

Desire, Fantasy, and the Writing of Lesbos-sur-Seine, 1880-1939

by

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Abstract

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My dissertation challenges a commonly accepted view that literary representations of lesbianism were merely a momentary fashion, linked to Symbolist and Decadent movements in literature. More than a trope for artistic sterility, the explosion of Sapphic representation emblemized the social fractures prevalent during the Third Republic. This dissertation illustrates that “Sapphism”—in literature and beyond—became a type of shorthand to discuss everything from declining natality to changing gender roles, from military fears to urban space to the nature of artistic production. Using legal, racial and other social discourses to provide different kinds of contextualization, my readings of such canonical authors as Zola, Proust, and Colette reveal how lesbian depictions were not merely about sexuality or art but addressed a host of social and political anxieties. Beginning with an analysis of censorship of lesbian themed novels between 1885 and 1895, I demonstrate the randomness of censorship and its failure to stem the growing number of lesbian depictions. This chapter is followed by an investigation of the role of racial and ethnic othering of the lesbian in French literature as a means to discuss French fears of contamination from its colonies and perceived threats from other world powers. Lesbian characterizations not only gestured to concerns about “Frenchness” and the health of the State, but they also linked sexuality with space. The literary accounts linking lesbian circulation with certain public spaces helped to reconfigure urban landscapes in Paris. The last chapter discusses ways in which both literature and the public lives of bisexual and lesbian authors challenged preconceived notions about marriage and its privileged status as the *nec plus ultra* of social relationships. Ultimately, I contend that lesbian history in France was not as invisible or non-existent as previously believed, but that in fact, the lesbian representation played an important role in the French imaginary as a means of discussing contemporary social anxieties.

*To the memory of my "Mamma," Millie Martin (1934-2005) and
in honor of my "Daddy," Major Lowry Martin:
you remain the greatest influences in my life.*

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Introduction

In 1857 the great French poet, Charles Baudelaire, was the defendant in a censorship trial for his collection of poetry, *Les Fleurs du mal*. At issue were a series of poems that focused on love between women. Deemed as an “attentat à la pudeur” several of his poems were banned. This watershed moment in French literary history aroused my curiosity as to what was so threatening about the representation of same-sex desire among women. I told myself surely there must be more at work than the mere literary expression of sexuality. Why else would a collection of poems merit judicial intervention? Using this question as a starting point for my dissertation, I began to look at the explosion of Sapphic representations during the French Third Republic and to question what these literary imaginings might mean not only as discursive artifacts but also as pieces of a broader cultural mosaic. What I found is that the increasing visibility of lesbian representation was not just a consequence of the interests of the Symbolist or Decadent movements in rethinking different sexualities, but a way to discuss other socio-political anxieties such as falling birth rates, or changing gender roles, or anxieties about colonialism. In fact representations of same-sex desire among women produced some of the best-sellers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century such as *Mlle Giraud, ma femme* or *Claudine à l'école* as well as much more serious literature such as *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and the register and sophistication of literary treatment runs the gamut from the popular and prurient to the intellectual and urbane. In understanding how Sapphic representations can be read as commentary on contemporary social tensions I explore the ways that depictions of same-sex attraction between women are implicated in discourses about obscenity, race, social and national spaces, and family.

The history of the development of a French lesbian community cannot be disassociated from the history of its representations, both literary and visual. Over the last twenty years there has been a great deal of scholarship illustrating how medico-scientific discourses contributed heavily to early representations of lesbians as degenerate, immoral, and vampiric.¹ In early efforts to make the lesbian legible to a French audience, writers—whether novelists or journalists—frequently described where and how these “pathogens” circulated, as if their goal was to help minimize contamination. Literary interest in lesbianism was not just because of its power to titillate: lesbians became a master cipher to discuss all types of social anxieties in France—a kind of shorthand to discuss everything from ovariectomies and the *grève de ventre* to women’s changing gender roles, from military fears to urban space to the nature of artistic production.² Using legal, racial and other social discourses to provide different kinds of contextualization, my readings of such canonical authors as Zola, Proust, and Colette reveal how lesbian depictions offer multi-layered understandings not merely about sexuality or art but about a host of other social and political anxieties. I also incorporate forgotten (and less memorable) works from authors such as Armand DuBarry and Henri d’Argis along with extra-literary

¹ See Michael Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits, and Pornography: Fin de Siècle Discourse in Decadent Rachilde* (Dover: University of Delaware Press, 2009). A discussion of the continued trope of vampires in contemporary French cinema can be found in Lucille Cairns, *Sapphism on Screen: Lesbian Desire in French and Francophone Cinema* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2006), 37-44.

² Daniel Borys, *Carlotta Noll: amoureuse et femme de lettres* (Paris: A. Michel, 1905). Henri d’Argis, *Gomorrhe* (Paris: Charles, 1889). Lacroix, *La Bonifas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925). Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Pocket Classiques, 1999). Renée Vivien, *Une Femme m'apparut* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1904).

artifacts such as Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings or Ambroise Tardieu's medical treatises on sexuality to demonstrate the influence of emerging legal, medical, and social discourses on lesbian representation.

In discussing "lesbian" literary representations and their importance in understanding French culture during France's Third Republic, I take into account Stuart Hall's "view of culture and knowledge, which is that identity, history, agency and practice are not fixed entities but parts of a system of representation which is permanently *in process*."³ The very term "lesbian" is problematic: an extremely unstable signifier that eludes a clear cut, definitive definition while taking on shades and nuances of meaning depending on the historical, geographic and cultural context in which the term is being used. During the first decades of the Third Republic, "*les femmes damnées*" was a common term for lesbians. However, Baudelaire's designation of lesbians as "damned women" rather than as Sapphists, tribades, or other terms available to denote women who loved women, was not a linguistic happenstance, but a choice imbued with strong ideological implications. As Mary-Jo Bonnet has pointed out, this term meant that women were not only excluded from the City of Man, but they were also excluded from the City of God.⁴ Thus, the "*les femmes damnées*" immediately evokes the ostracisation of the women from society and condemnation by God. The use of a more sexualized term, such as tribade, fricatelle, fricatrice, gougnotte, stresses the physical pleasure that women could give to one another, and might undercut the "âpre stérilité" of their "jouissance" as Baudelaire so famously described it. The use of the more cultivated term Sapphism to describe same-sex desire among women gained currency in certain circles during the Belle Époque, but as the twentieth century dawned the term was slowly replaced with lesbianism. The slippage in terms also denotes a shift in and out of various kinds of discourse, from the titillating and commercial commodification of the lesbian to a pathologized ontology that was "a mark of woman's inherent viciousness and perverse animal nature," to terms with historical implications, to terms associated with attempts to build communities and positive identities.⁵ I have opted to use the term lesbian rather than Sapphist or its derivatives because it remains the dominant vocabulary in academia to discuss same-sex desire among women. I do so with an understanding of the word's origins and its rise to prominence as the most common French signifier for women who loved women; although, as a gesture to the Belle Époque I use at times Sapphism and its variants.

Methodology

Between 1880 and 1939 French culture witnessed the ascendancy of medicine and psychology as purveyors of scientific "truth," and these fields contributed greatly to French understanding of sexuality. What many had understood previously as sexual acts were transformed into a pathologized sexual identity, a discursive transformation that influenced contemporary understandings of gay and lesbian communities. "Historians of sex have shown us that the idea of 'having' a sexual orientation, where 'having' is translated into a form of being, is a modern idea."⁶ Scholars such as Terry Castle have lamented the invisibility of the lesbian. Castle advances the idea that lesbianism is apparitional, i.e, subject to a culturally constructed

³ Chris Rojek, *Stuart Hall* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 2.

⁴ Mary-Jo Bonnet, *Les relations amoureuses entre femmes du XVI au XX siècle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995), 235.

⁵ Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women: Lesbians in French Novels* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2000), 4.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 69.

invisibility that repeatedly places it at the margins of representation. While this may be truer in Anglo-Saxon cultures, other scholars have noted that France produced a great deal of literature with lesbian protagonists or themes.⁷ The interface between literary discourses and legal, medical and scientific ones, is at the heart of my project. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the cultural significance of the novel as literacy steadily increased. No other art form was more concerned with the ethnographic detailing of society. Thus, the novel contributed to creating notions of both French history and the history of other peoples and societies through their representations. Because of the novel's position as an important social mirror, it can help us understand the ways that literature aided in fashioning contemporary conceptions of same-sex desire among women. I have read scores of novels from the well known to the totally forgotten spanning several decades that focused on Sapphic desire and also explored the ways biopolitical discourses from law, medicine and psychology contributed to and reinforced those literary imaginings.

The interdisciplinary approach to this project has required that I draw upon methodologies from several disciplines from jurisprudence to geography. Because I am a literary scholar my engagement and analysis of literary and visual texts is based on close readings, but I also into account the historical moment in which the works were produced in order to contextualize and nuance my readings. I have examined a wide corpus of materials that include personal life writings (journals, diaries, memoires, letters, biographies, etc.) of writers such as Colette, Renée Vivien, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Mireille Havet and many others. Concomitantly, I have drawn on popular and scientific documents such as illustrations, newspapers, magazines, medical journals, legal documents, legislative histories, travel guides, etc. to anchor my readings and to make connections between artistic production and contemporary social issues. Bringing new perspectives to familiar materials such as Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* or Colette's *Claudine* series, I draw on sources that have been neglected or understudied in order to discuss the racialization of the lesbian or the imbrication of space and sexuality in the French imaginary. I push further, expanding the scope of inquiry to include less canonical or forgotten works that further illustrate the importance of the lesbian in the French imaginary during the Third Republic. Some of these forgotten novels enjoyed wide commercial success and provide important insights into the ways the lesbian was packaged for commercial consumption. Because authors embedded contemporary concerns about various social issues within these descriptions of lesbianism, my study of how the lesbian came to be imagined makes contributions to a variety of other disciplines including Gender & Women's Studies, Legal Studies, Race Studies.⁸

To illustrate the polyvalence of lesbianism as a signifier for a range of socio-political anxieties, my four chapters examine different aspects of how lesbians came to be represented in

⁷ It is an interesting phenomena of the later nineteenth century that the dominant discourses around "perverse" sexualities were scientific discourses and literary discourses. While science seemed to concentrate heavily on the male homosexual, literary discourse seemed to be obsessed with the lesbian. "Fin de siècle France in particular produced a huge number of literary and pictorial texts representing love and sex between women" (Michael Wilson, "Sans les Femmes, qu'est-ce qui nous resterait: Gender and Transgression in Bohemian Montmartre," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straus [New York: Routledge, 1991]).

