night, feverishly search [the classifieds for] the employment they needed to survive.”29 One journalist informed readers about an ad placed by traffickers that read: “WE seek young women workers for easy, well-remunerated work.” The work turned out to be brothel-based prostitution in the provinces, a fact that, this journalist implied, would have been clear to the young female readers if they hadn’t been blinded by the ad’s promises of wealth and an easy life.30

Those building the narrative of the white slave trade made it clear that avoiding performing arts jobs and their glamorous allure was not enough to protect oneself against the threat of being trafficked. The jurist Paul Appleton saw traffickers’ ads as particularly revolting because they “speculate on women’s misery” by offering well-paid jobs in foreign locales to working-class women looking to engage in legitimate, moral labor.31 The trafficker,

31 Paul Appleton, La Traite des blanches: thèse pour le doctorat (Université de Lyon, faculté de droit) (Paris: Librairie nouvelle de droit et de jurisprudence Arthur Rousseau, 1903), 26–27.
in other words, was targeting women quite distinct from the stereotype of the lazy prostitute, intent on giving herself over to pleasure rather than doing an honest day’s work.\textsuperscript{32} One journalist presented a series of enticing ads typical of the white slaver’s formula, which included offers of work to governesses, teachers, demoiselles de compagnie, and models.\textsuperscript{33} When, on average, twenty to thirty women respond to the ad, the “bandits” could then choose “the youngest, prettiest, most naïve among these little ouvrières who believed in the sincerity of the humbug [boniment].” By the time the “poor children” understand the real intentions of their new employer it’s too late: “the trafficker has caught his prey,” which he will send on to supply the world’s brothels.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Le Matin} was intent on “revealing the underbelly [les dessous] of the traffic,” showing how it worked to trick the country’s most honest women. One article explained how an ad for “a brilliant position for dames de compagnie, school teachers or governesses, willing to leave for Warsaw” led a mass of women from Paris (and those who had spent their life savings to get there from Brittany, the Midi, and the Nord) to present themselves at the newly-constructed offices of an agency run by a young twenty-something woman, who had reportedly sent hundreds of women to Russia in less than eighteen months. That is, before the \textit{Matin} had her operation shuttered. These were not women who were “already more or less defiled [viciées]. No!” These were women whose most prized possession among their meager belongings was a brevet, “that poor teaching certificate, obtained with so much effort,”

\textsuperscript{33} Félix Méténier, “Chair à louer,” \textit{Père Duchêne}, May 17, 1902. Paul Appleton provided a similar list of women’s jobs. Appleton, \textit{La Traite des blanches}, 27.
\textsuperscript{34} Félix Méténier, “Chair à louer,” \textit{Père Duchêne}, May 17, 1902.
which was supposed to “open up so many brilliant horizons” for them and was going to land them the advertised job and help them establish “a modest and calm existence.” Upon arrival in Warsaw, however, the promised job dissolves and, without the money to return to France, many end up traveling to South America as part of the white slave trade, in spite of all of their hard work, education, and hope for a better life.\textsuperscript{35}

It was thus not only those women in search of luxury, fame, and adventure—those who wanted to travel to exotic places as performance artists—who fall into the trap. Ida Sée, writing in the feminist daily the \textit{Fronde} also warned that “unemployed household servants, hatmakers, seamstresses, even schoolteachers and governesses, run immense risks leaving with faith in an advertisement; nine times out of ten, the advertisement is the insidious invitation that leads the dazed woman [l’\textit{étourdie}] into the birdcatcher’s net.”\textsuperscript{36} The insistence on these women’s unemployment reminded readers that these were women in dire financial straits, who were drawn to these want ads out of financial necessity, who wanted to “live by the fruits of their labor in dignity,” not out of a naïve search for diversion from within the bourgeois home. It was specifically impoverished young women, without money or protection, who were drawn to the big city by an interesting advertisement where they arrived only to “throw themselves into the gaping maw of the Minotaur,” falling into the “net” held out by a “vast association that is carefully organized (!) and whose goal is infamous.”\textsuperscript{37}

The trafficker/advertiser as predator and innocent woman as prey was a recurring theme in these stories, which thereby insist on the illegibility (at least to women) of want ads

targeting women. As we have seen, in 1902, Sée referred repeatedly to women being caught in traffickers’ nets. The same year, journalist Félix Métenier compared classified ads used by traffickers to capture Parisian women to the mirrored traps set to attract larks toward hunters waiting to ambush.\footnote{Félix Métenier, “Chair à louer,” Père Duchêne, May 17, 1902.} And even 25 years later, in 1927, the same language (down to the lark and the mirror) recurred in discussions of the role of advertising in sex trafficking schemes.\footnote{Jean Robert, “La Traite des blanches: l’exploitation des jeunes parisiennes par l’appeau de l’art cinématographique, mais l’homme de buenos-ayres est plus criminel,” La Tribune de Paris, Oct. 1, 1927.}

The want ad published in the newspaper was thus described in an interwar anti-trafficking publication as “nothing more than a way to get hold of young women looking for work and to seize them.”\footnote{Daniel Parker, Les Trafiquants de femmes: leurs méthodes de recrutement, l’organisation de la “traite” (Paris: Association pour la Répression de la Traite des Blanches, s.d.), 4.} As such, Daniel Parker, a delegate of the Ligue Française pour le relèvement de la moralité publique, warned that many of these employment ads should\textit{a priori} be seen as “suspicious,” including those for music-hall artists, fashion and artists’ models, manicurists, masseuses, nurses for beauty institutes, barmaids in dancehalls, and café servers. In these professions, he informed, prostitution is often considered “one of the obligatory conditions of the work.”\footnote{Parker, Les Trafiquants de femmes, 4.}

Following Daniel Parker’s logic, all ads needed to be treated with caution. Parker gives one example of a woman who responded to a want ad where she was told that she could either make 800 francs, or, if she was “nice [gentille]” she could make 2000 francs, meaning 800 francs as a dactylo and 1200 as a prostitute. This, he lamented, is “what we have the audacity to offer young girls looking to earn a living.”\footnote{Parker, Les Trafiquants de femmes, 4.} Even if girls had read the warnings...
and “knew” what to look out for, it would be difficult to avoid all the kinds of work journalists and anti-trafficking activists proclaimed as potential dangers: the workplace, then like now, was a sexualized space that could easily be portrayed as dangerous for women. Anti-trade organizers knew that women were easy marks precisely because well-paid work for women was so scarce. While feminists used this situation to argue for higher wages for women workers, the primary outcome was that, for women, looking to the classifieds and their numerous, shimmering want ads always meant taking a (sexual) risk.

**Monstrous Mothers**

As should already be clear, not all the sexual danger to be found in the classifieds came from or led to foreign shores. Danger for girls could emerge in the home well before entering the back pages. Since Judith Walkowitz’s landmark *City of Dreadful Delight*, scholars have shown how the traffic in innocent women was a useful narrative for reinforcing national strength, white supremacy, and patriarchy through the exercise of state control over women’s bodies as they traveled around the world in a period of early globalization.43 This was, however, a profoundly unstable form of power, in large part because it was rhetorically very open-ended. Molly McGregor Watson has shown how, in the early twentieth century, the white slave trade was a cipher, an “empty category” that could be used by a variety of different groups (Jewish, Christian, abolitionist) to argue for their own visions of what the nation should look like and to iterate their fears about the direction in which it was currently heading, especially with regard to fears of “modernity” and its technological advances.44 For


Watson, then, this “empty category” is most often filled with particular social problems, including female poverty, capitalism (often accompanied with anti-Semitic rhetoric), racial mixing, and declining natality, which critics hoped to resolve using state mechanisms. This cipher could, however, be filled with other things.

What would the repercussions or implications be if the source of danger, rather than organizations made up of foreign men targeting women seeking lucrative work, was white women (including mothers), republican schoolteachers, and ads appealing to male clients, which were answered by republican government officials? On November 3, 1911, Le Matin broke a story that it described as “the apotheosis of scum [l’ordure]”: a “shameful traffic” in innocents that provided all the elements for such a modified white slavery narrative. Readers learned that a group of mothers of young daughters—so young, the journalist insisted, that simply printing their ages elicits “a sentiment of fear and shame”—used classified ads to “offer their very young children to despicable regulars [de tristes chalands],” both in their homes and in “bureaux de renseignements.”45 If the ads were mentioned, however, their content was was never, to my knowledge, discussed by anyone, a fact that is interesting given that they were far from your run of the mill advertisements, ranging from the simple, if strange (“Curiosities?”), to the cryptic (“Be those genuine travelers who are tireless not toward a goal but toward elsewhere”) and the bizarrely blunt (“Not being afflicted with an infirm mind, I do not work for glory or for my name to be remembered for posterity!!! I work to get rich, only in my home, no bluffing... You’ll always get your money's worth!”).46 With these unusual

45 “La Traite des innocents,” Le Matin, Nov. 3, 1911. For the non-sexual history of these intelligence services, which were known for their classified advertisements, see Dominique Kalifa, Naissance de la police privée: détectives et agences de recherches en France, 1832–1942 (Paris: Plon, 2000).
46 Gil Blas, Oct. 9, 1908; Le Supplément, July 22, 1909; Le Supplément, Mar. 5, 1910.
ads out of the frame, the facts of this case could be described as “as banal as possible and in no way distinguishable from affaires of the same order that are frequent in Paris” by a journalist for *La Lanterne*, which, it should be noted, was directed and edited by Victor Flachon until his ejection from the role on November 20, 1911.\(^47\) That is to say, that, until the name of M. Victor Flachon was dragged into the story on November 18, this case was destined for obscurity (by design?) as just one more hastily reported fait divers that would quickly be forgotten.

Flachon, a respected newspaper director mixed up in a sordid scandal, gave this news item legs. When Flachon was indicted for excitation des mineurs à la débauche, his attorney complained that this was “a pimp’s crime,” not intended for the likes of Flachon. However, it was precisely the entrance of this man into a story about the criminal underworld that made it so interesting to readers.\(^48\) With the focus on Flachon, the question of classified advertising was quickly sidelined in the mainstream press’s coverage, absent from commentary except for infrequent references to the fact that the pimps were known to have placed ads which “cover certain newspapers.”\(^49\) Advertising reappeared, however, at the center of a series of articles printed in *Action française*, the right-wing, anti-Semitic, and nationalist daily that used the Affair to unmask the corruption of the Republic’s top ministers. To make sense of this simultaneous omission and emphasis, we will first need to

---


\(^{48}\) “L’Affaire de mœurs,” *La Lanterne*, Nov. 30, 1911. For a legal argument about how the article targeting “excitation des mineurs à la débauche” (article 334 of the Code pénal) was indeed intended to apply to pimping and prostitution and not a more general conception of “debauchery,” see Roger Paux, “De l’embauchage et de l’excitation des mineurs à la débauche: thèse pour le doctorat en droit” (Nancy: Imprimerie Camille André, 1925).

\(^{49}\) “L’Affaire de Montmartre,” *La Lanterne*, Dec. 21, 1911.
better understand the incredibly complicated and messy story of what happened, who was involved, and why this scandal touched a nerve.

The Making of the Flachon Affair

According to the chief of the police’s *brigade mobile*, the outlines of a case against a child prostitution ring began to come into focus on October 13, 1911, when Madame Poncelet came to the police chief’s office to alert him that her 14-year-old son, Marcel, had left home a few days ago “under conditions such that she believed he had been carried off by pederasts.” When they found him, Marcel told the police that he had indeed been solicited on the Boulevard by a “pederast,” well-known to the police, who took him home with him and procured him for another known pederast. Marcel added that another boy, age 15, had also been procured for this man. Upon arrest, the other boy admitted that he had been living for several months at the home of a Madame David, who ran a *maison de rendez-vous* and who prostituted him to her clients. He added that David also received young girls and gave the police enough information to identify and find them.

This information dovetailed with police investigations already underway that had discovered that a Mme Lafarge, who prostituted her 13-year-old daughter Marie-Louise, was in contact with a pimp, Mme Guillemin, who called herself the distinctly foreign-sounding Nitchevo (which means “nothing” in Russian) and publicized her services in newspapers such as *Gil Blas* and *Le Supplément*. This new information revealed that Lafarge also brought

---

50 For another example of a man targeting a young boy (in this case an eleven-year-old) on the boulevards, see the testimony cited in Dominique Kalifa, *Paris: une histoire érotique, d’Offenbach aux Sixties* (Paris: Payot, 2018), 149–150.
her daughter to Mme David’s. At the same time, other inspectors were keeping Mme Lamarre under surveillance for prostituting her daughters, aged 9 and 11 respectively. They found that, in addition to receiving individuals at home, she also took her daughters to maisons de rendez-vous, including that of Mme Badot. Another arrest for pederasty on October 25 provided the police with information about yet another pimp, Mme Levassor, who, along with Mme David, prostituted young girls, including the daughters of Lamarre and Lafarge. As the investigation continued, the number of interconnected names grew until twenty adults were arrested on charges of having “led minors into debauchery.” Over twenty-five children were found, the youngest with ages in the single digits.51

Toward the end of the report, and without much fanfare, the police note that in the process of identifying these children, they found that Victor Flachon, director of La Lanterne and his mistress, Georgette Veron, had procured young girls through these channels, leading to their inculpation for “excitation habituelle des mineures en vue de la débauche.” Where the police saw these details as simply that, details in a larger case, the press instead saw sensational headlines. Flachon’s involvement made the network the police uncovered more than a simple fait divers; his name, and his association with both press and government, made his appearance in court—with his young mistress and alongside pimps—a scandal [Fig. 3.2].

Coverage quickly focused in on the prosecution of Flachon, who, from 1902 until his accusation in November 1911, had been the editor in chief of La Lanterne, a popular republican, anti-clerical newspaper, which has been described as “the only success story in

51 Report, Le Commissaire de Police, Chef de la Brigade Mobile, à Monsieur le Directeur Général des Recherches, Affaire Attentats aux moeurs et complicité, Nov. 24, 1911, BA 1689, APP.
radical journalism." Three of his predecessors in this position (Aristide Briand, editor from 1896-1898; Alexandre Millerand, editor from 1898-1899; and René Viviani, editor from 1899-1901) would eventually serve as Prime Minister. Flachon was said to be seen by allies as an “important man,” as a “creator of ministers and deputies.” He seemed destined for a similarly brilliant political future as his predecessors and had already served as a member of an extra-parliamentary commission interested in reforming the police des moeurs, where he, somewhat ironically, served alongside the first woman ever named to such a commission, Avril de Sainte-Croix, who we have already encountered fighting against classified advertising placed by pimps.

---

While Flachon was ultimately convicted, many observers—his journalist peers—agreed that Flachon’s mistress, Georgette Véron, was behind everything: she was the one who visited pimps in search of “petites amies,” young girls whom she used to feed her deviant desire for...
what the court referred to as “immoral practices” and “obscene caresses.”\textsuperscript{55} In the hands of these sympathetic journalist comrades, Flachon was depicted as a middle-aged man bewitched and blinded by Véron, the alluring 25-year-old milliner (and alleged prostitute) [Fig. 3.2], whom he kept in a sumptuous apartment on the rue Baudin (today’s rue Pierre Semard in the 9\textsuperscript{th} arrondissement). He saw her as an angel and cut off contact with friends who claimed to recognize her from their visits to Parisian brothels. In this version of events—which contrasted with Flachon’s own statement that he was the only one to blame\textsuperscript{56}—Flachon was simply the naïve man holding the purse strings, which may not have made him innocent, but made his actions more palatable to readers. Even upon Véron and Flachon’s sentencing to prison alongside a number of pimps, love—or lust?—remained at the center of this story: the two were reported to have shared a long kiss, through desperate tears.\textsuperscript{57}

Verneuil, a journalist for \textit{Gil Blas}, explained Flachon’s actions by depicting him as an inexperienced \textit{parvenu}, reminding readers that he had been the tram inspector of the Department of the Seine.\textsuperscript{58} When Flachon took the helm of \textit{La Lanterne}, people purportedly imagined that he cleaned his own office. Surely, then, he was just overwhelmed by his newfound luxury and power. It was Véron who knew about the pimp Guillemin’s young girls, it was she who led him toward their unnatural embraces, and it was she who was at fault if the police wrote his name down in their registers. Because of her, “the ex-tramway

\textsuperscript{55} “L’Affaire de moeurs, le jugement, M. Flachon est condamné à un an d’emprisonnement,” \textit{L’Intransigeant}, Jan. 12, 1912; Tribunal de 1\textsuperscript{ère} Instance du Département de la Seine (Police correctionnelle, 8\textsuperscript{e} chambre), Jan. 11, 1912, D1U6 1131, AP.

\textsuperscript{56} “Le Scandale des procureuses: M. Flachon va-t-il être mis en liberté ?” \textit{Le Journal}, Nov. 24, 1911.

\textsuperscript{57} “L’Affaire de moeurs, le jugement, M. Flachon est condamné à un an d’emprisonnement,” \textit{L’Intransigeant}, Jan. 12, 1912.

\textsuperscript{58} On Flachon’s career as tram inspector, see F 14 11403, AN.
inspector was lost.” But—and here, according to Verneuil, was the second cause of his naïveté—his relatively newfound political power as newspaper director led him to assume he would be above the law, that his “friends” could make the problem go away.

Not everyone, however, was as sympathetic as Verneuil to Flachon’s situation, finding it hard to look past the minors he had purchased. During the trial, journalists described the “pathetic procession” of four young girls who, one after the other, presented themselves in the witness stand. One was just eleven years old. All were dressed in the uniform of the Assistance publique, their hair in braids. They were described as looking pale and fragile, as if they had been forced to grow up too fast, “like those plants that one makes bloom too quickly under renewed layers of manure.” This played right into new fears that men were developing a perverse taste for little girls, which went hand in hand with supposedly rising rates of vice among young people.

In the courtroom, after witnessing this sad parade, the assistant public prosecutor, Regnault, was careful, in the closing prosecutorial speech, to distinguish between Véron, a 25-year-old woman who had lived in this “special milieu” and been the victim of its bad example, and Flachon, a 54-year-old cultivated man “who has neither the excuse of youth nor that of senility.” He noted with disappointment that Flachon came before the judge, “a smile on his lips, claiming his right to take whomever he likes for his own pleasure. I hoped here for [an expression of] regret. No, he continued to affirm his right. It wouldn’t have

60 Verneuil, “Le Cas de M. Flachon.”
62 Corbin, Women for Hire, 320.
taken much for him to claim it as his right as a ‘citizen.’ His attorney even attempted to establish that this right is written in the Code.”

The defense reiterated his claim to innocence by stating that Flachon and Véron found the girls already “in circulation” and that they “were presented to them as professionals.” The state had been known, after all, to register underage girls as prostitutes, even if, by the early twentieth century, most registered minors in Paris were at least eighteen. This line of argument was further reinforced in *La Lanterne*, which had until recently been directed by Flachon himself, in an article that insisted that the girls were already thoroughly debauched, noting at multiple reprises that they had already been known to frequent houses of prostitution by the time Flachon found them and that they were certainly at least thirteen years old (then the age of consent) and presented themselves as being sixteen or older. The law, this author continued, was intended to target pimps, not men like Flachon, guilty only of receiving already debauched minors, purportedly without knowing it, in the privacy of his own home and in his villa—known as Villa “La Lanterne”—in Boulouris-sur-Mer, on the Côte d’Azur.

64 “Le scandale de Montmartre,” *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, Nov. 25, 1911.
65 Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 321. The state’s registration of underage girls as prostitutes had been contested since the late 1870s. In 1879, the “morality section” of the Société pour l’amélioration du sort des femmes, headed by feminist Maria Deraismes, put together a petition to call for the abolition of this practice. Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 219. A senatorial commission on child delinquency had also looked into the question of the prostitution of minors in 1882. And underage prostitution was also the object of the law of Apr. 11, 1908. Presented by Senator René Bérenger, it placed prostitutes under the age of 18 in reformatories. Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 320–322.
Another line of defense resonated with even Flachon’s harshest critics: “How have
the police limited their charges to only one important person, when they are very familiar
with the maisons that are engaged in this traffic as well as their regular clients?”\(^{67}\) Where were
all the other clients? One of Nitchevo’s last ads in the Supplément read: “Where are you
going??! Where am I going? Why, I’m going where ‘Tout Paris’ [everybody who is anybody]
goes, to Mme Nitchevo’s, 22, rue Labruyère, mezzanine.” An informant told Le Journal that
the “Nitchevo agency” was always full of old, well-dressed, venerable-looking men—diplomats,
magistrates, professors, rentiers—who hurried toward her apartment in limousines and
sumptuous carriages.\(^{68}\) The libertarian journalist Victor Méric also noted that, from the
interviews with the young girls, it had become clear that among their clientele there was “one
magistrate, one colonel, and members of parliament.” “Why,” he asked, “have they not found
these men?”\(^{69}\)

Why indeed, given that it seemed like Tout Paris really did go to Nitchevo’s, was
Flachon the only notable person the police had trained their sights on? When questioned,
one of the young girls mentioned the name of the (very recently deceased) socialist deputy
and journalist Alfred Gérault-Richard, which apparently led the defense to cry out: “It was
decided that we wouldn’t talk about the Gérault-Richard dossier. Why was it mentioned?
And what about the others?” Socialist journalist Jules Uhry, who overheard this burst of
questions, which were left unanswered, couldn’t help but wonder why there was a dossier

\(^{67}\) “L’Affaire de Montmartre,” La Lanterne, Dec. 21, 1911.
\(^{68}\) “Le Scandale des procureuses: M. Flachon se constitue prisonnier, d’autres arrestations
imminentes,” Le Journal, Nov. 22, 1911.
no one was supposed to mention. He mused: “Why were there others? And what is being hidden?” If there were others, why weren’t they standing trial like Flachon?\(^70\)

**Hidden Dossiers: The “Real Peril” of the Republic and its Satyr-in-Chief**

*La Lanterne* was certainly biased in its coverage of a scandal with their director at its center, and thus their good name on the line, but it was clearly not the only newspaper that supported the opinion that Flachon’s singularity and the existence of hidden dossiers was the “mysterious side” of an affair that was “strange from one end to the other.”\(^71\) This was certainly the case for the far-right-wing, monarchist, nationalist, and anti-Semitic *Action française*.\(^72\) Their close, almost obsessive coverage of the scandal and ensuing trial soon found a focal point in one missing dossier in particular: the one given the number 399 bis. They reported on December 25 that a reliable source had told them that 399 bis concerned an *instituteur* B who worked for the city of Paris and was still at his post, still teaching Parisian schoolchildren. This public schoolteacher was the boyfriend of the “femme N” [Nitchevo, one of Flachon’s “suppliers,” about whom we will learn more in what follows] and “wrote invitations to engage in the white slave trade [*des appels à la traite des blanches*], in a well-known ‘Supplément’ for her.”\(^73\) They were sure that the fact that the teacher was not sitting next to Flachon in court meant that he had friends in very high places. They meant to find out who

---


these friends were, but they already had some ideas and didn’t hesitate before naming “among them, the predecessor of Flachon Victor as director of La Lanterne, erstwhile common law convict, minister of Public Instruction, then of Justice, then président du Conseil [prime minister], Aristide Briand.”

Through Briand and teacher B, the Action française had the Republic in its sightlines, with the newspaper and all it stood for as its material target. On December 27, they reminded their readers that, in his closing remarks, the prosecutor had said that “‘it’s worth mentioning [...] that it’s by means of transparent advertisements in a well-known special paper [feuille spéciale], entitled le Supplément, that clients, looking for children, and pimps exploiting minors are most often put into contact.’” This journalist wished the prosecutor had gone even further, adding that the Supplément had been created by one of Flachon’s predecessors at the Lanterne, that “it had long been printed on the same premises as this newspaper, that it had once been one with it.” The Supplément had, in effect, started its life in 1884 as the Supplément littéraire de La Lanterne before becoming Le Supplément in 1895. With this split, the tri-weekly literary Supplément claimed to be “completely independent” of the daily, political newspaper La Lanterne. And yet, with the split, Eugène Mayer, the financier who had who had launched the paper in 1877, took up the role of administrative director—taking care of everything having to do with advertising—for both papers. The general public would,

---

77 La Lanterne, July 26, 1895; “Causerie,” Le Supplément, Jan. 1, 1901.
78 “A nos lecteurs,” La Lanterne, June 28, 1895. La Lanterne and Le Supplément both continued to have offices at 18 rue Richer until La Lanterne moved to 24 rue Poissonnière on Apr. 21, 1902, shortly after Flachon took up his post there.
understandably, continue to see the *Lanterne* and the *Supplément* as linked, seeing *Le Supplément* as *Le Supplément de la Lanterne*, and not only because the title of the latter indicated its continued existence as a supplement to something else.\(^{79}\)

*La Lanterne*’s role in the scandal was thus not limited to the person of Flachon. The ads the prosecutor was denouncing, including those placed by the schoolteacher, could be traced back to this paper itself, and somewhat circuitously, back to Briand whose tenure at the head of *La Lanterne* from 1896-1898 (directly following its nominative split from *Le Supplément*) made it easy to link him to this literary journal’s sexual excesses and lax advertising policies. He was certainly not responsible for the publication of the prostitutional ads printed in these pages after his departure, but the intimate link between these newspapers could make him seem guilty by association, however distant it might be.\(^{80}\)

On December 28, readers of *L’Action française* learned more about the scandal’s new key players in two articles on the topic. The first focused on two men who were not present in the courtroom: Briand and “B.” The article explained that the hidden dossier 399bis revealed that the schoolteacher had already been brought to a local police station in 1906 for engaging in the *traite des blanches*, but that the case against him failed to move forward.

---

\(^{79}\) To give a sense of how intimately connected the two papers were, *Le Supplément* is archived as part of *La Lanterne* in the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s online database Gallica and it is impossible (to my knowledge) to search *Le Supplément* without also searching *La Lanterne*, even for the years following the split between the two newspapers. For a reference to the *Supplément de la Lanterne* in the context of the Affaire Flachon, see Rivarol, “Echos: Et Steeg?,” *L’Action française*, Jan. 7, 1912.

\(^{80}\) While Briand critics such as Leon Daudet state that Briand had previously directed the *Supplément*, I have not yet been able to verify that the directorial link between *La Lanterne* and *Le Supplément* continued after Eugène Mayer stepped down. Leon Daudet, “Briand et sa bande: Flachon Victor, l’instituteur B..., et autres lanterniers,” *L’Action française*, Dec. 29, 1911.
and he was able to keep his job thanks to the intervention of Aristide Briand, then Minister of Public Instruction.⁸¹

The other article provided coverage of the trial, or what the title referred to as “Republican scandals.” They were not interested in being subtle. They wanted to make sure that their readers could “no longer be mistaken,” saying that “in these mucky interrogations [interrogatoires boueux], it’s the entire doctrine of the regime that marches by in flesh and blood, with its ‘droit au plaisir’ le plus abject, with its procession of pimps whose composite image [l’image d’ensemble] synthesizes the figure of the Whore [Gueuse].”⁸² In this journalist’s hands, the pimps, procurers, and bad mothers that made their way onto the witness stand became the embodiment of the Republic and its (bad) sexual politics. Rather than the menace of a dangerous outsider, it was the Republic itself that presented a sexual danger to the French nation. The “Jewish Republic”—ruled by “crime and gold,” treason (Dreyfus) and sadism (Flachon)—was a threat for France.⁸³ For the anti-Semitic right, the Republic was structurally similar to the figures of the Jew and the pervert, those internally foreign threats.

The prolific journalist Léon Daudet (1867-1942)—a figurehead of anti-republican, anti-Semitic French reactionary politics and co-founder, with Charles Maurras, of the Action française—was dedicated to shedding light on this danger. He was sure that the law of 1905, guaranteeing France’s secularism through the separation of Church and State, had been

---

⁸³ Léon Daudet, “La Politique: de Flachon à Soleilland,” L’Action française, Nov. 23, 1911. If Flachon was not himself Jewish, it was easy to cast him as such, given that sexual perversion and Jewishness had long gone hand in hand within anti-Semitic rhetoric. This association had recently been reinforced in coverage of the Dreyfus Affair. See Erin G. Carlston, “German Vices: Sexual/Linguistic Inversions in Fin-de-Siècle France,” Romanic Review 100, no. 3 (May 2009): 279-305.
“prepared, composed, and written” at Victor Flachon’s desk in his offices at the Lanterne, which he imagined covered with beers and the final proofs of the Supplément’s advertisements, calling clients to corrupt minors. Republican secularism, long supported by the anti-clerical editorial line of La Lanterne, was thus linked with the sexual immorality of classified advertising. In the case of schoolteacher B, Daudet saw a foreshadowing of what “secular, obligatory schooling will be when the lanterniers will have obtained their dear monopoly from the parliamentary majority.” That is to say that he foresaw a future in which the republican public school would open itself willingly to the machinations of “the horrible Whore [Gueuse]—[…] that Nitchevo of République,” allowing her to do what she liked with “the souls and bodies of these young children” while docile republican newspapers like the moderate Le Temps would report on these actions as those of an ex-school-teacher “accompanying [her] young students with much devotion.”

The republican nature of this scandal was only reinforced by this assertion that the high-powered pimp Guillemin/Nitchevo was formerly a schoolteacher (whether this is true or not is another story—I have found nothing to corroborate this information). In recounting her interrogation in court, a journalist for the Action française described her as “vivacious [vive], lively [alerte], and sharp-tongued [la langue bien pendue],” and as “defending herself with vehemence.” In the courtroom, she came off as well-spoken and funny, at her ease in front of a crowd. When the court’s president told her that she is “one of Paris’s most

important procurers [proxénètes]. [...] Most of the minors we will hear from have been in your maison,” her response made those present laugh. She said: “That’s not true. I only receive majors. I run a sort of extra-matrimonial agency.”87 While we must look critically at their intentions for recounting this story, it is important to note that the Action française did not invent this exchange. In Le Journal’s report on the trial printed the same day, Guillemin/Nitchevo comes off as even more sharp-witted and gifted for the kind of humor French illustrated papers were known for. According to their report, she “indignantly protested” against the prosecution’s referring to her as a tenancière de maison de rendez-vous. The president thus asked her what her profession is, which led her to respond: “Director of an extra-conjugal agency in favor of the development of free unions.”88 While for Le Journal, the interest of this exchange lies primarily in its entertainment value, for the Action française, it’s all about what it says about the republican school system, and, by extension, the Republic itself. The familiar nationalist trope that republican schooling was a source of sexual perversion had found some ground to stand on.89

If it is unclear whether or not the witty Nitchevo was once a schoolteacher for the city of Paris, there is corroborations that schoolteacher B, who was employed as a teacher at a primary school for boys on the rue Béranger in the 3rd arrondissement—and whom the Action française would finally name as Charles-Julien Beucké on January 9, 1912—was indeed

---

89 On this nationalist trope, see Judith Surkis, Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), especially her discussion of Maurice Barrès’s 1897 novel Les déracinés in Ch. 3 (pages 90–103), which explores an image of republican schooling as a source of criminal and sexual perversion.
involved with Nitchevo, and likely did write the ads for her business. At a meeting of Paris’s Municipal council on December 29, 1911, royalist council member (and yet another virulent anti-Semite) Roger Lambelin had asked the Director of Education what he was planning to do about the fact that one of his schoolteachers was the collaborator of Flachon’s procurer, “Mme Nitchevo,” for whom he wrote “special” ads in the *Supplément*. The director claimed that this was the first time he was hearing about this, but that he would be sure to launch an investigation.\(^{90}\) Hesitant as I am to agree with the nationalist, monarchist (and collaborator-to-be) Maurice Pujo, it is hard not to be skeptical about the director of primary education Louis Bédorez’s assertion that this matter had not come to his attention, given that *Action française* had “clearly designated the schoolteacher-pimp” for an entire week leading up to this interaction.\(^{91}\) An anonymous source had also told *Action française* that Bédorez had already known for five years—since Beucké’s arrest in 1906 for engaging in the white slave trade—that he was a person of “detestable morals,” that he was the “lover of the pimp Nitchevo,” and that several of the addresses indicated in ads by Nitchevo were for apartments known by the administration to have been inhabited by Beucké.\(^{92}\) Bédorez refuted all of these facts, and by late January could only say that “it had been impossible to resolve” whether Beucké had written the “odious ads in the *Supplement*” and that they had found no proof of any relationship between Nitchevo and Beucké besides the one he admitted to upon

---

\(^{90}\) “45. Question de M. Roger Lambelin sur le rôle qu’aurait joué, d’après certains journaux, un instituteur de la ville de Paris dans les scandales dévoilés par l’affaire Flachon,” *Bulletin municipal officiel de la Ville de Paris*, Jan. 4, 1912, 80.


interrogation, that of having once been her child’s godfather. Bédorez did decide to suspend Beucké, but based on some suspicious jewelry purchases, not on any links to illegal prostitution, a move that critical observers saw as an attempt to minimize Bédorez’s own culpability in the case.