⁸ One could take as an example the kinds of fears that inspired authors often to portray the lesbian as coming from Germany or other Anglo-Saxon countries but not from the French colonies, which was a direct consequence of French anxieties about its colonial project.

the French imaginary and how those characterizations relate to contemporary French social issues. The first chapter begins with a discussion of obscenity, language, and censorship, and notes the astonishingly wide proliferation of representations of the lesbian in these years in a variety of literary genres. The following chapters address issues of race, urban space and family as they help structure lesbian representation. The first chapter studies a number of instances of censorship between 1885 and 1895 directed at depictions of lesbian relationships and wonders why certain representations were censored while many others were not. Most of the court records from these trials do not exist or cannot be located; consequently, the focus of the chapter is on the excised passages themselves, or, as in the case of one novel, *Deux Amies*, the entire novel. Searching for commonalities and parallels in the offending rhetoric that might have caught the prosecution's eye, I compare these suppressed passages to another commercially successful lesbian novel, Catulle Mendès's *Méphistophéla*, which represents one of the most sustained literary treatments of lesbianism of the period. What appeared to have triggered censorship (but only in random cases) were not so much the actual descriptions as what they suggested—the call to imagine what the writer would not say. The deleterious effects of fantasy were evidently more dangerous than explicit details. The lack of a clearly defined legal standard for obscenity also suggests that justice was not blind when it came to censorship, but that the political fallout of possible trials influenced who was prosecuted. Authors with cultural cachet and a literary reputation such as Catulle Mendès avoided censorship despite equally graphic details while less known authors were censored, fined and jailed. Yet, despite censorship, literary representations of lesbians flourished during many decades of the Third Republic. Thus, while censorship is often framed as repressive exercise of the State's power, I notice its randomness and its paradoxically productive effects. Knowing censorship was possible surely influenced the way people wrote. It is here that the convergence of vice and visibility become so germane to artistic production. Censorship helped shape a discursive space for representations of and by lesbians in which they creatively worked to construct ways to escape further patriarchal commodification within literary works.

My second chapter explores the racialization of the lesbian in French literature and some of the motivating factors that inspired authors so frequently to locate her origins outside of the Metropole. Specifically, this chapter unravels some of the politics of racialization or ethnic othering of lesbians in novels throughout most of the Third Republic. For instance, the “Germanic lesbian,” who was out to seduce France's virtuous maidens, was an obtuse way of rehearsing political tensions between France and her archenemy. Because issues of race and the discourses surrounding race and/or ethnicity were fundamental to the organizing and creation of many of the bourgeois discourses of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, (particularly in political thought, law, and medicine), a slippage occurred between scientific definitions of “race” and everyday understandings of cultural identities. Consequently, the writers I discuss often treat Jewishness in terms of race rather than ethnicity. The conflation of race and ethnicity was inevitable as colonialism increased economic, linguistic, sexual and cultural exchanges between various groups. One of the discoveries during my research was that lesbians from French colonies are notably absent from almost all literary representations, even though lesbians were so frequently portrayed as coming from other countries that rivaled France for colonial dominance.⁹ Whether American, German, Austrian, English or Russian, lesbianism was

⁹ I hope to pursue the implications of this intriguing discovery in future work.

an exported sexuality that threatened French women. As France grappled with its own changing identity and competing social forces, the “imagining” of the lesbian and the attendant agglomeration of racial discourse around her representation provides a trenchant and noteworthy example of the interplay between politics and sexuality. The simmering anti-Semitism during the Third Republic echoes in the portrayals of lesbians as “Israélites” or “Juives,” and novels such as Félicien Champsaur’s *Dinah Samuel* (1885) or Jean Lorrain’s *La Maison Philibert* (1904) and *Le Tréteau* (1906) drive this point home. The racial and ethnic coding of the lesbian as other reflects French concerns about foreign contamination and notions of Frenchness. Whether one focuses on the Germanization of lesbian protagonists or the haunting absence colonized women in these texts, the lesbian body becomes a site of political ideology and social stakes. The invisibility of certain ethnicities/races in the portrayal of lesbians in France while others are clearly marked provides an important commentary on French attitudes and social constructions of other national identities and nation building.

Besides marking the lesbian as racially or ethnically other, authors also associated lesbians with particular urban spaces to the point that they became almost synonymous with specific geographic locations. If French literature often painted the lesbian as coming from “elsewhere”, she was nevertheless very firmly planted in the Parisian landscape. Although spaces and places are increasingly regarded as socio-cultural constructions as much as physical locations, little of this emergent work in cultural, feminist, and queer geography has been incorporated into the study of lesbian space. Through an examination in chapter 3 of these geographic and metaphorical spaces in which the literary lesbian circulated, I work to produce a cultural map of desire, a map that is in part the result of male fantasy and social observation. When, where, and how lesbians circulated are crucial in understanding how social networks and sexual communities formed. A geographical perspective also helps show the ways in which lesbian desires and modes of being might reconfigure or restructure space. Whether women were fighting for space at the *tables d’hôte* of Parisian cafés or cruising for sex in the Bois de Boulogne, the association of space and sexualities highlights the importance of geography in the construction of sexual communities.

As women who loved women began to carve out spaces in which to meet, socialize, and make visible their desire, they also created affective relationships that further destabilized bourgeois mores. Women formed long-lasting relationships that defied conventional categories and morality. These relationships are the topic of my fourth chapter. Some women, such as Nathalie Clifford Barney advocated open relationships that permitted sexual freedom while providing an unshakeable emotional fidelity. Renée Vivien conceived of marriage as a form of prostitution that brutalized women. In short, this chapter explores the ways in which French authors, but particularly lesbian and bisexual women, challenged received ideas about marriage. While one tends to think of marriage equality as a product of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, my research demonstrates that lesbian and bisexual writers, through their works and their often public lives, proposed new models for rethinking affective bonds and that lynchpin institution of French bourgeois society—marriage. Writers such as Mardrus, Vivien, Barney, Colette reframed marriage not as a religious sacrament founded on biological imperatives and natural law, but as a social contract based on spiritual love and sexual desire. They were, in fact, proposing a new set of “family values.”

My research has profited from the pioneering works of such scholars as Lillian Faderman, Elizabeth Ladenson, Karla Jay, Jennifer Waelti-Walters, as well as from scholarship

that has excavated and recovered lesbian histories. My hope is that my work helps illustrate how very rich and complex lesbian representation actually was during the years of 1880 to 1929, height of France's colonial empire, and the early and middle decades of the Third Republic. The literary imaginings I consider are important to our understanding of non-normative sexualities, and the vast array of texts used to nuance and contextualize the close readings of these literary texts shows how French literature can engage with both social/cultural histories and contemporary politics. Allegations that non-normative sexualities tear at the fabric of society and may even threaten national interests echo contemporary discourses around LGBT issues both in France and the United States. To paraphrase Montesquieu, it is not as important to "épuiser un sujet" as it is to make the readers think. This dissertation does not intent to provide an exhaustive treatment of lesbian characterizations in French literature of the Third Republic, but rather it focuses on specific facets of those portrayals to nuance our understandings of lesbian histories while elucidating how those past narratives enhance and reframe contemporary ways of understanding non-normative sexualities. In doing so, this work makes clearer how these literary imaginings have been both influenced by and have influenced numerous disciplines. From "Damned Women" to a "new generation of women," the literary figure of the lesbian represented a crossroads where social fears, fantasy, and desire converged to create both a modern sexual identity and a symbol of the complexities of a rapidly changing France.

Chapter 1: The Narrative Peepshow: Censorship and the “Scene”

“Les grandes œuvres subsistent par leurs côtés passionnés. Or, la passion, c’est l’excès, c’est le mal. L’écrivain a noblement rempli sa tâche, lorsqu’en prenant cet élément essentiel à toute œuvre littéraire, il l’accompagne d’une grande leçon.”—Honoré de Balzac

“You should not read novels. They courage you to believe in a kind of happiness that doesn’t exist, and, by weakening our moral fiber, they detach your min and heart from reality.”—Patricia Mainardi

Novels could be dangerous—and the Third Republic’s record of censorship highlights concern about the erotic and political power of the written word. For a country associated with libertinage and moral insouciance, France was remarkably prone to censorship, as illustrated by the number of written works censored between 1890 and 1912—at least twenty-one books a year. In the years immediately preceding the Great War, the number of censored books rose dramatically.¹⁰ The Third Republic was a time of paradoxes in which France’s patriarchal society outwardly praised and actively encouraged the stodgy stability of homelife while husbands and sons “supported the enormous number of cabarets, brothels, and apartment buildings that specialized in bachelor rooms.”¹¹ The virtues of motherhood and marriage were publicly lauded yet artists, novelists, and other purveyors of “culture” promoted and admired the subversive elements of less traditional female roles to such an extent that demi-mondaines such as Liane de Pougy or Emilienne d’Alençon attained national fame and cult status. Among the favored topoi of male-authored novels was the figure of the lesbian, whose place in French literature was well established by the end of the Belle Époque. More than just a signifier of deviant sexuality, lesbianism was multifunctional—its representation provided a refracted manner of critiquing social changes and commenting on national anxieties. Some authors used lesbian themed novels to titillate a primarily male readership, while justifying their treatment of the subject matter on moral grounds—they were elucidating the mysteries of Lesbos so that such pitfalls could be avoided. However, the growing popularity of lesbian-themed novels, especially between 1880 and 1920, provided more commercial value than moral instruction. The public’s appetite for such morally suspect subject matter inevitably aroused the watchful eyes of those charged with determining what was fit for print. Between 1881 and 1910 only fourteen books were censored, but three of the fourteen novels censored contained lesbian love scenes.¹² The commodification and commercialization of the lesbian with its accompanying pathologization and derision is indicative of the cultural climate of the Third Republic. French ambivalence for bourgeois traditions manifests in the consumer desire for titillation and society’s advocacy of

¹⁰ Annie Stora-Lamarre, *L’Enfer de la Troisième République: censeurs et pornographes (1881-1914)* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 1990), 203.

¹¹ Benjamin F. Martin, *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1984), 4.

¹² Between 1910 and 1914 a significant upsurge in censorship occurred as the government changed, and in those four years there were one hundred and seventy-five censorship trials. Annie Stora-Lamarre, *L’Enfer de la Troisième République*, 203.

traditional values of marriage, maternity and family life. As one historian wrote, “[t]his attitude of ambiguity and hypocrisy in life spilled over from personal to public codes, particularly in the exercise of law, order, and justice.”¹³ The history of the Third Republic’s legal system is a testimonial to the capriciousness of “justice” and its susceptibility to political considerations.

Censorship was no less capricious or immune from political considerations than other exercises of governmental power. The heightened surveillance of literary works during the Third Republic may be attributed, in part, to several factors: the influx of immigrants; rapid urbanization and its social consequences, and increasing literacy. The growing treatment of lesbianism as a literary object attests to its importance in the French imaginary. Embedded within the portrayals of same-sex desire among women were various ideological discourses that linked sexual “deviance” with pathology, ethnic or racial otherness, feminism, and other social issues. Lesbianism was often depicted as “sterile”—linking desire with a women’s refusal to bear children, which was almost a patriotic duty.¹⁴ Perhaps the proliferation of lesbianism as a literary topos was disturbing to certain elements of the French bourgeoisie; certainly, some of these works began to attract the censor’s attention. In this chapter, I examine three novels that provoked the judicial system’s intervention: *Deux Amies*, *Jouir... Mourir*, and *Chair Molle*. Reading these novels alongside another famous novel of the period, *Méphistophéla*, which escaped censorship despite being every bit as subversive, risqué, or graphic as the three censored novels, I demonstrate the often aleatory nature of French censorship. The Third Republic’s impulse to stifle certain types of literary representations of lesbianism can be contextualized in a broader political landscape. The new standard for censorship became *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* a term that became associated more or less with obscenity. However, a clear definition of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs*/obscenity was never clearly enunciated by either the judicial system or the French government, which was undoubtedly attributable, in part, to the restive social and political climate during most of the Third Republic. Despite the lack of a clearly defined standard, all of the novels that were censored were charged with having violated this standard. Yet, these novels offer no clear frontier between the socially acceptable and the intolerably “immoral” and obscene representations of lesbianism, but they did warn other writers of the misty shoals that surrounded this imagined Lesbos and the very real possibility of shipwreck as they navigated by the censor’s often contradictory and unreliable maps.