This tepid reaction and halfhearted investigation—and then only in response to continued harassment from the Action française—in response to the accusation of a schoolteacher’s involvement in this scandal, led the widely-read Roman Catholic daily La Croix to follow suit in using the case of the schoolteacher/recruiting agent/prostitutional advertising writer Beucké to denounce republican secular schooling itself as “the real peril.”

The anti-Semitic, monarchist, anti-militarist Urbain Gohier also wrote in L’Œuvre that he was convinced that Flachon would eventually be given a new chair at the Sorbonne where his “moral doctrine and conception of the family” fit in well with the theories then in vogue at the university, which elevated homosexuality and pederasty, told everyone to follow their pleasure, and live their lives as they wish [“(Vivre sa vie... Corydon, Alexis... Trahit sua quemque voluptas, etc.)”]. Flachon had offered the court a fairly traditional account of his right to act on his desires—prostitution had long been cast as a “necessary evil” for just this reason—but in Gohier’s hands, Flachon’s sexual interest in young girls made it possible to cast him as a pervert who would be at home among homosexuals. As such, it was easier to conjure Flachon as an internal, hidden threat.

94 Cyr, “Encore le vrai peril,” La Croix, Feb. 8, 1912.
Even the editor of the center-right newspaper Le Figaro, Gaston Calmette (best-known posthumously for his assassination at the hands of Henriette Caillaux in 1914\(^{96}\)), who was avowedly skeptical of the Action française’s methods more generally, had to admit that their revelations seemed to be supported by reliable documentation; he was troubled that the government was not overly concerned by the accusations.\(^{97}\) He said that, if it all turned out to be true (which seemed likely), “one has to admit that the administration of primary education is singularly guilty and all fathers have the right to be outraged.” He continued: “The State that wanted to assume all responsibility for educating young people has the responsibility to strike without mercy in such a case.”\(^{98}\) It seems as though the State (or at least its educational branches) agreed, eventually. In early March, new information led the Departmental Council on Primary Education, which had previously suspended Beucké, to vote to prohibit him from teaching in either public or private schools.\(^{99}\) On August 4, 1912, a provincial newspaper reported that Beucké was finally “definitively driven out of the school he dishonored” thanks to a judgement from the Conseil supérieur de l’instruction publique that certified, contrary to Bedorez’s earlier assertions, that “this schoolteacher cohabitated with Nitchevo, who had been convicted for flachonisme, that he knew of her job as pimp and

---

\(^{96}\) Edward Berenson, The Trial of Mme Caillaux (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

\(^{97}\) This is not the first time that the problem of sexual advertising brought together odd bedfellows. In 1905, Henry Bérenger’s socialist, anti-clerical, and republican newspaper L’Action and Paul de Cassagnac’s bonapartist, Catholic L’Autorité applauded each other for their shared combat against the “pornographic classifieds,” even going so far as to reprint each other’s articles on the subject. See Lucifer, “Les Petites annonces: un article de l’Autorité, premiers résultats,” L’Action, July 3, 1905.

\(^{98}\) Gaston Calmette, “Un cas suspect,” Le Figaro, Jan. 20, 1912.

that he tolerated it.”

Maurice Pujo surely took great pleasure in stating that the “Action française was right.”

Nothing in the facts revealed through oppositional reporting reflected well on the government. The somewhat socialist, anti-clerical, anti-Semitic Gustave Téry, writing for L’Oeuvre, brought things back around to Aristide Briand, government representative and previous head of La Lanterne who had also been prosecuted for a sex crime: in 1891, he was sentenced to prison on a count of indecent exposure for having sex outdoors near Saint-Nazaire with his lover Jeanne Nouteau, wife of a notable local banker. Flachon and Briand, Téry asserted, were good friends, even “tenderly united [tendrement unis],” an assertion that again insisted on the perverse proclivities of republicans in power, even those, like Briand and Flachon, whose known sexual excesses were only of the heterosexual, if extra-marital, kind. Even the way he denied knowing Flachon seemed to signal their unhealthy closeness. As an example, Téry reminded his readers of a photo that had appeared in the illustrated Excelsior in January 1911, purportedly showing Briand, then the head of the government (président du Conseil), spending the winter vacation at Flachon’s villa [Fig. 3.3].

---

102 Christophe Bellon, Aristide Briand (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016), 43-47. This scandal, used for decades against Briand by the extreme right, was known as the “affaire de Toutes-Aides,” after the name of the field, three kilometers outside of Saint-Nazaire, where the couple was found.
103 Gustave Téry, “De St-Nazaire à Boulouris: Briand et Flachon,” L’Œuvre, 1912, 1er semestre, 39.
Téry acknowledged that the image was “falsified,” that it did not actually show Briand at the villa Lanterne, but nonetheless sees guilt in Briand’s indignant response. If Briand was unaware of what happened in Flachon’s villa, shouldn’t he be happy that people thought he was somewhere he wasn’t? This confusion would ensure him peace and quiet during his vacation elsewhere. Why, that is, if he didn’t know about Flachon’s sexual predilections, would he be concerned with disabusing the public of the idea that the ex-director of the Lanterne’s presence in Boulouris was not actually his?
Lanterne might be spending time with its current director? Daudet agreed: Flachon and Briand had been friends for going on fifteen years, ever since Briand had directed the Supplément with its advertisements placed by the likes of Beucké. In fact, these men were such good “buddies [poteaux]” that Flachon was Briand’s “moral conscience, his doctrine, his line. When he had spoken well in the Chamber, he wondered: ‘What would Flachon think?’ No matter what Briand said to the contrary, his critics saw him as the “Minister of Nitchevo.”

Advertising: A Republican Vice?

Whether the focus lay with small fry Beucké or big fish Briand, the story always came back to one thing that the mainstream press had little interest in exposing and one thing both men on the margins of this scandal were reported to have in common: the classifieds. The judge did not ignore it. He stated that intelligence represented Guillemin as a “particularly dangerous pimp given the methods she uses to provoke minors into debauchery,” namely the use of intensive advertising campaigns to attract clients in search of minors. Oddly, however, none of the journalists we’ve encountered ever felt the need to do more than gesture to the ads, even though they could only have strengthened the Action

---

104 Gustave Téry, “De St-Nazaire à Boulouris: Briand et Flachon,” L’Œuvre, 1912, 1er semestre, 39-40. For an explanation of the mistakes made in Excelsior’s photomontage (namely that the photo of Briand is not taken anywhere near the Côte d’Azur and that the villa represented in the photos was in fact that of Flachon’s neighbor), see Pierre Lafitte, “M. Briand n’a pas été photographié à Boulouris,” Excelsior, Nov. 25, 1911.


108 Tribunal de 1ère Instance du Département de la Seine (Police correctionnelle, 8e chambre), Jan. 11, 1912, D1U6 1131, AP.
française’s case or added to the entertainment value of coverage in *Le Journal*. In effect, Nitchevo’s many and diverse ads in *Le Supplément* stand out from the crowd as often longer, more complex, self-referential, and sometimes even funny—quite different from the majority of ads that shared space with Nitchevo’s, such as the straightforward ads for massage we saw in the last chapter or the fraudulent want ads discussed above. It seems entirely possible that someone well-educated wrote them. For example, on June 18, 1908, a few years before news of the scandal broke, she published three different ads on the same day. The first was in the Marriages column and read:

Modern marriages:
Before: *des grands mots.*
During: *des petits mots.*
After: *des gros mots.*

Madame Nitchevo, bureau 37

Her ad in the miscellaneous column read:

Do you suffer from continual anxieties? incurable wounds? Do you have stains on your past? difficulties in the present? concerns about the future? Are you sad, worried, uneasy? Then come quickly to consult me. My business [maison] is not quayside, but on the mezzanine and near metro Villiers!

Madame Nitchevo, 34, r. de Constantinople, Mezz. on left.

And, finally, an ad in the Second-Hand Goods column read:

“Our vices are like our nails, we cut them from time to time, but they grow back just as quickly Madame Nitchevo, bureau 37.”

If one ad was not enough, by the third, with its assertion of the inescapability of vice, it was clear to any reader that something unusual was happening chez Madame Nitchevo in her apartments in the 8th and 9th arrondissements. And day after day of a combination of poetic ads, straightforward ads [“Marriages, all situations, Mme Nitchevo, 34, r. Constantinople,
mezzanine on left, 10 to 6 o’clock”\textsuperscript{109} and ads filled with question marks [“? ? Nitchevo-Ruprecht, 30 r. St-Georges, mezz.”\textsuperscript{110}] at the very least raised significant questions for readers.

If the judge certainly went too far in proclaiming that Nitchevo’s ads were “formulated in such a way that leaves no doubt about the objective this publicity was tending toward,” some of her ads do state things clearly enough to cause surprise that \textit{Le Supplément} had not already stood trial for \textit{outrage aux bonnes moeurs} because of their role in facilitating Nitchevo’s business.\textsuperscript{111} Was the paper, like Beücké and Briand, being protected by some kind of Republican scheme?\textsuperscript{112} There was ample reason to wonder. One ad read: “Between two downpours, come to my mezzanine, and tell me frankly the Parisian pleasures you are unaware of; the spontaneity, or even coarseness, of certain confessions will not scare me off: your preferences, your preconceived notions, your obsessions will be troubled by the uninterrupted continuity of ever-renewed curiosities. Madame Nitchevo, bureau 37.”\textsuperscript{113} Ads had been convicted of obscenity for much less. No one, however, complained and it would be more than three years before Nitchevo would find herself in court, and even then \textit{Le Supplément} (and other journals she advertised in such as the arts and spectacle-focused \textit{Comoedia}) would be left more or less alone, or at least left out of the courtroom. Even though,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{110} “Divers” and “Agences,” \textit{Le Supplément}, March 11, 1909.
\textsuperscript{111} Tribunal de 1\textsuperscript{ère} Instance du Département de la Seine (Police correctionnelle, 8\textsuperscript{e} chambre), Jan. 11, 1912, D1U6 1131, AP.
\textsuperscript{112} As early as 1905, observers expressed surprise that the \textit{Supplément} and its immoral advertising seemed to be untouchable. One asserted that each time the court wanted to go after them, the chancellery told them to simply issue a warning. In its “intangibility,” anti-pornography advocates assumed that it must belong to “some rich manager or to a politician feared by all parties” because even when ministers changed, the policy to leave the \textit{Supplément} alone stayed in place. 1\textsuperscript{er} congrès national contre la pornographie. Bordeaux, 14–15 mars 1905: rapports, discussions, vœux et conférences (Bordeaux: Imprimerie commerciale et industrielle, 1905), 29.
\textsuperscript{113} “Divers,” \textit{Le Supplément}, May 26, 1908.
\end{flushright}
on April 4, 1912, Police Prefect Louis Lépine responded to the scandal by signing a regulation forbidding the use of advertising by maisons de rendez-vous, Le Supplément would continue to publish ads for agencies resembling those placed by Nitchevo.\footnote{“Règlement du 4 avril 1912 concernant les maisons de rendez-vous,” DB 408, APP. This interdiction had already been included in a regulation issued by Lépine on Feb.14, 1900, which established police oversight of maisons de rendez-vous and prohibited advertisement by maisons de rendez-vous and maisons de tolérance. Corbin, Women for Hire, 323–324.}

This was not the first time Le Supplément and papers like it had been spared a court appearance, even when advertisements were at the center of the case. In the 1908 prosecution of ads placed by Demarest and her fellow masseuses (see Chapter Two), the defense questioned the fact that only “small newspapers” like Fin de Siècle were standing trial when the same ads for massage, “paid for by the same ladies,” also appeared in big newspapers like the Echo de Paris, the Journal, Gil Blas, and the Temps. The prosecutor admitted that these “grands journaux” had indeed published the same ads, but, he insisted, they “also published other things, more serious and earnest ads.”\footnote{Le Semainier, “En glanant,” La Vie oranaise, Apr. 17, 1908. This article is sympathetic with the small newspapers and raises questions about just how “serious” and “earnest” these other ads are when they include fraudulent, but expensive advertisements for “Buisson Hella Mondial” which was linked to the Rochette Affair, critiquing the fact that ads linked to practices of fraudulent speculation still seemed more “serious” and “earnest” than ads linked to sex. See “Arrestation du financier Rochette: un krach de 200 millions,” Le Petit Parisien, Mar. 24, 1908.}

The Action française had other ideas about why no sustained judicial attention was ever trained on Le Supplément or on the ads Beucké placed there: its affiliation with La Lanterne was problematic for many in power. In addition to Aristide Briand, other important politicians had passed through the editorial office of La Lanterne, including René Viviani, who in 1911 was serving as a Deputy for the Creuse region and would, in 1913, become Minister of Education. If Le Supplément, formerly Le Supplément de la Lanterne, was found
guilty of assisting in the corruption of French children, it would make the *Action française*’s narrative of the Republic itself as a corruptor of young girls (and boys) harder to combat, even without a Beucké as schoolteacher-advertiser to make the connection particularly clear.

If the government had a reason to keep this side of the story quiet, so did many other newspapers. Even if they did not run ads by Nitchevo herself, their classified pages were not exactly moral spaces. Catholic daily *La Croix* lamented that “most of the boulevard newspapers that are scandalized by Flachon insert, on the next page, ultraflachonian short stories, advertisements, and correspondence.” Ads were a dangerous topic, indeed. But ads were not all dangerous in the same way. As we have seen, an ad for a well-paid job or for easy or glamorous work as a dancer on an international tour was imagined to dupe innocent young women. Nitchevo’s ads worked differently. They were so many nets for johns looking for the satisfaction or realization of their wildest, most vicious dreams and desires, including, of course, those for underage girls. All the same, they exposed the way in which advertisements could be used to all the more efficiently exploit young girls, boys, and women, printed in plain sight and with no direct repercussions. An article in *La Démocratie* told its readers that Flachon’s faults could not be attributed to the regime. What the regime should be held accountable for, Maurice Pujo responded in the *Action française*, was the way in which it kept Beucké in his job as a teacher even though it had known for years that he “was engaged in the white slave trade, wrote advertisements for the *Supplément*, supplied women to Nitchevo [était le rabbateur de Nitchevo].” It was the regime that had allowed Beucké to

---

deliver young girls to “Flachon’s vices” and it was the regime that had delivered young boys to “Beucké’s education.”

Avoiding the Trap of Trafficking

This argument targeted a topic of great concern to republican leadership: republican morality. In its fight to wrest power from the church, republican leaders attempted to hammer out a new, secular republican morality for the nation’s boys and girls. Outside the realm of education, another crucial point of moralization was the law, as we saw in chapter two. In addition to working to protect readers from obscenity, the law protected minors from clandestine brothel owners who made money off of these girls’ and boys’ activities. The law protected minors from their parents, taking these girls and boys away from the mothers that prostituted them and placing them under the care of the state’s Assistance publique. And the law protected minors from the touch and sight of clients like Flachon and Véron. The courtroom was a mediated theater for republican morality, even when the case was heard behind closed doors, as was this one, thanks to press coverage of what happened. The moral Republic punished the immoral and stopped Flachon’s career in its tracks.

A number of quite diverse groups, however, were less than convinced by the state’s moral theater. The monarchist *Action française* clearly thought the whole thing was a sham,

---

118 Maurice Pujo, “Après Sangnier-Thalamas Sangnier-Beucké!,” *L’Action française*, Jan. 23, 1912. It is interesting to note that Pujo chooses not to use the prostitution of young boys by Nitchevo as part of his critique. Perhaps, because it was not relevant to the Flachon story in particular, he forgot about the sexual exploitation of boys like those in Beucké classroom? Or perhaps he wanted to focus on girls in danger rather than further complexifying an already complex story?

that the Republic, its lawmakers, and its bureaucrats were vectors of corruption. Flachon’s
attorney thought so too. His plea intimated that the case against Flachon was politically
motivated, an act of vengeance by the morals police, against which Flachon had led an
intense campaign providing proof of the squad’s immorality and calling for their
dissolution.120

Abolitionists and anti-trafficking activists were also dubious about the Republic’s
commitment to morality. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Séverine was critical of
the way the free press also acted as a pimp by publishing the ads that led women into
prostitution. A somewhat more generous contemporary would refer to the press as the
“unconscious accomplice” of traffickers.121 Prostitution abolitionists like Avril de Sainte-
Croix also saw the state as an accomplice and enabler of international trafficking.
Confronting the system of state-regulated prostitution, these activists had begun to see the
state itself as creating the “market” in women.122 More specifically, they saw how the French
model of tolerated prostitution, and clients’ desire for continually renewed “merchandise,”
had created a system of procurement for domestic brothels that had been easily expanded to
serve new international markets.123 Still others argued that men’s sexual desires were out of

120 “L’Affaire de Montmartre: plaidoirie de M’ Varenne,” La Lanterne, Jan. 6, 1912. For more on the
early twentieth-century campaign against the police des moeurs, see Jean-Marc Berlière, La Police des
122 Watson, “The Trade in Women,” 26–32
123 Corbin, Women for Hire, 280–285. Feminist and prostitution abolitionist Marcelle Legrand-Falco
made this same argument in the early 1930s, stating that it was precisely the constant search for
younger and newer “personnel” in state-regulated brothels that “gave rise to what was once called the
White Slave Trade and which we now, at the request of the League of Nations, call the Traffic in
Women, to indicate that this problem touches women of all races.” Marcelle Legrand-Falco, “Projets
d’abolition,” in La Traite des blanches et prostitution, témoignages de notre temps 4 (Dec. 1933), 26, BA
1689, APP.
hand and the unequal, gendered system of morality (upheld by regulated prostitution) out of order if it could be cast as natural to exploit “poor, working-class women, who might have perhaps become excellent mothers” but who, because of brothel-owners and traffickers, had become “immoral prostitutes [filles de mauvaises mœurs], alcoholics, consumptives [phtisiques].”¹²⁴ In other words, they showed how this state-sanctioned situation was contributing to the decline of the French nation in terms of morality, hygiene, and demography.

In 1922 this narrative was officially sanctioned when the League of Nations proclaimed that the Traffic in Women and Children, by which it meant the phenomenon of women and children traveling abroad to engage in sex work, was primarily caused by the existence of state-regulated brothels.¹²⁵ In fact, the very idea of “white slavery” had itself emerged out of an abolitionist critique of domestic regulated prostitution beginning in the 1880s. In France, however, this early abolitionist fight was crushed, and its energies cannily funneled—by neoregulationists invested in the continued (hygiene-focused) regulation of prostitution—into a singular focus on the sale of innocent women across international borders.¹²⁶ As Alain Corbin shows, neoregulationists turned a feminist campaign against regulated prostitution into a campaign of moralization that led to public approval of an even greater surveillance of women’s actions, occupations, and travel.¹²⁷ In other words, a campaign against state policies of invasive policing became a campaign for republican efforts to police the streets. In so doing, a fundamental abolitionist problematic concerning the

---

¹²⁶ Corbin, Women for Hire, 275–276.
¹²⁷ Corbin, Women for Hire, 297, 327.
gendered double standard of sexual morality—seen as the originary point for prostitution itself given that men were expected to have sex before marriage while women were forbidden from doing so—was obscured.¹²⁸

The narrative of the white slave trade as one of foreign threat that triumphed in the early twentieth century was a powerful and resilient one. It crested again in the 1930s with the rise of the genre of reportage. This time the focus was all the more firmly anchored in explicitly anti-Semitic and xenophobic (but not necessarily anti-republican) narratives of (foreign) Jewish traffickers, French (white) victims, and colonial (non-white) clients.¹²⁹ As in the nineteenth-century transition to an industrial economy, women were once again seen as victims of unbridled capitalism (now global and embodied in the sophisticated international business models of foreign traffickers instead of in domestic factory owners and the way low wages fueled street-based prostitution).¹³⁰ Given the poor economic conditions of the times, omnipresent ads for lucrative and easy work abroad were imagined to be incredibly tempting.¹³¹ In this story of girls led astray, the role of the French state’s toleration of domestic prostitution was kept resolutely outside the frame. The Republic was to be the international protector of its (often wayward) women and defender of its own moral and civilizational status in its colonies.

In the short term at least, the abolitionists had failed (their victory in the closing of brothels in 1946 was a pyrrhic one, part of a post-war purge of collaborators rather than the result of abolitionist organizing).132 Flachon’s defense? Failed. The Action française might have gotten Beucké fired, but its larger goal of undermining republican leadership by casting it as a sexual danger to French women had failed. The Republic did not fall in 1912, nor would the monarchy ever rise again. Aristide Briand remained central on the political stage—moving between high-profile positions as Deputy, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Justice, and Président du Conseil—until his death in 1932.

These movements failed, but their failure is good to think with. I, like Gaston Calmette before me, did not expect to be even a little bit convinced by the arguments of some of the Third Republic’s most virulent anti-Semites or to find resonances between their unreflexively misogynist arguments and those of feminist abolitionists. However, what they, together, show us can be seen as another version of what we saw in the previous chapter: efforts to moralize the Republic could never fully be reconciled with the fact that the economy of the free press was partially built on sexual advertising. Nor could these efforts be reconciled with republican men’s investment in the freedom of their own sexuality, an investment most clearly voiced by the Flachon in his assertion of his citizenly right to pleasure (outside the structure of marriage). Once again, as in Chapter Two, the desire for the continued co-existence of men’s unbridled sexuality and a moral narrative of the Republic protected the classifieds, even as this advertising space continued to be seen as posing a direct

132 The law of Apr. 13, 1946 closing the brothels was undermined little more than a week later when the law of Apr. 24, 1946 recreated the regulatory system through the renewal of registration (la mise en carte) for prostitutes. Christine Machiels, Les Féminismes et la prostitution, 1860–1960 (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016), 238.
threat to women’s virtue, and thus to the nation. Only this time, the classifieds were not protected by legislative or judicial reticence, but rather by what appeared to be occult protection of the mainstream press by the government and protection of the government by the press. Flachon was the scapegoat. He took the fall so that men’s sexual citizenship could be protected, so that men’s business could continue as usual. Some villains had been punished, but the system would not be changed. The narrative of the white slave trade survived unscathed, able to continue doing the work of stabilizing the internally riven nature of republican sexual and economic morality and re-casting the threat out(side).

The fact that the classifieds continued to be seen as a site of sexual danger and exploitation for women until World War II (an idea that has returned in recent decades\textsuperscript{133}) certainly made it difficult for women to tap into the possibilities this newspaper section might have offered as a “legitimate” job center, just as the narrative of “women in danger” made it possible to constrain the freedoms of the New Woman: sexual, economic, physical, and otherwise. But the failure to act decisively made certain things possible that otherwise would not have been. Operating in the extra-legal space republican men had themselves created, the classifieds could lead to dishonor and could mask incredibly exploitative and unfree trafficking schemes like the one operated by Nitchevo. However, they also remained a site of survival, of evasion, hope, and, perhaps more than anywhere else in this moment, women’s business, especially (but not exclusively) for those whose reputations were already lost causes. It is to these uses of the classifieds that we turn to next.

Chapter Four: The Rise of the Rendez-Vous

While the previous two chapters have looked to law, justice, and scandal, in this chapter I use some of the same sources to examine the classifieds from a different vantage point: that of how and why women themselves made use of classified advertising to build sexual businesses and of the effects their entrepreneurship—combined with that of the midwives and abortionists discussed in chapter five—had on society at large.

Taken at face value, the story this chapter tells is an unsurprising one. The transition from the state-regulated, carceral-style brothel [maison de tolérance or maison close]—which provided room and board for its filles, occupied the entire building, and was, at least originally, clearly marked on the street—to the less enclosed, apartment-based maison de rendez-vous (always clandestine until 1900, potentially legal after this date)—which (theoretically) did not house its employees, usually (but not always) occupied a single apartment in a bourgeois building, and was invisible from the street—is a well-known one within the history of prostitution, first described by Alain Corbin in Les filles de noce in 1978. This transformation was also clear to contemporary observers. In 1874, for example, a police report stated with concern that “for a long time already, the number of maisons de tolérance has been constantly dwindling and many of those that remain are in a precarious position.” The police saw the principal causes for this state of affairs as (1) competition from clandestine prostitution and (2) the “repulsion that registered prostitutes [filles inscrites] express at working in a regulated brothel [en tolerance] and the way furnished rooms and bars facilitate their ability to work and
avoid the surveillance of the administration,” surveillance the police saw as necessary to public health and safety.¹

In the early twentieth century, another observer saw the white slave trade itself as the result of prostitutes’ desire for independence and to “live for themselves.” According to this author, veteran prostitutes had experienced an “awakening to independence” that inspired them to speak up for themselves and to “choose between the bad and the worse”: they were no longer willing to sign themselves into a sort of sexual serfdom.² Exploitative and highly-surveilled brothel-based work was not their only option, and they knew it. It was supposedly because of this that traffickers had to trick innocent women into foreign brothels using fraudulent classified advertisements.

But if the classifieds were imagined to be a weapon in the hands of unscrupulous traffickers, they were also and undoubtedly a tool in those of the experienced prostitutes or madam. Working out of furnished rooms, seedy hotels, back rooms, and bars was not new in the age of the white slave trade. The widespread use of classified advertising by sex workers and intermediaries, however, was. It was via newspaper advertising that a maison de rendez-

---

¹ “Proposition d’accorder à la fme Richard Maitresse de Maison, 12, rue Feydeau, l’autorisat|lon de recevoir en passe des filles publiques.” Report, Paris, May 18, 1874, DA 226, APP. The report continues: “Ces causes, que l’administration ne saurait supprimer complètement, pouvant avoir pour résultat la disparition des maisons tolérées, et, dès lors la suppression de toute base pratique pour la répression et la surveillance de la prostitution publique, il est impérieusement nécessaire de venir en aide aux maitresses de maison et de les mettre en mesure de lutter contre la prostitution clandestine, en tant, au moins, que les moyens employés ne compromettront en rien l’intérêt de la sûreté et de la santé publiques.”

vous, unmarked from the street and “identical to all other apartments,” could make itself known to the public.³

Charles Virmaître (1835-1903), the author of many books on Paris and its (sexual) underworld, noted the connection between prostitution and advertising in the late 1890s. While he could understand why the number of authorized brothels would fall, why women would want to escape the power of the agent de moeurs, he had questions about why the police allowed the number of maisons de rendez-vous to multiply “prodigiously,” and why they “close their eyes and let them spread their ads with impunity in certain newspapers,” even when some of the addresses given by the so-called masseuses were known to the police as sites of prostitution.⁴ The answer Virmaître eventually gives is that the “street-based prostitute [fille de la rue] offends the bourgeois, while those based in maisons de rendez-vous, who are, however, the same with a different envelope, serve his pleasures.”⁵ The publicity of the classifieds, it seemed to him, offended less than the much more embodied publicity of the street.

While bourgeois men found their pleasure in these maisons and had the power to protect their existence, they were not the only or even the primary reason that this transformation away from a system of enclosed prostitution occurred. As even the police themselves seemed to understand (at least in 1874), there were advantages to be gained for prostitutes who could avoid constant administrative surveillance. Apartment-based

---

³ Paul Meunier, Commission extraparlementaire du régime des mœurs: rapport sur le fonctionnement du service des mœurs à Paris (Melun: Imprimerie Administrative, 1904), 145.
⁵ Virmaître, Paris-impur, 69. This same dynamic of gentrification, expulsion of street-based sex workers, and the rise of indoor prostitution (and the girlfriend experience) has been identified in the contemporary period. See Elizabeth Bernstein, Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
prostitution might, as Alain Corbin has argued, give male clients the thrill of seduction and pseudo-adultery, rather than the mere “genital release” sought previously by less well-integrated and sexually miserable immigrants, but this was an effect rather than a cause of changing forms. First and foremost, working from apartments and furnished rooms gave madams, employees, and independent sex workers an opportunity for a certain kind of independence. Starting in the late nineteenth century, in a moment of economic depression that hit women (both working- and middle-class) especially hard, this semi-independence became accessible to a broad swathe of women. This was thanks to classified advertising.

In the vast literature on the history of prostitution, it is noteworthy that prostitutes’ advertising has never merited more than a passing glance, as if it were a minor, yet interesting, detail in the story, rather than an important cog in a new system. In some work on this period, these ads have even gone completely unseen. This is particularly notable in a study of representations of prostitution in the Parisian press in 1891, which critiques the way in which newspapers represented prostitution as a light-hearted, aestheticized galanterie, rather than accounting for the socio-economic realities of prostitution. They do not note, however, that it was precisely at this moment that the press became important to the socio-economic reality of prostitution through advertising. Despite the fact that the authors do mention the classifieds and some of the sexual products and services sold there, they ignore the presence

6 Corbin, Women for Hire, 174–186.
of coded ads for prostitution on the same pages. To some extent, this can be understood as a problem of interpretation. As we saw in chapter one, reading the sexual classifieds was something contemporaries learned to do, and something I have had to learn to do as well, in both cases with the help of criminal reports and reporting. Many small ads for massage and English lessons would thus not jump out as “prostitution” to someone reading the newspaper in search of something else. And, as we saw in chapter two, understanding the difference between a “suspicious” ad and a “legitimate” ad could and can be quite difficult. It is impossible to be certain that an ad for a pied-à-terre or for language lessons was a veiled call to johns. As was true for those building cases against immoral advertising, the only way to be sure was to hear from someone who followed these ads to women’s apartments. As such, in what follows, I look to police surveillance reports, trial records, and judicial reporting in newspapers that offer glimpses of what was to be found at these addresses and thus allow us to illuminate and analyze the understudied and nominally hidden relationship between prostitution and advertising, showing how the history of prostitution, the history of women’s work, and the history of advertising all look different if we read prostitution and advertising together.