I. Muting the Muse? The Consequences of Censorship

Censorship has been an integral part of the French political and intellectual landscape for centuries, prompting one scholar to remark that “French authorities devoted truly amazing amounts of time and energy to imposing restrictions on freedom of expression.”¹⁵ As Elizabeth Ladenson has noted “One of the reasons for the explosion of literary indecency trials in France during the nineteenth century was a fundamental shift, starting with the revolution, in the way

¹³ Benjamin F. Martin, *The Hypocrisy of Justice in the Belle Époque* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1984), 5.

¹⁴ Jane de la Vaudère, *Les Demi-sexes* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1897). Borys, *Carlotta Noll: amoureuse et femme de lettres*. Charles-Étienne and Odette Roche, *Les déséxuéées* (Paris: Éditions Curio, 1924). For a discussion of French anxiety around birthrates and the link to patriotism see Michael Finn, “Female Sterilization and Artificial insemination at the French Fin de Siècle: Facts and Fiction,” *Journal of Human Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2009): 26-43.

¹⁵ Robert Goldstein, “Fighting French Censorship, 1815-1881,” *French Review* 71, no. 5 (1998): 785, 787.

unacceptable material was dealt with by successive governments.”¹⁶ The censorship laws of nineteenth-century France underwent several changes depending on the regime at the time. In 1881, the Third Republic ostensibly sought to extend certain freedoms through the abrogation of the 1819 censorship laws that abolished offenses such as *outrage aux souverains* or *délit d’offense à la morale religieuse* and redefined the standard for censorship as those cultural products that committed *outrage aux bonnes mœurs*. However, the legislature played a double game, because the more “liberal” law not only raised the maximum fine by 1,000 francs, from 500 francs to 1,500, but the new law also doubled the maximum amount of jail time from one year to two years for violation of the new legal standard of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs*.

The changes to censorship laws created judicial problems that legislators did not foresee or could not resolve. First, a clear and precise definition of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* was never articulated sufficiently to be easily understandable. Judges charged with interpreting and applying the law made various attempts to define or clarify this costly offense, but lawyers to legislators acknowledged the impossibility of providing workable definitions. For instance, Louis André, a well-known *conseiller à la Cour d’Appel à Paris* frankly admitted that “Il est impossible de définir d’une façon précise la définition d’outrage aux bonnes mœurs.” Even the *Chambre des Députés*, who had promulgated this new law, admitted defeat when attempting to provide a workable definition of this offense, because the legislative records show that the Chamber of Deputies’ legislative committee had concluded that “Il n’est pas possible de définir le délit d’outrages aux bonnes mœurs et la Commission de la Chambre l’a vainement tenté; tout ce qu’elle a pu faire c’est d’énumérer les moyens par lesquels le délit pourra se commettre.”¹⁷ Albert Eyquem, laureate of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, an influential body during the late 1880s and 1890s, admitted that no appropriate definition existed for this potentially criminal offense, but that “though this leaves the meaning of the crime arbitrary, it nevertheless permits us to affirm that the law tolerates publications that take a certain license but do not push the limits of the obscene.”¹⁸ In fact, by 1898 the conflation of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* with obscenity seemed to be complete, when Senator Béranger, a crusader against pornography, had the word obscene deleted from legislation and replaced with “*outrage aux bonnes mœurs*.” The impossibility of definition illustrates part of the conundrum that faced writers, judges, and the legal system: what constituted “obscenity,” and if the work were not clearly obscene how was one going to determine this affront to public decency and the work’s alleged immorality?

In 1882 the laws governing censorship were further amended. The changes to the 1881 laws instituting the *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* standard now read that novels would be treated differently than other forms of artistic production. The new legislation modified the court’s jurisdiction so that the law “réprime comme délit de droit commun et soumet au Tribunal correctionnel l’outrage aux bonnes mœurs commis par des moyens de publication autres que le livre, c’est-à-dire par le journal, la livraison, etc.”¹⁹ This bifurcated system referred offending novels or books to a jury while songs, brochures, drawings, and other documents created by the

¹⁶ Elizabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art’s Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 8.

¹⁷ Lionel d’Autrec, *L’Outrage aux mœurs* (Paris: Éditions de l’épi, 1923), 25.

¹⁸ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 37.

¹⁹ Zévaès, *Les Procès littéraires au XIX siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 1924), 227.

press were immediately within the jurisdiction of the correctional tribunals. One of the underlying assumptions to this amendment was that if novels were brought before the correctional tribunals it would open the floodgates for litigation because of the sheer number of “naughty” novels and cases tried to a tribunal were less cumbersome than jury trials.²⁰ The end result was two fold. First, books, novels, and collections of poetry were referred to a jury, while a poem, a short story, or a *conte* published in a newspaper would automatically now fall under the jurisdiction of the correctional court and circumvent the jury process. A literary hierarchy was established that encompassed its own set of suppositions. The legislators seem to have assumed that only the more educated and wealthy elements of society had access to novels, and they were better armed against the harmful effects of a novel’s lubricious and immoral depictions. The framers of the new censorship laws regarded drawings, poems, and other ephemera as theoretically posing a greater threat to public decency because they could be quickly created, published, and disseminated among the popular masses. The lower classes, lacking the education to resist the corrupting influence of these depictions, might be more susceptible to the inflaming of their passions and to the commission of immoral acts as a consequence. This explains why various other forms of cultural production other than the novel would be censored before correctional tribunals after 1882—in practical terms there were fewer procedural hurdles. Ephemera could now be censored more quickly and withdrawn from circulation without the various formalities of a jury trial.

The efficiency of this bifurcated system in policing ephemera is borne out by the number of lawsuits brought against the press as compared to lawsuits against a novelist. Between 1880 and 1910 there were seventy-five lawsuits filed against the *feuilles grivoises* (popular press) while only fourteen novelists were sued for offensive writing.²¹ Most interestingly, three of those fourteen novels specifically dealt with lesbian themes. This means that almost a fifth of all censorship trials relating to novels had crossed the literary line of acceptability because of depictions of same-sex attraction, and this parallels what was happening with the press where “les tribunaux condamnent les articles qui mettent en scène le récit des ‘passions coupables’, en particulier celles d’une ‘femme pour une autre femme.’”²² My concern in this chapter is with the novelistic staging rather than with journalistic ones. I wish to determine what, if any, were the boundaries of novelistic lesbian representation.

II. Deux Amies: Lesbian Bacchanalia and Female Pleasure

“*Mater purissima...Mater inviolata... ora pro nobis..pro nobis..nobis....*” From the opening lines of René Maizeroy’s novel, *Deux Amies*, written in 1885 with its citation from the Catholic common prayer, the reader is thrust in the cloistered female space of the convent, a historically suspect space for same-sex sexual practices dating back at least to Diderot’s *La Religieuse*. The paradox is that the reader is also in the religious sphere that condemns lesbianism, which anticipates the token moralistic stance of the novel despite its very overt appeals to the erotic imagination. René Maizeroy creates a novel that draws upon almost every

²⁰ The law of July 29, 1881 regarding the freedom of the press established a distinction between crimes against “bonnes mœurs” found in drawings, engravings, paintings, emblems, etc. and those produced through other modes of publication. See *Ibid.*, 225-226.

²¹ Stora-Lamarre, *L’Enfer de la Troisième République*, 192, 201.

²² *Ibid.*, 193.

clichéd lesbian representation of this period and includes it in this work, and notably *Deux Amies* is the only novel to be censored in its entirety between 1885 and 1895.²³

Maizeroy's novel follows a traditional lesbian literary pattern in several ways. First, he describes religious space as not only generative of same-sex desire but also as nurturing of these types of relationships. The novel opens in a convent with the two young "*amies*" praying at twilight, one older than the other and serving as her "protector."²⁴ Maizeroy follows the stereotype of the lesbian couple as physical opposites: Jeanne, one of the two main characters is described as "...maigrotte aux yeux drôles qui paraissait avoir douze ans et que les 'moyennes' surnommaient 'Colas' à cause de sa taille grêle de gamin" while Eva is a strong, dark girl of Russian descent with a domineering and mischievous personality.²⁵

Maizeroy quickly sketches a scene in which he has the little girls in bed and teases the reader with erotic gestures that anticipate the impending lesbian sexual descriptions. Eva sneaks into Jeanne's dormitory bed after their prayers are recited, slides her young body against Jeanne and begins to kiss her. Their romantic words indicate a budding awareness of their sexuality.²⁶ Without being overtly sexual, Maizeroy's prose as he describes how the sheets covering the girls undulate like the waves on a pond with their shuddering treats the reader to a preview of the linguistic peepshow that he will use throughout the novel. The ever-present "non-dit" allows the reader to see enough to discern the outlines of lesbian affection, but it is the reader who must supply the details.

Much of the narrative is devoted to explaining how these two young women are able to debauch, to seduce, to make love to women whether they are young girls, married women, or working women. These two convent schooled girls ask why women should not seek their own sexual pleasures just as men did? This is the question that Eva has in mind when she solicits contributions from her former female classmates from her convent school days as well as women she has meet at the salons and balls she has attended. Her goal is to create a club that will provide an exclusively female space for their pleasure—a space that affords women complete sexual liberty. Eva establishes the by-laws of the society, and the rules of the secret society leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to the *raison d'être* for this group. Maizeroy writes that the rules were nothing more "from the first page to the last, than an erotic call, a pleasing enumeration of libertine details and almost the ridiculous childishness that remained from the memories of the convent. The hotel ended up becoming a true brothel."²⁷

²³ The legal arguments took place behind closed doors, and there is very little information available about this trial other than the announcement in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*. Thus, we can only surmise what might have been so particularly offensive that the entire book was banned.

²⁴ Certainly one could return to *La Religieuse*, but more recent novels such as *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme* also have the young women first discover same-sex attraction and physical relations while in the convent. In fact, in *Mademoiselle Giraud*, the protagonist specifically condemns the convent as a breeding ground of this vice.

²⁵ René Maizeroy, *Deux Amies* (Paris: Victor-Havard, 1885), 4.

²⁶ "Elle avait complètement oublié ce que son inséparable amie Eva Moïnoff venait de lui murmurer tout bas au sortir du salut, et elle manqua de crier, de réveiller tout le dortoir dans la brusque surprise du baiser qui frôlait ses joues et la sensation d'un corps qui se glissait contre le sien... leurs mots jolis de romance se croisaient rapides, oppressés, et les couvertures qui dessinaient les contours de ces corps à peine formés avaient le frémissement, les régulières ondulations d'un étang calme... Elles arrangeaient leur vie comme des fiancés qui vont bientôt se marier" (Ibid., 6).

²⁷ "Un règlement... et n'était, de la première à la dernière page, qu'un appel érotique, une énumération complaisante de détails libertins mêlés d'enfantillages presque ridicules où demeuraient des ressouvenances du couvent. L'hôtel finit par devenir une véritable maison interlope" (Ibid., 41).