**Procuring Business**

To begin, I’d like to return briefly to the Affaire Flachon. But rather than following the political scandal and intrigue inspired by this scandal, as we did in the previous chapter,

---

9 Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski, “La Prostitution dans la presse parisienne à la fin du XIXe siècle: Gil Blas, Gil Blas illustré, Le Courrier français (1891)” *Littératures* 69 (July 2013): 187–211. Ads for massage in *Gil Blas* led the police to launch investigations into clandestine prostitution as early as 1893. See BA 1689, APP. Ads for massage were already running in *Gil Blas* in 1891, the year examined in the article in question.
here we will train our focus on the pimps and the organization of their prostitutionsal network, which the investigation that led to the Affaire brought to light just before World War I. This is not the earliest case we will look at, but I want to start here because in this case it is already clear that distance from the regulatory system is not necessarily aligned with moral good. This is not (or not only) a story of resistance. It is also one of exploitation. We already know that women (including mothers) profit from the money pre-teenage and teenage girls made performing or witnessing sex acts either at home or in maisons de rendez-vous owned by other women. That said, as historian Julia Laite has argued in her work on (male) sex traffickers in the same period, it is important to see “pimps and traffickers as caught up within the same global forces of labour and exploitation that affected the women who turned to commercial sex” if we are to operate “more complex critiques of prostitution” that go beyond rescuing heroes and condemning devils to show the imbrication of all of the actors in this network with “tolerated structures” of patriarchy, labor exploitation, and global capitalism.\(^\text{10}\) Yes, many of the women we will look at in this chapter exploited other women, but we cannot lose sight of the fact that these female pimps were also caught up in and exploited by even bigger exploitative structures. They too were real people.

As you may recall, one of the threads that led to the Affair Flachon began to unravel when, on October 13, 1911, Mme Poncelet went to the chief of the Police’s Brigade Mobile to report that her fourteen-year-old son Marcel had been missing from home for a few days, a disappearance that she thought had been brought about by “pederasts.” Marcel Poncelet, when found, admitted that he had been solicited on the Boulevard by Compas, known to

the police as a pederast, who took him to his home on behalf of an industrialist named Allard, also known to the police. Poncelet wasn’t alone. Compas had procured at least one other young boy for the industrialist: a fifteen-year-old Even who also procured men on the boulevards under Compas’s surveillance. When arrested, Even told the police that he had lived for several months in Mme David’s maison de rendez-vous at 30 rue du Faubourg Montmartre, in the ninth arrondissement near the grands boulevards, where he and a number of young girls were expected to entertain clients.

The police had also been keeping tabs on Mme Lafarge, who had encouraged her thirteen-year-old daughter, Eliane, to engage in prostitution. Surveillance had shown that Lafarge was in communication with the procureur Mme Guillemin, known as Nitchevo, who lived at 22, rue La Bruyère (9th arrondissement), and that she had brought her daughter to Mme David’s. Yet other inspectors had their eyes trained Mme Lamarre, who prostituted her daughters, aged nine and eleven, both in her home at 76 Boulevard de Clichy (18th arrondissement) and in maisons de rendez-vous, notably Mme Badot’s at 13 rue Viète (17th arrondissement).

On October 25, 1911, police officers arrested a man named Pons, who was monitoring a “young pederast” named Chocat as he solicited on the street. Pons confessed and told the police that he provided young boys such as Chocat to the known procurer Mme Levassor, at 90 rue Legendre (17th arrondissement) for her clients. From there, things escalated quickly and exponentially, with so many people involved and interconnected that it became difficult to keep track of it all. Mme Elloy prostituted her daughter and her son at home and at Mme Levassor’s, along with a number of other young boys and girls. Mme
Pietrapertosa prostituted her sister at her home as well as at Mme Levassor’s and Mme Davy’s. Mme Martin sent clients to Mme Davy. Mme Barjac and Mme Guillemin prostituted boys and girls in their homes.\textsuperscript{11} The list already went on and on, and the police had not yet uncovered the full extent of the operation.

The Flachon Affair took this messy network of procuring, soliciting, and touting—by individuals [a subsection of which is pictured and identified in Fig. 4.1] defined by the court as newspaper owners, seamstresses, hatmakers, and, for those who made their living exclusively by these means, as “without profession”—and smoothed it out into a story about the exploitation of young girls by those in power.\textsuperscript{12} The story journalists told aligned and continues to align well with narratives about prostitution and white slavery in this period. But police surveillance reports disrupt this narrative with information about the day-to-day operation of maisons de rendez-vous and apartment-based prostitution, the place of these prostitutonal forms in women’s economies, and the increasing proximity of prostitution and homosexuality.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} The previous section is based on information given in a report regarding the Affaire Attentats aux mœurs et complicité sent from Le Commissaire de Police, Chef de la Brigade Mobile, à Monsieur le Directeur Général des Recherches in Paris, Nov. 24, 1911. BA 1689, APP.
\textsuperscript{12} Police correctionnelle, 8\textsuperscript{e} chambre, Jan. 11, 1912, D1U6 1131, APP.
\textsuperscript{13} On the archival proximity of homosexuality and female prostitution, see Andrew Israel Ross, “Sex in the Archives: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris,” French Historical Studies 40, no. 2 (2017): 267–290.
In addition, these sources also call into question long-held assumptions about the evolution of modern sexuality and especially about men’s desire. The story looks quite different if the *maisons de rendez-vous*, housed in bourgeois apartments, were not, as Corbin has argued, catering primarily to the desires of high-class clients looking for adultery, for the
sense that they were sleeping with another’s man’s wife. Police investigations make clear that the maison de rendez-vous was very much a site of eroticism, where male and female clients could purchase sex with children (or those dressed like children), flagellation, group sex, homosexuality, voyeurism, bestiality, role-playing, and other non-normative sex acts. The tolérance had, as Corbin has shown, transformed from a “seminal drain” into an opulent temple of debauchery, dedicated to sexual “perversions,” but the late nineteenth-century democratization of these “tastes, fantasies, and techniques that had formerly been the preserve of aristocratic eroticism” was not confined to the maison close. It could also be found in many unmarked (but well-advertised) apartments on the right bank, radiating out from a dense center in the ninth arrondissement, at the foot of Montmartre, in a neighborhood long associated with prostitution through the figure of the Lorette, named after the area these prostitutes called home, and with the newspaper, whose offices straddled the Boulevard. Investigations launched by the police, who are our best source of information on these maisons, also often started with scrutiny of the classifieds.

---

14 Corbin, Women for Hire, 126.
15 Kalifa, Paris, une histoire érotique, 39–41. This area is also the heart of Parisian prostitution in the Comédie humaine. For example, in Honoré de Balzac’s Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes (1838–1847), Esther, the novel’s central courtesan, lives in the ninth arrondissement, first on the rue Taitbout and then on the rue Saint-Georges. On the geography of the Parisian press and the importance of its proximity to the boulevards and their theaters, cafés, and brothels, see Patrick Eveno, “La Presse parisienne du Second Empire aux années 1970: un quartier, des métiers et des sociabilités” in Être parisien (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004), 125–134, esp. 131–132. An article in Le Rire also insinuated that readers needed to be suspicious of ads for massage with addresses in the Saint-Georges neighborhood of the ninth arrondissement: “Il est bon d’ailleurs de se méfier quand il est question de massage. Certains journaux foisonnent de petites annonces vantant les talents de masseuses domiciliées dans le quartier Saint-Georges.” Pick-me-up, “Le Rire de la semaine,” Le Rire, Sept. 25, 1909.
In what follows, I use a selection of police reports (from local police stations, the furnished room brigade, and the vice squad) and newspaper articles spanning from 1893 to 1940 to reconstitute and analyze the prostitutional world the classifieds made (1) during the period leading up to World War I, which scholars have referred to as both the golden age of the press and the golden age of bourgeois prostitution\textsuperscript{17} and (2) in the interwar period, marked by the fall of the great papers of the Belle Epoque (which had been the home of many sexual ads), the rising importance of illustrated weeklies and magazines, and waves of sexual liberation (met with police repression).

\textbf{In the Light of the Daily}

The police first began combing the classifieds for information about clandestine prostitution in the early 1890s. In 1891, ads such as “Me Denise, massage, 9, r. Léonie, 3\textsuperscript{rd} on left” began to appear frequently in the hodge-podge \textit{petite correspondance} column in \textit{Gil Blas}.\textsuperscript{18} This Denise, one journalist observed, “understood the advantages of advertising.”\textsuperscript{19} She understood it so well, it seems, that her small ads were well enough known for successful soap maker Victor Vaissier to refer to the masseuse Denise in his own advertising for Congo soap—taking the form of a poem called “\textit{Emballé} [Excited],” written from the point of view of a client—which appeared one page before “Denise’s” ad in the November 16, 1891 issue of \textit{Gil Blas}:

\begin{quote}
Oh! l’experte masseuse! On l’appelait Denise;
Son geste était très doux, son attitude exquise;
Sa main du Congo fin exhalait la senteur...
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Corbin, \textit{Women for Hire}, 211.
\textsuperscript{18} “Petite correspondance,” \textit{Gil Blas}, Nov. 16, 1891.
156

Et comme elle massait, je l’appelai: ma sœur! ²⁰

Hercule de L… à M. Victor Vaissier. ²¹

The prosecutor, troubled by the “persistence of this advertisement” by the massuese—and perhaps by the added attention Congo soap’s allusion attracted to it—wanted to know the procedure by which “Denise and Co. massaged their fellow citizens.” ²² Those who “went to the location indicated in the newspaper” discovered Denise, her daughter, and a few other young “students” offering both more and less than a hygienic massage. ²³ The advertising clearly worked because, before long, there was a “veritable procession at Mme Denize’s and the business’s profits, it would seem, were excellent.” ²⁴ That is, until the day that the chief of police visited the masseuse. By February, the masseuse, whose real name was Mme Paganel, was convicted of “excitation habituelle de mineures à la débauche” for her role in prostituting her fourteen-year-old daughter Céline. She was sentenced to four years in

²⁰ According to coverage of the ensuing trial in Le Petit journal, which seems to find the whole case (ending with a conviction to four years in prison and the stripping of paternal authority) rather funny, a client of Mme Denise’s made everyone laugh when he used the same play on words in his deposition, saying “Je suis un vieil ami de la famille, […] Je considérais madame comme ma sœur.” Maître Corbeau, “Les Tribunaux: défense de masser,” Le Petit journal, Feb. 10, 1892. Whether this is true or not, Congo’s joke clearly circulated.

²¹ “Emballé!,” Gil Blas, Nov. 16, 1891. Dottin-Orsini and Grojnowski analyze another Congo soap ad/poem (entitled “Masseuse fin-de-siècle”), arguing that such ads contributed to the lighthearted and bawdy tone with which prostitution was discussed in the boulevard press. Their discussion of the Congo soap ad, which alludes to prostitution through the language of massage but does not name sex directly, makes it all the more bizarre that they ignore ads placed by prostitutes using the same code in the same papers. See Mireille Dottin-Orsini and Daniel Grojnowski, “La Prostitution dans la presse parisienne à la fin du XIXe siècle: Gil Blas, Gil Blas illustré, Le Courrier français (1891)” Littératures 69 (July 2013): 195.


²³ “La traite des blanches—le salon de massage de la rue Léonie,” Le Matin, Feb. 9, 1892.

²⁴ “La traite des blanches,” Le Matin, Feb. 9, 1892.
Mme Paganel’s advertisements stopped, but her advertising methods were gaining steam among female sexual entrepreneurs.

When the Service des garnis trained their eyes on 6 rue de Provence following an anonymous letter of denunciation received in September 1893 accusing a black Martinican woman called Finister or Finistère of prostituting a girl of barely eight years old, none of the many prostitutes or procurers they found working from apartments at this address placed advertisements.²⁶ Finister’s clients were almost all regulars and the two maisons de rendez-vous on the floor below her, which, collectively, employed between eleven and fourteen women each day, likely attracted clients by word of mouth (it would have been difficult to inform clients about the availability of a sodomizing hairless dog any other way).²⁷

The apartments at 6 rue de Provence, “full of femmes de débauche” and the site of “all kinds of orgies” may not have been advertised in 1893, but they were already enmeshed in the web classified ads had begun to spin.²⁸ In addition to the sex businesses discovered in the main building, police surveillance (conducted by one officer masquerading as a prospectus distributor and one clandestine prostitute hired as a police informant to get them inside) also revealed that, in a building at the back of the courtyard, a landlady named Mme Dufour was subletting four or five rooms and two apartments to prostitutes.²⁹ The Service

²⁵ ⁹e chambre, Feb. 8, 1892, D1U6 417, AP.
²⁶ Letter, dated Sept. 29, 1893, attached to report “Au sujet d’actes immoraux qui ont lieu dans la maison située rue de Provence, 6,” BA 1689, APP.
²⁷ Report, “Investigations et surveillances relatives à une Née Finister, 6, rue de Provence,” Chef du Service du Sûreté, Oct. 11, 1893, BA 1689, APP.
²⁸ Report, “Au sujet d’actes immoraux qui ont lieu dans la maison située rue de Provence, 6,” Service des Garnis, Oct. 16, 1893, BA 1689, APP.
²⁹ Report, “Au sujet d’actes immoraux qui ont lieu dans la maison située rue de Provence, 6,” Service des Garnis, Oct. 16, 1893, BA 1689, APP.
was inclined to treat Mme Dufour with indulgence, given the fact that it was her useful
information that had launched an investigation into the actions of Mme Paganel. Dufour
had witnessed Paganel visiting one of the 6 rue de Provence maisons de rendez-vous—about
a ten-minute walk from her massage institute on the rue Léonie—with her daughter in tow.
Everyone knew someone who was using advertising to grow their business.

As we saw in Chapter One, the coverage of this case against Mme Denise/Paganel
began the work of teaching newspaper readers to decode encrypted ads. But what if it also
taught sex workers how to employ advertising? The number of ads placed by women was
certainly rising quickly, and the police were taking notice. For example, on December 9,
1893, Mr. Benezech, chief of police for the Rochechouart neighborhood in Paris’s ninth
arrondissement launched an investigation into an ad reading “Salon épilatoire, 23 Rue
Rodier au 1er. L.,” which had been appearing in Gil Blas’s then small “petites annonces”
section for many months.30 That day, he left the station with his employees and traveled to
23 rue Rodier, where he rang the bell on the first floor at a door marked by the words “Mlle
Louise S.E.” Inside, he immediately saw two women: one had opened the door for them and
the other was in the dining room. In the bedroom he found one other woman “preparing
herself to have relations with an individual.” This last woman was a registered prostitute
named Eugénie and the other two women, Laure and Marie, were waiting for clients. The
apartment was in Laure’s name and Laure admitted that she took a cut of everything Eugénie
made. All three were arrested and sent to the Dépôt at the Préfecture. The investigation was

30 For one example of this ad, see “Petites annonces,” Gil Blas, Sept. 5, 1893. On this day, it was one
out of fourteen ads, a number of which were placed by women seeking jobs as servants, cashiers, and
servers.
conclusive: the pseudo-hair removal salon was actually a clandestine brothel. The chief ended his report saying: “I will continue to act zealously to fulfill my functions with the greatest care in order to give every satisfaction to Monsieur le Préfet.”

He was not alone in his zealous actions, but he was among the first to use the classifieds to get there. The “petites annonces” column in *Gil Blas* he was working with was a mix of personal communications (“ZAZ.Geqg jehqgj 7 phg.F.tqvuf vud jhnz dqu”), open-ended searches for relationships, jobs, or lodging, lost dogs, and offers of lessons and other services. The heterogeneous nature of the ads made it harder to tell the difference between sexual and non-sexual content. By 1895, however, when 6 rue de Provence first entered the world of advertising on its own terms—thanks to a Mme Lecour who offered her services as a masseuse and as a seller of art objects to the many readers of *Le Journal*—a consistency of form was beginning to emerge, marking both the professionalization of independent sexual entrepreneurship and the increasing legibility of these advertisements where the police and the general public were concerned [Fig. 4.2].

---

31 Report, Quartier Rochechouart, Mr. Benezech, Commissaire de Police, Paris, Dec. 9, 1893, BA 1689, APP.
32 Within the following decade, the Service des garnis would begin to use the classifieds to investigate clandestine prostitution. For an example of this attention, see the note from the Service des garnis to the Préfet de police from Apr. 17, 1903 reprinted in Daniel Grojnowski, *Eugénie Guillou, religieuse et putain* (Paris: Pauvert, 2013), 107–108.
33 “Petites annonces,” *Gil Blas*, June 22, 1893.
34 An ad reading “Mme Lacour, masseuse, 6, rue de Provence” ran in *Le Journal* on Aug. 28, 1895 and another for “Mme Lacour, vend objets d’art, 6, rue de Provence” also ran in *Le Journal* on Aug. 17, 1895.
Pre-War Trajectories: Splendeurs et Misères des ex-institutrices

So far, we’ve begun to get a sense of how the classifieds became a point of interest to the police, whose investigations discovered interconnected networks of sexual businesses. But who were these women? Why were they doing what they were doing? What did their
days look like? What happened before the police arrived and after they left? Most police reports give little in the way of answers to these questions: they see a “questionable” ad, they go to the address, they find “suspicious” behavior, and they do something about it, end of story.

However, if these sources are not particularly forthcoming about the lives and motivations of the women involved, there were other circumstances that could lead to the collection or reception of a greater evidence base with which to construct a fuller, if still incomplete, picture. To answer the questions the individual report cannot, I turn to the stories of two sexual entrepreneurs, Marie Bigot (1860-1897) and Eugénie Guillou (1861-?). whose careers, for two very different reasons, are more visible than most others in the press (for the first) and the police archives (for the second). In what follows, I recount their stories with as much detail as is possible (which, in Eugénie Guillou’s case, is a lot) in order to give a more complete sense of the role advertisements could play in women’s economic lives.

*From Advertiser to Fait Divers: The Afterlife of Marie Bigot*

Through advertising in mass circulation newspapers such as *Le Journal*, women like Marie Bigot and Eugénie Guillot managed to make largely successful careers for themselves in unmarked apartments even as they moved and changed their names frequently. What we know about Marie Bigot emerges as a composite image of what journalists eagerly uncovered (and perhaps fabricated) about her past in the wake of her mysterious murder. According to the journalist Edouard Ganneron, writing in *Le Journal*, Marie Bigot was born in 1860 in Hennebont, in Brittany, where she was educated and earned her “brevets supérieurs” before
leaving home for Paris with the intention of launching a teaching career.\textsuperscript{35} Everyone, Ganneron assumed, knew “just how frequent disappointments were in the teaching profession [la profession d'institutrice],” and Bigot, after waiting a long time for a job opportunity that never appeared and exhausting her meagre resources, decided to prostitute herself to survive. She was pretty and smart: with economy and foresight, she was able to claw her way out of the seedy underworld toward the heights of the “monde de la haute galanterie.”\textsuperscript{36} According to A. Dupin, writing in \textit{Gil Blas}, Mlle Bigot arrived in Paris with the goal of giving French lessons and making enough to live independently. Disappointed time and again, she became friends (“a more than intimate friendship”) with a very beautiful woman who ran with the in-crowd (lancée dans la haute noce) and quickly found success thanks to her beauty. Once her beauty had faded—she’s described here as “gelatinous”—she was still able to keep up a comfortable lifestyle by setting up business as a procurer, trading in other women’s youth and beauty.\textsuperscript{37} Jean de Paris’s coverage in \textit{Le Figaro} said that Bigot had turned to prostitution due to dissatisfaction with her schoolteacher’s wages and that she, despite being “not pretty, fat, plump,” nonetheless had many clients.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Le Rappel} described her as a tall brunette who had once been superb and, nearing forty, still had some of her beauty left, which she made good use of in her “petit commerce,” which was quite prosperous thanks to her newspaper advertising.\textsuperscript{39} Coverage in the \textit{Radical} told a story of seduction in which the

\textsuperscript{36} Edouard Ganneron, “Assassinat d’une femme galante: Yvonne de Balagny,” \textit{Le Journal}, Nov. 29, 1897.
pious Joséphine (Marie’s other first name), who had been raised in a maison religieuse and taught in several households after getting her brevet d’institutrice was fatally seduced by a man, which led her to leave for Paris where she “slipped little by little into la galanterie.” As she did, she began to “make recourse to fourth-page advertising in certain newspapers to attract clients.”

Whatever led her into bourgeois prostitution, what is clear in every story is that advertising was crucial to the success of her peripatetic business. Early in her career, she took the aristocratic name of Yvonne de Balagny at 27 rue de Moscou (8th arrondissement) for around four years, working alongside perhaps five or six other women. After that, she spent two years presenting herself as an educated language teacher with the more bourgeois name of Mme Marie Senart in a ground-floor apartment at 2 rue Crétet (9th arrondissement). She then spent a short time using both her own name and that of Jeanne de Beauchamp at 9 rue Viollet-Leduc (9th arrondissement) before becoming Mme Madeleine or Jane or Diane Duc and claiming to offer language lessons in a furnished room on the ground floor off of the courtyard at 19 rue Victor-Massé (9e arrondissement). Finally, she spent eighteen months working out of an apartment at 3 rue Pierre-le-Grand, where she would be murdered in November 1897.

42 I’ve been able to find examples of her ads at 19 rue Victor-Massé, but there is evidence that she placed ads at other addresses as well. In Le Journal on Nov. 15, 1894, her ad read: “Leç. de langues viv. Mme DUC, 19, rue Victor-Massé.”
43 Not all of the journalists agreed on the order in which she inhabited these different addresses. Here, I’ve followed the timeline given in Thargelion, “Le Crime de la rue Pierre-le-Grand,” L’Aurore,
At each new address, regulars were joined by new clients who saw her ads in the classifieds. Monsieur Furet wrote, in the literary newspaper *Les Romans inédits*, that he had overheard a man talking with a couple of *femmes galantes* at the Folies Bergères, one of Bigot’s old haunts, about how he had met Marie. He told his companions that he was first “nabbed” by her when she lived on rue Viollet-le-Duc. He had read one of her ads on the fourth page of a newspaper (“Moving sale, *objets d’art* for sale... speak to Mme Beauchamp between 2 and 6 o’clock”), which he subsequently cut out and headed for her apartment.\(^4^4\) He would encounter her again months later after following an ad in the same newspaper to a different address, using a different name, to find a woman claiming to seek a “serious union” with a “man with a [good] position.” Surprised by her complicated advertising system, one of his friends told him that this was “a trick [truc] she often made use of to great effect...She had created a very serious clientele for herself and owned property in Brittany.”\(^4^5\)

She was successful enough that over time her inexpensive mahogany furniture was replaced with old carved oak, her wardrobe expanded, her lingerie became more refined, and her jewelry box filled with expensive pieces.\(^4^6\) But was it her success, or rather the means of her success—the classifieds—that led to her death? After a few months of searching for the assassin, the only serious lead the police had was the well-known fact that “Marie Bigot placed many advertisements in certain newspapers to set up easy relationships [des relations faciles] for herself.” It seemed likely that “the man who had done the deed could be one of these

---

\(^4^5\) Monsieur Furet, “Police-Gazette,” 171.
The police thus launched an investigation into “the world of people who communicate with femmes galantes via advertising and quickly learned that the morning of the crime, Marie Bigot had received an unsigned postcard marked with bizarre characters and informing her that they would be coming that same day.” The concierge told the police that, a few days before her death, Bigot told her that a man who had just won the lottery was going to visit her and that she “had entered this relationship following the publication of an advertisement in a newspaper.” The concierge also asserted that this man had indeed come on the day the crime was committed.

A 42-year-old ex-police officer named Rodot or Rodeau fit the description she gave perfectly. At his apartment, not far from Marie Bigot’s, the police found newspapers with articles about her murder underlined as well as an extensive collection of correspondence with femmes galantes whom he had located by placing ads in the newspaper (e.g. “Forty-year-old man, well-off, seeking liaison with rich woman, disinterested, of any age”), using a procedure similar to the one Bigot used. Under questioning, he admitted to the 1883 murder of the prostitute Maria Jouin over a decade earlier while still an officier de sureté (the statute of limitations had passed...), but would not confess to the more recent murder of Marie Bigot, in spite of striking similarities between the two cases. The officer in charge was sure this man had done it, but could not prove it, especially given the multiplicity of other possible explanations that could only be ruled out with great difficulty. The murder could even have been a mistake: rumor had it that Joséphine-Marie Bigot had “unusual

tastes” and that “her passion was to simulate scenes of assassination.” Perhaps a client “went all the way in his role [as murderer] in one of these scenes of debauchery.”

Whether her own unusual tastes (if it was genuinely her own “tastes” or “passions” at work and not simply a business decision) were at play in her death or not, at least one observer was sure Marie Bigot’s desire for independence was to blame for her death. “Look what happened,” Santillane wrote in Gil Blas, “to this poor Marie Bigot, alias Yvonne de Balagny, who thought she could do without a petit homme [pimp].” She had worked so hard to be able to buy herself a little country house where she could live out her days in peace, respected by her neighbors and the parish priest, but, before she could retire, a man took advantage of her independence to kill her like so many women before her. For this author, (male) pimps—the “last knights”—were not contemptible at all. If only Marie Bigot had had such a devoted petit homme “hidden in the adjoining room, ready to emerge” to defend her, she might have lived to see the fruits of her hard work.

**Eugénie Guillou: A Voice from the Archives**

To valorize the pimp as chivalric figure is, however, to misunderstand the appeal of the kind of indoor sex work facilitated by classified advertisements. For Marie Bigot and Eugénie Guillou, unmarried ex-schoolteachers, overeducated and over-ambitious for the

---

49 “Le Crime de la rue Pierre-le-Grand,” Le Radical, Dec. 1, 1897. Marie-François Goron also mentions a similar instance of sexual reenactment of crimes in the same time period. He recounts that, in the wake of the famous “malle sanglante” case, a prostitute rented an apartment, furnished it just like the one where the crime took place, dressed just like the murderess, and offered to reenact the murder for clients. See Marie-François Goron, L’Amour criminel: mémoires du chef de la Sûreté de Paris à la Belle Époque (Paris: André Versaille éditeur, 2009 [1899]), 242–243.

world they were living it, it seems clear that it was precisely the ability to earn a comfortable living without dependence on men that made the profession appealing. For Marie Bigot, this ended in tragedy, with her murder, like so many sex workers before and after her, at the hands of a man intent on murdering prostitutes.\textsuperscript{51} Eugénie Guillou was luckier and, perhaps, savvier. She herself eventually took on the role of pimp (or madam) and found strength in numbers without men’s help with enough success that Deputy Paul Meunier described her as an “educated, elegant woman, perfectly proper and amiable” in his 1904 report on the regulation of vice in Paris.\textsuperscript{52}

She nonetheless had much in common with Marie Bigot. In addition to having been a schoolteacher, Eugénie Guillou also moved often, placed many advertisements, and took on many different names. However, if we know so much about her trajectory it is not because she died spectacularly, but rather because she created an unprecedented amount of information about herself (including having her photograph taken as both nun and prostitute). She was the one who communicated this information to the police, cannily using police officers—and their almost inevitable surveillance—to her own ends and, in so doing, ensuring that her name and image would mark the historical record.\textsuperscript{53}

As literary historian Daniel Grojnowski makes clear in his presentation of Guillou’s police dossier, which he published as \textit{Eugénie Guillou, religieuse et putain}, Guillou’s writings offer us one of the only existing examples of direct testimony in an archive nearly devoid of


\textsuperscript{52} Paul Meunier, \textit{Commission extraparlementaire du régime des mœurs: rapport sur le fonctionnement du service des mœurs à Paris} (Melun: Imprimerie Administrative, 1904), 155.

\textsuperscript{53} These photographs are reproduced in Daniel Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou, religieuse et putain} (Paris: Pauvert, 2013), 18, 44, 84.
the voices of those classified as “prostitutes.”\textsuperscript{54} Guillou, born in 1861 in the 18\textsuperscript{th} arrondissement of Paris, however, does not enter the historical record as a prostitute or as a pimp but rather as a nun who feels she has been wronged by her superiors. She tells a story about herself as a brilliant student who, shortly after taking up her first teaching post (which paid a meager 25 francs per month), decided to enter a convent. According to her, her family, which had been well-off in her youth, lost everything, including her dowry and thus any dreams of marrying her well. Instead of marrying someone less worthy of her, someone who could not fulfill her fantasy of “becoming a chatelaine like my mother so beautiful and loved” she decided to leave society altogether, a society which made it difficult for an educated woman to support herself, and become a nun.\textsuperscript{55} From 1880 to 1892 Guillou lived among the Dames de Sion, becoming Sister Marie-Zénaïde de Sion and serving as a schoolteacher, the functions of which she performed well enough to receive a certificate testifying to her “good character [\textit{bonnes vie et moeurs}]” and her “teaching abilities” upon her departure.\textsuperscript{56}

The separation, however, was not an amicable one. Informed she would not be allowed to renew her vows and that she did not have a religious vocation, she launched a long legal battle against her ex-Sisters in which she asked them to pay her for the twelve years of work she had done for them (24,000 francs) and for damages linked to her termination.

\textsuperscript{54} Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou}, 12, 16. In what follows, I rely on Grojnowski’s transcriptions of the Guillou dossier, which is no longer located under the call number BA 1689 at the Archives de la Préfecture de Police. It has likely been moved to the new JC subseries on the brigade mondaine and police surveillance of prostitution, which, as of April 2019, has yet to be opened to the public.

\textsuperscript{55} “Renseignements personnels sur Mademoiselle Eugénie Guillou (par elle-même)” and “Autres renseignements secondaires, étrangers à la matière du procès” in Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou}, 32–34.

\textsuperscript{56} “Copie du certificate que m’ont délivré les Dames de Sion” in Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou}, 30.
(25,000 francs).\textsuperscript{57} She would not win this battle, which would stretch on for a decade, until 1902, but it would shape her. She wrote: “I am no longer, one can feel it, the same young timid and fearful woman who, leaving the convent, wants to let herself die of despair and sadness, no, I now have a goal, I’ve dedicated my life to vengeance!”\textsuperscript{58}

It’s possible to see her entry into a life of “vice” as a form of vengeance, but her anger seems to more accurately be against anyone who would seek to control her or tell her what to do, anyone who would keep her from controlling her own life and livelihood. It seems likely that failure to find well-paying and steady work as a teacher after leaving the convent led her to an employment agency that furnished her, in September 1899, with a job as a servant in Madame la Comtesse de Bethlem’s maison de rendez-vous at 61 rue de Provence, where she was promised 1.50 francs per day. After less than a week, she was ready to quit and was writing to the police to tell them that her employer was refusing to pay her.\textsuperscript{59}

When Guillou resurfaces in the archive in July 1901 and begins to experiment with setting out on her own, she uses the classifieds as a springboard. She responds to an ad in Le Journal placed by a woman who promised to “charge herself with indicating everything you desire as well as with all confidential missions and actions [démarches].”\textsuperscript{60} She informed the advertiser, whose advertisements she had noticed in Le Journal for some time, that she is a “femme du monde, of superior education and cultivation, rather strong, thirty-five years

\textsuperscript{57} “Mademoiselle Guillou contre la congrégation des dames de Sion” [copie d’un article de journal, fin 1902–début 1903?] in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 41.

\textsuperscript{58} “Autres renseignements secondaires, étrangers à la matière du procès” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 38.

\textsuperscript{59} “Carte-lettre affranchie rue de Provence, le 24 septembre 1899” and “La comtesse Bethlem à la police, le 27 septembre 1899” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 55–56.

\textsuperscript{60} Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 57.
old”—a musician, painter, and linguist for whom being whipped is “a passion, a need.” She promised that she would compensate the advertiser generously if she could find her a “well-off man who loves to spank women.”

To protect her anonymity, she asked that a response be sent via poste restante to E. de P. G. X. 545.

Perhaps it was also in the classified pages of *Le Journal* that she found the address of “Nelly the pimp,” as the police referred to her. Between 1901 and 1905, Nelly placed frequent advertisements for English lessons and for an “elegant pied-à-terre,” which was open everyday from 1 to 7 p.m. on the second floor at 72, rue Taitbout (9th arrondissement).

However Guillou found Nelly’s address, sometime in 1902, Guillou wrote to tell her that she had some new and “very interesting” instruments for penance from the convent. However, she asked Nelly if she could refrain from telling clients that Guillou likes flagellation in the future: “the young man that I saw at your place left marks that lasted a long time, and everyone goes at it too brutally.” She asked if, instead, she could tell them that she could “punish them dressed as a nun [en religieuse] or amuse them in some other way.” For this work, she hoped that Nelly could arrange things so that Guillou would take home 20 to 25 francs each time—substantially better pay than she had made as a teacher (25 francs per month) or as a domestic servant in a maison de rendez-vous (1.50 francs per day). Even

---

63 For a few examples, see issues of *Le Journal* from June 8, 1901; Mar. 15, 1902; Mar. 1, 1905.
between sex workers and with no public to posture for, Guillou insisted on her cultivation, promising Nelly a piano lesson for each client she found for her.\textsuperscript{65}

After a year or two of finding work in discrete \textit{maisons} like the one operated by Nelly, she had accumulated enough money and know-how to set out on her own. As Grojnowski puts it: “Like all those who refuse the constraints of the sidewalk and the regulated brothel, Eugénie Guillou used newspaper advertising to propose her services in an intimate setting.”\textsuperscript{66} Doing so, however, required an apartment of her own and enough money to bribe the concierge and to pay for the frequent advertising. Fronting these costs, however, would allow her to keep all of her subsequent earnings for herself, rather than giving half of everything she earned to a madam like Nelly. On August 2, 1902 she placed an ad in the “Marriages” column of \textit{Le Journal}, which read:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

When one of her respondents turned nasty and threatening, Guillou sent the police the correspondence that purportedly came from a rich man looking for an authoritarian woman who would be cruel with him and could teach his servant the art of fustigation.\textsuperscript{68} She told the police that these letters were actually sent to her by a “professionelle de l’amour”—another

\textsuperscript{65}“Lettre d’Eugénie Guillou à ‘la proxénète Nelly” in Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou}, 62.

\textsuperscript{66}Grojnowski, \textit{Eugénie Guillou}, 92.

\textsuperscript{67}This translates, roughly, to “Noble \textit{femme du monde} of middle age, well educated, polyglot, musician, author, and poet, artistic tastes, authoritarian character, ex-nun in a big convent (recent trial), would marry a distinguished, educated man who is either very gentle or energetic enough to dominate her. Age and financial situation not important. Respond within two weeks to E.V.A. at the Journal.”

prostitute—who was jealous, thinking Guillou’s ad represented competition. She explained that she, the perfectly respectable Madame Guillou de Launay, a degree-holding schoolteacher who could “furnish excellent references” and who had spent “twelve years as a nun-teacher in one of Paris’s top convents,” had placed the ad as a joke and had only continued the correspondence to mock the prostitute trying to dupe her into thinking she was a very rich man.69

Despite her claims that her foray into advertising was all just for a laugh, by October 1902 at the latest, she was placing ads for her apartment-based business in a modest apartment (540 francs per year) in the Batignolles neighborhood (17th arrondissement). The police discovered that Guillou was the author of an ad in Le Journal that read “Dame du monde, giv. Eng. less. from 2 to 7 p.m. Madame de Florinval. 62, rue Saussure, 3rd floor (parc Monceau),” an ad that drew a certain number of men and women to her home.70 In December, a police informant took a closer look, climbing the three flights of stairs to knock on the door marked “Institutrice diplômée.” Guillou herself opened the door, letting the man into a three-room apartment furnished in a way the informant could only describe as “miserable” and of “offensively poor quality.”71 The informant, there to set Guillou up, made an appointment for a lesson with young girls, requesting that they be completely undressed so that the police would have less trouble charging her for debauching minors when they

launched a raid and caught everyone red handed. Guillou didn’t suspect anything. She promised to start a fire in the early morning so that no one would catch cold.72

“Informed” that “Mademoiselle Guillou Eugénie-Marie dite ‘de Launay’, dite ‘de Florinval’”73 received female minors in her apartment, a team of police officers showed up to interrupt one of institutrice Guillou’s rendezvous. It was Guillou herself, dressed as a nun, who opened the door to the men who found themselves in a dining room separated by a red curtain with a man dressed only in his underwear and a domino mask with lace attached to cover his whole face on one side, using a hole in the curtain to watch the three naked women who were on the other. Guillou calmly explained that the women, all three of whom were seamstresses in their early twenties (no minors), were there serving as models in a painting lesson. The police knew of one of them, Le Bihan, because of the ads she had placed seeking work as an artist’s model (they were clearly keeping close tabs on the classifieds). Le Bihan admitted when questioned that the holes in the curtain were not only for the man’s eyes, that they were also intended to facilitate anonymous hand and blow jobs. Based on this information, the three women and Guillou—who insisted she had never been with a man74—were arrested for engaging in clandestine prostitution. A search of the apartment turned up five little whips and a switch that could be used for flagellation, which the police confiscated along with a painting and the mask the client had been wearing.75

73 “Mandat de perquisition et d’amener du préfet de Paris à Charles Lespine, commissaire de police de la ville de Paris,” Dec. 1902 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 80.
74 There were rumors, however, that convent life had initiated her into “lesbian pleasures.” “Note sur Madame de Florinval et sa maison” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 98.
75 “Copie du rapport (1re Division, 2e Bureau, 3e Section) transmise au 1er Bureau du Cabinet, le 10 décembre 1902” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 80–83.
In his commentary on Guillou’s dossier and its lacunae, Daniel Grojnowski reminds us just how humiliating this arrest and subsequent internment in Saint-Lazare, a prison reserved for prostitutes, must have been for a woman who insisted on having her education recognized (and who was adamant about her virginity).\(^7\) Between 1903 and 1913, the ten years that follow her experience in prison, Guillou, a.k.a. De Launay, Mac Cormack, Erzy, Lucie Raymond, Dulac, de Boislorey, and Florinval moved many times, rarely staying in any location for very long.\(^7\) The only things that held steady in her life during this period are a desire for economic stability, compliance with the police, and reliance on advertising.

Eugénie Guillou was arrested in early December 1902. When she emerged, she quickly obtained police authorization to run a maison de rendez-vous in the afternoons, after her morning language and piano lessons were over.\(^7\) By late January 1903, she was already placing ads for English lessons by “Madame Raymond” in a new three-room apartment on the third floor at 25 rue Bellefond (9\(^{\text{th}}\) arrondissement), which she was renting for 700 francs per year.\(^7\) Women who worked for her had to agree to her terms, which included charging each client ten francs toward the cost of advertising in addition to ten francs for the room, ten francs for the woman (of which Guillou would take half), and a supplement of 1 to 5 francs for bedding, light, heat, and service. If the client was wealthy, she reserved the right to ask for a much higher supplement, making it possible to cover advertising costs without paying out of her own pocket.\(^8\)

---

\(^7\) Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 88–89.
\(^7\) Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 89.
\(^7\) Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 102.
\(^7\) “Note sur Madame de Florinval et sa maison,” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 105.
\(^8\) “Rapport,” Feb. 18, 1903 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 105.
\(^8\) “Tarif et règlement de la maison” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 103.
After being kicked out of her rue de Bellefond apartment and living, for a short time, in a furnished room, Guillou managed to get back on her feet and climb one more rung up the ladder. In May 1903, she asked for authorization from the police to run a tolerated maison de rendez-vous in a fourth floor apartment of five rooms at 23 rue de Berlin (today’s rue de Liège in the 8th arrondissement) that she rented for 1450 francs per year. The maison, marked by a card on the door reading “Madame Boislorey, English lessons,” had three lodgers who waited for clients in toilettes de ville, rather than the state of undress common among their brothel-based colleagues, and who were regularly visited by a police-approved doctor. The minimum price: twenty francs.81

Although Guillou was careful to perform compliance with police regulations, writing to inform them when new women came to work for her, the visibility of her advertising nonetheless posed a problem.82 The police collected ads in Le Journal for Spanish lessons offered by Madame Raymond and, after the third one, “Guillou was warned once and for all to put a stop to her advertisements for lessons. She promised to stop.”83 Her promise, however, was quickly forgotten: advertising was, after all, the lifeblood of her livelihood.

In addition to helping her find clients, the classifieds were also an effective way to find employees. After failing to find the kind of of-age servant willing to clean and satisfy

83 “Rapport,” June 30, 1903 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 113. During this time period, she placed many kinds of ads for her maison de rendez-vous under many different pseudonyms and in a number of different newspapers. For example, in Le Journal, on May 16, 1903 she placed two ads: 1) “Soins c. doul. Me Boislorey, 23, rue Berlin, 4e ét.” and “Chez prof.d’ang.récem.instal.,gent.p.à. ter.b.meub. s.rue. F. de Boislorey, 23, rue de Berlin, 4e ét.” On Oct. 6, 1903, in Le Supplément, she placed an ad that read “Gentil et discret petit pied-à-terre Chez institutrice diplômée, massage. P. très modéré. Mme de Florinval, 23, rue de Berlin, 4e ét.”
clients through employment agencies, she placed an ad in *Le Journal*. Thirty-five women responded and Marie Dubuffet, born in 1881, got the job. When the police, responding to a letter of denunciation, questioned Dubuffet about her work, which she did alongside four other women the police described as regulars on the maison de rendez-vous circuit, she said she liked living at Madame de Florinval’s and that, if she took clients in addition to her domestic labor, it was “because she likes it, because she has a two-year-old to raise.”

Despite the fact that the police found nothing out of order (all of the women, including Dubuffet, were adults, and were regularly screened for venereal disease) and despite Guillou’s attempts to make herself as useful and agreeable as possible to the police (she offered information about her business and those around her and promised free services to Monsieur Lespine of the *service des garnis*), her ads were routinely cut out and added to her ever-growing police file. Once in a while, the police would call her in, perhaps to tell her to cease and desist, or to ask her to modify things so that rather than advertising “elegant furnished rooms for rent, visible during the week and on Sunday” the text would be limited to “elegant furnished rooms for rent,” ostensibly making the sexual nature of the ad less visible to the untrained eye.

Guillou, however, was too good at what she did to be brought down by a little unwanted police intervention in her advertising practices (the aspect of her business most visible to the general public). The same went for judicial intervention. As of early 1904, she—

---

as Mme Erzy—was running an authorized maison de rendez-vous on the second floor at 54 rue de la Victoire (9th arrondissement) in an apartment rented for 6000 francs per year, made up of six rooms, of which two were rented as furnished rooms.\footnote{“Greffe correctionnel,” Feb. 23, 1906 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 133.} One of her ads for a “furnished room,” placed in 1905 in the illustrated weekly 
*Vieux Marcheur*, was included in a court case against immoral advertising that had editors, newspaper owners, admen, and bookstore owners (and their ads for erotic literature) as its primary target: Guillou was the only woman and the only person involved in sex work convicted (out of eighteen defendants).\footnote{July 31, 1906, Tribunal de 1er Instance du Département de la Seine, Police correctionnelle, 9e chambre, D1U6 935, AP.}

When an undercover agent visited the maison, the first question she asked him was whether his visit was inspired by one of her ads and, if so, which newspaper he had seen it in.\footnote{“Greffe correctionnel,” Feb. 23, 1906 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 133.} He, of course, specified the *Vieux Marcheur* and she immediately launched into an explanation of the way her business worked: that her maison was authorized by the préfecture, that she had seven or eight lodgers who were visited by doctors, and that her prices were fairly high (between ten and one hundred francs). There was absolutely no mention of the furnished room for rent promised by the ads she placed—the rooms were already taken, in any case—which led the agent to conclude that “there is no doubt that the ad that Mademoiselle Guillou placed in diverse newspapers has the goal of attracting clients to her maison de rendez-vous and not to rent a furnished room.”\footnote{“Greffe correctionnel,” Feb. 23, 1906 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 134.} During her interrogation, Guillou admitted to having placed ads in the illustrated journals *Vieux Marcheur* and *Fin de
sécul as well as in other newspapers such as Le Supplément, L’Écho de Paris, Le Figaro, and L’Éclair, but vigorously denied that there was anything immoral about her ads, in form or in content. According to her, the ads were straightforward: “I have two apartments. I rent one as furnished rooms and I use the other for my luxury goods business.” The court was not convinced and she was slapped with a four month suspended prison sentence and a 500 franc fine. A second conviction for immoral advertising would send her to prison, but that didn’t stop her from advertising—her livelihood depended on it.

Less than four months later—supposedly after a month-long spa treatment for her health in Plombières-les-Bains—the police were again taking note of her advertisements for furnished rooms and were again noting that her furnished rooms were already occupied. Perhaps it was—as Guillou claimed—her health, perhaps it was her experience in court, but around this time, Guillou began to consider selling her business. In June 1906 she wrote to a colleague to tell her that if she could find her a buyer for her maison, which was “admirably situated and frequented by a rich and numerous clientele,” she would give her a 10% commission. A year later, she was still looking for a buyer for her “Maison de Rendez-vous” which she estimated as worth 30 to 40,000 francs but which she willing to sell at any price, even under 10,000 francs with a 10% commission. It was, according to her, “an established maison, in existence for more than ten years, with a rich clientele, in part feminine” and

---

91 “P.V. fait le 23 février 1906 par Monsieur Ch. Berthelot, commissaire” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 135.
92 “Note d’audience du 30 juin 1906” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 136.
93 “Note d’audience du 30 juin 1906” in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 136.
95 “Lettre dactylographiée d’Eugénie Guillou,” June 12, 1906, Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 137.
which was known “as one of the most interesting and best run in Paris.” After all costs were paid, there were 1000 francs to be made each month. According to Guillou (who was undoubtedly overselling things at least a little), this was a very good opportunity.

*Dreams of a Beautiful Business?*

It’s not clear from the records whether Guillou ever successfully found a buyer, but she insisted that she wanted to get out of the sex trade. In late February 1908, she wrote to Monsieur Badin of the *Service des garnis* to tell him that she would soon be opening a new business, which she was calling the “Institut Vénus” at 77 rue de Turbigo (3rd arrondissement). When an inspector came to learn more about this supposedly non-sexual commercial venture, Guillou told him that the business would be focused on selling a “special belt for women” called the “Vénus-Phébée.” The inspector described the belt, which he saw with his own eyes, as “made of copper or steel, about 2 cm wide and covered with plush or velvet, extendable or with a spring, adapting itself perfectly to the waist which it compresses without, they say, harming those organs essential for life!” Alongside the sale of the belt, Guillou’s business would offer health and beauty treatments, offered by a doctor (to consult with clients and give treatments for obesity, baldness, wrinkles), a masseuse and two students, in a space for hydrotherapy. All in all, the inspector seemed impressed with

---

and convinced by what Guillou was doing, describing her apartment, which she rented for 1300 francs per year, as “clean, almost luxurious.”

To attract clients to her new hygienic establishment, Guillou would use a tried and true method: the classifieds. But in this she acknowledged that there was a problem. She herself had long contributed to and made use of the sexualization of the classifieds, to the creation of a code in which massage and other health and hygiene services were assumed to mask sexual ones (a process we examined in Chapter One). She said that she would place ads for her beauty institute in *Gil Blas*, *Le Figaro*, *L’Écho de Paris*, *le New York Herald*, etc., which would “without a doubt attract men at first, but they would, little by little, be ousted.” Guillou “wanted an exclusively feminine clientele.” To this end, she would not place any ads in *Le Supplément*, “this newspaper being read by a vulgar clientele, she feared that the young people would come in a group to create a ‘ruckus’ [du ‘chahut’] and, in this way, discredit the maison which she wants to manage on a firm footing [tenir sur un bon pied].”

Ousting them, however, would not be easy. One of the first ads she placed for her new institute ran in *Gil Blas* on February 27, 1908 in a category of its own, “Hygiene, Pharmacy.” It read: “Institut Vénus, 77, r. Turbigo (place République). Beauty, hygiene, massage, hydrotherapy.” Directly below it was the “Hygiene—Massage” column, which was filled with ads for massage and beauty treatments, including by those known to be involved in the sex trade, like Nelly, whom we met earlier. In fact, the very first ad in this rubric was placed by someone using one of Guillou’s own pseudonyms and claiming to be the new address of her

---

maison de rendez-vous. It read: “Engl. Massage. Mme Dorinval, 12, r. La Bruyère, mezzanine on left, near place St-Georges, prev[iously] 54, r. la Victoire.” Was Guillou running a maison de rendez-vous and a beauty institute at the same time? Or had Marie-Louise Haas, her second in command who had become mistress during Guillou’s medical leave, taken over the business for good? 102 In either case, if Guillou’s desire to distinguish her beauty work and her sex work was genuine and not a performance for the police, this distinction was made difficult by her need to advertise.

That said, it was precisely at this moment that beauty work was emerging as a viable, respectable, and highly-profitable opportunity for women. 103 France’s first beauty institute had been opened in 1895, just over a decade earlier, by Guillou’s contemporary, Marie Valentin Le Brun, who offered elite clients beauty services that included manicures and massages. 104 At this time, the Polish-born Helena Rubinstein (1872-1965) was already busy building a global cosmetics empire with salons in Australia and England. In 1912, she moved to Paris and opened a new salon, the success of which was due, in part, to her husband’s advertising savvy. She would become one of the world’s most wealthy women. 105

Rubinstein’s advertisements for her products and for her beauty institute at 255 rue Saint-Honoré, near the Place Vendôme (1st arrondissement), like ads for Mme Valentin Le

---

104 Grout, The Force of Beauty, 35.
Brun’s Institut de Beauté at 26 place Vendôme, did not run on the classified page and were neither inexpensive nor “petite.” When Rubinstein placed ads in *Gil Blas*, specifically targeting the paper’s “female readers and subscribers,” these ads ran at several pages of remove from the back-page ads for massages, baths, manicures, and other “beauty treatments.” And in the pages of the *Figaro*, an ad for Le Brun’s Institute ran on the first page, far from the classifieds and other medical ads on the fifth and sixth pages. Legitimacy, it seems, was something to be purchased. It didn’t come cheap. In the back pages, women like Guillou could aspire to more lucrative sex businesses, but would have a hard time leaving the sex trade behind entirely.

Guillou quickly changed the name of her business from the Institut Vénus to the less suggestive Beauty-Palace, but the name change alone could not erase all confusion. In June 1908, the police received a letter from a man who had visited the beauty institute—which he described as “very well established [très bien installée]”—looking for sex. Guillou informed him that this was not in fact a maison de rendez-vous, but a genuine massage parlor. However, in talking with one of the three masseuses that worked there, he learned that “very few clients come for real massages.” By October 1908, Guillou was again placing ads in *Le Supplément*, and thus reaching out to what she had recently described as a “vulgar clientele.” In February 1909, Guillou told the police that she had recently fired two employees who had behaved in an “improper manner”: one of them had lied about her references and had

106 For an example, see *Gil Blas*, Apr. 4, 1913, pages 5 and 8.
107 *Le Figaro*, Dec. 21, 1904.
108 “Lettre adressé à la police,” June 24, 1908, accompanied by an ad for Beauty-Palace in *L’Écho de Paris* from Apr. 28, 1908 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 144.
actually come to Guillou straight from a maison de rendez-vous. Despite Guillou’s efforts to convince the police and the public that her beauty institute did not sell sex, no one seems to have believed her. The police describe her maison as a “suspect business operating under the cover of massages,” in short, a “maison de rendez-vous,” in spite of Guillou’s “boasting” that she offers only “serious massage, to the exclusion of any other shameful commerce.”

By September 1909, Guillou gave up the ghost and presented herself to the police in order to declare that, in addition to offering beauty treatments and legitimate massages, she also had two masseuses (undergoing the sanitary visit required of prostitutes) who would offer “superfluous things” to visitors who asked for them.

By May 1910, she was placing ads both appealing to clients as “Madame Guy” in the pages of Le Supplément and to offer up the lease on her “beauty and massage institute” to readers of Le Journal’s classifieds. In mid-July 1911 she moved, leaving her apartment empty and failing to inform the police of her new address. As always, she was in search of new money-making opportunities and had landed on private detective. On Friday, October 11, 1912, Guillou presented herself at the service des garnis to offer her services as a private investigator and was told to come back Monday morning. That weekend, she followed up

113 Le Supplément, May 31, 1910; Le Journal, May 28, 1910. One reader wrote to her in response to one of her “Madame Guy” ads to tell her: “do your job as a mother madam [mère maquerelle], but do it in silence and leave us alone.” “Carte postale anonyme envoyée à Madame Guy (Eugénie Guillou),” July 23, 1910 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 155. Guillou was still advertising her “instit. de beauté et mass. à céder. 77, r. Turbigo” in Le Supplément on Sept. 6, 1910.
114 “Rapport,” Aug. 21, 1911 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 155–156.
with a note to Monsieur Lefils at the service, asking that he at least take her offer seriously and explaining that she could, at the very least, be useful in uncovering the prostitution of minors, a problem that had been making headlines earlier that year because of the Flachon scandal (discussed in Chapter Three). She told him that she could “disguise herself as a nun, a nanny, a bread seller [porteuse de pain]” or even as a mother looking to prostitute her daughter and thus enter anywhere: “people aren’t wary of [a woman] like they are of men.” Her investigative work would of course need to be remunerated, since “one must live and have some resources.” If the police could not “pay her reasonably” then she would have to open her own detective and information agency, essentially coming full circle to become the woman she had written to early in her career, whom she had asked for help in finding work as a sex worker interested in flagellation. With such an agency, she explained, she could get the madams of maisons de rendez-vous to pay her to send clients their way and could continue to make the police happy by sending them information about these clients. For Guillou, it mattered little whether her money came from the police or from madams, what mattered was that the money came.

There is no record in the archives that the police took Guillou up on her offer (although they already had a long history of taking unpaid tips from her), nor that she opened an agency of her own, but her first visit inspired the police to keep a close eye on her, thereby giving us our last, and in some ways most revealing, glimpse of Eugénie Guillou in the flesh. In this case, the investigation did not take the form of posing as a client and visiting her at

home, but rather of tailing her as she went about her business, running errands, unaware of
the spying eyes that followed her every move. The spy began his work just after four p.m. as
Guillou, “around forty-eight years old, short, black hair, brown eyes, dressed in a brown suit,
wearing a little hat in black velvet with ornamental cherries, black shoes and carrying an
overnight bag,” left the office of the police chief and walked toward Châtelet to catch a bus.  
He followed her onto the bus and to Opéra, where she put on some brown gloves and walked
into the “Institut de Beauté Keicher-Valentin” at 9 rue de Volney. Ten minutes later she
reemerged—perhaps with some new skin cream to work against emerging wrinkles or
perhaps with plans for a new beauty business. She then walked back toward avenue de
l’Opéra, where she visited the offices of the New York Herald (at number 49), where the
paper had its classified advertising office, and the Écho de Paris (at number 6, place de
l’Opéra), spending ten minutes in each building. While her tail doesn’t venture a guess as
to why she visits these newspapers, it is pretty safe to assume that she stopped to place ads,
especially given that she had a history of buying advertisements in these newspapers. After
these errands she ran a number of more banal ones, buying an egg and some cheese at
Madame E. Prel’s dairy shop, haggling over some bananas with a female fruit and vegetable

118 “Rapport de filature: Guillou (la Religieuse),” Oct. 12, 1912 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 158.
120 For an advertisement for this beauty institute, vaunting its beauty products that can conserve
female beauty at any age, see “Petit carnet: la beauté des femmes,” Le Figaro, Nov. 29, 1911.
121 The police document gives the address as being at number 9, but this is surely a typo. The New
York Herald’s avenue de l’Opéra offices were at number 49.
122 Mark Tungate, Media Monoliths: How Great Media Brands Thrive and Survive (London: Kogan Page,
2004), 92
124 See an ad for her Beauty-Palace in the “miscellaneous” column of the Apr. 28, 1908 issue of L’Écho
de Paris.
seller [*marchande de quatre saisons*] (and eventually deciding not to purchase any), buying some bread in a bakery and a pastry at a pastry shop, asking the female bathroom attendant in the square Montholon for the “free toilets,” and finally, at a little after 6 p.m., settling in on a park bench, after changing place twice (maybe she *did* know someone was watching her...) to eat the provisions she had collected on the way in her overnight bag. When she finished eating, the inspector followed her onto another bus, which she took south across the city from the 9th to the 5th arrondissement, where she entered the hôtel du Languedoc et du Cantal and did not reemerge.

Life in a hotel was a step down from her past existence as mistress of an expensive maison de rendez-vous and an “almost luxurious” beauty institute. This was clearly not the most stable period of her life. According to the police, she lived at this hotel (5th arrondissement) from October 8 to November 9, 1912, when she moved to the passage de l’Industrie (10th arrondissement), where she stayed until May 1913, before moving to 75 faubourg Saint-Denis (10th arrondissement) for about a week. During this period, she continued to place ads, apparently moving from the role of pimp or madam back toward that of prostitute. No matter how much she had fallen, she still had control over her body and her work. She made clear that she was looking for work that would not fall into the category of “banal love,” no matter how well-remunerated it might be. She promised a client that had responded to her ad, but who “was not an initiate and had not understood

---

the meaning of her advertisement” that “it will be a great pleasure for me to open new horizons.”¹²⁹

Shortly after this, the police lost track of Guillou and her movements. Did the last of her ads collected by the police, in which she posed as “Lady Birch,” looking for a husband to provide her a home that could remind her of the “austere life of yesteryear,” come to fruition?¹³⁰ Is it possible that she disappeared and settled down to a delightfully “austere” married life with a man who understood her needs, never to place an ad again? The very last piece of evidence in police hands is from a man who expressed interest in and understanding of her proposition, saying that “few women have your character, your tastes. Few men have your qualities, your ideas.” The correspondent described himself as a 35-year-old, young-looking, only son of a well-off family. He said that, for many years, “I’ve dreamed of a wife like you, but for just as long, alas! I’ve considered my dream to be an immense chimera.” Was she sincere? Did a “person like her”—in other words, a Lady who liked birching—really exist?¹³¹ And we can wonder, as Guillou certainly did, if the young wealthy man writing to her was in fact everything he said he was.

It is hard to imagine this ad-inspired exchange leading to marriage—or to imagine Eugénie Guillou ever settling down, for that matter. Perhaps she was too tired to keep up with the exhausting schedule she had been keeping for over a decade. Perhaps, with the outbreak of World War I, her favorite newspapers stopped taking her ads and she didn’t

¹³⁰ “Annonce parue dans Le Supplément,” Apr. 22, 1913 in Grojnowski, Eugénie Guillou, 163. There is a typo in Grojnowski’s transcription, which gives the name Lady Binch, thereby occluding the reference to the English practice of birching. The original ad in the Supplément from this day reads Lady Birch.
¹³¹ “Copie d’une lettre addressée à Eugénie Guillou,” Apr. 24, 1913 in Grojnowski, 163–164.
want to take her business elsewhere. In the absence of any further archival trail, we will likely never know where she went or what she did with the years she had left. What is certain is that she lived her life by her own rules, on her own steam, and with frequent recourse to the classifieds. She was an expert at telling her own story. If she disappeared, I choose to believe it is because she wanted to.

**Moral Censorship and Containment: From World War to World War**

From the 1890s until World War I, sex workers and sexual entrepreneurs placed ads and built businesses in some of the highest-circulation daily papers. With the coming of the war, however, things began to change. As the Catholic and moralizing *Revue des lectures* characterized it in the 1930s, “for nearly twenty-five years [from 1892 until 1914], *Le Journal* dedicated itself to a propaganda of lust,” operated in large part through its classifieds, which served as a medium for immorality, “not without filling the company’s coffers.” However, from their point of view, “since the war, this has changed.”132

There was a reason for this. With the news that German spies were making use of the classifieds, and especially of those in *Le Journal*, to communicate sensitive military information, Charles Humbert, *Le Journal*’s director, was happy to remove columns such as “godmothers” (*marraines*, women who served as wartime correspondents with soldiers), “marriages” and other columns where women had long ruled. He was loath, however, to do

---

the same with ads for real estate and jobs—even if national defense was on the line.133 Other newspapers were more cooperative with the military order that was circulated on February 17, requiring police-issued visas for the publication of any classified ads published in rubrics including “classes and institutions,” “Lessons, intelligence [renseignements],” “investigations,” “for rent,” “miscellaneous,” “marriages,” and the personals.134 Obtaining a police visa would require the verification of the advertiser’s identity and the “reality of what was being advertised,” by means of a verification that was supposed to take no more than four days.135 As a result, classified advertising numbers plummeted and the sexual ads Le Journal had become known for disappeared from its pages.136 Even without the discontinuation of their preferred classified rubrics, it would have become much more difficult for sex workers—who advertised using false names and under what the police saw as false terms—to advertise in those newspapers that were in strict compliance with this order.