Maizeroy makes it clear that no female is safe from the sexual advances of Eva and Jeanne, both of them two voracious predators. A significant portion of the novel narrates Eva's seduction of Luce, a happily married French beauty whose pastoral life in the countryside with her charming husband and young infant make her the embodiment of the French ideal of bourgeois domestic life. The young couple is a devoted one, and their apparent affection touches even the hardest of hearts; yet, after months of effort, conniving, and the use of all of her charms, Eva is able to seduce this paragon of French female heteronormativity. After an evening spent in Eva's embrace in the forest of a Château where they are spending a summer vacation, this modest young housewife becomes so smitten with Eva that she flirts openly with her at dinner parties and sends her kisses behind her fan.²⁸ Although a great deal of the narrative is devoted to the full siege of Luce's virtue, the seduction is only a temporary one, yet long enough for Luce to suffer a terrible equestrian accident in which she falls from a runaway horse and almost dies. When she awakes from her coma, she is cured of her lesbian desire, sees the error of her ways, and repents. She returns to her husband, all the wiser, and more firmly entrenched in her happy bourgeois life. Eva, who despite her craven sexuality, had actually fallen in love with Luce, realizes that she will forever be excluded from the happiness that Luce has found. Eva Moineff, with her Russian heritage, then marries a socialite from Saint Petersburg and finds respectability in her new home on the Champs-Élysée. Thus, she escapes the sinister death that often accompanies lesbian sex in novels of this period. Jeanne, on the other hand, finds no redemption in heterosexuality, but only sinks further into lesbian depravity—wasting away in the arms of a young actress who drains her physically, emotionally, and financially. She dies in a sanitarium in a vegetative state.

This novel is constructed out of the intrigues and seductions of two “*détraquées*”; two young women whose only thoughts are for sexual pleasure among women. The reader is treated to endless accounts of seductions, passionate kisses, shivering female bodies, and intrigues. Maizeroy makes little attempt to camouflage the one-dimensionality of this work; for instance, he does not rely heavily on naturalist literary motifs to legitimize his work or create a complex layered narrative that explores other issues.

The successful seduction of Luce, the embodiment of good French bourgeois principles of marriage, motherhood, and family duty, allows us to read the text as suggesting that some French women may be susceptible to “predatory” lesbians no matter how ostensibly established in heterosexuality such a woman may be. It may indeed have been troubling to the prosecutor and the jury that a novelist had imagined and written about the vulnerability of French women to same-sex relations.²⁹ However, the sustained and detailed narrative of female debauchery and sexual pleasure that ends with Jeanne as a “*monomane*” in the grip of a “*délire érotique*” is highly provocative. While the novel's language may never have become so graphic as to offend conventional standards of decency, its uninterrupted scenes of lesbian cruising, seduction, and debauchery proved to be one literary peepshow that ran too long.

III. *Chair Molle*: Invitation à Imaginer

The sublime erotic pleasure of lesbian sex is also central to the passages regarding lesbianism that were to be banned from Paul Adam's first novel, *Chair Molle*, published in the

²⁸ Ibid., 194-196.

²⁹ I was unable to locate court documents regarding this trial other than descriptions in the *Gazette des Tribunaux* for April 27-28, 1885.

same year as *Deux Amies*, 1885. When Paul Adam wrote *Chair Molle* he was fervent admirer of Zola and naturalism. He would become a prodigious writer with over sixty works published between 1885 and 1924 as part of literary career that encompassed numerous genres and styles. Literati of numerous movements appreciated his works and invited him to their salons.³⁰ Adam wrote naturalist novels, symbolist novels, historical novels, and psychological works among others.³¹ However, he garnered instant notoriety with his first novel, mainly because it was censored.

Paul Alexis, a writer and close friend of Zola, wrote the preface for *La Chair Molle*, because Adam was such a devoted acolyte of Zola and naturalism. Alexis, whose own literary work had gained some recognition, should have provided some literary weight and importance, and possibly protection, to Adam's work.³² Alexis' imprimatur and benediction of this work provided a direct affiliation to Zola, the most well known practitioner of the naturalist novel. Alexis was somewhat familiar with the subject matter since he had also published himself short story a few years earlier centered on a lesbian relationship.³³ It was the story of a dying courtesan who falls in love with a tough young lesbian, whose masculinity is stressed by her wearing of a leather coat. Lucie's passion causes her to spend 20 francs a day to keep this "hoodlum," despite the economic hardship this costs her. Alexis wrote in his preface that Adam's work was the result of a conscientious writer, who like a good painter paints nature's models, limiting himself to what he has seen, noted, lived, or at least guessed. Alexis ends by praising the work, stating that "Enfin, l'émancipation de tout, un beau calme, aucune concession à la morale bourgeoise: tout cela n'est pas vulgaire."³⁴ Alexis' preemptory gesture of legitimization anticipated accusations of salaciousness or lasciviousness that would far exceed any claims of a naturalist project, which was purportedly the faithful representation of the "truth" or "science." His defense of Adam would not be limited to writing the book's preface. Soon after *Chair Molle*'s publication, Adam was brought before the *Cour d'assises de la Seine* on August 10, 1885 on charges of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs*. In the newspaper *Cri du peuple*, Alexis continued his defense of Adam's novel in the court of public opinion while criticizing the jury's verdict. He extolled the virtues of the novel while criticizing the jury's verdict in the newspaper. The jury found Adam guilty of *outrage aux bonne mœurs* for eight different passages in his novel, and the *Cour d'assises* ordered those passages cut from the novel. I will only examine those passages that either explicitly or implicitly represent lesbian relationships since this chapter seeks to understand what in lesbian literary portrayals warranted censorship.³⁵

³⁰ Adam frequented Robert Caze's salon which counted such notables as Henri de Régnier, Jean Moréas, Jean Ajalbert, Huysmans, Camille Pissaro, and Edmond de Goncourt." See Zévaès, *Les Procès littéraires*, 241.

³¹ J.P. de Beaumarchais, *Dictionnaire des littératures de la langue française* (Bordas: Paris, 1984) 8. The year after the publication of *Chair Molle*, Adam co-wrote two symbolist novels. See Paul Adam, *Le Thé chez Miranda* (Paris: Tresse and Stock, 1886) and *Les Demoiselles Goubert* (Paris: Tresse and Stock, 1886).

³² It is important to note that Alexis, himself, had some importance in literary circles. He was the most faith and fervent student of Zola's, and he enjoyed, during naturalisms' triumphant years, a reputation as a true authority. See Zévaès, *Les Procès littéraires*, 241.

³³ Paul Alexis, *La Fin de Lucie Pellegrin* (Paris: Charpentier, 1880). Leslie Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41, no. 3-4 (2002): 152.

³⁴ Zévaès, *Les Procès littéraires*, 241.

³⁵ The excised passages are set out at length in Yvan Leclerc, *Crimes écrits: La littérature en procès au XIX siècle* (Paris: Plon, 1991), 405-408. The original court file is listed as available in the Archives de Paris, but in the summer

The other four passages related Lucie's reaction to sex with men. The first two of the remaining passages that do not discuss lesbian relations reveal Lucie's disgust with men's lust when she makes her first entrance into the chic bordello's salon. The last passage to be censored details her orgasm with an army officer, but in all of these passages regarding heterosexual relations, Maizeroy also invites the reader to imagine what occurred rather than detailing it.

Chair Molle recounts the life of a Lucie Thirache, a working-class girl whose tragic spiral from the upscale bordello to the streets to confinement in a hospital forms the narrative arc of this work. Lucie's story begins with her arrival at Douai, where she works as a maid for the Donard bordello. Due to her good looks she is quickly recruited as one of the bordello's "working girls" and they rebaptise her as Nina (a thinly veiled intertextual reference to Zola's Nana, with whom she shares the same type of hyperbolic death, earned as part of the "wages of their sins"; although, they do follow very different routes to this final destination). Like Nana, Lucie dreams of an escape from her life as a prostitute, but Lucie/Nina never has the monetary success nor the renown that Nana obtains during her reign as the *courtisane extraordinaire* of Paris, she dreams of a life of respectability, a country home, social redemption, and respectability. Adam's faithful adherence to Zola's overarching narrative trajectory in *Nana* permits him to reinscribe tropes developed by Zola linking prostitution, lesbianism, pathology, and death.³⁶ Lucie falls in love with Léa, a prostitute at the Donard bordello. Half of the passages censored in this novel are descriptions of their love affair, which Adam configures as a dialectical relationship of power in one of the censored passages: "elle était reine, l'autre esclave: ses gestes ordonnaient, ceux de l'autre affirmaient obéissance, et il lui prenait parfois, une rage d'afficher son autorité, des envies féroces de torturer cet être si beau, de pouvoir crier ensuite: 'cette femme est à moi, c'est mon bien.'" ³⁷ Despite Lucie's primary affective interest being a woman, she becomes a great success and becomes the toast of the *maison close* until she is infected with syphilis, which prompts her dismissal and signals the end of her lesbian love affair.³⁸ The second half of the novel begins with Lucie in a hospice recovering from her illness and wanting to reform her life. Her efforts to reenter honorable society are ultimately futile. First, she becomes the mistress of a military officer but is forced to return to prostitution after the officer discovers she had taken another lover while he was away on military maneuvers. Eventually, the hard life of a working class prostitute wears Lucie down, and she dies in a hospital of syphilitic hepatitis.

of 2007 after my request for Adam's court records, I was told that they were "unavailable" without further explanation. Apparently, the staff at the Archives de Paris were unable to locate the dossier.

³⁶ The narrative precedent in the nineteenth-century begins at least as early as Balzac's *La fille aux yeux d'or* with Paquita's death, but it was at its zenith between 1880 and 1910. For a brief survey of some of the novels that followed this pattern of lesbianism as pathology one can consult: Paul Adam, *La Chair Molle* (Brussels: Brancart, 1885); Armand Dubarry, *Les Déséquilibrés de l'amour* (Paris: Chamuel, 1896); Gabriel Faure, *La Dernière journée de Sapphô* (Paris: Mercure, 1901); Jean-Louis Dubut de Laforest, *Mademoiselle Tantale* (Paris: Dentu, 1884); Charles Montfort, *Le Journal d'une saphiste* (Paris: Offenstadt, 1902); and Adrienne Saint-Agen, *Amants féminins* (Paris: Offenstadt, 1902).

³⁷ Adam, *La Chair Molle*, 77-78.

³⁸ Adam makes clear that Lucie (Nina) is completely invested in her lesbian relationship. Her work required her body, but nothing more: "Et il fallait encore, le métier exigeant, gratifier de faveurs semblables les indifférents et les êtres chéris. Cela la répugnait fort. Ainsi les mâles ne pouvaient satisfaire à ses désirs d'épanchements amoureux" (Ibid., 76). Lucie, who had heretofore dreamed and connived to catch a rich male lover who would support her, now only uses men to support her female lover. Any possible emotional attachment to a client or physical pleasure from her lovemaking is barred by her devotion to Léa.

Adam introduces lesbianism into the novel in the same way that Zola wove it into *Nana*'s plot—through a close relationship with another prostitute that reiterates the “scientific” and juridical discourses of the nineteenth century concerning the genesis of much of lesbianism. Prostitution had been heavily linked to lesbianism at least since the publication of Parent-Duchâtelet's work, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris considérée sous le rapport de l'hygiène publique, de la morale et de l'administration* in 1836. His thesis was that a girl sinks into public prostitution only after she has led a disorderly existence that eventually plunges her into debauchery. Once a *fille publique*, the young woman is assuredly bound for the supreme vice—lesbianism. Lesbianism is the end-point, the culmination for all that was perceived as wrong in France: the weakening of paternal authority, the church's declining influence, the progress of liberalism and secularism, the ascending power of public opinion, and the changing workforce. In his work, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, Alain Corbin states that “excessive social mobility, which increases the risk of proletarian contagion; growing uniformity in dress, which makes it difficult to distinguish among the classes and stimulates a taste for luxury and coquetry among the poorer classes; political upheavals; the spread of a sense of the transitory, which leads people to seek ‘immediate pleasures’...” were factors that worked to produce an anxiety about sexuality, prostitution, and finally the threat of lesbianism. The paradox is that ultimately lesbianism could not be harnessed for male desire and integrated into any stable heteronormative modality—even for male visual pleasure. The prostitute represented a sexual commodity for men's pleasure that could be purchased and which could be conceived of as inherently and historically heterosexual. French discourses of power reconfigured this privileged masculine power/sexual exchange. These legal and “scientific” discourses suggested that some of these women were only nominal heterosexual for economic reasons. The absence of desire on the woman's part and the assertion that some prostitutes preferred to “set up house” together rather than choose a man effectively removed them from the heteronormative paradigm.³⁹ The unwanted effect of these “discoveries” was to concede, at least implicitly, that sexuality might not be as fixed as French society claimed but rather it was fluid—a complex alchemy that depended on many socio-economic and hereditary factors. Hence, a prostitute's original heterosexuality could be transmuted into lesbianism for various reasons, and this could mean that the sexual orientation or libidinal economy of other members of French society might also be unstable. The prostitute, ineluctably woven into the heterosexual imaginary, is undone, turns in on herself, and becomes a hotbed of potential anti-heterosexual behavior. As I will discuss in chapter three, by the time *Chair Molle* was censored, the idea that lesbians were usurping male privilege by patronizing brothels for their own pleasure was beginning to enter the French imaginary.