Luckily for them—and to the dismay of many observers concerned both with national defense and with a perceived wartime rise in immorality—there were certain periodicals that were willing to bend the rules. On March 17, 1917, a full month after the order was given,

---

134 “Arrêté,” Gouverneur militaire de Paris Dubail, Feb. 21, 1917, BA 1712, APP.
136 For an example from Le Journal proclaiming their requirement that ads be accompanied by a visa from the police, see “Petites annonces,” Le Journal, July 31, 1918. Sexual ads were seen as doubly—or even triply—dangerous, given that prostitutes were seen as well-placed to serve as spies, prostitution was bad for national morality, and such ads could also serve as a method of communication for enemy spies. For an example of how prostitution was seen as a threat to national defense and morality, see letter from Émile Pourésy on behalf of the Fédération Française des Sociétés antipornographiques to the Préfet de Police of Paris, Jan. 12, 1917, BA 1689, APP.
the weekly illustrated periodical *La Vie Parisienne* finally informed its readers and advertisers that “following a government decision, each person sending a ‘petite anonce’ or a ‘petite correspondance’ to a newspaper must from now on obtain a visa from the police station nearest their place of residence. We inform our readers that it is ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY that they comply with this formality.”137 In spite of their assertion that they had returned ads that did not follow the new regulation, their advertising pages remained well-stocked with ads placed by masseuses, manicurists, commercial matchmakers, and, especially, with personals from soldiers seeking *marraines de guerre*.138 The police did not buy the weekly periodical’s performance of compliance. On July 18, 1917, the director of the Police Judiciaire received a note from the Prefect of Police informing him that “certain periodicals and especially ‘La Vie Parisienne’ do not seem to be following the regulations to which they are subjected.”139

The concern, however, was not solely with national defense. It was also a question of French morality. In December 1915, the Minister of War (Press Section) wrote to the Prefect of Police to remind him that the Ministry of War was only charged with censoring the press in cases where national defense is at stake—“moral censorship” was not within their purview.140 Anti-pornography groups, concerned with *La Vie Parisienne*’s advertising from a moral point of view argued that immoral ads were in fact dangerous for national defense, even when they did not facilitate communication by enemy spies. In May 1917, activists from

139 “Note pour Monsieur le Directeur de la Police Judiciaire,” July 8, 1917, BA 1712, APP.
140 Lettre, Le Ministre de la Guerre (section presse) à Monsieur le Préfet de Police (cabinet), Dec. 26, 1915, BA 1712, APP.
the French Federation of Anti-pornographic Societies asked René Besnard, Undersecretary of State for War, to do away with all correspondence related to marraines in *la Vie Parisienne*, because they “exercise a demoralizing action on our soldiers,” given that, in their opinion, the communications were, in fact, nothing more than ads for prostitutes.\footnote{Yann Braz, “Réponse à M. Saglio: fils d’un membre de l’Institut, petit-fils d’un sénateur, directeur du journal *la Vie parisienne*,” *L’Univers*, Mar. 17, 1918, 168.} M. Saglio, director of *la Vie Parisienne* responded to this attack by saying that it was for this very reason that the journal never accepted any ads for marraines seeking filleuls, only for filleuls seeking marraines, since it was “easy to see to what untoward commerce such ads could lend themselves.” In the same vein, the board of directors at the journal had also decided, of their own free will, to remove all ads for “masseuses,” “manicures,” and the like.\footnote{Yann Braz, “Réponse à M. Saglio: fils d’un membre de l’Institut, petit-fils d’un sénateur, directeur du journal *la Vie parisienne*,” *L’Univers*, Mar. 17, 1918, 168.} Indeed, from over fifty such ads, all placed by women, in the February 23, 1918 issue of *La Vie Parisienne*, the number dropped to zero the following week. Kicked out of *La Vie Parisienne*, “masseuses” and “manicurists” still had places they could go. Illustrated, “humorous” journals like *Le Rire* drew their readers with the promise of eroticism and were not interested in asserting a claim to morality on any of their pages, even during wartime.

When the war was over and censorship of the classifieds was finally lifted, some saw it as a reassuring return to normalcy, with newspaper readers once again “finally authorized to know” that “Miss Rickett, manicurist, receives from three to seven o’clock.”\footnote{Monsieur Grinche, “De bric et de broc!,” *La Baïonnette*, Jan. 30, 1919, 67.} While literally true, this was not precisely accurate. The Miss Ricketts did not return to the pages of *Le Journal* in anything like their prewar numbers, even as the classifieds regained their
prewar prominence. The war had gone a long way toward purifying the back-page classifieds in the daily press, purging it of its sexual shadow. This is not to say, though, that these women had disappeared. They were still there and they were still numerous, but they were no longer operating in the light of the daily. Their center of gravity had moved to journals like *Le Rire* and *Le Sourire*, filled with erotic stories and images and frequently described as “galant.”

Unlike Marie Bigot and Eugénie Guillou, some women made the transition seamlessly. Renelle Patureaux (1876-?), known to the classified page as Martès, was one of these. Patureaux started her life closer to the bottom than the other women we have encountered so far. Rather than spending time in the schoolroom, Patureaux was convicted of vagrancy in September 1893, at the age of seventeen, and sentenced to reform until her twentieth birthday. Around the same time, she worked as a “danseuse excentrique” known either as “Pigeonette” or “Bouton d’Or” on the stage at the Moulin Rouge. In 1895, she married Jean Jules Cheneval, a.k.a. Blond-Blond—ex-advertising agent and ex-pederast with a prior conviction for vagrancy and theft—before traveling to Australia for two years and New York for one. In both places, the couple lived solely on the proceeds of prostitution.

Back in Paris, Patureaux was looking for a stable business model. In October 1903, she wrote to the police to request authorization to replace Mme Gaudine as the tenancière of a three-story maison de rendez-vous at 11, rue Poissonnière (2nd arrondissement). The police granted her request and she began operations with the unregistered prostitute Marie

144 Report, Oct. 14, 1903, Patureaux Renelle, JC T54, APP.
145 “Note complémentaire,” July 8, 1903, Patureaux Renelle, JC T54, APP.
146 “Note complémentaire,” July 8, 1903, Patureaux Renelle, JC T54, APP; Report, Oct. 14, 1903, Patureaux Renelle, JC T54, APP.
147 Report, Oct. 12, 1903, Patureaux Renelle, JC T54, APP.
Chevalier, who had traveled to Australia with her, as her second in command. Patureaux got to work quickly, completely refurbishing the maison, which the police’s Service mixte des garnis described on January 8, 1904 as “very comfortably installed” and, as such, revealing “a certain prosperity.” Perhaps some of this prosperity came from the clients attracted by the classified ads that Patureaux had begun to place in *Gil Blas* in December 1903. In any case, by December 1904, Patureaux had transferred ownership of the business to a Mme Helgorski, and spent a few years living in small apartments with her mother and perhaps spending some time abroad. It seems likely that these moves had something to do with her divorce—by 1909 the couple was living separately, with her husband residing outside of the country. Without her husband, but not alone—her second in command, Marie Chevalier, seems to have still been by her side—Patureaux went to the police in early 1909 to let them know that she was opening a maison de rendez-vous at 14 rue de Berne (8th arrondissement). Before long, Patureaux began advertising again, this time offering “English classes” in *Le Supplément* and “English and German” in *Le Rire* and *Gil Blas*. The police classified her as a “pimp placing scandalous advertisements in certain newspapers,” a

---

149 “La maison de rendez-vous sise 11, rue Poissonnière,” Dec. 10, 1903, JC T54, APP; Report, Jan. 8, 1904, JC T54, APP.
150 “Pied-à-terre, nouvelle installation, 11, rue Poissonnière, 11, au premier étage.” *Gil Blas*, Dec. 12, 1903. The police linked these ads to Patureaux a few months later. “Le Gil Blas du 20 Mai 1904,” JC T54, APP.
151 Report, Dec. 9, 1904, APP JC T54; Report, Dec. 8, 1905, APP JC T54; Report, Mar. 1, 1909, JC T54, APP.
152 Report, Mar. 1, 1909, JC T54, APP.
153 Report, Jan. 18, 1912, JC T54, APP.
154 Report, Mar. 1, 1909, JC T54, APP.
155 For example, see *Le Supplément*, July 31, 1909; *Gil Blas*, Oct. 15, 1910; *Le Rire*, July 15, 1911.
fact that seems to have prompted several raids of the premises. The raids were inconvenient, but they did not stop either her business or her advertising practices.\footnote{Report, Feb. 15, 1912, JC T54, APP.} Also inconvenient was the fact that Gil Blas and Le Supplément stopped publication beginning in 1914 for the duration of the war. However, the weekly “humorous” magazine Le Rire continued its operations and would—along with such journals as Le Sourire, La Vie Parisienne, and L’Humour—become a primary site for prostitutional advertising during the second half of the Third Republic. Ads for Mme Martès’s “comfortably furnished rooms” at 14 rue de Berne looked right at home in the expansive and expanding sexual advertising pages of Le Rire rouge, Le Rire’s wartime edition [Fig. 4.3].\footnote{Le Rire rouge, Mar. 23, 1918.} In 1919, after ten years at 14 rue de Berne, Patureaux handed the reins over to a woman named Reine Sautereau. She left, but the centralization of ads like hers in the erotic press was here to stay.\footnote{Note, Mar. 11, 1919, JC T54, APP. On Reine Sautereau, see Sautereau Reine, épouse Nottinger, JC T62, APP.}
Figure 4.3: Sexual advertisements, including an ad for Mme Martès’s “comfortable furnished rooms” (second down in the first column from the left).


Source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France
In the 1920s and 1930s, illustrated Parisian weeklies and monthlies were widely decried as a sexual marketplace, one that had expanded greatly in the wake of the war. In 1924, Jacques Duboin, Deputy for the Haute Savoie, wrote to the Minister of Justice to complain about the fact that *Le Rire* and *Le Sourire* were only solvent because of non-disguised ads for brothels that took up several pages in both of these publications. Indeed, the judicial interdiction against ads for maisons de rendez-vous in this special press was said to cost these papers a total of more than a million francs in revenue each year, with some so hard hit that they had to stop publication altogether. Moralist observers and the newspaper owners themselves could agree on one thing: “if [sexual] advertisements are outlawed, newspapers will fall on their own.” Such an important revenue source was a difficult thing to stop, however, and the police were also concerned with the ever-growing number of ads for licentious businesses and clandestine brothels they found in “journaux galants,” despite their hard work to counter them.

The centralization of sexual advertising thus meant increased revenue for the “comic” (read erotic, and sometimes even pornographic) press, the gentrification of the mass press,

---

159 Report, Direction de la Police Judiciaire, cabinet de M. L. Lefebvre, commissaire de police, Feb. 24, 1937, BA 2242, APP.
160 Letter, Oct. 7, 1924, BB 18 6485, 57 BL 147, AN.
162 Anonymous, handwritten note, in folder with documents from 1920s and 1930s, BA 2242, APP. For the magazine’s side of things, see letter from Louis Querelle, Owner of *Le Sourire*, to the Préfet de Police, May 6, 1926; and letter from Pierre Puel, Director of *L’Humour* and *Sans Gêne*, to M. Chain, chef des services spéciaux de la Brigade Mondaine, Aug. 4, 1939, BA 2244, APP.
163 Reports, commissaire de police Albert Priolet (Brigade Mondaine) to monsieur le directeur de la Police Judiciaire, Oct. 16, 1929 and Dec. 12, 1929, BA 1690, APP; Report, commissaire de Police A. Priolet to monsieur le Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP. I have access to much less information for the interwar period than I do for the pre-war period due to the fact that the only files one hundred years old or older may be consulted in the JC sub-series at the Archives de la préfecture de police.
and an easier target for the police and the judiciary. According to Albert Priolet, Commissaire de Police in the Brigade Mondaine, in a report he wrote on newspaper advertising, all of the ads placed by or for individuals, pieds-à-terre, masseuses, matrimonial agencies, fortune tellers, and bookstores in magazines such as Le Sourire, L’Humour, La Vie parisienne, Frou-Frou, Gens qui vient, and Paris-Flirt were cause for vice squad concern. According to him, ads placed by individuals, often in marriage columns, were, in fact, placed by “prostitutes looking for a generous protector, for perverts interested in ‘orgies’ or flagellation.” Ads for pieds-à-terre were nothing more than “hotels that receive only couples, by ‘rendez-vous,’” and which vaunt their multiple egresses and their discretion (even if the ads are themselves “eye-catching”). Ads for medical treatments and massages serve as light cover for clandestine brothels and were important enough for business that even police raids didn’t stop women, such as Mme Sarrazin, a.k.a. Marsa, director of the Richepanse Institute, from placing ads. Ads for “curious” books and photos whip up readers desire for pornographic and obscene materials, even if these desires were often disappointed upon delivery. The woman in charge of the “Montholon” bookstore admitted that her ads were meant to attract a clientele made up of curious and unstable people to whom she could sell unexceptional books and engravings as well as expensive “aphrodisiacs” that were, in fact, nothing more than cheap

164 Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
165 Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
166 It is interesting that, in this case, the Institut Richepanse advertised both in the overtly erotic La Vie parisienne and among “les addresses de Madame” for beauty institutes, targeting a female audience, in Le Figaro and on the fashion page, “Élégances,” in Comoedia. La Vie Parisienne, Nov. 7, 1931; Le Figaro, Nov. 26, 1931; Comoedia, June 18, 1931. The police only took note of their advertisements in La Vie Parisienne, leaving unanswered questions about what female readers of the Figaro and Comoedia might have been doing at the Institute. Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
cologne and pills filled with sugar. Ads for fortune tellers in these same journals blithely and unabashedly revealed their indifference to (or perhaps ignorance of) the law, article 479 of the Penal Code, that made it illegal to make a living off of divination, prognostication, or dream interpretation."

In addition, Priolet was convinced that marriage agencies, which spent a lot of money on advertising, only rarely spent their time setting up lasting, legal relationships. Instead, they acted as an interface, helping those “women and young girls who don’t dare or don’t want to engage too openly in prostitution find the address of a discrete maison de rendez-vous or of a generous lover” in order to “markedly augment the financial resources that they find insufficient.” By this same method, clients interested in group sex, pederasty, and other forms of “deviant” sex are matched up with maisons or individuals who can respond to their desires. This was the case with Mme Lislair’s agency at 22 rue de Vignon (9th arrondissement), which placed ads in La Vie Parisienne for a “Parisian information office,” specializing in “unions” and—in smaller font—“marriages” and Mme H. Decourcelle’s “bureau mondain de renseignements privés” at 28 rue St-Georges (9th arrondissement), which placed ads in the same magazine, promising “Unions. – Marriages – All relationships.” Both of these agencies had supplied a seamstress named Béatrice with “pretty girls” and “generous

---

167 Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
168 Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
169 La Vie Parisienne, Oct. 17, 1931. During the war and interwar periods, Mme Lislair had also placed ads in Le Rire (e.g. July 7, 1917), La Presse (e.g. Sept. 16, 1919), and Jazz (e.g. Dec. 15, 1925). Priolet found H. Decourcelle’s ad in the Oct. 22, 1931 issue of Le Sourire. Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.
amateurs” for the well-frequented orgies she held weekly in her apartment (the police found eleven people there on October 16, 1931 and eight people on October 23).\textsuperscript{170}

It is easy to think of publications like \textit{Le Rire} as men’s magazines, but Priolet’s report points toward a need for a reconsideration of this preconception. All of his advertising categories are filled with ads placed by businesses run and staffed by women. Even though he does not tie fortune telling businesses to the sex that runs through all of his other categories, he includes them because they’re run by women. This was not, however, the only use women made of these papers. Women were also reading these papers for their own amusement, in search of sexual intrigue, or seeking the work or money to be found through the numerous agencies such as those discussed above.

The 1920s have long been characterized as a moment of sexual liberation, and the classified ads and personals to be found in periodicals like \textit{Le Sourire} certainly bear witness to increasingly clear statements about non-reproductive sexual desires. If sex was no longer being advertised in the most mainstream daily papers, it was declaring its presence in much more straightforward ways in papers that, while lower-circulation, could nonetheless be found for sale in the same kiosks across the city (to the dismay of moralists who spent much energy trying to get the police to shut down kiosks run by men and women who continued to sell periodicals known to run sexual advertising).\textsuperscript{171}

For those working in the sex trade, centralization in the illustrated press had as primary effect that ads placed for masseuses, manicurists, and matrimonial agencies were less likely to be mistaken for being anything other than sexual commerce. Their distance from

\textsuperscript{170} Report, A. Priolet to the Procureur de la République, Oct. 28, 1931, BA 2243, APP.

\textsuperscript{171} BA 2242, APP.
the Helena Rubinsteins of the world only got clearer. This was not solely a bad thing—it certainly got rid of confusion. Perhaps the biggest change, then, was in the fact that it was harder for women to cast themselves (or to be cast) as innocents caught in a sexual spider’s web. They could not say, that is, that they had purchased the paper for its feuilleton or for its faits divers—the sexual or erotic content was on every page. These were not the kinds of papers that people just left lying around. As the magazine put it in 1923, “Froufrou is not on every table, but it is in every pocket.”

Local ordinances often prohibited (more or less temporarily) the display and/or sale of journals convicted on obscenity charges (as were Gens qui rient, Frou-Frou, Paris-Flirt, etc.).

Frustrated that Le Sourire and Le Journal amusant had avoided such restrictions, in spite of their scandalous advertisements, the Catholic priest and moralist activist Father Louis Bethléem (1869-1940)—known for his frequently re-edited Romans à lire et romans à préscrire—performatively destroyed issues of these two journals. At the police station, the priest explained that he had done this “not because of the naked woman represented on the last page, but because of the advertisements for maisons de rendez-vous appearing at the back of the publication, on the inside.”

Prostitution via back-page advertising was of greater

---


173 See Préfecture de Police note on Senator Buhan’s demand that Le Sourire and Le Journal Amusant be prohibited in kiosks, Dec. 5, 1929, BA 2242, APP.


176 “Note pour monsieur le Préfet,” 1930; Report, Commissariat de Police du quartier de la Madeleine, affaire concernant M. l’Abbé Bethléem, Jan. 4, 1930; Letter, L. Bethléem to le commissaire de police du quartier de la Porte Saint-Denis, Dec. 27, 1929, BA 2242, APP.
concern to this paragon of Third Republican moral censorship than were erotic images on
the cover of illustrated magazines. In this case at least, the textual primed over the visual.

Such journals (and their advertising) nonetheless remained accessible to a wide
variety of women. In Joseph Kessel’s 1928 novel, Belle de Jour, the very bourgeois Séverine
finds an ad for the maison de rendez-vous she had secretly been frequenting (as the
eponymous Belle de Jour) in one of the illustrated magazines she and her husband bought
to read during a seaside vacation.\textsuperscript{177} Outside of literature, in 1939, Alice Vadrot, a 27-year-
old waitress wanted to make some extra money to be able to take a vacation. She thought
that a good way to do this would be to go to a maison de rendez-vous whose address she had
found thanks to an advertisement “in a libertine newspaper [journal libertin] like the
‘Sourire.’”\textsuperscript{178} Maria Doménica Farina, a forty-two year-old Italian teacher had, that same year,
found her way to Mme Nelson, an intermediary who sent an “ami” her way and who, once
it was over, paid Farina 150 francs in return for her “amiability.”\textsuperscript{179} Eighteen years old (and
thus legally a minor), Jeannine Dervin had left her parents’ home and found herself in a
hotel without financial resources. She decided to present herself to Mme Nelson after seeing
an ad in Le Sourire that promised to find women “situations” by presenting them to “certain
messieurs,” which Dervin soon found out meant sexual relations.\textsuperscript{180} Thirty-four year-old
divorcée Hélène Wickenden had also found Mme Nelson through an ad in Le Sourire, and

\textsuperscript{177} Joseph Kessel, Belle de Jour (Paris: Gallimard, 1928), 118–119.
\textsuperscript{178} “Commission rogatoire en date du 7 mars 1940 de M. Lesire,” Mar. 18, 1940, dossier Pigot, F 7 14857, AN.
\textsuperscript{179} “Commission rogatoire en date du 7 mars 1940 de M. Lesire,” Mar. 18, 1940, dossier Pigot, F 7 14857, AN.
\textsuperscript{180} “Commission rogatoire du 22 décembre 1939 de M. Vinces, juge d’instruction,” Jan. 6, 1940, dossier Pigot, F 7 14857, AN.
had been sent three different men with whom she had “intimate relations,” making between 1000 and 1500 francs each time, an amount that represented half of what the men paid Mme Nelson. Mme Nelson—alias of the forty-eight year-old Jeanne Pigot—stated that she took half of what each visitor paid (which was, according to her, the much more modest total of 150 francs) as compensation for travel and advertising costs—ads which, as we have seen, brought her employees and clients alike.

Residential Business

As the police themselves had long known, maisons de rendez-vous were not only staffed by pros, registered or unregistered. In addition, “in these back rooms [officines], one finds female civil servants, wage-earners, workers who, led by advertisements, go to the agency to find the ami whose subsidies are hoped for to round out a meager budget.” This was, according to a member of the brigade mondaine, a slippery slope: “prostitution lies in wait for them.” That is to say, then, that prostitution lay in wait for every woman, given that few jobs open to women paid more than a “meager” salary: civil servants, secretaries, and factory workers alike felt the squeeze (and the temptation to let themselves be guided by advertisements toward well-remunerated sexual labor) at the end of the month. Any woman,

---

181 “Commission rogatoire en date du 7 mars 1940 de M. Lesire,” Mar. 20, 1940, dossier Pigot, F 7 14857, AN.
182 “Procédure de flagrant délit d’excitation habituelle de mineure à la débauche: déclaration de PIGOT, Jeanne, Marie, alias ‘NELSON’, directrice d’agence matrimoniale, demeurant 6 rue Lincoln, Paris,” Oct. 2, 1939, dossier Pigot, F 7 14857, AN. The discrepancy between 150 and 1500 francs in the testimony from Mme Nelson/Pigot and Hélène Wickenden respectively could be due to a typo on the part of the police. It seems unlikely that Wickenden would be making 10 times as much as other women.
183 Letter from commissaire de police Albert Priolet to the directeur de la Police Judiciaire, Dec. 28, 1929, BA 2242, APP.
even the well-off and well-loved Séverine in *Belle de Jour* might be secretly selling sex in a maison de rendez-vous in her spare time—indeed, the afternoon opening hours of many of these maisons indicate that such a double existence was not just possible but even likely.

Perhaps this, then, was the real change operated in the move from tolérance to rendez-vous and in spite of the expulsion of sexual advertising from center to relative periphery: the occasional prostitution and survival sex that women had been engaging in for centuries was now at the heart of urban sexual commerce, at the heart of a well-oiled, comfortable, and nearly invisible machine. Where registered brothels occupied entire buildings and employed (and permanently contained) only registered women, maisons de rendez-vous were allowed to operate in a single apartment and to receive registered and unregistered women alike who lived elsewhere and had other jobs, as long as they underwent frequent medical examination and were of age (legal majority was at twenty-one years of age).

This transition is thus one that could be described as the rise of the apartment as a space of business—a transition with important effects for women’s lives and livelihoods, as well as for Paris’s urban economy writ large. In her *Apartment Stories*, Sharon Marcus points out that accounts of modernity have excluded residential spaces from consideration, as somehow less urban than the department stores, cafés, and boulevard life that have garnered more attention. City life, for these critics, was life lived in public, not in a presumably feminized private. Likewise, accounts—drawing on Baudelaire and Benjamin’s reading of him—that have seen the prostitute as a particularly “modern” figure have also tended to focus on the streetwalker and her problematic commodified circulation on the streets of Paris, rather than

---

on the indoor sex worker. This is logical, insofar as feminist theorists such as Elsa Dorlin have argued that prostitution is itself a concept that was designed as a means of control over women’s mobility in the public sphere. Marcus, however, reveals that a closer look at the bourgeois apartment building raises questions about the distinctness of public and private, showing the boundary between these spheres to be incredibly porous, and any separation between them tenuous at best. This distinction becomes even more problematic if we attempt to account for the rise of a new form of indoor sex work (itself both intimate and public) within these supposedly private spaces.

The apartment has, admittedly, not been a locus of study by business, economic, or labor historians, except in studies of homework or cottage industries, which saw the dispersion of industrial labor into the home; or in the history of feminist fights for wages for housework and reproductive labor. In the nineteenth century, however, the apartment also emerged as a locus for women’s business ventures. With even the smallest ad in the back pages, the so-called private space of the apartment was spontaneously transformed into a business, and one with very low overhead: if services were the only thing for sale, there was no need to order stock, and employees (as we have seen) could also be found via classified ads. Women’s apartment-based labor was a canny response to efforts to “protect” women in the (external) workplace that, as historian Mary Lynn Stewart puts it, had the effect of

---


preserving “women’s secondary status in the labour market without materially improving their working conditions outside or inside the home.” The wage gap—what the feminist scholar and activist Silvia Federici calls the “patriarchy of the wage”—that resulted and was justified by these discourses about protection, motherhood, and men’s breadwinner status was thus a crucial spur to the rise of this new home-based economy, one disconnected from both capitalists and their factories and from pre-industrial home production as part of a family economy. In their own homes as well as in apartments rented expressly for their business ventures, women set out on their own, often without either husband or boss. In Parisian apartment buildings, populated by families, servants, prostitutes, and, as we will see in the following chapter, midwives and abortionists, the distinction between private and public, open and intimate, business and residence was porous indeed.

Chapter Five: “Midwives” and the Death of the “Race”

“Seeking maternity is strictly forbidden there; man is barred entry in perpetuity.”

“Midwife: Sterility! Discretion! – We don’t read the classifieds often enough; they hold many interesting documents for the moralist.”

When the midwife—the sage-femme, or, literally, wise woman—was invented in the late eighteenth century, she emerged as the opposite of and antidote to her predecessor, the dangerous, untrained matrone, who was cast as a major cause of depopulation.¹ The sage-femme, properly educated in the medical arts, was to be a silver bullet for France’s declining birth rate, serving as an intermediary between a new science of natality and that new object of manipulation: the population.² With the Revolution, the sage-femme gained rhetorical significance: she would be the one to midwife the new Republic. In this capacity and with this symbolic weight, midwifery was made the first female profession to be legitimated by a diploma.³ No amount of training, however, could remove the shadow of abortion and infanticide from the job because, as one observer put it in 1840, “the victim fears dishonor more than death; her accomplice likes money more than honesty.”⁴

It was in precisely this moment, at the dawn of the “media era”—ushered in by the creation in 1836 of the first low-cost newspapers, financed by advertising revenues—that midwives and unhappily pregnant women began to find each other through the Petites-Affiches via “modest advertisements” that led readers to the eminently discreet and anonymous services they sought. Mme Renard, “élève de la Faculté de Médecine et des Hôpitaux de Paris, ancien chef de service à la Clinique d’accouchement, attachée au service de la Providence Médicale, élève de MM. Cullérier, Lisfranc, etc.” was just one of the state-trained midwives who placed ads for maisons d’accouchement and other obstetrical services in newspapers in the 1840s and 1850s. Despite her impressive pedigree, her advertisements made her the butt of jokes. An article in Le Journal pour rire in 1854 mocked the way she put forth her “birthing villa with garden without any exterior sign [villa d’accouchement avec jardin sans aucun signe extérieur],” saying that this “intrigued many people” who were “very interested in these women that give birth with a garden” and felt sorry for those who didn’t have the means to give birth chez Mme Renard, thereby “necessarily giving birth with an exterior sign.”

Likewise, in the pages of the free journal Le Tintamarre: critique de la réclame, satire des puffistes—simultaneously able to maintain its free status thanks to plentiful advertising and fond of ridiculing advertisements (especially those of advertisers who had failed to renew

---

7 She was among four women offering their obstetrical services in this issue. Le Causeur: journal des intérêts matériels, intellectuels et moraux, Dec. 1853. For another example of her advertising, see Le Mercure des théâtres, June 14, 1846.
their contracts)—Edmond Martin took aim at Mme Renard’s offer to deal with “placing children,” asking her to clarify exactly where she places them. Incensed, Mme Renard wrote to the journal, asking them to “tell M. Martin that I always follow the wishes of the mother.” But what, Martin wondered, would she do “if the wishes of the mother took precedence over the wishes of morality?” By the end of the decade, cultural critics were still talking about her ad, but critique had taken precedence over humor. In 1859, journalist Alphonse Duchesne asked in Le Figaro why “ladies need such discretion in such a morally reputable villa.” At midcentury, however, advertising was not definitively discrediting for the legitimate midwife. Mme Lachapelle, “maîtresse sage-femme, professeur d’accouchement,” whose ads for her treatment of “maladies des femmes” and “women’s sterility” could be found in a wide variety of newspapers across a long career that spanned the 1850s to the 1880s.

This changed in the final decade of the nineteenth century. As the mass press filled with an unprecedented number of ads for midwives, abortion came to be seen as a major cause of depopulation, rather than simply an atypical or marginal practice. If not everyone agreed that “all midwives practice abortion,” it was widely believed that ads for midwives,

---

10 Edmond Martin, “Elle est bien en colère Mme Renard,” Le Tintamarre, June 1, 1856.
12 Le Figaro, Aug. 31, 1868. For other examples of her ads, see Le Causseur, Dec. 1853; Le Tintamarre, May 18, 1856; Le Mémorial diplomatique, Aug. 25, 1870; Le Rappel, June 29, 1874; La Vie Parisienne, Dec. 24, 1881; L’Univers, Dec. 14, 1886.
and especially those dealing with “sterility” and “lateness,” were ads for abortive practices. Dr. Dieupart was concerned that the “publication of these ads with the word ‘lateness’ was the equivalent of saying to women: ‘You can have an abortion.’” Both Dr. Dieupart and Dr. Ménil Pfeiffer argued that one way to stop “these matrones with their state-issued diplomas”— a concept that would once have been a paradox in terms—was to stop them from placing advertisements in mass-circulation dailies, “despite the freedom of the press.” Indeed, ads for abortionists, those “matrones féticides” were said to be found not only in those periodicals with “obscene caricatures,” but also “in a good number of mass dailies,” as well as in respectable “magazines, literary revues, fashion journals.” This concept was satirized in a caricature by Albert Guillaume [Fig. 5.1] that depicted a matronly midwife buying a classified advertisement that read “Midwife – skilled – discreet...There is a salamander.” If her female readers really did understand what this meant, as the midwife assured the advertising agent they would, it was because the salamander stove had been at the center of a number of abortion cases reported recently in the press: the salamander had been used to incinerate aborted fetuses. The advertising midwife was not a midwife at all. She was an abortionist.