Although Adam does follow the example of Zola's *Nana* in his way of introducing lesbianism, the depiction of amorous relationships between women is quite different, and this might be where Adam ran into trouble with the judicial system. Unfortunately, I have found no records that indicate exactly how this novel came to the attention of the State's attorney or what the original complaint was. However, the records do show which passages were found offensive, and a review of them allows for analysis and comparison. *Chair Molle* varied greatly from many previous novels laced with Sapphic relationships such as *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma*

³⁹ In the plastic arts, one can think of Toulouse-Lautrec's brothel paintings such as *Two Friends* that document these relationships.

femme or *Nana* because nowhere in these novels were lesbian women's pursuit of pleasure so graphically portrayed.

The first passage with lesbian content (the fourth among the eight) to be censored illustrates the movement from the intentionally oblique rendering of lesbian desire to a more sensual accounting. The novel's first explicit female on female love scene does not distance itself from the practical physical aspects of foreplay. Without recourse to the crudest street language that might move towards on the pornographic, Adam does not leave Lucie and Léa in the tenebrous boudoir where the reader catches only glimpses of their bodies. Rather than looking through the keyhole at nebulous moving shadows or providing gauzy descriptions that merely describe the bliss of a kiss, Adam goes further in an interesting way. He has Léa begin kissing Lucie on her stomach, and from there he begins to describe the violent reactions that these kisses provoke:

Tout à coup comme prise de rage elle appliqua à plusieurs reprises sa bouche sur le ventre poli, et brusquement, enfouit sa tête dans les chairs blanches qu'elle étreignit avec violence. Lucie eut un long frisson, ferma les yeux, se cacha la face dans ses bras, et, sous l'influence rapidement croissante d'une volupté inconnue, elle sentit ses nerfs se tendre et se détendre délicieusement en une précipitation qui s'accélérait; c'étaient des soubresauts, des halètements rauques, des sanglots. Alors Léa se relevant, se précipita sur le corps de Lucie se mit à couvrir de baisers sa face, sa gorge; et les femmes enlacées se pâmèrent, bouche à bouche, dans un spasme furieux, interminable.⁴⁰

As I will discuss later in this chapter, nine years later, Victorien DuSaussay's suggestive novel, *Jouir... Mourir*, does not so distinctly gesture to the possibility of oral sex as a part of the erotic landscape between lesbians, even though his passionate description of intertwined female bodies shuddering from orgasm was enough to warrant censorship. Despite the lubricity of Adam's description, Adam pleaded during his trial that he had in no way intended for his work to be pornographic, but that the naturalist movement required a brutally honest and objective eye. His intent was not to incite the public to vice but rather to warn it, or so he stated in his *interrogatoire*.⁴¹

Adam further claimed that there were there were no *double entendres* in his work. Such a claim, however, ignored the significance of the verb "s'enfouir" which literally means to bury or shove an object into another; and although Léa could bury her tongue in Lucie's stomach, the conjunction of the tongue on the "ventre" (an imprecise anatomical term which can range from the stomach to the pelvis) is an open invitation for the imagination to rove further downward. Moreover, the sentence that follows records Lucie's reactions to her lover's tongue, and it is patently a description of sexual arousal and orgasm. The author moves from describing what is being done to what one feels. This is an example of the narrative peepshow—tantalizing the reader with just enough information to set the stage for sexual interaction with directions and cues for the imagination, then moving from the physical details to sensations and emotions. Lucie shudders at length, closes her eyes, hides her face, her nerves tense and relax—and what follows are jolts, raucous panting, and cries. The scene ends with both women melting in an

⁴⁰ Adam, *La Chair Molle*, 73.

⁴¹ "En écrivant mon livre, je n'ai eu en aucune façon l'intention d'exciter à la débauche ou à l'immoralité, ni en un mot de faire une œuvre pornographique, mon but, bien au contraire, a été de mettre en garde contre le vice et l'inconduite, et c'est pour ce motif que j'ai dû me servir de couleurs aussi sombres et de peintures aussi répugnantes" (Leclerc, *Crimes écrits*, 404).

unending and furious spasm. There is a space of silence, a visual disconnect, between the physical acts and their effects. The infiltration of scientific discourse into the naturalist literary movement, and this movement's reliance on the truth of science to defend its crude observations, were not sufficient to convince the jury of Adam's innocence. In this case, naturalist claims to describe neutrally an orgasm obtained through lesbian sex were not considered protected in any way from censure by its literary ambitions.

The jury found another passage obscene that described Lucie's affection for Léa even though it appears completely innocuous. It merely stated that "Maintenant, Lucie Thirache ne pouvait se passer de Léa. Assise près d'elle en un coin du divan, elle aimait rester des journées entières les jambes enchevêtrées aux siennes, les mains enserrant sa taille, la regarder toujours."⁴² In the entirety of the excised passage not one adjective or adverb describes passion, heightened sensuality, or arousal. The offending lines, which are found two pages after the first forbidden passage, begin by simply stating that Lucie could not do without Léa. The next sentence states matter of factly that Lucie loved to spend entire days on the corner of the couch, her legs entangled in her friend's, her hands around the other's waist, always looking at her. In the whole passage the only two adjectives are entire and entangled. Given the apparent inconsistencies of censorship one must query: what was obscene about this description? The jury's condemnation of this passage appears to rely on an understanding of *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* as anything "qui peut faire naître dans l'esprit des idées impudiques ou lascives."⁴³

Adam is faithful to Parent-Duchâtelet's studies of prostitution and to Zola's literary depictions of prostitutes as indolent, overdeveloped hedonists, and debauchees. There should have been nothing new or particularly scandalous about these conceptions of the prostitute. Yet, I would suggest that perhaps it is not what is stated but the author's invitation to imagine what is behind these lines or after them that is dangerous. The reader must imagine these entire days when the two women languish together on the couch, their legs entangled, their bodies touching, hands around their waists... a slow-brewing passion that consumes them to the exclusion of all others. Is it the total exclusion of men from their affective world, this hermetic self-sufficiency, that the jury found so menacing? What is obvious is that during the Third Republic segments of French society were deeply preoccupied with obscenity, and any novel that a jury found too "suggestive" might have been found guilty of obscenity.⁴⁴

The last passages to be censored are reminiscent of the lines from Molière's *Tartuffe* that state "par de pareils objets les âmes sont blessées/Et cela fait venir de coupables pensées," because it is the evocative power of the words to suggest further sexual fantasy that are at issue. The narrative continues to accentuate the intimate complicity between Lucie and Léa while unequivocally confirming the possibility of a libidinal economy that not only excludes men but establishes an anti-heteronormative pleasure matrix. Although the passage is quite long, I have

⁴² Ibid., 406.

⁴³ This is how la Cour de Paris defined it in a judgment against the paper, *Jean qui Rit*, in 1903. d'Autrec, *L'Outrage aux mœurs*, 132.

⁴⁴ Lionel Autrec's book, *Outrage aux bonnes mœurs*, provides an excellent review of the treatment of this offense as well as the ways in which different courts, politicians, and others understood this offense from 1882 through 1923. What his work makes clear is that a very vocal segment believed that they were drowning in a corrupting "marée pornographique." The publication and dissemination of artistic works portraying various sexualities and non-normative ways of living were deemed by some to be a threat to the well-being of France.

chosen to quote it in its entirety so that the reader gets a true sense of the rhetoric used to describe their relationship.

Lorsqu'elle eut connu Léa et sa tendresse, il lui sembla que ses aspirations étaient réalisées bien au-delà de ses rêves. Cette fille savait joindre à une grande habileté amoureuse, un raffinement délicat dans le choix de ses prévenances. Vautrée tout le jour aux côtés de Lucie, elle ne tarissait pas son admiration pour les svelteness de l'adorable Nina, pour les pâles matités de ses chairs, pour la petitesse rare de ses extrémités. A chaque exclamation élogieuse, de ses longues et fines mains, elle caressait les membres vantés avec une chatouillante lenteur. De tels attouchements fréquemment répétés, maintenaient Lucie Thirache en un énervement délicieux. Une telle apologie de ses charmes, murmurée en languissantes inflexions, était à la fille une harmonique mélodie, berceuse de son imagination somnolente. Puis soudain, à la vue de cette femme couchée sur ses genoux, faisant saillir pour elle les courbes lascives de son corps, tournant vers son visage de grands yeux noirs tout humides de larmes amoureuses, une triomphante vanité empoignait Lucie: elle était reine, l'autre esclave; ses gestes ordonnaient, ceux de l'autre affirmaient obéissance, et il lui prenait parfois, une rage d'afficher son autorité, des envies féroces de torturer cet être si beau, de pouvoir crier ensuite: « Cette femme est à moi, c'est mon bien. » Elle ressentait aussi une vindicative jouissance à verser en ses mains tout l'or de ses profits; la chair en vente perpétuelle achetait de la chair à son tour; elle, toujours possédée, possédait enfin. Et elle entendait jouir de cette possession dans toute sa plénitude. Léa ne devait jamais la quitter; à un asservissement de toutes les minutes, Lucie astreignait son amante, heureuse d'imiter les mâles qui la tenaient elle-même, sans un répit, à leur disposition. Et d'autant plus parfait était son bonheur, d'autant plus sûres ses représailles que Léa, avec la gracilité élégante de ses formes, avec sa chevelure bouclée, coupée courte, son langage brutal et son habitude de jurer approchait davantage à la virilité.

How a jury came to a certain decision was rarely made public absent allegations of improper jury conduct. One can make some assumptions about what might have been offensive if he contextualizes the passage with the political climate. First, there is a total inversion of male/female gender roles in which Lucie, the toast of the bordello, takes on the role of the male as both lover and benefactor of Léa. She has effectively withdrawn her affections from the heterosexual libidinal economy and poured her energy, resources, and emotions into another woman. Her declaration that Léa is "*son bien*"—her property—also means that another woman is removed from the heterosexual matrix. Thus, there are two women who may not produce children for the Republic, and who are fully satisfied sexually without a man. As Adam writes, Lucie "entendait jouir de cette possession dans toute sa plénitude." The reader is asked to imagine the multitude of the ways that Lucie could "enjoy" her possession, and one cannot help but notice the use of the verb "*jouir*" and its double meaning as a verb that both means to climax as well as to enjoy. Maybe Luce simply wanted to make Léa come in every way that she could imagine.