17 Albert Nast, La Loi et l’Avortement: étude critique (Paris: Librairie Georges Crès et Cie, 1911), 20–21; Annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 15 juin 1917, 4ème rapport supplémentaire fait au nom de la Commission chargée d’examiner la proposition de loi de M. Lannelongue et un certain nombre de ses collègues, tendant à combattre la dépopulation par des mesures propres à relever la natalité, par M. Cazeneuve, Sénateur, Sénat, BB 18 6169, AN.
In a legal project undertaken by the Senate’s Commission de la dépopulation in 1912, an article was proposed to “restrict midwives’ right to advertise,” imposing fines for those who failed to comply. The criminal division of the Ministry of Justice expressed his

\textit{beurre} issue on the \textit{faisuse d’ange} that was titled “the salamander” showed a woman putting something into a salamander stove, with the caption: “Pleurez pas tant, ma petite...il est mieux là qu'à l'Assistance.” “Les Faiseuses d’anges,” \textit{L’Assiette au beurre}, no 315, Apr. 13, 1907.
reservations about such a disposition, stating that “the right to advertise belongs to all business owners [commerçants]; doctors and pharmacists can make use of advertising without any restrictions and we don’t see any reason why, if the ads don’t make use of any immoral expressions or announce the use of abortive practices, midwives should be deprived of this method for making oneself known.” ¹⁹ Midwives were after all integral to the successful repopulation of France—it was their art that “provides bodies to the homeland [fournit à la patrie des bras].” ²⁰

There was one major obstacle, however, that kept midwives from carrying out their profession honestly: money. If the diploma “recognized the act of the accoucheuse as a form of work and opened the right to the material and social recognition of this work,” the fees collected from performing childbirths were rarely enough for a woman to live on, especially given the massive number of women trained for this profession: 70,000 women were granted diplomas during the nineteenth century and over 1000 were practicing in Paris alone in 1907. ²¹ The forensic medical specialist Paul Brouardel wondered how midwives even managed to live given this situation, which he saw as explaining why “many of them […] do not hesitate, even for a small sum, to engage in shameful practices, which have cast great discredit on the corporation to which they belong.” ²² One midwife, formerly the head of the Paris Maternity Hospital [la Maternité], told Irenée Gaulain of the Action Française that she

¹⁹ “Note sur le projet de la Commission de la dépopulation,” Nov. 16, 1912, BB 18 6169, AN.
²⁰ Sage Pranchère, L’École des sages-femmes, 52.
had seen acts of heroism among her former students, one of whom had turned away an offer of five hundred francs to perform an abortion when she didn’t even know if she would have anything to eat that night.23 However, it was not possible for everyone to be so virtuous. Midwives caught practicing abortion frequently defended their actions by saying that “a person has to eat.”24 As one midwife put it in a letter to the editor in La Sage-femme, for many state-trained midwives, poverty and greed meant that, “far from being the principal factor in repopulation” as they should have been, midwives “become the most active agent of depopulation.”25

The overpopulated ranks of state-educated midwives were thus both the nation’s best hope for regeneration and a state-created cause of depopulation.26 The simultaneity of their position as savior and danger, as solution to and cause of depopulation, made the midwife an object of great concern. Press advertisement was at the center of this concern. In this chapter, I analyze the complications that arose from the association of ads for midwives with abortion, an association that many saw as stemming from midwives’ insufficient earning power and the lucrative nature of abortion. This association was particularly problematic given that it implicated the press (an important symbol of the Republic and a major voice in the fight against depopulation) in facilitating population decline and women’s revolt from

---

26 They embodied Jacques Derrida’s idea of the pharmakon: both poison and remedy. See Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation: Between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction (New York: Routledge, 1990), 57.
their reproductive duties. In particular, I show how it became possible to imagine excluding a legal (female-dominated) and symbolically important profession from the right to advertise.

Here, There, and Everywhere

Ads for midwives were everywhere in the first half of the twentieth century. They could be found in great numbers in some of the biggest dailies of the Belle Époque like Le Matin or Le Journal [Fig. 5.2], and in Paris-Soir, the highest-circulation title during the Interwar period, and its afternoon edition, Paris-Midi [Fig. 5.3]. They slipped into “the most respectable [correcte], virginal” newspapers, into fashion magazines like L’Écho de la Mode, bourgeois women’s magazines like Femina, theatrical newspapers like Comoedia, highbrow literary journals like George Clemenceau’s L’Aurore (of J’accuse! fame), the farmer’s newspaper L’Agriculture nouvelle, as well as somewhat risqué journals like Le Rire and La Vie Parisienne.27 Ads for Paris-based midwives could even be found in regional dailies like the Journal de Rouen and the Dépêche de Rouen.28 Midwives in other urban areas, from Lille to Algiers, also began to make use of newspaper advertising.29 These ads were an important

27 Citation from “La Réclame anticonceptionnelle” by Dr. Dieupart, reproduced in Marie Roger, “De l’épuration,” La Sage-femme, Dec. 5, 1908, 183; L’Écho de la mode, July 7, 1907; Femina, Feb. 15, 1914; Comoedia, Jan. 24, 1908; L’Aurore, Apr. 10, 1904; L’Agriculture nouvelle, Jan. 4, 1908; Le Rire, Jan. 5, 1907; La Vie parisienne, Oct. 3, 1931.
28 Cour Rouen, 1912, Provocation à l’avortement: vœu du Conseil général de la Seine-Inférieure tendant à la répression des annonces de journaux contenant des provocations à l’avortement, BB 18 6171, 44 BL 173, AN.
29 Le Grand écho du Nord de la France, Nov. 5, 1912; Le Tirailleur algérien, May 13, 1906; L’Écho d’Alger, Sept. 18, 1912.
form of revenue for these titles and not least for mass press titles, which had been known to publish more than 20 such ads in a single issue.  

![Figure 5.2: Le Journal, May 11, 1908.](source: gallica.bnf.fr/ Bibliothèque nationale de France)

---

30 Annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 15 juin 1917, 4ème rapport supplémentaire fait au nom de la Commission chargée d’examiner la proposition de loi de M. Lannelongue et un certain nombre de ses collègues, tendant à combattre la dépopulation par des mesures propres à relever la natalité, par M. Cazeneuve, Sénateur, Sénat, BB 18 6169, AN.
Where, though, were midwives—those overworked and underpaid professionals—getting the money to place these ads? When Dr. Georges Bertillon (brother of the creator of anthropometry, Alphonse Bertillon, and of well-known statistician and founder of the Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, Jacques Bertillon) conducted a study of abortion in France in the first decade of the twentieth century, he was
astonished by just how much certain midwives spent on newspaper advertising. According to his calculations, among the fifty who placed frequent advertisements, all spent about as much on advertising each year (around 1000 francs) as a midwife could legitimately earn, and many spent twice as much or more (between 2000 and 13,000 francs). Members of the Syndicat général des sages-femmes de France agreed that these ads, which “rose to 18,000, 15, 13, 9,000 and even 3,600 francs [sic], cannot be covered with [the revenue from] deliveries or even with lodgers.” While newspaper archives are notoriously incomplete, and their advertising records especially so, there is at least some evidence to back up these assertions. The archives of Le Journal show a midwife named Roux, of 35, rue de Lyon, placing sixteen one-line ads in April 1907 at six francs per line, paying a total of 96 francs for one month’s advertising. A number of her competitors, who undoubtedly paid extra for stylistic choices that would call attention to their ads including bolding, black outlines, and keywords printed several lines tall (including a seven-lines tall “retard” and several three-lines tall “sage-femme”), must have racked up quite the bill. Delivering babies paid a lot less than the illegal work of performing abortions, leading both Bertillon and the federation of midwives to believe that the vast majority of ads that purported to be for midwives—such as those placed by Roux offering “discretion” and proximity to a train station—were actually

31 For his study, Bertillon monitored a number of newspapers for two weeks and collected all midwife ads placed during this period, using these ads to create dossiers for each woman from which he estimated annual spending on advertising. Bertillon, L’Avortement, 27.
33 Société Le Journal, Annonces, No 29, 8AR 147, AN.
34 Le Journal, Apr. 4, 1907. It is unclear why Roux, with her very simple and relatively inexpensive ads, shows up in the Journal’s advertising records while her nearly twenty competitors do not.
(not-so-) veiled ads for abortionists. In Paris, Bertillon asserted, there is a “considerable number of midwives for whom it is impossible to live off the honest and legal exercise of their profession. Poverty, fatally, chases them off the right path.” In their impoverished state, some—those whom Bertillon describes as having no scruples—choose to live solely on the proceeds of abortion, an “industry that they make fruitful using advertising.”

If honest midwifery barely paid enough for a woman to keep herself alive, abortion, when advertised, could bring in significant revenue. Bertillon claimed that he could prove this because, during his investigation, by a stroke of almost unbelievable luck, he found the account book of a Madame L.N. This pseudonym, according to Irenée Gaulain of the *Action française*, masked Mme Blanche Barlet, of 112 rue Réaumur who was a “sort of queen of the corporation,” with ads for her services as midwife/beautician running in a vast number of periodicals, including *Le Journal*, *Le Matin*, *Le Supplément*, *Comoedia*, *Le Rire*, *La Vie Parisienne*, *L’Agriculture nouvelle*, *La Dépêche coloniale illustrée*, *Le Journal du Dimanche: gazette hebdomadaire de la famille*, and *La Vie au grand air: revue illustrée de tous les sports*. Barlet was

---

35 Roux’s ad on Apr. 4, 1907 in *Le Journal* read, “Sage-Femme, 9 à 6 h. Discret. 35, r. de Lyon, p. gare.” Bertillon, *L’Avortement au point de vue médico-social*, 26–31. The Syndicat voiced concern that Bertillon was trying to get rid of midwives, describing them as “the authors of depopulation,” when, in fact, most who failed to support themselves as midwives would give up the profession rather than “risking dishonor.” Those who place ads, they asserted, were a “tiny minority”: “of the thirteen thousand midwives in France, there are not two hundred that merit to be called [flétrir du nom] Angel Makers.” They nonetheless agree with Bertillon that advertising was not accessible to those practicing honestly as midwives. Marie Roger, “Le Scandale des ‘Sages-Femmes’ dans L’Action Française,” Nov. 1912, *La Sage-Femme*, 102.


described—on the occasion of her death by suicide with her married pharmacist lover in May 1912—as a tall, very brunette woman with “intelligent eyes” and a loud voice who “gave the impression of being a woman made to dominate.” She was said to have been born in 1869 in a small Loiret village to small farmers, but had studied enough to go to Paris to get her diploma as a midwife of the first class. It was this woman, who treated her businessman husband like a “thing, a toy” and was preparing to divorce him who, according to Bertillon, spent the most of any Parisian midwife on advertising and, consequently, had an extremely large client base. He wrote that she “lives in a sumptuous apartment in a large building, equipped with every modern comfort, elevator, etc. in the most expensive neighborhood in Paris. Her rent is 5000 francs, without accounting for taxes. The furniture that fills it cost 30,000 francs.” An article in Le Petit Journal added that her building was one of the nicest on the street. Barlet was said to have told “anyone who would listen—and this was very possible—that she earned one hundred thousand francs each year.”

Bertillon found everything about this woman—from the luxury of her apartment with its abundant art on the walls, to her private coupé and expensive toilette (on which she spent

---

43 Bertillon, L’Avortement au point de vue médico-social, 30. Bertillon’s findings were also published in “Les Sages-femmes criminelles,” Le Rappel, Oct. 14, 1912.
8,000 francs per year, in part on expensive dresses from a well-known designer)—rather exaggerated and garish. This was not, however, a life of leisure, and while she “still looks young at thirty-five,” she worked hard to have the things she had and, with “money as her god,” was “always looking for a new source of revenue.” If he judged her for her interest in displaying her “wealth rather than real elegance,” a fact that he ascribes to what he assumes to be her “foreign and modest origins,” he couldn’t help himself but be impressed by the life she had created for herself and her two daughters, and, most notably, by her conspicuous consumption and the revenues that made it possible.

In raising her annual advertising expenses to a stunning 13,500 francs, Mme Barlet had greatly increased her revenues. As one unnamed woman, who was said to be “very in the know” about what happened in Barlet’s “sumptuous apartment,” told a journalist for Paris-Midi, thirty to forty (often quite wealthy) women came each day seeking the midwife’s services thanks in large part to her “clever advertising.” However, as another journalist put it in Le Petit Parisien, “if her earnings were real, their source was more than suspicious.” These suspicions had drawn judicial interest to her on multiple occasions. The public prosecutor’s office had investigated her practices several times, but she was always able to outwit them. She had also been tried multiple times before the cours d’assises (circuit courts) on abortion charges. Each time she was acquitted—although, in one instance, in 1909, this

48 Bertillon, L’Avortement, 28.
49 This journalist also attributed the number of clients to close relationships with the city’s fanciest maisons de rendez-vous. “Le Drame mystérieux de la rue Réaumur,” Paris-Midi, May 30, 1912.
was only after having served five months of preventive detention, an imprisonment which some journalists said had driven her somewhat mad. On another occasion, in 1910, she appeared before the Loir-et-Cher circuit court for having performed an abortion in Paris on Mme Lejeune, a mother of four, separated from her husband and pregnant by her gendarme lover Monnet who buried the resulting “small cadaver” in his yard: the jury acquitted everyone. Each acquittal allowed her to “continue to practice for her rich and abundant clientele.”

These decisions may simply be an example of the way in which juries tended to show understanding and sympathy for poor unmarried women or married women with too many children seeking the services of an abortionist (and an unwillingness to strike them with the very harsh prescribed punishments). Bertillon and many criminologists and legislators were certain that the main problem with the enforcement of article 317 of the penal code (on abortion) was that it was so severe that it made juries hesitate to convict, even in cases where the defendant was unquestionably guilty. The nationalist newspaper *Action française*,

---


55 On a play that took this sympathetic view of the crime of abortion, see “Discussion: discussion sur le rapport du Dr Louis Jullien: ‘La propagande anti-conceptionnelle,’” *Bulletin mensuel: Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale*, Apr. 7, 1909, 135–136. For declarations that abortion could be excusable or even a humanitarian act, see pages 137, 157–158.

56 Bertillon, *L’Avortement*, 34. It was a commonplace among the elite that juries—the “justice of the people,” associated with irrational crowds—were overly lax in their verdicts. Cahen, *Gouverner les mœurs*, 148.
however, was suspicious of the way in which abortionist midwives who placed ads in the
mass press were treated with great lenience by the forces of order, a lenience that they
thought went beyond the scope of a hesitant jury. Less than a year after the Flachon Affair
erupted (see Chapter 3), Action française journalists Maurice Pujo and Léon Daudet were
again pointing the finger at the “dangerous Republic” for its role in tolerating and profiting
off immorality. Where the Flachon scandal revolved around ads for prostitution by Nitchevo,
this new scandal, the “Scandale des sages-femmes” found its center of gravity in the
advertisements placed by the midwife Mme Hérault.

Everything started when Gabrielle Mazzato died in Barbazon in August 1912 from
complications following an abortion.57 A police search of the dead woman’s home, ordered
by the prosecutor of Melun, “led to an interesting discovery: the address of a Parisian
midwife, Mme Hérault, 56 avenue Ledru-Rollin” among Mazzato’s papers.58 Le Matin’s
coverage of this fait divers did not mention just how easy it would have been for the young
woman to find this address, and for good reason: on August 13, an ad in Le Matin itself read
“1st class midwife. Mme Herault. Consult. 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. (Lyon-Orléans train stations),
near Rue de Lyon. 56 Avenue Ledru-Rollin.” The convenient location near the gare de Lyon
likely made the ad for Mme Hérault’s clinic stand out to the young Mazzato, who would have
come to Paris from Barbizon, to the southeast of the city.

The ensuing investigation into Mme Blanche Hérault, age forty (or perhaps forty-
two), turned up incriminating letters and the information that she ran a second clinic at 60

57 The papers give her name as Mazzato, Mazato, and Mazatto. I have chosen to stick with a single
spelling to avoid confusion.
58 “Boulevard Montparnasse existait une officine de faiseuses d’anges,” Le Petit Parisien, Sept. 24,
boulevard Montparnasse with the help of another midwife named Adrienne Chaubernard who had received her diploma a year earlier. A search of these premises, which had been in operation for about a year, led the police to catch the women in flagrant délit, performing a 400-franc abortion on a seventeen-year-old servant while her thirty-three-year-old lover/boss, who was posing as her husband, waited. Both midwives were soon thereafter arrested. Interviews at Hérault’s previous residence at 9 rue de Lyon revealed that she had become a midwife five years earlier, following the death of her husband.59

A few weeks later, in September and October 1912, Maurice Pujo and Léon Daudet found a way to tie the case against Mme Hérault to their ongoing campaign against police chief Louis Borde, who presented himself as an agent of purification, but who was referred to in the Action française as the “vile provocateur and thief of the ninth arrondissement” for his alleged role in launching a (failed) police conspiracy against the far-right group through an attempt to sell weapons to Action française’s youth organization, the Camelots du Roi, which would then conveniently be found during a police raid.60 According to Pujo, Borde

had been taking bribes from the recently arrested midwife Mme Hérault, that “notorious abortionist,” and using them to finance his political aspirations. In return for her subsidies, it was alleged, he “knowingly protected this woman’s criminal industry for four years by throwing out the numerous complaints lodged against her,” including many from directors of maternity wards and clinics who saw firsthand the results of Hérault’s work. How else could the fact that she “practiced her guilty industry in plain sight”—not only in her clinic on the avenue Ledru-Rollin, but also in two others boulevard Magenta (run by her friend Mme M…) and boulevard Montparnasse—be explained?

The story, however, was not as simple as Mme Hérault paying Borde to look the other way. Supposedly, Mme Hérault and Mme M... (an officier d’académie) had founded a “small mutual aid society [société amicale], called, bizarrely, the ‘Société des Zigs,’ where abortionist midwives and the protectors of these women got together each month at a banquet given at Restaurant Italien.” Borde, it was said, “never missed a single banquet” and reassured all present as to the “security of their sad profession” by his presence at their gathering. As Léon Daudet put it, Borde, who is “charged with controlling crimes and misdemeanors, is

---

Borde-Verneuil. La Guerre sociale,” L’Humanité, Sept. 11, 1912. It seems as though an internal investigation of Borde’s actions determined that he was not guilty of provocation, but had been remiss in failing to communicate to his superiors that someone was attempting to draw him into a conspiracy against “partisans of the duc d’Orléans.” “Le Faux complot policier: M. le commissaire Borde passe à la Folie-Méricourt,” Le Petit Parisien, Sept. 28, 1912.


himself a pimp, a thief, a provocateur and the paid henchman of a child killer!” Borde, that “‘distinguished’ commissaire of infanticides,” had “one hand on the [penal] code, the other in the pocket of Mme Death-to-Kids [Mme Mort-aux-Gosses] or on [criminal police officer] Warzé’s shank.”

As their detailed coverage continued, Daudet and Pujo began to think that Borde, while certainly guilty, was in fact a small criminal cog in a corrupt system (a point on which far left and right could agree). Why, they wondered, had press coverage of the arrestation of Mme Hérault been so “unusually discrete”? Had a provincial prosecutor accidentally committed a “serious gaffe” in arresting her? Action française was sure that the provincial commissaire Dantel had stumbled on the truth, which was that there existed “a whole gang of powerfully protected criminals, the whole organization of Parisian midwife-abortionists” that was “linked to powerful people through so many shameful services rendered, so many secrets, so much collusion.” The proof was in the fact that, in Paris, the number of abortions was about equal to the number of births (50,000 abortions to 60,000 births per year according to Bertillon), but the number of cases against abortionists was only about twenty to twenty-five per year and these were those women who couldn’t afford high placed protectors. Those who escaped prosecution were “high-placed [hautes] and powerful women” with

67 Journalists at the Guerre Sociale would also launch a campaign against “police provocations,” calling out Borde’s actions toward the Camelots du Roi, which had been brought to light through Action française coverage as well as through criminal proceedings that Pujo brought against Borde (who was, in the end, acquitted). “Tribunaux: l’affaire Borde,” L’Humanité, July 9, 1913.
“considerable annual revenue” and who live in the lap of luxury, serving upper class clients, who have a personal interest in protecting their midwives from prosecution.\textsuperscript{69} Maurice Pujo imagined police prefect Louis Lépine dressing down the provincial magistrates, screaming: “You really are from Melun! You thought you were so impressive, discovering that Mme Hérault is an abortionist. Oh! You really thought that we didn’t know? […] Did you think that the Petit Parisien, the Matin, the Journal and the Écho de Paris, that place her ads, really didn’t understand the generous advertising purchased by Mme Hérault, Mme M..., Mme Barlet and their ilk or by Nitchevo? […] that the Prefecture doesn’t know about the Midwives column?”\textsuperscript{70} Of course they knew. And of course they did nothing, because, as Pujo imagined it, abortion was “an industry that the law condemns, but that the Republic protects.”\textsuperscript{71}

In fact, the more these journalists thought about it, the more this scandal resembled the Flachon Affair with its compromised higher-ups and strange journalistic silences. As in the Flachon scandal, this immoral commerce was hiding in plain sight: “In all mass circulation newspapers there is, on the advertising page, a “Midwives” column, like there’s a “Marriages” or “Furnished rooms” or “Personals” columns.” Mme Hérault’s “discrete or transparent” ads could be found alongside those for Flachon’s supplier, Nitchevo. But, even more than Nitchevo’s inexpensive classified ads, those ads placed my midwives like Mme Hérault brought in important revenues for a wide range of newspapers—in Herault’s case, this amounted to approximately 9,000 francs per year.\textsuperscript{72} Her ads were lucrative enough that 

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Maurice Pujo, “Pourquoi l’on veut étouffer l’affaire Borde-Hérault,” L’Action française, Oct. 4, 1912.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Maurice Pujo, “Le Scandale des sages-femmes,” L’Action française, Oct. 7, 1912.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Pujo, “Le Scandale des sages-femmes,” L’Action française, Oct. 7, 1912.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Maurice Pujo, “Le Scandale des sages-femmes,” L’Action française, Oct. 5, 1912.
\end{itemize}
arrested.\textsuperscript{73} What were “several thousand pre-infanticides” to newspaper directors when there was money to be earned?\textsuperscript{74} It was clear to Pujo why, when a “scandal breaks, a press whose palms had been greased in this way [ainsi arrosée]” would choose to stay quiet. “Protected by the police, protected by the press, the child killers [tueuses d’enfants] can do whatever they like.”\textsuperscript{75} Little wonder that Mme Hérault was allowed to return home, where she could continue to receive clients—thanks to ads that had never stopped running—for her “child-killing industry” and pretend she had never even been arrested, telling anyone that asked that she had taken a little vacation.\textsuperscript{76}

A few months later, Mme Hérault wrote to Action Française, requesting that they publish a letter of self-defense on their first page. She said that she had taken their mudslinging in silence because she knew that she would not be found guilty by any honest investigation. She completely denied being an “abortion entrepreneur [une entrepreneuse d’avortement]” or of having thrown money at government agents.\textsuperscript{77} But whether she gave money to Borde or not, money remained a question. How could she afford the advertising that she, signing off with the name and address that appeared so often in newspapers’ advertising pages, could not deny having placed? Was it possible that a midwife could place


\textsuperscript{74} Rivarol, “Échos: les Letellier, Aristide Briand, Borde et la Hérault ou ‘le bagne à Paris,’” L’Action française, Oct. 12, 1912.

\textsuperscript{75} Maurice Pujo, “Pourquoi l’on veut étouffer l’affaire Borde-Hérault,” L’Action Française, Oct. 4, 1912.


\textsuperscript{77} Maurice Pujo, “Le Scandale des sages-femmes: une lettre de Mme Hérault!,” L’Action française, Dec. 19, 1912.
ads and be honorable? An advertising manual advised advertisers to demand that that their “ads never be placed next to ads for midwives or sellers of magic spells” because “anything that harms morality or that could dupe someone will lead to an unfavorable impression of neighboring ads.”78 In the advertising pages, was the midwife always already an abortionist?

**Midwife vs. “Midwife”: A Question of Honor**

The question was a thorny and recurrent one for midwives. Readers of the daily installments in the *Action Française*’s “Scandale des sages-femmes” series might start to wonder if the idea of an honorable midwife was itself a contradiction in terms, if it was in fact true that “in every midwife there is the stuff of an angel-maker.”79 Writers for *La Sage-femme*, the official organ of the Syndicat des sages-femmes de France certainly felt attacked by the negative representation of their profession. The federation addressed a letter to Maurice Pujo to tell him that only a small number of French midwives deserved to be called angel makers and to demand “for our corporation, the respect that is due to almost all its members.”80 Pujo responded that he would not dream of denying the respect due to midwives, stating that “we only wanted to augment it [respect] in aiding in what Mme Léon Roger herself calls ‘the

---

necessary purification \textit{[épuration]} of the profession.'”\textsuperscript{81} Another article in his paper likewise insisted that midwifery is “good and worthy of respect when exercised honestly.”\textsuperscript{82}

If Roger and Pujo were actually in agreement, Pujo had not responded to the specificity of the midwives’ critique, which was concerned with a comment that another midwife, ex-head of Paris’s Maternity hospital, had made about advertisements to an \textit{Action Française} journalist, Irenée Gaulain. This woman claimed that every single one of her former students were virtuous and that she had “never seen the name of one of her students in the \textit{petites annonces} of a newspaper.” In response, Gaulain asked: “According to you, Madame, is this a criterion?” The midwife asserted that the “indication is, at the least, of considerable value. Midwives exercising their profession honestly are in the vast majority. They would be happy to see all members of their corporation banned from placing advertisements.”\textsuperscript{83}

Madame Roger and other members of her federation were displeased that this article made it seem as though anyone educated outside of the Maternité de Paris was to be treated with suspicion, a claim that was especially egregious given that it was patently untrue: everyone had seen ads in which midwives vaunted their education at the Maternité de Paris!\textsuperscript{84}

But if they disputed the idea that education was not a good way to distinguish the good midwife from the bad one, they did not defend midwives’ right to advertise.


In fact, advertising was at the core of Roger’s group’s attempts to purify the profession. They had already, for several years, made it clear that no one was more concerned about the publication of advertising for “midwives” in the mass press than midwives themselves. Midwifery, as we have seen, was a historically important profession for women. It is clear that it did not pay nearly enough to support a single woman, but this was a fact that was common to most (if not all) jobs deemed “women’s work” at this time. At least midwifery, which required the obtention of a state-issued diploma, held prestige. It is unsurprising, then, that a number of women were deeply invested in protecting the respectability of their profession and in making it clear that they thought these ads were a form of “extermination” that went against their desire to assist births, not abortions, “because really it is repugnant to be an abortionist [avorteurs ou avorteuses].” One Marseille-based midwife wanted the Minister of the Interior to forbid the use of “elastic phrases” in advertising that “hint at special intentions with regard to a clientele who could be susceptible of finding itself in an uncomfortable [embarrassée] situation.” For the respectable, “title,  

85 They were not the only midwives to use a campaign against advertisements to assert their own honorability. A group of midwives from Le Havre also wrote to the Minister of Justice asking him to put a stop to ads for “abortion agencies.” Letter from Mar. 20, 1908. AN BB 18 6583, 70 BL 47.  
87 For the laws surrounding the practice of the profession of midwifery, see Adrien Carpentier, Codes et lois pour la France, l’Algérie et les colonies (Paris: Imprimerie et librairie générale de jurisprudence, 1912), 1032.  
88 Letter from a group of midwives in Le Havre to the Minister of Justice in Paris, Mar. 20, 1908, BB 18 6583, 70 BL 47, AN.
name, and address should suffice” [Fig. 5.4]. To prove their respectability, it was imperative that they distinguish themselves from matrones and avorteuses, or, even better, get rid of these scourges on the profession entirely. They needed, at the very least, “to prove that the Midwife could work for repopulation [la Sage-Femme peut tout pour la repopulation].”

Figure 5.4: Midwives denouncing midwives. Letter from “A Midwife” to the Minister of the Interior in Paris, Marseille, January 19, 1917, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 202, AN.

[89] Letter from “A Midwife” to the Minister of the Interior in Paris, Marseille, Jan. 19, 1917, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 202, AN.

In 1906, the Syndicat des Sages-femmes de France—whose goal was to “defend the moral and material interests of its members and of the profession”—had launched a fight against certain forms of advertising by midwives.\(^91\) The Secretary General, Madame Pinègre of Bois-Colombes (a northwestern suburb of Paris), wrote to both the Prefect of Police and the Minister of the Interior to ask them to intervene and take action against ads that “appear in newspapers and throw discredit on our profession.”\(^92\) She declared that the Syndicat had passed a resolution to forbid midwives from including any information in their ads besides their address, their opening hours, their prices and an indication as to whether they take lodgers. This stemmed from the fact that they considered the mention of the words “discretion, sterility, lateness [as] having the goal, not of drawing a clientele made up of women who want to become mothers, but of those who fear motherhood.”\(^93\) The Minister of Justice transmitted their request to the public prosecutor, but he didn’t think any action was necessary.\(^94\) Police investigations led to the temporary disappearance of such ads and several arrests, but a few weeks later, everything was as it had been before.\(^95\)

Could midwives place ads and be honest practitioners of the profession? The question, which long remained an open one, was put into relief in the case of the midwife

\(^91\) “Statuts du Syndicat général des sages-femmes de France,” La Sage-femme, May 5, 1907, 72.
\(^93\) Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Paris, à Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Garde des Sceaux, Ministre de la Justice, Oct. 20, 1906, BB 18 6583, 70 BL 37, AN.
\(^94\) Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Paris, à Monsieur le Président du Conseil, Garde des Sceaux, Ministre de la Justice, Oct. 20, 1906, BB 18 6583, 70 BL 37, AN.
Anaïs Boulier. Boulier seemed to be unequivocally one of the good guys. In 1899, she joined the Syndicat des Sages-femmes de France and served as the treasurer for the Midwives of the Seine Department’s Mutual Aid Society. In 1902, she founded a philanthropic organization to work against depopulation through the offer of “almost familial” assistance to pregnant and often unmarried women, “poor abandoned ones” who had nowhere else to turn besides to the abortionist. The work of these altruistic midwives made it possible for fille-mères to stop working by providing them the care and rest they needed to give birth to healthy babies (in secret if they wished), babies that would one day swell the ranks of the army in defense of the patrie. La Mère, with its simultaneously “humanitarian and patriotic” impetus, had the support of important men: Paul Brouardel, previously the dean of the Faculté de médecine de Paris and major public health advocate served as the group’s honorary president. Boulier was also active in the Chambre Syndicale des Sages-Femmes, which met in the offices of the female-run newspaper La Fronde, a newspaper that also published Boulier’s summaries of the group’s meetings. Her work with “La Mère” brought new members into the organization and inspired her to speak out against the continued

99 “Tribune du travail: Chambre syndicale des sages-femmes,” La Fronde, July 18, 1903.
100 A. Boulier, “Tribune du travail: Chambre syndicale des sages-femmes,” La Fronde, Mar. 15, 1903
problems posed by matrones. The project received financial support from the Minister of the Interior and Paris’s department council (Conseil général) and between 1906 and 1908 alone the group aided around 200 women. She called on the state to fund more projects like hers and asked parliament to vote on a bill presented by the senator Paul Strauss on the “protection of mothers and infants,” which would support poor pregnant women. She was a member of the Congrès national de l’assistance publique et privée in 1908 and the session at which she presented her work was presided over by Senator René Bérenger, that paragon of morality.

She was for all intents and purposes the ideal midwife, working selflessly to ensure that even unwed mothers carried their pregnancies to term. What then did it mean that she was a prolific newspaper advertiser, or, in the words of a fierce critic of midwives’ advertising, Dr. Dieupart: “How to explain that this midwife spends 25,000 francs to advertise abortion and, at the same time, spends her time working for repopulation?” For the women of La Sage-femme, representing an organization in which Boulier had once stood (unsuccessfully)

---

104 This session responded to the question of “Assistance à la femme ouvrière avant et après l’accouchement, au triple point de vue de la prévoyance, de l’hygiène et des secours proprement dits (Action publique et initiatives particulières).” “Deuxième assemblée générale,” IVe congrès national d’Assistance publique et privée, Reims: 21 au 26 avril 1908, 135, 154–155, 175.
for office, the “usefulness” of “La Mère” would be “indisputable if one of its promotors had not compromised it with questionable ads: RETARDS...” Marie Roger argued on behalf of La Sagefemme that unmarried mothers certainly needed the services that La Mère promised, but emphasized that such a project “must be perfect in every way and cannot serve as personal publicity in the interest of honors and profits.” Although they insisted that they already had significant documentation, they nonetheless made a call for any midwives who had been involved with the group and could provide further information, running a questionnaire on the topic in nearly every issue between March and December 1909.