The last passage censored for lesbian content is one page from the preceding passage, and it also does not describe or allude to any particular sexual acts; yet, it does establish the primacy, the uniqueness, and the desirability of same-sex love between women. Part of the offending

passage states that Lucie “se serrait à son amante, aspirant de toutes ses forces les grisantes suavités, laissant ses mains se perdre sur la peau humide et satinée, bien autrement douce que celle de l’homme.”⁴⁵ Lucie relishes her physical intimacy with Léa, which provides her with sensual pleasures that she has never experienced, as she loses herself in the tactile pleasures of Léa’s moist and satiny skin into which she seems to sink or plunge. The allure of their skin is like a siren’s song that provides a narcissistic mirroring in each of the three passages, and it highlights the difference between women’s softly sensual skin and the brutish roughness of men’s skin. However, unlike the preceding passage, it is Lucie’s response to Léa’s touch that is underscored in the last passage: as soon as Lucie sinks into Léa’s soft curviness she is grasped or embraced with an energy that not even the most robust or hearty man could muster. Moreover, Léa kisses her furiously without bruising her, and bites her without hurting her.⁴⁶ A savage and almost uncontrollable passion is unleashed that provides infinite pleasures and myriad responses from languidness to vigor: Adam is insistent that this pleasure is solely within the power of the lesbian lover to bestow. He titillates the reader as he describes the women’s love making by saying that “le pouvoir de les rendre exclusives, multipliait les charmes de ces voluptés. Nul de ces plaisirs n’était répété avec d’autres... Et cet amour grandissait.”⁴⁷ Not only are men not invited to join in these love games, but they are also incapable of giving such pleasure. The tension between vice and visibility is always at play in this work, to pull back the boudoir curtains too far, even if the view is obscured, invites one to imagine a sexual otherness that may be both dangerous and contagious.

Adam’s testimony that he never used any words with a double meaning underscores the very fact that in these erotic lesbian scenes there are polyvalent terms or allusions that might lead a reader to less “salubrious” interpretations.⁴⁸ The very uncontrollability of language poses a problem for the writer, the jury, and the French State. The ability of words to inflame the imagination, to invite the reader to project, to invent, and to fill in the spaces, were all part and parcel of the narrative peepshow. When Adam writes of Lucie “enjoying” and/or “coming” with Léa “*dans toute sa plénitude*,” the audience is invited to interpret what that means, and in doing so, the reader must necessarily imagine, visualize, and ponder the possibilities of meaning. Although the State has various means to foreclose potentially subversive interpretations or readings whether by laws and regulations or through the judicial system, the State’s desire to censor is always already doomed to failure. The complexities of interpretation anchored in time, place, and context as well as the variability of the individual reader make sanitized reading impossible.

IV. Jouir...Mourir: “Référence sans fard à la débauche de la chair”

Victorien DuSaussay appealed to the most prurient interests of the French public by writing a succession of novels with loosely woven plots and caricatures of decadent themes such as morphine addiction, nymphomania, and the eternal search for forbidden pleasure. The quality of his prose is almost amateurish and laughable. Few authors have written a novel where two chapters drone on about the lovely sensations of morphine. It is undoubtedly his reputation as a

⁴⁵ Adam, *La Chair Molle*, 79.

⁴⁶ “Lucie se sentait aussitôt étreinte avec une énergie qu’elle ignorait chez les mâles les plus robustes; elle était embrassé furieusement sans être meurtrie, mordue sans être blessée” (Ibid).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Excerpts from Paul Adam’s *Interrogatoire*, August 16, 1885, qtd. in Leclerc, *Crimes écrits*, 404.

“hack” writer that further encouraged the legal establishment to censure him. Unlike Catulle Mendès, who frequented literary salons and counted numerous authors among his friends and acquaintances, and whose novel, *Méphistophéla*, will be discussed later in this chapter, he had no respectable literary reputation to shield him. One can also easily imagine many other reasons his novel would have provoked attempts to censure it.

DuSaussay makes no attempt to develop a genealogical tree to establish the pathological foundations of his main character’s unbridled and perverted sexuality, and this marks a stark departure from the censored novels already discussed in this chapter. Both *Deux Amies* and *Chair Molle* relied on contemporary “scientific” understandings of the causes of lesbianism, such as poor heredity, nervous disorders, etc., to provide a naturalist patina to the work that might make the lesbian subject matter more defensible as morally or scientifically instructive.

From the very beginning of the *Jouir...Mourir*, the reader is immersed in the passions of Andrée de Saint Yvette, the main character, about whom the author only tells the reader that she was a sexual “lion and not a woman.”⁴⁹ Andrée is recently widowed, and the novel opens with her bemoaning the death of her husband and the sensual pleasure that he would have provided. She decides to dedicate herself to the pursuit of sensual pleasure—including the ultimate sensual experience of death. The baroness’s life becomes an ex-voto to the gods of pleasure, a monument to desire, a totem to the pursuit of boundless hedonism. DuSaussay diagnoses her reckless pursuit of pleasure as symptomatic of her hysteria.⁵⁰

DuSaussay does not rely on the tropes of relatives who are morally, physically, or spiritually defective to explain Andrée’s thirst for sensual pleasure—an obsession with pleasure that eventually leads to a same-sex affair. Avoiding the common explanations of this perversion as symptomatic of pathologies or corruption (often by a servant), Andrée’s desire for same-sex love comes from a lesbian-themed novel that she read and whose dangerous depictions corrupt her. “Son esprit devint esclave des choses lues, de ces amours étranges, malades empoignantes qui savent faire mourir et laissent rêver.”⁵¹ Thus, literature is again cast as a dangerous vehicle of contagion—it can incite dangerous thoughts and excite forbidden desires such as lesbianism. In a moment of ironic self-reflexivity, the novel in question is DuSaussay’s previous novel, *Les pires joies*, which he refers to as “un livre malsain.” Whether the author truly believed that sexual orientation or desire could be altered by a book, he certainly provides no other explanation for Andrée de Saint-Yvette’s “fall into the bottomless gulf of perfected vice.”⁵² She is a woman whose single-minded goal is to obtain as much sensual and sexual pleasure as possible and to experience ultimately a pleasure so astoundingly intense and unfathomable that one cannot survive it. Despite Andrée having the most fluid and voracious sexuality of all of the characters in the books that were censored, it was only the description of lesbian sex that was censored. For instance, descriptions of sex between Andrée and her lover/physician as they mix sex and morphine and ether go without remark.⁵³

⁴⁹ Victorien DuSaussay, *Jouir...Mourir* (Paris: P. Anthony et Cie, 1885), 6.

⁵⁰ In a moment of egalitarianism, both Andrée and her male lover are described as victims of hysteria. “Alors, cet homme et cette femme réunis dans un hôtel transformé en temple passionnel, hystériques tous les deux, chercheurs de passions brutales, de plaisirs insensée, de folie érotique mirent leur intelligence surexcité par les désirs les plus brûlants, toute leur intelligence, à la recherche des plus suprêmes joies” (Ibid., 179).

⁵¹ Ibid., 133.

⁵² Ibid., 158.

⁵³ Ibid., 188-191.

Contrary to the protagonists of *Deux Amies* and *Chair Molle*, Andrée is firmly rooted in heterosexuality. Only after having read *Les pires joies* and encountering a beautiful gypsy dancer from Spain while on a trip through North Africa does Andrée succumb to another woman's advances. The two women meet in a bar where Andrée is deeply moved by the woman's grace and her voice as she performs. The gypsy dancer notices Andrée's attention and strikes up a conversation. The great differences in social class do not prevent Andrée from inviting the Spanish gypsy dancer to go sailing with her, and as the boat rocks off the waters off the North African coast the two women kiss and begin a white-hot love affair. Andrée forgets her male lovers and is so completely satisfied with her female lover that she almost loses consciousness from the pleasure.⁵⁴ Their affair is short-lived, because Andrée eventually discovers her lover in bed with another man, who incidentally turns out to be the dancer's husband. Despite being a novel that is completely dedicated to cataloguing Andrée's sexual excesses and drug use, only fifteen lines describing the lesbian encounter were censored—this notwithstanding the fact that Andrée saps men of life through her sexual appetite and eventually dies with her physician/lover from a drug overdose of morphine.

The condemned lines of the work were egregious enough to cause the jury both to excise the passage and to fine the author. He was also sentenced to jail time. In a novel that primarily details the sexual escapades of a heterosexual woman, the offending lines merit closer analysis. DuSaussay wrote:

Ce furent d'abord des baisers, des caresses, des morsures, des cris. Leurs corps se confondaient dans le pénombre, leurs bouches s'ouvraient rouges comme de la pourpre, rouges comme du sang, leurs bras se raidissaient comme des ressorts d'acier et revenaient s'abattre sur les épaules et sur les reins avec un fouettement de liane; les narines ouvertes larges semblaient aspirer l'air de la volupté, les yeux se fermaient sous la paupière nerveusement tendue, les jambes se contractaient et les doigts se crispèrent comme pour étreindre.

What might have been so morally offensive that these lines had to be excised from the text? The first line serves as a cryptic code of coitus that begins with kissing, moves further to embracing/touching and leads the reader to imagine the frenzied sexual play that leads to biting, and ultimately to cries of pleasure. Again, the reader is asked to imagine an extravagantly passionate sexual encounter between two women from the very first sentence, and it is one that clearly testifies to one woman's ability to give another woman pleasure. Rather than condemn her same-sex desire or to pathologize it, DuSaussay merely lists it as another modality for obtaining pleasure. With French society increasingly preoccupied about its declining birthrate, "nineteenth-century doctors began not only to allow for but also to insist upon mutual sexual pleasure within the context of conjugal relations, injecting a measured amount of eros into the marital alcove and thus transforming and expanding the possibilities for marital sex."⁵⁵ Yet,

⁵⁴ A common threat in each of the censored novels is the author's description of the inimitable pleasure that only women can provide to one another. The fluidity of desire, especially with married women, might be especially troublesome since their turn to lesbianism suggests that heterosexual sex is not as satisfying.

⁵⁵ Karen Offen, "Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 648–676. For a comparative study of European depopulation see Simon Szreter, "Falling Fertilities and Changing Sexualities in Europe Since 1850: A Comparative Survey of National Demographic Patterns," in *Sexual Cultures in Europe*, ed. Franz X. Eder et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Restructuring Gender in Post-War France, 1917-1927* (Chicago:

these women are able to find sexual pleasure without a male partner, and moreover, this pleasure is totally satisfying. Proposing that women can enjoy each other's bodies for no other reason than for their carnal satisfaction conflicts with the very well documented push in France for women to marry in order to procreate and thus provide soldiers to protect the Republic, populate its colonies, and furnish manpower for its industries.

The second line speaks of the union of these two female bodies that literally lose themselves one in the other, a merging, that allows a coalescing rather than a conjoining. DuSaussay's description of the women's red mouths, the purple red of blood, is a thinly veiled allusion to their aroused sexual state. Writing of their mouths necessarily implies or evokes their lips, and as in English, a woman's labia is referred to as "*les lèvres*." Thus, by emphasizing their mouths as blood red and open—these moist cavities could evoke for the reader the protagonists' genitalia. The possibility of sexual associations and double-entendres were almost *de rigueur* in writing about lesbian love at the turn of the century.⁵⁶ The very title of the chapter, "In Excelsis," seems meant to provoke offense, as it is borrowed from Christian liturgical formulations such as "Glory to God in the highest." One scholar has even commented that this paragraph is one of the most suggestive and daring scenes of fin-de-siècle literature exactly because of its treatment of the women's mouths and the immediate evocation of their lips as a double entendre.⁵⁷ Few novelists of the period gestured so explicitly to the female genitalia as devouring, abysmal red mouths as did DuSaussay.