The results of the investigation were never published and despite their insistence that they were not there to pass judgement, but rather to weigh the facts and, hopefully, push Boulier back onto the straight and narrow, they had denounced Boulier’s organization as “an enormous bluff.” They accused her of using her maternal health work as a scheme to open doors that would have been slammed in her face if people knew that she placed ads for her “absolute discretion” in newspapers [Fig. 5.5]

---

109 “L’Épuration (4e article),” La Sagefemme, Mar. 5, 1909, 39, 43.
The federation of midwives was so desperate to protect the honor of their profession by fighting against midwives’ advertising that they were willing to ally themselves with Dr. Dieupart in his campaign against such publicity, rather than give their colleague the benefit of the doubt. This was despite the fact that Dr. Dieupart had spent much energy fighting against the profession on the basis of what he saw as the fact that most midwives practiced medicine illegally. They were so desperate to prove themselves honorable and above suspicion that they had even printed Dieupart’s claim that 99% of Parisian midwives unofficially practiced gynecology and and that 50% did so openly, advertising these services either in newspaper ads or on the signs outside of their homes and thereby casually breaking the law of 1892 on the illegal practice of medicine, which restricted midwives to assisting women in childbirth, without the use of medical instruments. According to the doctor,

---

any advertisement for surgical massage, gynecological bandages, medical electricity, pediatric medicine, and maladies des dames should be considered as an illegal practice of medicine.\(^{111}\) No wonder certain midwives were keen to distance themselves from advertising of any kind.

Boulier, however, didn’t take Dieupart’s attack or his threat that he had a dossier of compromising information about her lying down. She defended herself from his attack on her honor, which had been published in the monthly bulletin of the Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale, by writing to the group’s founder, Dr. Alfred Fournier, to ask him to publish her response in the bulletin. She explained that she had been called to testify as part of an investigation into midwives who placed advertisements in the daily press, but that she had been completely exonerated of any wrongdoing. She was, she insisted, “profoundly attached to [her] corporation, which deserves public respect for its dedication, so often unacknowledged.”\(^{112}\) She was sure that Fournier would understand the importance of clearing herself of Dieupart’s “slanderous accusations,” both for her own name and for that of the midwives’ corporation.\(^{113}\) This solidarity did not go both ways: the corporation, or at the very least the Syndicat in which she had once been a member, was quick to throw her under the bus, and did so repeatedly.\(^{114}\)

The critique of midwives’ advertising, however, could easily lead to a critique midwives more generally. In the Bulletin officiel du Syndicat des Médecins de la Seine, Dr. Gonzalve Menusier moved from a call for the eradication of ads for abortion in newspapers—

\(^{111}\) “Congrès pour la répression de l’exercice illégal de la médecine,” La Sage-femme, May 5, 1906, 70.
\(^{113}\) Boulier, “Correspondance manuscrite,” 241.
to which Marie Roger, president of the Syndicat responded “Bravo! Midwives worthy of the
name are with the doctor”—to call for the elimination of midwives themselves, which he
described as the “parasites” of the medical profession.\footnote{Marie Roger, “Causerie: remède de la faillite de la médecine, suppression des sages-femmes,” \textit{La Sage-femme}, Dec. 5, 1909, 177–178.} This was, understandably, a step too
far: could male doctors really offer the kind of gentle, tender care a female midwife could?\footnote{Marie Roger, “Causerie,” \textit{La Sage-femme}, Dec. 5, 1909, 179.}
They would stake their claim to their own “indispensability,” but, even when faced with a
man calling for the end of their profession, one of the Syndicat’s first concerns was to express
their alignment with him in the fight against illicit advertising. Nothing would stand in their
way.

\textbf{From the \textit{Sage-Femme} to the Senate: Regulating Advertising, Combatting Depopulation}

Throughout 1908 and 1909, during the Syndicat’s joint campaign with Dr. Dieupart
against immoral advertising, success always seemed just around corner. In early 1909, the
Syndicat celebrated the fact that Senator René Bérenger’s entry into the fray had led to the
prosecution of a number of advertisers and newspapers.\footnote{For more on these July 1908 prosecutions, see Chapter Two.} Their work would not have been
in vain: they were sure that these advertisements would quickly be forgotten and “the medical
profession would once again be honored and respected.”\footnote{M.R. [Marie Roger], “Nous ne sommes plus seuls!,” \textit{La Sage-femme}, Jan. 5, 1909, 5.} By June 1909, the Syndicat was
applauding the end of the campaign, crowned by the happy outcome of the “end of these
shameful advertisements, which further depreciated our already so denigrated profession.”\footnote{“Bulletin officiel du Syndicat général des sages-femmes de France: procès-verbal de l’Assemblée
The celebration, however, was short-lived. Before too long, the ads were back. Dieupart’s
method of appealing directly to the newspapers clearly did not have the long-lasting effects they were after.\textsuperscript{120} If Dieupart thought his work was done, the midwives would have to continue alone.

In early 1911, Marie Roger wrote to the directors of all Parisian newspapers to specify the kind of advertising she hoped to see the last of, so that people might stop equating midwife with abortionist.\textsuperscript{121} But she didn’t stop there. She also wrote to the Minister of the Interior on behalf of the Syndicat to call his attention to the continued problem of the wording of midwives’ advertisements in newspapers of all kinds, in effect calling for state surveillance over the practices of midwifery, or at least of those midwives who placed advertisements.\textsuperscript{122} The association called for rules that would make it such that ads would include nothing but the “midwife’s \textit{name}, \textit{address}, and \textit{hours of consultation}.”\textsuperscript{123} The Ministry of Justice was sympathetic and understood that these ads placed by midwives could be “written in terms that make it possible to question the honorability of people exercising this profession” but, according to him, there was nothing to be done about it: the expressions used were not obscene and even if it could be argued that they contained incitements to abortion, this was not a crime as the law stood (although certain legislators had recently taken up the question).\textsuperscript{124} On March 1, another civil servant at the Ministry of Justice added that it was not the attorney general’s job to “take the necessary measures to protect ‘the dignity

\textsuperscript{120} For an example of his method of direct appeal, see “L’Épuration (4e article),” \textit{La Sage-femme}, Mar. 5, 1909, 40.

\textsuperscript{121} An example of this letter was reprinted in “Suite de la 1\textsuperscript{e} délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation,” \textit{JO Sénat}, Feb. 7, 1913, 41. BB 18 6169, AN.

\textsuperscript{122} Note, Ministère de la Justice, Direction des Affaires Criminelles et des Grâces, 1\textsuperscript{er} Bureau, Feb. 25, 1911, BB 18 6171, 44 BL 139, AN.

\textsuperscript{123} Note, Ministère de la Justice, Feb. 25, 1911, BB 18 6171, 44 BL 139, AN.

\textsuperscript{124} Note, Ministère de la Justice, Feb. 25, 1911, BB 18 6171, 44 BL 139, AN.
and the prosperity of the corporation of midwives.” This seemed like another dead end, but it wasn’t. The midwives’ fight against ads for abortion and their resolution for how to moralize midwives’ advertising would soon find itself taken up by members of the Senate.

***

In early 1913, the Senate was discussing a bill aimed at combatting depopulation that had been proposed by the (deceased) moderate leftist senator and doctor Odilon Lannelongue (1840-1911) in 1910, shortly before his death. The original bill made no mention of abortion, focusing instead on familial financial aid to civil servants, but abortion—a question that elicited unusual consensus across party lines—soon became the exclusive focus of the conversation, and of the proposed law. By February 1, 1913, the right-wing Count de Las Cases (who stood against the separation of church and state) had the floor and was complaining about midwives’ ads that read: “Midwife, correspondence, sterility, discretion, infallible method.” The law, he insisted, was only as good as its enforcers and in the case of ads like this one, the police were too credulous. He knew that a “woman who reads this ad interprets it, if she is in need, as indicating that she will find in the midwife the discretion necessary to get her out of that which preoccupies and oppresses her. But when the police present themselves at the indicated back room, they tell him: ‘You misunderstood. What we want to cure is sterility (laughs). On the contrary, we are absolutely dedicated to helping women who have not yet had children obtain the happiness of having them.’ (More laughter.) The police give up. I don’t know if they give the midwife a good grade,

125 Note, Ministère de la Justice, Feb. 25, 1911, BB 18 6171, 44 BL 139, AN.
126 Cahen, Gouverner les mœurs, 157.
if they give her Academic Palms.”\textsuperscript{127} Luckily, he continued, the new law would put an end to midwives’ ability to run circles around the police. If passed, it would make it so that such ads would not be publishable, such that midwives “cannot have recourse to advertising, notably through newspaper ads, prospectuses, or signs, unless it is only to indicate their name.”\textsuperscript{128}

The proposed law was not as harsh as de Las Cases made it sound. It left open the possibility of midwives placing advertisements as long as they limited themselves to communicating their “name, titles, qualities, and address, as well as their conditions of admission and residence.”\textsuperscript{129} The midwives’ dream of a moralized advertising space had been successfully transferred into the legislative machine. And yet, as had been the case in the midwives’ internal discussions, the very possibility of an honest ad was continually called into question. The very wording of the article lent itself to this slippage. It began: “In no instance can midwives make recourse to advertising” before going on to list the exceptions to this rule.\textsuperscript{130} Catholic Senator Fabien-Cesbron, who had also voted against the separation of church and state affirmed that he had seen many infractions “committed with the help of newspaper advertising,” and that “in no instance can midwives make recourse to advertising, especially through newspaper advertising.”\textsuperscript{131} The language of the bill, however, stated that “it is necessary to prohibit such ads without mercy,” but specified that these ads had “nothing

\textsuperscript{127} “Suite de la 1\textdegree  délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 1, 1913, 29, BB 18 6169, AN.
\textsuperscript{128} “Suite de la 1\textdegree  délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 1, 1913, 29, BB 18 6169, AN.
\textsuperscript{129} “Suite de la 1\textdegree  délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 8, 1913, 54, BB 18 6169, AN.
\textsuperscript{130} “Suite de la 1\textdegree  délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 8, 1913, 54, BB 18 6169, AN.
\textsuperscript{131} “Suite de la 1\textdegree  délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation,” JO Sénat, Feb. 8, 1913, 58. BB 18 6169, AN.
to do with the completely natural advertisement of a proper and honest birthing center
[maison d’accouchement] that wants to make itself known. And yet, making such a distinction
was “delicate terrain.” It was clear that, for many Senators, advertising by a midwife couldn’t
help but be seen with suspicion.132

The legislative committee was, nonetheless, careful to state that they didn’t see all
midwives with suspicion, unlike some who used these advertisements to cast aspersions on
the entire profession. The Syndicat was applauded for its long-term fight against suspicious
ads and the letter they had circulated two years earlier to newspaper directors was read in
full to an enthusiastic audience of Senators.133 In the letter, the Syndicat asked newspaper
directors to give the “necessary orders to stop publication, in midwives’ advertisements, of
the words: discretion, security, we place children, monthly troubles, irregularities, or any
other analogous expression” as these were the “terms that could be interpreted as being
provocations to abortion.”134 The response to the reading of this letter was simply that “there
can only be unanimous support for the proposed measure which would prohibit this noxious
advertising [publicité malsaine],” to which the room replied “Very good! very good!”135

Despite the unanimity around this particular question, discussions dragged on, with
no end in sight. Many thorny problems slowed the process, including opposition by doctors

132 No 449, Sénat, année 1913, annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 11 décembre 1913, 2e rapport
supplémentaire fait au nom de la Commission chargée d’examiner la proposition de loi de M.
Lannelongue et un certain nombre de ses collègues, tendant à combattre la dépopulation par des
mesures propres à relever la natalité, par M. Cazeneuve, sénateur, 12, BB 18 6169, AN.
133 “Suite de la 1re délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation,” JO
Sénat, Feb. 7, 1913, 41. BB 18 6169, AN.
134 “Suite de la 1re délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation,” JO
Sénat, Feb. 7, 1913, 41. BB 18 6169, AN.
135 “Suite de la 1re délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation,” JO
Sénat, Feb. 7, 1913, 41. BB 18 6169, AN.
to articles that would require the official declaration of premature births or abortions, thereby limiting medical confidentiality, and questions about how to organize surveillance of birthing centers.\footnote{Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les moeurs}, 158.} The war, too, served to block progress on the law, even as it gave rise to an even more repressive imaginary. For example, in late 1914, the military governor of Lyon attempted to enact an order that would have “worked to end abortive maneuvers by banning all advertisement by medical doctors, pharmacists, or midwives for health and recovery centers or childbirth clinics, as well as all advertising for contraceptive products.”\footnote{Letter, Minister of Justice to Minister of War, c. Dec. 1914, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 201, AN.} The Ministry of the Interior, asked to weigh in on the legality of the order by the Ministry of War, quashed it, arguing that such action was outside the powers of the military governor whose right to ban publications under the law of 1849 on the “State of Siege” was limited to those things that could “excite or maintain disorder,” by which its authors “had certainly not meant to target moral disorder.”\footnote{Letter, Minister of War to Minister of Justice, Dec. 5, 1914 and Note, Ministry of Justice, Dec. 15, 1914, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 201, AN.}

Returning to the realm of civil law to combat the problem of abortion, in October 1916, journalists at \textit{Le Figaro} called for a vote on the Lannelongue law, stating that the problem of midwives’ advertising, which M. Barthou, Minister of Justice had described as an “evil that was both hurtful and disastrous for our country,” was a matter of urgency and should be acted on as “a measure of national defense,” something of utmost importance during a period of war.\footnote{“La Dépopulation,” \textit{Le Figaro}, Oct. 12, 1916.} The legislative process was picked back up in 1917 when radical party senator and pharmacist Paul Cazeneuve relaunched the bill in only slightly amended
form; it quickly encountered some of the same stumbling blocks it had a few years earlier.\footnote{Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 169.} Despite finally passing the Senate on January 28, 1919, it seemed as though these questions would never be resolved.\footnote{Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 174.} On July 23, 1920, the fiercely patriotic republican Deputy Paul Ignace took matters into his own hands, calling for quick adoption of a new bill made up of only those articles from the Cazeneuve bill that could be “established without difficulty between the Chamber and Senate”—those against the provocation to abortion by texts or advertisements, the supply of contraceptives or abortifacients, and contraceptive propaganda.\footnote{Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 175; “Projet de loi tendant à réprimer la provocation à l’avortement et la propagande anti-conceptionnelle présenté au nom de M. Paul Deschanel, par M. Gustave Lhopiteau.” BB 18 6170, AN.} The democratic method of slow deliberation was thrown over for some efficient wartime urgency: the bill passed the Chamber that very day with a vote of 521 to 55 and became law on July 31, 1920.\footnote{Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 176.} Ads that “will have provoked the crime of abortion, even when this provocation is without consequences” could now be punished with six months to three years of prison and a fine between 100 and 3000 francs.\footnote{“Loi réprimant la provocation à l’avortement et à la propagande anticonceptionnelle,” \textit{Journal officiel de la République française: Lois et décrets [JO Lois]}, Aug. 1, 1920, 10934. BB 18 6170, AN.}

This was, however, significantly less specific than earlier iterations had been. In 1917, for example, the proposed article still specified what was allowed in such ads, such that anything besides “names, titles, qualities, and address, as well as their conditions of admission and residence” would be illegal. The idea was that “this article would undoubtedly put a stop to this all too frequent practice, used by [male and female] abortionists, to indicate
the address of their childbirth center or simply their home, in joining it with indicative comments,” such as “discretion is assured (!)”[sic]. Under the vaguer text that was the law of 1920, judges would have to be able to prove that the words “discretion is assured” were indeed provocation to abortion. Without clear guidance on acceptable language, that is, the judiciary would be forced to look beyond the advertising page.

**To Catch an Abortionist: Legal Precision and the Problem of Shooting at Shadows**

Dr. Bertillon could have told the legislators behind the law of 1920 that their anti-advertising article would miss the mark. Abortion was notoriously difficult to prosecute and it was in fact the targeting of advertising qua advertising that held the most promise for cracking down on the spread of abortion businesses. In his 1910 report on the repression of abortion, he recounted the basis for this prosecutorial difficulty through the story of an attempt by M. Gustave Dron, the mayor of Tourcoing (who was trained as a doctor), to rid his city of twenty-six dangerous matrões who were supposedly robbing Tourcoing of hundreds of births each year. In this case, in 1908, a police action—which Fabrice Cahen has described as “pioneering”—caught all twenty-six abortionists in flagrant délit: every one of these women agreed to undertake the “abortive operation” on the agents’ female accomplice. And yet, the case against them was dismissed all the same because the “person who pretended to submit to the process was not in the condition required for there to have

---

145 No 156, Sénat, Année 1917, session ordinaire, annexe au procès-verbal de la séance du 15 juin 1917, 4ème rapport supplémentaire fait au nom de la Commission chargée d'examiner la proposition de loi de M. Lannelongue et un certain nombre de ses collègues, tendant à combattre la dépopulation par des mesures propres à relever la natalité, par M. Cazeneuve, Sénateur (4e rapport Cazeneuve, 18–19. BB 6169, AN.

146 Bertillon, L’Avortement au point de vue médico-social, 32–33. Cahen, Gouvrer les mœurs, 163-164.

147 Bertillon, L’Avortement, 32–33. Cahen, Gouvrer les mœurs, 163.
really been pre-infanticide.” A counselor at the Cour de Cassation explained that “penal law requires, for there to have been a crime, that there is not only the intention to harm and an attempt, successful or otherwise, but also that there is an object that could be the victim of this crime. For example, if an assassin thinks he sees his victim in the shadows and takes a shot at him, and if he, in fact, thought he was shooting at a man, but instead shot a tree, there is no case against him. However, there was intention to harm and there was an attempt that only failed due to circumstances independent of the will of the perpetrator. And yet, it is not proven that the woman who was operated on was pregnant and thus that there was an attempt at abortion.”

To catch an abortionist in flagrant délit, the police would have to put themselves in the uncomfortable position of sending in a woman who was actually pregnant.

If doctors were in their right to be indignant at this state of affairs, Bertillon nonetheless admitted that “the precision of legal texts is an indispensable element of good justice.”

It was nonetheless frustrating that women like the midwife Vincent, who placed ads promising her discreet services in newspapers like Le Journal, were said to make five or six hundred francs or more on good days by performing abortions, and were known to the police as abortionists, could continue to act with impunity.

It was also frustrating that women like hardware seller [marchande de couleurs] Mme Marie Guyot, who had found Mme

---

148 Bertillon, L’Avortement, 33.
149 “Le Péril de la dénatalité et la répression de l’avortement, exposé fait le 7 janvier 1939 à la 1re brigade régionale de police mobile par Fernand Boverat,” (Paris: Éditions de l’Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation), 12, Brochures, BB 18 6176, AN.
150 Bertillon, L’Avortement, 33.
151 Chanudet, “Voici les faits qui m’ont été racontés par Mme Marie Guyot,” BB 18 6172, 44 BL 212, AN. Procureur général, près la Cour d’Appel de Paris à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 9, 1917, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 212, AN.
Vincent’s address in *Le Journal* and obtained two abortions in the same year at her hands, was not convicted of abortion due to a lack of proof.\textsuperscript{152}

The law of 1920 did not change anything on this score. Fernand Boverat, who was the most influential pronatalist of the interwar period—radicalizing the anti-abortion movement and writing texts such as “La race blanche en danger de la mort” (Éditions de l’Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, 1931)—relaunched the fight against midwives’ ads in the 1930s as part of a bigger battle against abortion and the supposedly resultant depopulation.\textsuperscript{153} Boverat, Vice-President of the Conseil supérieur de la Natalité and leading figure at the Alliance nationale, was convinced that the relatively small number of abortion charges (hardly a few hundred each year) was due not to the fact that those guilty of the crime were hard to find, but rather that the police failed to act: the police “know midwives and abortionists who, in any case, barely hide their industry.” Many midwives, he added, “advertise that they take lodgers or treat women ‘at all stages’ and that, often, these ads are placed by professional abortionists.”\textsuperscript{154}

However, the best that the Ministry of Justice could do in response to such a state of affairs was to immediately alert the country’s public prosecutors of the “need to find the true goal of these advertisements and to bring charges against any offences discovered.”\textsuperscript{155} The ads in and of themselves were untouchable. As the prosecutor at the Department of the Seine’s Tribunal de 1ère Instance put it, the elimination of “ads placed by suspicious

\textsuperscript{152} Le Procureur general près la Cour d’Appel de Paris à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, Mar. 9, 1917, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 212, AN.

\textsuperscript{153} On Fernand Boverat’s fight against abortion, see Cahen, *Gouverner les mœurs*, 194–202.

\textsuperscript{154} Ministère de la Justice, Note pour M. le Garde des Sceaux, Dec. 13, 1934, BB 18 6176, AN.

\textsuperscript{155} Ministère de la Justice, Note pour M. le Garde des Sceaux, Dec. 13, 1934, BB 18 6176, AN.
midwives [sages-femmes au trafic suspect]" demanded by Boverat was impossible as the law
stood. The law of July 31, 1920 did not allow for preventive censorship that would make it
illegal to place such ads, nor could it engage legal proceedings against ads “written in
sufficiently prudent terms” that they could not be described as a “provocation to abortion”
in the terms of the law.156

For Boverat, the continued presence of midwives’ ads in the press felt like a slap in
the face of his unflagging efforts to ensure the strictest repression of abortion possible. In
early 1937, he wrote to the Minister of Justice: “you know that professional abortionists
enjoy, with very few exceptions, complete impunity, in spite of the ads that many of them do
not hesitate to place in the newspapers. The inertia of the authorities where they’re
concerned allows them not only to decimate French natality, but also to ruin the health of
thousands of women each year.”157 Propaganda put out by the Alliance nationale contre la
dépopulation bearing the name “Le Massacre des Innocents” likewise took aim at these ads.
With the failure of the old laws, the organization used this text to call for new laws that
would
give public powers the possibility to forbid advertisements in
newspapers and periodicals by midwives who receive lodgers
‘at all stages’, assuring them ‘absolute discretion.’ These ads
are, except for a few rare exceptions, barely disguised offers
made by [female] abortionists. The Alliance nationale
convinced a number of major dailies, including Le Petit
Parisien, L’Intransigeant, Le Journal, Paris-Midi, Paris-Soir, etc. to

156 Parquet du Tribunal de 1ère Instance du Département de la Seine, Le Procureur de la République
à Monsieur le Procureur Général, Dec. 1, 1936, BB 18 6176, AN.
157 Fernand Boverat, Secrétaire-Général of the Alliance Nationale pour l’accroissement de la
population française, to the Ministre de la Justice, Feb. 2, 1937, BB 18 6176, AN.
eliminate, out of patriotism, this publicity from their columns. It must disappear everywhere.\textsuperscript{158}

As \textit{Paris-Soir} put it, their support of the Alliance nationale went beyond words: they had decided to aid the fight against abortion by “closing its columns to classified ads by midwives, among which too often slipped, next to honest texts, suspicious addresses.”\textsuperscript{159} This was, as the article’s title put it, a “question of life or death for France.”\textsuperscript{160}

This invocation of patriotism, in \textit{Paris-Soir} and in the Alliance’s brochure, positioned ads placed by midwives as a national threat, and imagined midwives themselves as assassins of the kind of angelic white French baby depicted on the front cover of this brochure who, by the back cover, had been reduced to a bright red splotch of blood, reminding readers that “abortion is a falling birth rate [dénatalité] and a falling birth rate is war.”\textsuperscript{161} In the years immediately following the war, moral activists warned that the state’s failure to stop these illicit businesspeople from advertising in the papers implicated public powers in “an organization that was destructive of family and race.”\textsuperscript{162} The work of the Alliance nationale, represented throughout this brochure as Marianne, without the phrygian cap, but occasionally with a (rather phallic) sword, would ensure the birth of France’s children and deliver swift and final justice on the abortionists, who are armed, in Figure 5.6, with much smaller knives.

\textsuperscript{158} “Le Massacre des innocents” (Paris: Éditions de l’Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation, n.d. [c. late 1930s]), 16, BB 18 6176, AN. According to Fabrice Cahen, 235,000 issues of this brochure were published in 1939, with a republication in 1944. Cahen, Gouverner les mœurs, 200.

\textsuperscript{159} “La Natalité: question de vie ou de mort pour la France,” \textit{Paris-Soir}, July 8, 1939.

\textsuperscript{160} “La Natalité,” \textit{Paris-Soir}, July 8, 1939.

\textsuperscript{161} “Le Massacre des innocents,” BB 18 6176, AN.

\textsuperscript{162} Note relative aux expositions publiques d’images et de titres ou couvertures de livres, à caractère licencieux, et aux annonces de produits anticonceptionnels ou abortifs, c. 1916, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 205, AN.
Paris-Soir’s article, however, makes it clear that their summary justice would also take down those honest midwives who placed advertisements that were, unfortunately, nearly impossible to distinguish from those placed by abortionists. Collateral damage was acceptable to the Alliance, especially given the fact that many abortionists had brought in significant revenue thanks to newspaper advertising. The Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation asserted that it “is unacceptable for them to keep the money earned in this way; if only as an example for those who would be tempted to imitate them, it is indispensable that this money be taken from them.”163 This was a long-standing critique. Already in 1916, the Ministry of Justice was urged by the Société contre la Licence des Rues to consider that this “direct propaganda was created with a goal of mercantile speculation [...] and with the intention of inciting the public and especially women to acts that harm the social order.”164 This was not, they argued, a question of freedom of expression; rather it “constitute[d] a shameful abuse of the freedom of Commerce and Industry,” one that directly hurt the state:

Inviting a young girl, a woman, to buy a certain birth control product is not only inciting her to debauchery, but also, at the same time, to prejudice the State, which is concerned with the augmentation of the number of citizens, and, possibly, the future child, who has a right to the chance at life resulting from the union of man and woman.”165

163 Vœu de l’Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation, Répression de l’avortement, Feb. 2, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
164 Note relative aux expositions publiques d’images et de titres ou couvertures de livres, à caractère licencieux, et aux annonces de produits anticonceptionnels ou abortifs, c. 1916, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 205, AN.
165 Note relative aux expositions publiques d’images et de titres ou couvertures de livres, à caractère licencieux, et aux annonces de produits anticonceptionnels ou abortifs, c. 1916, BB 18 6172, 44 BL 205, AN.
In the absence of a new law, the patriotism of newspaper owners—or perhaps just their fear of the Alliance’s sword of “Justice”—was the next best thing to protect state and unborn child from money-grubbing midwives. But the Alliance had reason to believe that they might soon see Justice done. They had the ear of the Minister of the Interior, Albert Sarraut (1872–1962), who, on December 27, 1938, wrote a memorandum, inspired by requests made by the Alliance nationale contre la depopulation, to all police prefects on the subject of midwives’ advertisements, asking the police to intensify their fight against abortion through the diligent search for and surveillance of these “harmful businesses.” It began:

Numerous observations and multiple investigations have shown that, with the help of certain advertisements placed in special papers, criminal abortion practices have multiplied in many cities, to the great detriment of our birthrate, which was already deficient.

These clandestine back rooms, where abortive maneuvers are carried out, are the object of disguised advertising that leaves no doubt about the condemnable character of these businesses; many abortion professionals
engage in these criminal actions with impunity, thereby wreaking havoc upon our population, havoc that public powers have the duty to prevent and severely punish, in the interest of public welfare [*salut public*].

At the same time, Sarraut also wrote to the Minister of Justice, Paul Marchandeau, to inform him as well of the role newspaper advertising played as the impetus behind the multiplication of abortions in many cities. He informed him of his request to the prefects to intensify their repression, but also wanted to know if Marchandeau thought there was any way to exercise control over the “suspicious character of these advertisements, which could constitute, by their promises of ease, an incitement to practices that morality condemns.” With his letter, he included “one specimen among so many of these advertisements which leave no doubt about the condemnable activity of these back rooms” so that Marchandeau could inform him as to whether this “immoral advertising” was punishable by law. In any case, Sarraut insisted, “given the importance of this question” it was “desirable that, in the interest of morality, the terms of this advertising be controlled and regulated” and that judicial authorities given instructions to “exercise severe and rapid repression” wherever possible.

The ad Sarraut sent Marchandeau was, in this case, not for a midwife, but rather for a business that offered early diagnosis of pregnancy that advertised in a number of mass-circulation dailies, including *Le Journal*. It had been brought to Sarraut’s attention by Fernand Boverat himself, who was sure that Sarraut already knew that “this early pregnancy testing was, except for extremely rare exceptions, used solely by women who planned to get

---

166 A. Sarraut, Ministre de l’Intérieur, à Monsieurs les Préfets, Dec. 27, 1938, BB 18 6176, AN.
167 A. Sarraut, Ministre de l’Intérieur, à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, Ministre de la Justice, Dec. 26, 1938, BB 18 6176, AN.
168 Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Paris à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, Mar. 18, 1939, BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN.
abortions if they were pregnant” and that the “laboratories that undertake these diagnostics are thus back room abortionists.”

He was sure that such advertising would lead to an increase in the number of abortions and hoped, given that current legislation did not make it possible to put a stop to the advertising itself, that Sarraut would consider creating a special police brigade to deal with the issue. In the meantime, Boverat gave at least one presentation to the police himself, informing them that back alley businesses were not hard to locate because they had so many clients and that the easiest way to locate these abortionists was simply by reading their advertisements in newspapers, including those for pregnancy testing labs, which supposedly gave the name of an abortionist to unhappily pregnant women (who comprised 99% of those who used this service, according to Boverat). This was a method that would have been familiar to the police, who had long used the classifieds to track prostitutes, that other major threat to sexual morality and natality.