The description of the women's mutual orgasms is also almost hyperbolic: their arms stiffen like steel and beat on their shoulders and backs; their nostrils dilate; and they seem to breathe in the very essence of sensual pleasure. Their legs tense, their bodies heave and clinch as they climax. DuSaussay's description is a nuts and bolts love scene, terse but effective. The power of this sexual encounter cannot be minimized or decoded as anything other than a paean to Sapphic love.

The chapter's mixes the sexually subversive with the religiously sacred, and DuSaussay renders lesbian sex an "other worldly" experience that leaves a woman in an exalted state. Andrée's disavowal of lesbianism is the consequence of her lover's, Pépita's, betrayal. The ferociously orgasmic nature of their coupling defies the heteronormative imperative of male penetration and domination while simultaneously offering an alternative vision of sexuality both highly pleasurable and gynocentric. Andrée incarnates a desire to push all boundaries, to flaunt social dictates, and to transgress class. She is about the "desire to become 'otherwise,' to question and to be questionable—to become queer to oneself."⁵⁸ Andrée refuses the imposed values of her station in life: she refused to adhere to the aristocratic codes of conduct, to be an obedient and willing wife, to sacrifice her pleasure for man's. Her quest to experience the ultimate pleasure is in fact a vehicle for self-knowledge, and that adventure evidently took her too far from the safe harbor of heteronormativity.

University of Chicago Press, 1994); and J.E. Pedersen, "Regulating Abortion and Birthcontrol: Gender, Medicine, and Republican Politics 1870-1920," *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 3 (1996): 673-698.

⁵⁶ Certainly other literary examples from this period support this reading. For instance, Mallarmé writes in his poem, "une négresse", originally entitled "Les lèvres roses," "étrange bouche/Pâle et rose comme un coquillage marine" that cuts the black skin of a lesbian."

⁵⁷ Nicole Albert, *Saphisme et Décadence dans Paris Fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Éditions de la Martinière, 2005), 188.

⁵⁸ Judith A. Peraino, "Listening to the Sirens: Music as Queer Ethical Practice," *GLQ* 9, no. 4 (2003): 44.

V. *Méphistophéla* and the Importance of Being Famous

The last novel to be discussed in this chapter is Catulle Mendès's *Méphistophéla*, published in 1895; this work provides an interesting counterpoint to the three previous novels analyzed both because of certain parallels and congruencies as well as various dissimilarities. Juxtaposing this novel with *Deux Amies*, *Chair Molle*, and *Jouir... Mourir*, highlights the inconsistencies in censorship and the capriciousness of both a judicial system obliged to apply a nebulous legal standard and of juries composed of individualized understandings of morality. Mendès's novel is particularly salient to this discussion because of its commercial success; yet, despite its extended treatment of lesbianism as both salacious and demonic, it escaped prosecution for *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* and censorship.

The novel traces the entire sexual trajectory of its protagonist from the halcyon innocence of her young schoolgirl days to her final stay in an asylum. Sophie, the main character, is the only character in the four novels who does not exhibit migratory sexuality, which shifted its objects of desire between males and females.

Mendès, like Adam and Maizeroy, followed Zola's naturalist technique of tracing a family genealogy to reinforce the scientific aspect of the novel. Sophie's mother is described as an unattractive urchin, the product of unknown parentage, but who grew up in the insalubrious environment of the theater. Described as a child so inherently prone to wickedness that to teach her vice would be as "useless as pouring poison into a chalice of aconite or belladonna," Sophie's mother quickly became sexually initiated at twelve years old by a woman named Madame Ernestine who had noticed her at the theater.⁵⁹ Although, Mendès leaves unsaid what transpired between the two, the reader does know that Phédo, Sophie's mother, does not go home that night, and she is soon spending her afternoons in the "loge de la troisième danseuse, qui s'ennuyait entre le ballet de deux et le ballet de quatre."⁶⁰ As is often the case in naturalist novels, Mendès is quite detailed in linking Phédo's physical appearance, which is less than attractive, as a consequence of hereditary degeneration. "...[E]lle n'était pas jolie, ne le deviendrait pas en grandissant, avec son nez trop long et ses yeux trop petits, et ses minces lèvres déjà défléuries, et sa peau sèche, presque rugueuse, bossuée de gros os."⁶¹ Despite her unattractive physical appearance, a Russian count offers to take her to Moscow to live with him. Once there, he initiates Phédo into all manner of vice and perversion, and the weight of those debaucheries change her physiognomy so that her body can be read as an organic text—her accruing vices and sins visibly change her appearance so that all may see.

In line with naturalist doctrine, Phédo's sins are visited upon her daughter and become equally legible. "Imperturbable, hautaine, officielle, dirait-on, la baronne Sophor d'Ermelinge, en sa fixité sinistre, en sa pâleur de morte mal ressuscitée, est l'impératrice blême d'une macabre Lesbos."⁶² Mendès alludes to the possible genealogy of this "pathologized" and decadent sexuality as originating with Sophor's mother, who not only shared her favors with women, but who is completely morally corrupt.⁶³ Phédo's own sexual past allows her to recognize her daughter's sexual orientation, but because of her aspirations for bourgeois respectability, she

⁵⁹ Catulle Mendès, *Méphistophéla* (Paris: Dentu, 1890), 85.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶³ Sophie's/Sophor's father was also morally and physically degenerate, but his sexual appetite was heterosexual. His penchant for sadism might explain Sophor's sadistic tendencies later in the novel.

decides to find her daughter a husband. Mendès describes in detail the attempts to “normalize” Sophor through marriage, which was often seen as a “cure” for hysterical or sickly women as well as for lesbian attraction.⁶⁴

Like several of the authors who were censored, Mendès envelops his work in the protective coating of science, as if his claim to scientific legitimacy might serve as a prophylactic against the scouring eye of the law.⁶⁵ He had already been embroiled in a censorship case concerning his first work, a comedy in one act, entitled *le Roman d'une nuit*. In that instance, Mendès was fined and sentenced to a month of prison.⁶⁶ After the 1881 and 1882 changes to laws on censorship, Mendès republished his comedy in 1883 and wrote in a preface about how his trial had marked him, and in which he had expressed his gratitude for the support of well-known authors such as Flaubert and Baudelaire who attended the court proceedings.⁶⁷ During the Third Republic some literary works escaped censorship by relying on their “scientific” dimensions, which sometimes proved to be an adequate defense to shield them from censorship.⁶⁸ In *Méphistophéla*, Mendès carefully shapes a character that is repulsed by her sexuality, who does not wish to assume it, but who is ultimately unable to resist.⁶⁹ Her lesbianism is shown to be the result of biological defects and moral degeneracy that are directly related to heredity. Mendès’s here mirrors the scientific discourse of the time, which moved from viewing same-sex sexual orientation exclusively as symptomatic of physical infirmities to thinking of it as a psychological problem as well as a physical one. Tardieu linked female and male homosexuality to abnormally large clitorises or pointy penises, but by the 1880s Charcot and Magnon offered more complex psychological explanations, to accompany the physical ones.

Throughout Mendès novel, Sophie/Sophor is repulsed by her sexual orientation, disgusted by her attraction to women, and the weakness of the flesh, and Mendès is able to maintain a higher “moral” tone in reinforcing the myth of the emotionally desolate lesbian and the impossibility of lesbian love.⁷⁰ Sophie’s disgust at her initial identification with a lesbian community makes this quite clear. Fleeing the hideaway where she had whisked her love interest/childhood friend to whom she unsuccessfully tried to make love, Sophie encounters a group of Parisian lesbians who are returning from the countryside. Sophie’s nascent repugnance

⁶⁴ The recuperation of a lesbian character through heterosexual marriage or relationships is still evident in novels decades later. See, for example, Victor Margueritte, *La Garçonne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1922); Charles Rivière, *Sous le manteau de Fourvière* (Paris: Éditions Charles Anquetil, 1926); and Jean Binet-Valmer, *Sur le sable couchés* (Paris: Flammarion, 1929).

⁶⁵ “En ce temps où la science découvre des vérités pareilles aux prétendus mensonges des antiques magismes et des sorcelleries, où l’expérimentation cesse de démentir les institutions anciennes...” (Mendès, *Méphistophéla*, 3).

⁶⁶ Leclerc, *Crimes écrits*, 373-376.

⁶⁷ Catulle Mendès, *Le Roman d'une nuit* (Paris: H. Doucé, 1883), 22-23.

⁶⁸ Works such as *la Jeunesse rendue aux vieillards* or *les Perversions de l'instinct génésique* avoided censorship through a defense that was based on these works’ scientific or medical value. Stora-Lamarre, *L'Enfer de la Troisième République*, 202-203.

⁶⁹ Mendès, *Méphistophéla*, 36, 225.

⁷⁰ In 1895 the overwhelming majority of novelists had not dared to imagine and to write into existence lesbian characters that were actually happy, fulfilled, and socially integrated figures. In fact, most literary works until 1900 depicted lesbians as victims of pathology. Notable exceptions are Pierre Louÿ’s prose poems, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and novel, *Aphrodite*, and Maurice Montegut’s novel, *Don Juan à Lesbos*. However, Montegut still refers to lesbians as “damned women” even if he does describe them as happy; Waelti-Walter’s describes Montegut’s description of lesbians as “joyful, tender, loving, and happily prosperous.” See Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 62. See also Maurice Montegut, *Don Juan à Lesbos* (Paris: Dentu, 1892).

is described in language that is intended simultaneously to titillate the reader and to condemn the act. “Elle ne pouvait pas se cacher, qui par la bouche qui veut la bouche, par le corps qui veut le corps, elles devaient lui être comparables; hideuses, écœurantes, n’importe c’étaient des espèces des sœurs qu’elle avait.”⁷¹ The hypocritical and routine double play of graphically evoking while apparently condemning same-sex sexualities was a popular technique of Mendès’s, which may aid in explaining how he escaped censure. Mendès was provocative and yet appropriately condemning of lesbianism, and he clearly pandered to the entrenched Catholic sensibilities still present in French social institutions with his consistent religious references and Judeo-Christian moralizing. While Catholics may have considered Mendès an immoral writer, his use of Catholicism as a moral compass buttresses the argument that the novel was meant to inform and instruct the public about the dangers of lesbianism.⁷²

From the opening chapters of the novel Mendès places young Sophie under the sign of the demonic with his descriptions of a strange, infernal laughter that rings in her ears. Frequent references to religious iconography infuses the text with the religious framework that one would imagine in a novel entitled *Méphistophéla*, including a tediously long hallucinatory black mass in which “la Démone possédée” chooses Sophie/Sophor as the elected one to know the “gospel of the new caresses,” to be the teacher of glorious and new mysteries of hedonism. This melodramatic scene serves at least two purposes. First, this scene implicates a long Judeo-Christian history that links sexuality with sinfulness in order to label further the lesbian as inherently evil. In a overwhelmingly Catholic country, Mendès’ description invites the reader to draw parallels between Lucifer, the beautiful fallen angel who defies God out of his pride, and Sophie, who out of her own pride as the beautiful enchantress, is able to mesmerize women with her stares, to sow regrets in souls and to enjoy her “diabolical triumph.” because of her pride.⁷³ Few can resist the temptation of her beauty, her curious charm, or her cruelly forceful personality. Thus, an accusation that Mendès was pandering to the sexually curious or decadent could be defended against with an appeal to the heavy-handed religious condemnations of sexual deviance the novel puts on display.