Investigations into one pregnancy-testing business, the Centre Eyolma, did not, however, support Boverat’s point of view. M. Zamaron, the Commissaire aux délégations judiciaires specially charged with “abortion cases,” found nothing untoward, outside of the fact that the lab’s director, Eugène Arlaud—who was 55, married, and the father of three

---

169 Fernand Boverat, Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, à Monsieur le Ministre de la Justice, Dec. 9, 1938, BB 18 6176, AN.
170 Fernand Boverat, Alliance nationale pour l’accroissement de la population française, à Monsieur le Ministre de la Justice, Dec. 9, 1938, BB 18 6176, AN.
171 “Le Péris de la dénatalité et la répression de l’avortement, exposé fait le 7 janvier 1939 à la 1re brigade régionale de police mobile par Fernand Boverat” (Paris: Éditions de l’Alliance nationale contre la dépopulation), 11–13, Brochures, BB 18 6176, AN.
172 Both Dr. Bertillon and pro-natalist senator and Alliance co-founder André Honnorat saw abortion and prostitution as paired regulatory problems, each calling for an abortion police to complement the police des moeurs. Bertillon, L’Avortement, 38; André Honnorat, Sénat, to Monsieur Marchandeau, Ministre de la Justice, Mar. 18, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
173 Zamaron would continue to fulfill this role under Vichy. Fabrice Cahen, Gouverner les mœurs, 261.
children—had previously been convicted for fraud and embezzlement. In Zamaron’s estimation, the practice was fairly straightforward. The Center’s services consisted of diagnosing whether a woman was pregnant via urine sample, a process whose validity had been recognized by the scientific community and which was practiced by many laboratories.174 The analyses themselves, of which there were about thirty each month, were carried out remotely in the Parisian suburb of Bougival by Mme Marcus, who was said to have previously been a laboratory assistant in a hospital maternity ward. Beyond a yes you’re pregnant or a no you’re not, no consultations were offered and no links to contraceptive propaganda or abortion were found. It was more than a little bit of a stretch to call a “scientific diagnosis of a state of pregnancy” a “method for procuring an abortion.”175 And if no one at the Centre Eyolma had a medical diploma, this was not actually required by law. The best Zamaron could do in this instance was to ask the judiciary police to keep a closer eye on “suspicious advertising” in the interest of finding ads that could be prosecuted as provocations to abortion and to indicate to Arlaud that it wasn’t the best look for someone with a criminal record to be at the “head of a business that was appealing to the public.”176 Arlaud agreed to find a more medically trained director (he had had one who had died a year earlier) and to stop advertising, but many other advertisements for reproductive services remained and Arlaud’s current business practices remained entirely legal.177

174 Parquet du tribunal de première instance du département de la Seine, Le Procureur de la République à Monsieur le Procureur Général, Mar. 16, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
175 Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Paris à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, Mar. 18, 1939, BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN.
176 Parquet du tribunal de première instance du département de la Seine, Le Procureur de la République à Monsieur le Procureur Général, Mar. 16, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN; Note, Ministère de la Justice, Mar. 21, 1939, BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN.
177 Note, Ministère de la Justice, Mar. 21, 1939, BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN.
At the heart of this exchange lies a deep uncertainty about what exactly constitutes an incitement to abortion. Could the very fact of informing a woman that she was pregnant be an incitement to abortion? This is hard to imagine in an age in which the use of the pregnancy test is widespread.\textsuperscript{178} For high powered men like Boverat, Sarraut, and Marchandeau, however, there is a common assumption that the only reason a woman could want to know whether she is pregnant at an early stage is because she would want to abort the fetus as quickly as possible. They cannot imagine another reason a woman would want to have this knowledge about her own body and future. Women’s knowledge of their own body was thus construed as the first step toward abortion. Women could not be trusted. If Zamaron’s investigation made different assumptions about the scope of the law, this did not put a damper on their zeal and their investment in removing reproductive advertising from the pages of mass dailies. Zamaron himself would continue to use the classifieds in his productive surveillance efforts.\textsuperscript{179}

At roughly the same time that the judiciary police’s report came back, Marchandeau, who had a background in natalist movements, sent out a memorandum of his own to France’s public prosecutors [\textit{procureurs généraux}].\textsuperscript{180} He bypassed the non-starter of a story that was the Centre Eyolma and told them simply that Sarraut had ordered the police to work actively to track down “clandestine back rooms where abortion is habitually practiced.” “The multiplication of the number of these backrooms,” he continued, “for whom the clientele is


\textsuperscript{179} Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 261. Among those arrested in 1939 based on Zamaron’s work was radical feminist and doctor Madeleine Pelletier. Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 263.

\textsuperscript{180} On Marchandeau, see Cahen, \textit{Gouverner les mœurs}, 220.
recruited as much from the countryside as from cities, thanks to discreet but intense advertising campaigns, constitutes a grave danger socially and nationally.” Marchandeau then told his prosecutors that he expected them to “direct, support, and coordinate police action” and to do everything they can to “ensure the success of these investigations in order to find and bring these abortion professionals before the courts.” In support of these goals, he sent out a dispatch on May 1, 1939, reporting on possible modifications to present abortion legislation, including the possibility of forbidding advertising for childbirth services.

Responses were varied. The prosecutor in Dijon was convinced that the “prohibition of all advertising would already give a considerable result” and the prosecutors in Angers and Douai also expressed support for the prohibition of all back page advertising for birthing centers. The prosecutor in Douai defended his position that “advertising, in particular, is to be forbidden” by adding that “experience shows that many women find addresses in the press for the ‘welcoming maison’ or the ‘first class midwife with diploma’ who takes lodgers.” In this, they were in line with the wishes of Fernand Boverat, who advocated legislation that would make any advertising by doctors and midwives, in any form and in any publication, illegal.

181 Circulaire, Paul Marchandeau, Ministre de la Justice, à Monsieur le Procureur général, Mar. 16, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
182 Cour d’appel de Dijon, Le Procureur général à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 10, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN; Cour d’appel d’Angers, Le Procureur général près la Cour d’Appel d’Angers à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 9, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN; Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Douai à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 11, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
183 Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’Appel de Douai à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 11, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.
184 La lutte contre l’avortement, Rapport présenté au Haut Comité de la Population le 13 Mai 1939, par Fernand Boverat, BB 18 6176, AN.
The prosecutors in Bordeaux and Limoges, however, insisted that the problem was not with the advertising itself, but rather with a lack of surveillance over birthing centers, which, up to that point, were completely unregulated. Administrative surveillance that would require certain guarantees of moral conduct from anyone opening such a business would make it such that advertising for birthing centers would “present no danger.” The prosecutor in Chambéry was also hesitant about any move to forbid all advertising. He stated that “there exists, happily, birthing clinics that are not back room abortionists. Their advertising is honorable and useful. It informs families eager to guarantee discreet care for their pregnant relatives and to prevent a clandestine abortion or a scandalous birth, especially in the countryside or in a small city. This advertising, finally, permits the administration to operate a surveillance.” The prosecutor in Rouen agreed, stating that the prohibition of advertising would actually promote abortion. He asked “why prohibit serious birthing centers, where abortion is not practiced, from making use of the means to make themselves known and to develop their clientele?” Forbidding the use of advertising would simply make it the “special privilege of unscrupulous midwives” who will have no qualms about continuing to place their coded ads that “offer their services to anyone who desires them.”

185 Cour d’appel de Bordeaux, Parquet du Procureur Général, Le Procureur Général à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 6, 1939. BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN. See also Cour d’appel de Limoges, Le Procureur général près le Cour d’appel de Limoges à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 9, 1939, BB 18 6176, AN.

186 Parquet Général de Chambéry, object répression de l’avortement, Le Procureur Général près la Cour d’appel de Chambéry à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 8, 1939, BB 18 6176, 44 BL 397, AN.
The better move, he argued, would be to prohibit advertising from any clinic that had failed to obtain administrative authorization.\textsuperscript{187}

It was this last opinion that won out. In the Code de la famille, promulgated on July 29, 1939, Article 93 stated that “no one can open or direct a childbirth center or clinic, or a private establishment habitually receiving either for a fee or not, in any number, women who are pregnant or who appear or are assumed to be pregnant, without having obtained prior authorization from the prefect.” Article 96 added that “all commercial advertising, in any form, openly concerning pregnancy or childbirth or in a disguised manner, is forbidden, except for ads in favor of those establishments authorized by the conditions of article 93 or those running in publications exclusively reserved for the medical profession”\textsuperscript{188} In other words, starting in 1939, only authorized maisons would be allowed to place advertisements. There was now a clear way to remove ads placed by suspected abortionists from the pages of the press.

Despite the fall of France to the German army less than one year later, the Family Code was to have a long life and afterlife.\textsuperscript{189} But, where advertising was concerned, it would not act alone. On September 24, 1945, the Order of Midwives was created to serve as a

\textsuperscript{187} Parquet de la Cour d’Appel, Rouen, Le Procureur Général à Monsieur le Garde des Sceaux, May 11, 1939. BB 18 6176, AN.
\textsuperscript{188} “Le Code de la famille (décret loi du 29 juillet 1939),” BNF, 4-F PIECE-2340, 9.
\textsuperscript{189} As Camille Robcis puts it, the Family Code “inscribed familialism as both theory and practice at the very heart of the Republican order.” She shows how the Vichy regime built on this to make “the family one of the cornerstones of its National Revolution,” and how, in turn, “the continuities in family police [...] among Vichy, the Liberation, and the Fourth Republic are remarkable.” Camille Robcis, The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 47, 56. The Family Code clearly did not die with the Third Republic.
regulatory body for the profession, ensuring the quality of care. On September 30, 1949, a Code of Ethics drawn up by the Order’s National Board—made up of four (male) medical doctors, with a preference for those specialized in childbirth, five midwives elected by departmental councils, and one president (a doctor)—was decreed. This Code made explicit, in its tenth article, that “the profession of midwife is a ministry; it must not, in any case nor in any way, be practiced as a commerce.” As such, “all forms of personal advertising of a commercial nature, especially via the press or by radio,” were, except in very rare cases, “forbidden to the midwife.” As if this weren’t clear enough, Article 17 added that “in her writing, declarations, and lectures, the midwife must avoid any harm to the honor of the profession, all advertising or publicity, personal or of benefit to a third party or business of some sort, and which is, generally speaking, incompatible with the individual and professional dignity of a midwife.” What all of this boiled down to was that legitimate

---


midwives were not to use advertising at all. Where the Code de la famille had left the door open, the new Code of Ethics, which, on this count, has remained more or less unchanged into the present, slammed the door shut. Advertising was officially dishonorable and fundamentally unethical for midwives (as with many other health professionals), even for those whose practice was otherwise unimpeachable.\footnote{Frédéric Gras, “Communication et déontologie des professions de santé,” Légicom 11, no. 1 (1996): 13–20.} To be commercial was to debase a profession that put itself forward as altruistic and selfless.

It is easier to be selfless, however, if one is already financially comfortable, a situation that few midwives could have hoped to find themselves in without a husband. As one self-styled selfless midwife, the Lille-based Mme Boulmer, stated at the end of the nineteenth century, she placed advertisements and “would like to have a great fortune,” not for her personal gain, but in order to be able to help many more women in need and who could not afford to pay than she was currently able to.\footnote{Dame Boulmer au Ministre de la Justice, Jan. 18, 1898, BB 18 6582, AN.} A century later, Boulmer’s ability to use the classifieds would have been significantly more restricted, and this despite the fact that the European Court of Human Rights ruled that advertising was covered under the free speech protections in the European convention on human rights. The Court, however, also stated that these protections were less all-encompassing than those regarding other forms of speech, which means, in practice, that they trust national medical authorities to make their own decisions as to what are reasonable exceptions to these dispositions.\footnote{Gras, “Communication et déontologie des professions de santé,” Légicom, 17–18.} How did medical professionals come to a general consensus that to be an honorable member of the profession

\footnote{Gras, “Communication et déontologie des professions de santé,” Légicom, 17–18.}
meant that one could not advertise or operate using a commercial model? Such a decision meant something different for doctors with their high fees than for midwives, who often expressed having trouble making ends meet. A fifty-year fight by midwives, moralists, and pro-natalists against newspaper advertising, with its whiff of sexual scandal, had been won, but only by placing limits on free speech and removing any shred of legitimacy that lingered for female professionals in the back pages.
Conclusion

In his wide-ranging study of the history of the press, the journalist Auguste de Cambure stated that the classifieds, which had “supporters and opponents,” both “helped and did a disservice” to society. His discussion of the classifieds, however, focused solely on their bad effects, as he protested (perhaps too loudly) against the idea that France had the “monopoly on suspicious ‘Classifieds,’” refuting the British assertion that immoral advertising was “inherent to French moeurs.”\(^1\) By the end of his discussion of the classifieds, the association between immorality and classified advertising was so well established that there was no room for doubt that the statement “Italy too is familiar with the ‘Classifieds’” meant that the classifieds in Italy, as in France, America, Britain, Germany, and Austria, were immoral. Discussions of the classifieds just couldn’t seem to escape the question of their (dubious) moral status, which was intimately linked to their dubious commercial status: Cambure conceived of the classifieds as a second-rate or ersatz [succédane] form of advertising that combined a “commercial nature with a personal appearance.”\(^2\) This combination was, clearly, troubling.

In the preceding chapters I have examined how and why the question of morality became such a central one for the classifieds—this uncanny commercial, yet intimate advertising form. Advocates of the classifieds presented them as an efficient, rational way for bosses to find qualified laborers, for unimpeachable servants to find honest work, and for many others to find exactly that thing that they needed, even if it was a needle in the haystack,

---

\(^1\) A. de Chambure, À travers la presse (Paris: Th. Fert, Albouy & Cie, 1914), 533–534.
\(^2\) Chambure, À travers la presse, 533.
because everyone, including the needle, was assumed to read the newspaper. While the classifieds may have performed this service for some, they also opened up space for socially and sexually problematic individuals (including women) to act as economic agents and to open businesses of various kinds on their own and with low overhead in the symbolically-important pages of the newspaper. The service the classifieds performed was thus quickly re-imagined as a “disservice” to a society that increasingly feared the venality of the press and expected women to act as the dependent moral guardians of the republican family. The good the classifieds could do was too closely related to the havoc they seemed poised to wreak on sexual and gender order and on the democracy promised by the ideal of a press, free from financial interest, able to create informed citizens.

Responses to the multifarious use of the classifieds included projects to morally regulate this marketplace and the problems posed by its supposed immorality. These projects, which were carried out in the name of women’s virtue and the strength of the French “race,” marginalized and criminalized women who attempted to use the classifieds (and back-page newspaper advertising more generally) to create economic independence for themselves or to gain some control over their own bodies and destinies. Under the Third Republic, a regime that had to respond to fears that moral decay and degeneration were spreading throughout society, the policing of sexual morality in the classifieds and across urban space became a way of creating hierarchy and enforcing gendered and sexual norms that were seen as the bedrock of social order. The discourse of the immoral classifieds, circulated by a wide range of commentators, including feminist activists, made sure that “honorable” women did

---

not use the classifieds, made it nearly impossible for women like Eugénie Guillou to move from sex work into non-sexual beauty work, and made it difficult for women like Mme Boulier to work for the protection of poor mothers and place ads for her business at the same time. It also cast a shadow of illegitimacy on a broad swathe of women’s care work and small business ventures even when they sagely stayed away from the back pages. As the political and legal sociologist Jacques Chevallier puts it, the idea of _bonnes moeurs_ that painted the classifieds as a site of bad morality were “indissociable from a system of social domination,” one that targeted women and anyone else cast as sexually deviant.⁴ The resulting norms encouraged others to respect the social order, built on heterosexual marriage.

Despite multiple regime changes and major legal reforms effected across the five decades following the fall of the Third Republic in 1940, the regulatory quandary raised by sexual classified advertising remained. In the 1990s, _bonnes moeurs_ were written out of French law, but the threat of immoral classified commerce—productive, as we have seen, of hierarchy and social control—lived on.⁵ After a century of attempts to control sexual classified advertising via press law, prosecutors in France approached the problem from a different angle, leaving suggestion, interpretation, and obscenity behind in a new moral climate of sexual liberalism. In 1994, the year that _outrages aux bonnes moeurs_ disappeared from the French penal code, Paris’s criminal court [tribunal correctionnel], making use of their own euphemistic code, asked if “someone [is] a pimp when they manage a newspaper that

---

publishes somewhat peculiar [particulières] ads.” They answered in the affirmative, convicting weekly entertainment guide Pariscpe’s manager, Jean Lainé, and advertising director, Martine Rolland, to 200,000 and 50,000 franc fines, respectively, for the crime of procuring via ads for massage parlors printed by others in their paper. Pariscpe described this judgment as “somewhat severe for the press in general.”

This move certainly broke with precedent. In the first half of the twentieth century, the legal strategy of Senator Bérenger and his successors focused on the newspaper and the dangers it posed to the morality of its broad readership. In this new iteration, the danger was no longer the moral corruption of a population, but rather the sexual exploitation of specific female bodies. The press, once prosecuted as a pornographer selling smutty texts and images or for circulating materials that would “incite debauchery,” would now be confronted as a pimp selling women’s bodies. The newspaper’s new competitors, the Minitel and the

---

7 “Correctionnelle: ‘Pariscpe’ condamné pour proxénétisme” Libération, Jan. 27, 1994, DB 590, APP.
8 “Correctionnelle,” Libération, Jan. 27, 1994, DB 590, APP.
9 This maps onto the transformation charted by Lavaud-Legendre from a concern with protecting the common good embodied in the idea of bonnes moeurs to a concern with protecting the individual over and above everything else. Lavaud-Legendre, Où sont passées les bonnes moeurs?, VII–VIII, 15.
10 In Germany, prosecutors had, in conjunction with obscenity law, “used the pimping law to go after newspapers that ran personal ads offering massage and language instruction, which were really ads placed by sex workers seeking clients” since at least the Interwar period. Laurie Marhoefer, Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 46.
internet, would be too. The dreams of Belle Époque feminists, concerned about the press’s role in the international traffic in women, were finally being realized.

There was no innovation, however, when the court decided that the words “Carole-Martine, Swedish relaxation” left “no doubt about the nature of the services offered.” Nor was there innovation in the single-minded focus of Pariscope’s defenders on the harm of such judgments for press freedom or in their inattention to (or disinterest in) the ways in which such repression was and continues to be aimed at the control of sexually deviant bodies, even as sex work still offers lower- and middle-class women relatively high pay in a market where ill-paid part-time or service work constitute the bulk of women’s employment opportunities.

“Regulatory scrutiny” in Minitel chat rooms, as in the classifieds under the Third Republic, “fell mainly on sex workers, queer users, and the services they frequented” rather than on “mainstream, heterosexual” communications.

Questions surrounding sexual danger in the classifieds and the responsibility of media platforms for this danger have resurfaced in the twenty-first-century age of the internet. In 2018, a wave of judicial and legislative repression against sexual classified advertising on

---

14 The economic reasons for the participation of middle-class women in indoor prostitution in postindustrial societies are explored in Elizabeth Bernstein, Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 80–81.
15 Maillard and Driscoll, Minitel, 113.
the internet crested. In April, the anti-sex-trafficking law SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) passed through the U.S. Congress with strong bipartisan support, striking in this polarized moment; the repercussions were immediate and drastic.\(^\text{16}\) And given the global reach of American-based websites, they did not stop at American borders: the effects were felt in France as well.\(^\text{17}\) Thierry Schaffauser, a sex worker-activist and proponent of decriminalization, had good reason to ask whether sex will “soon be illegal on the internet.”\(^\text{18}\)

In an age supposedly marked by sexual liberation, a long way from the ideals of sexual morality that were supposed to (socially and legally) regulate life under the Third Republic, we are nonetheless witnessing, in the name of protecting vulnerable publics, the widespread closing of popular spaces of communication and commerce on the internet. Under the early twenty-first century’s neoliberal order, marked by rampant market deregulation, it is striking that the focus of much regulatory action has been in the realm of sexuality.\(^\text{19}\)

---


\(^\text{19}\) On the centrality of sex work and sexual violence in debates about platform responsibility—the responsibility of websites like craigslist for the content their users post—see Lingel, An Internet for the People, 53.
century ago, attempts to fight sex trafficking via media are often political acts, “publicity stunts” intended to show politicians taking action against moral ills, more than they are thoughtful responses to the realities of sex trafficking or the needs of sex workers.\(^{20}\) As such, measures intended to put an end to online sex trafficking and the distribution of child pornography on sites like Backpage and Tumblr respectively have been more successful at disciplining and privatizing online sexual behavior and moralizing internet activity more generally than at putting a stop to these crimes, which are themselves harder to track if they are operated offline. This poorly defined moral and sexual regulation, especially in the absence of more general labor protections, drives and exacerbates gendered economic and social inequality, rather than eliminating it, by making it more difficult for already marginalized women to earn livings and queer and feminist communities to form, at the same time that false political advertising circulates unchecked.\(^{21}\)

This seems to be in large part because, even with their migration onto the web, something messy and unrespectable remains in the classifieds on sites like craigslist and Backpage. Like the Third Republic’s print classifieds, these websites lack the slickness of the internet 2.0. They are a marketplace, but a personal one with little oversight. In these spaces, fears of scams and assault have re-emerged; lurid tales of violence and murder involving


craigslist ads are highly mediatized.\textsuperscript{22} In her study of craigslist, digital media scholar Jessa Lingel has noted that “thinking about craigslist’s transformation from the first stop for online exchange to a punchline for jokes about online sleaze opens up questions of what it means to stigmatize certain platforms and the people who use them. What do our fears and judgments say about our relationship to the internet, about our expectations for safe behaviors?”\textsuperscript{23}

This line of questioning is a fruitful one for the history of the immoral classifieds. To follow it is to get to the heart of why we are so afraid of the combination of the personal and the commercial, of intimacy and economic activity, and to interrogate what the sociologist Viviana A. Zelizer has described as the “twinned beliefs that intimacy corrupts the economy and the economy corrupts intimacy.”\textsuperscript{24} Of course, Paris’s commercial culture had, since at least the 1840s, been deeply imbricated with the city’s sexual culture.\textsuperscript{25} My study of the classifieds has shown how the rhetorical deployment of “immorality” served to separate intimacy and economy, in theory, but not in practice, leading to the exclusion of women’s intimate businesses from the realm of what counts as “the economy,” whether conceived of through the lens of capitalism, labor, or business. It has also, I hope, shown the importance of reintegrating this simultaneously intimate \textit{and} economic activity into historical study as it attempts to “reassemble the economic.”\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{22} Lingel, \textit{An Internet for the People}, 57–58.
\textsuperscript{23} Lingel, \textit{An Internet for the People}, 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Andrew Israel Ross, \textit{Public City/Public Sex}, 129–130.
New media makes this all the more urgent. The world it is creating is one marked by an ever-greater imbrication between the economic and the intimate. And yet, the mantle of the “economic” still seems to adhere more easily to some people, businesses, and corporations than others. Sexuality has not garnered serious attention as an important factor in analyses of capitalism. It is, however, the object of one of the most stable forms of market regulation and censorship. The classifieds and urban media and culture more generally have been among the most prominent spaces and platforms that activate fears of “sleaze” or of violence against women, fears that result in state regulation that limits freedom of speech, action, and movement. *Classified Commerce* makes clear that these objects of regulatory energy are spaces in which women have found ways out of the worst abuses of their societies—ones in which gendered inequality, exploitation, and violence are features, not bugs.
Bibliography

Archival Sources

*Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine (AN)*

8AR 147: Annonces, Le Journal, 1907

BB 18 6165: Publications obscènes, outrages aux bonnes moeurs, avortement, 1889–1898

BB 18 6166: Publications obscènes

BB 18 6167: Publications obscènes, application de la loi de 1898

BB 18 6168: Publications obscènes, outrages aux bonnes moeurs

BB 18 6169: Avortement, 1903–1917

BB 18 6170: Avortement, 1918–1931

BB 18 6171: Avortement, outrages aux bonnes moeurs, annonces

BB 18 6172: Avortement, neo-malthusianisme, outrages aux bonnes moeurs, pornographie, annonces

BB 18 6174: Publications obscènes

BB 18 6176: Avortement, 1920–1939

BB 18 6485: Proposition de loi du député Jean Bon sur le commerce de la presse et la responsabilité du gérant d’un journal, 1918

BB 18 6582: Exercice illégal de la profession de sage-femme

BB 18 6583: Exercice illégal de la médecine, avortement

BB 18 6806: “Bureaux de placement”

F 7 14856: Traite des blanches

F 7 14857: Traite des blanches

F 14 11403: Ministère des travaux publics, Personnel de l’Administration centrale: dossiers individuels: Flachon

F 18 1690: Chansons interdites

*Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (APP)*

BA 1689: La Traite des blanches et prostitution

BA 1690: Pédérastes

BA 1712: Presse pendant la guerre: Visa des petites annonces

BA 2242: Obscenités: annonces immorales

BA 2243: Obscenités, Librairies

BA 2244: Obscenités

DA 226: Prostitution

DB 408: Prostitution

DB 590: Prostitution, Proxénétisme

DB 851: Prostitution

JC T54: 14 rue de Berne, Patureaux

JC T62: 14 rue de Berne, Sautereau
Archives de Paris (AP)
D1U6 417: Tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, Dossiers de procédure correctionnelle:
Françoise Angèle Rambeaud Paganel, Excitation habituelle de mineures à la
débauche, February 8, 1892
D1U6 935: Tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, Police correctionnelle, neuvième chambre,
Dossiers de procédure correctionnelle: Victor Faron, Edouard Marie Chauvière,
Eugène Victor, Eugénie Marie Guillou et. al., Outrage aux bonnes mœurs, July 31,
1906
D1U6 995: Tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, Dossiers de procédure correctionnelle:
Clotilde Demaret Charpentier, Eugène Victor, Henri Trûle Bachmann, Jeanne
Gabrielle Demarest, et. al., Outrage aux bonnes mœurs, March 21, 1908
D1U6 1131: Tribunal correctionnel de la Seine, Police correctionnelle, 8e chambre, Dossiers
de procédure correctionnelle: Marie Godin née Davy, Florestine Lamarre née
Pannetier, Gabrielle Guillemin dit “Nitchev,” et. al., Attentat aux mœurs et
complicité, January 11, 1912.
D3U9 258: Cour d’appel de Paris, Affaires correctionnelles, Minutes des arrêts: Georges
Aimey, François Schreyer, Eugène Victor, Jeanne Gabrielle Demarest, et. al., Appel
par le ministère publique [Appeal of decision of March 21, 1908, in D1U6 995],
cour de Paris, chambre correctionnelle, July 13, 1908.
D3U9 465: Cour d’appel de Paris, Affaires correctionnelles, Minutes des arrêts: Gustave
Beyria et Gaston Lestrade (for outrage aux bonnes mœurs in Inversions), October 27,
1926.

Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP)
Documents éphémères

Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF)
“Le Code de la famille (décret-loi du 29 juillet 1939),” 4-F PIECE-2340.

Published Primary Sources
1er congrès national contre la pornographie. Bordeaux, 14–15 mars 1905: rapports, discussions, vœux

“45. Question de M. Roger Lambelin sur le rôle qu’aurait joué, d’après certains journaux,
un instituteur de la ville de Paris dans les scandales dévoilés par l’affaire Flachon.”
Bulletin municipal officiel de la Ville de Paris, January 4, 1912, 80.

“A huis clos: M. Flachon, l’ancien directeur de la ‘Lanterne’ passe en correctionnelle,
entouré de matrones de mères indignes et d’escarpes.” Le Matin, December 28,
1911.

“À nos lecteurs.” La Lanterne, June 28, 1895.


“L’Affaire de mœurs.” La Lanterne, November 30, 1911.


“L’Affaire de Montmartre.” La Lanterne, December 21, 1911.


“L’Affaire Flachon en correctionnelle.” L’Action française, December 27, 1911.


“Vrais, offres et demandes.” La Presse, October 14, 1889.
“Avis très important.” La Vie Parisienne, March 17, 1917, 254.

“Avis très important.” La Vie Parisienne, April 7, 1917, 321–323.


“Boulevard Montparnasse existait une officine de faiseuses d’anges.” Le Petit Parisien, September 24, 1912.

Mme Boulier. “Sur la protection de la Mère.” Alliance d’hygiène sociale: Congrès de Lyon (13-16 Mai 1907), Bulletin 9bis, 1907, 146–149.


Burrett, L. “Petites annonces.” La Vie parisienne, August 2, 1913, 552–553.


“Causerie.” Le Supplément, January 1, 1901.

“Ce que disent les journaux: lutte pour la moralité.” La Croix, April 26, 1930.


Contre la licence des rues (loi du 16 mars 1898). Orléans: Auguste Gout, 1906.


———. “‘Outrage au magistrat’ Borde.” L’Action française, October 1, 1912.


“Emballé!” *Gil Blas*, November 16, 1891.

“L’Épuration (4e article).” *La Sage-femme*, March 5, 1909.


“Gazette judiciaire: les annonces de massage.” *Gil Blas*, February 18, 1908.


“Loi réprimant la provocation à l’avortement et à la propagande anticonceptionnelle.” *Journal officiel de la République française*: Lois et décrets, August 1, 1920, 10934.


“M. Briand se repose sur la Riviera.” *Excelsior*, January 2, 1911.


Martin, Edmond. “Elle est bien en colère Mme Renard.” *Le Tintamarre*, June 1, 1856.


Metenier, Félix. “Chair à louer.” *Père Duchène*, May 17, 1902.


Mouthon, F.-L. “La Croisade contre le vice, ce que dit M. le sénateur Bérenger.” Le Matin, September 18, 1905.


“La Natalité: question de vie ou de mort pour la France.” Paris-Soir, July 8, 1939.


“Nos petites annonces.” Paris-Soir, December 3, 1924.


“Nouvelles diverses à Paris: une affaire de mœurs.” Le Figaro, June 10, 1904.

“Les On-dit: Republi...cité Française,” La Vie parisienne, Jan. 5, 1907, 243.


“Paris, 13 juillet 1908: Outrage, outrage aux mœurs, journaux et écrits périodiques, annonces contraires aux bonnes mœurs, texte obscène, but immoral.” Pandectes françaises périodiques. 1910, IIe partie, 68–70.


“Petite correspondance.” *Gil Blas*, November 16, 1891.


“Mme Hérault est en liberté!” L’Action française, October 6, 1912.

“Nouveau scandale Borde.” L’Action française, September 29, 1912.

“Pourquoi l’on veut étouffer l’affaire Borde-Hérault.” L’Action française, October 4, 1912.

“Le Scandale des sages-femmes.” L’Action française, October 5, 1912.

“Le Scandale des sages-femmes.” L’Action française, October 7, 1912.

“Le Scandale des sages-femmes: une lettre de Mme Hérault!” L’Action française, December 19, 1912.


“Reprise de la discussion.” Journal officiel de la République française: débats parlementaires, Sénat, June 11, 1897, 972–975.


——. “Échos: les Letellier, Aristide Briand, Borde et la Hérault ou ‘le bagnes à Paris.”’ L’Action française, October 12, 1912.


——. “Enquête sur l’œuvre ‘La Mère.’” La Sage-femme, March 5, 1909, 46–47.


——. “Nous ne sommes plus seuls!” La Sage-femme, January 5, 1909, 5.


“Les Sages-femmes criminelles.” Le Rappel, October 14, 1912.


Le Semainier. “En Glanant.” La Vie oranaise, April 17, 1908.


“Société Générale des Annonces.” La Presse, June 24, 1845.


“Suite de la 1er délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la depopulation.”

“Suite de la 1er délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation.”
Journal officiel de la République française: débats parlementaires, Sénat, February 7, 1913, 40–45.

“Suite de la 1er délibération sur une proposition de loi tendant à combattre la dépopulation.”
Journal officiel de la République française: débats parlementaires, Sénat, February 8, 1913, 50–59.

“Sur le seuil.” Inversions...dans l’art, la littérature, l’histoire, la philosophie et la science, November 15, 1924.


“La Traite des blanches et Prostitution,” Temoignages de notre temps, no 4, publication bimestrielle, édité par la société anonyme ‘Les Illustrés français,’ December 1933.


“La traite des blanches — le salon de massage de la rue Léonie.” Le Matin, February 9, 1892.


**Secondary Sources**