A potential prosecutor would have a difficult time establishing a case that the novel advocated a moral position or behavior incompatible with the ideals of the Republic, not the least of which was the idea that women should be wives and mothers.⁷⁴ And yet, one cannot read the erotic passages the novel contains without sensing that Mendès deliberately attempts to enflame the reader’s senses and tease the imagination. For all of the vituperative condemnation and moralizing narration, the other side of the equation is that there was still this licentious filigree that runs through the text.

VI. Conclusion

The narrative peepshow is always a chiascuro rendering of lesbianism that is as much or more motivated by male heterosexual desire or disgust than by an attempt to intelligently or accurately

⁷¹ Mendès, *Méphistophéla*, 225.

⁷² The 1903 edition states in the introduction that this novel “est un des plus effrayants, par conséquent un des plus salutaires exemples que la littérature ait jamais offerts au Pêché transgresseur des lois naturelles” (Ibid., 12).

⁷³ Ibid., 449.

⁷⁴ To solidify Sophie’s status as monster, demon, and outlaw, she fails both at marriage and at motherhood. Her refusal to give herself to her husband on her wedding night results in her brutal rape, and sixteen years later, she lusts after her daughter born from that fateful night.

portray it. An over reliance on the “truth” value of social institutions’ discourses, particularly in the medical and psychological fields, caused many authors to reduce literary depictions of lesbians to redundant platitudes without taking into account the richness of their life experiences. This resulted in often a one dimensional or flat character whose descriptions were more about her pathologies than the uniqueness of the particular protagonist. Thinking of lesbianism as an identity rather than a sexual act was the result, in part, of the medicalization of sexuality in which the lesbian was pathologized, demonized, and commercialized, but other factors contributed to the reductive characterizations of lesbians. First, literary representations of lesbianism were almost exclusively written by men who were heterosexual who observed but did not participate in lesbian social networks. Second, women authors, as lesbians or bisexual women, were slow to write about their experiences or to produce novels in which lesbians appeared. Thus, the reader is often to asked to read between the blinds—he never “sees” what the author means because the author is not relying on experience or knowledge.⁷⁵ The author asks the reader to fill in the blanks, to imagine, to participate in a voyeuristic ritual in which he cannot know, see, or fully experience the erotic acts of the female characters. What would we see through the half-closed slats of the “jalousies” if they were opened for the reader?

Perhaps the reader would see the plenitude of sexual expression that was wholly gratifying and not reliant on social institution’s enforced attitudes on sex—mainly that a woman required a man for sexual pleasure. Baudelaire’s censored poems *Lesbos* provided the genesis for the conception of lesbians as “les femmes damnées. His poems, in particular *Delphine et Hippolyte*, also reinforced the idea that physical love between women can be nothing be sterile and incomplete. A contrary view was hard to come by. To have admitted that physical and emotional intimacy between members of the same sex, particularly lesbians, could be fulfilling and guiltless would have been to disavow further the very foundations of patriarchy...men were superior to women, that women were dependent on men. Baudelaire’s portrayal of lesbians as “damned women” rather than as Sapphists, tribades, or other words denoting women who loved women, was not a linguistic happenstance, but a representational habit imbued with strong ideological undercurrents. As Mary-Jo Bonnet has pointed out, this term meant that women were not only excluded from the City of Man, but they were also excluded from the City of God.⁷⁶ Thus, “les femmes damnées” immediately evokes their ostracisation by society and condemnation by God. The use of a more sexualized term, such as tribade, fricatrelle, fricatrice, gougnotte, stresses the physical pleasure that women could give to one another, and thereby undercut the “âpre stérilité” of their “jouissance” as Baudelaire so famously described it.⁷⁷

During the years under consideration here, women in France were increasingly demanding the right to vote, to an education, to work, and to live their lives as they chose. The nineteenth century saw the rise of French feminism with the such notable militants as Flora Tristan, Jeanne Deroin, George Sand, Louise Michel, Hubertine Auclerc, and Madeleine Pelletier, to name a few of the woman who railed and fought against social inequities between

⁷⁵ There were a few female writers who wrote about or had lesbian themes in their works in which women were not pathologized. One would think of Colette, Renée Vivien, Natalie Clifford Barney, and possibly Lucie Delarue-Mardrus. However, women writers such as Liane de Pougy or Adrienne St-Agen followed the heteronormative modality of lesbian representation by showing lesbianism to be a result of pathology or moral degeneracy.

⁷⁶ Bonnet, *Les relations amoureuses entre femmes du XVI au XX siècle*, 235.

⁷⁷ Charles Baudelaire, “Délphine et Hippolyte,” in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1980), 104-106.

women and men. The Saint-Simeons had argued for free love, the right of a woman to love and to sleep with whomever she wanted without social stigma. Louise Michel was portrayed as an emasculating virago who helped to lead the Commune and almost cause the destruction of Paris. The upsurge of feminist discourse, women's groups, suffragette movements, women's publications, and women's organizations were indicative of challenges to French patriarchy.

In the vast majority of novels of the Belle Époque that treated lesbianism, the lesbian character was denounced either as an aberration, or as a moral degenerate, or as helpless victim of pathology and genetics. Those novels that subscribed to the State's dominant discourses often avoided censure even if they tested the boundaries of lesbian depiction. Women could enjoy same-sex relations, if the women remained in the service of the state by providing children, tending the home, and providing sexual outlets for their husbands. Lesbianism in that case could be viewed perhaps as distasteful, but not particularly threatening or decadent, but a consequence of natures too sentimental and poetic to be satisfied with the less emotive and romantic male race. For instance, In *Claudine en ménage* written in 1903, Colette's character Renaud gives an interesting explanation of Sapphism when Claudine confides in him that she wishes to have an affair with Rézi, a beautiful Austrian woman. Renaud's reaction is not one of disgust, disbelief, or condemnation in the face of his wife's avowal of her desire to not only cheat on him but to do so with a woman. His reaction is not the anticipated response of a bourgeois husband who allegedly represents the head of the family. He not only is understanding and amused, but he actively facilitates their liaison by renting the two women an apartment for their assignations. Claudine makes it clear, however, that her attachment and devotion to her husband are never really in jeopardy. She never contemplates leaving hearth and home, never expresses serious dissatisfaction with her husband, and falls desperately ill after discovering that her husband cheats on her with Rézi.

Another female writer, Adrienne Saint Agen, uses a similar ideological framework in her novel, *Amants Féminins* (1902). When her character Claudette kills herself by taking chloroform, it is her love interest, Paloma, who finds her body and the journal in which she had avowed her desire for Paloma. Even if Saint Agen does not really dare discuss the physical passion that might have been, the lust that was inspired, the physical craving that Claudette felt for Paloma—a desire so strong that it leads her to suicide, she does subscribe to a very early Collettian vision of lesbianism: it is a refuge for women who have been brutalized by men, whose hearts have been broken. The solace, the tenderness, the affection, the sentimentality that women can bear toward one another is enough to drive them into each other's arms, but is never enough to keep them there.⁷⁸ The author limits the extent of Claudette's explicitly libidinal imagination to kissing Paloma deliriously, to kiss so madly that one faints, but she never contemplates moving beyond the passion of those kisses, except to describe how she would love to contemplate Paloma's nude body.

Et puis je voudrais...oh!...la voir toute, sans voiles, dans l'épanouissement de sa nudité sculpturale...Oh! repaître mon regard de ce fascinant spectacle jusqu'à ce qu'éblouie je ne distingue plus les contours harmonieux, les lignes impeccables de

⁷⁸ Saint Agen explains the impetus that caused Claudette's suicide in this way, "ce qui l'a poussée vers moi [Paloma], c'est la nature délicate propre à notre sexe, laquelle, ennemie des sensations brutales, aime pour aimer, non pour jouir, est fidèle d'instinct et par son besoin, exclusive dans ses inclinations, nature que possède toute femme vraiment femme et qui était la nôtre" (Saint-Agen, *Amants féminins*, 74).

ce beau corps. Après je la verrais toujours au dedans de moi, je n'aurais plus qu'à évoquer le passé récent pour que surgissent à mes yeux ces formes provocantes.⁷⁹

The memory of Paloma's harmoniously sculptured body is Claudette's goal, but what the effect of that memory will be or is hoped to be is left for the reader to interject. In her diary Claudette writes that she refuses to imagine what it would be like to possess Paloma.⁸⁰ This novel and Colette's provide moral conclusions that coincide with certain aspects of the dominant ideology, at least to a certain extent. Claudine remains with her husband until his death and never has another lesbian affair after Rézi—but she also never provides children for the Republic. Claudette also refuses to participate in the service of the state by reproducing, but she kills herself and thus rids the state of another potential vehicle of “contagion.”

Some scholars have estimated that male authors wrote hundreds of books with lesbian themes during the fin-de-siècle period. The Third Republic's erratic impulse to stifle certain types of literary representations of lesbianism may be contextualized in a broader political landscape that included many challenges to the bourgeois ideology of the fin-de-siècle. Lesbianism, in some versions, was symbolic of the sterile commodification of art that Baudelaire decried, and his forging of the image of the lesbian as damned women subtly and insidiously influenced depictions of lesbianism for decades. The decadent writers turned to the theme of lesbianism as one of the “fleurs du mal” whose exotic perfume provided the spice needed to market their works. The immense commercial success of many of these novels indicates the audience demand for such representations, and Colette's first novel, *Claudine à l'école*—a work based on Claudine's voyeuristic narrative of lesbian relationships in a rural school in France including her own desire for a new “institutrice”—is considered by some scholars to be the all-time best seller in France.⁸¹ Adolphe Belot's *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*, published thirty years earlier was to remain his largest financial success, and the allure of the novel was its moralistic treatment of a love story between two women—the story of a woman who married, but would not consummate her marriage because of her love for another woman. She eventually dies as a consequence of her unhealthy vice. A striking number of novels were published between 1880 and 1920 that either related the story of a lesbian character or had lesbian characters sprinkled throughout the story. What have we learned from examining the handful of those novels that met with censorship? Throughout this period the steady stream of lesbian-themed novels or literary representations undermine claims censorship rendered lesbianism/Sapphism invisible. As I have illustrated in this chapter, many various discourses were marshaled to “construct” the lesbian, most often in an unfavorable light. One can only imagine how the conception of lesbianism might have been different for the thousands of woman who loved woman if they had not been characterized as insatiable sex addicts, nervous hysterics, unnatural moral defects, or physically infirm. Authors during the late years of the Third Republic, such as Colette and Claude Cahun, have talked about how novels with lesbian themes influenced them. Certainly, not all women who read these novels and identified as lesbians internalized their derogatory discourses, but the novels did offer a type of mirror in which they

⁷⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁸¹ Claude Pichois in the Pléiade's introduction to Colette in volume 1 states that Colette's *Claudine à l'école* was probably the all time best seller in France in terms of copies sold, but it certainly ranks highest when one considers the spin-offs from this literary phenomenon such as plays, clothes, etc. Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), lxvii.

could identify themselves. The medicalization of these women categorized them as pathological subjects that told them and society in general that they were actually physically defective or morally flawed.

The confusing aspect of censorship, here as in many cases, is the uneven and arbitrary manner in which it was applied. Despite my best efforts to discern some sort of coherent principles, there does not appear to be a hard and fast rule to explain the imposition of legal sanctions on some novels and not on others. In this chapter I used the Mendès novel, *Méphistophéla*, as a yardstick against which to measure the censored novels between 1880 and 1900 that either had lesbian themes or characters. In each case, the novels had sexual scenes that were presumably too graphic, too daring, and too illustrative. One would be hard pressed to read Mendès's novel, with its descriptions of Sophie/Sophor's ability to attract and seduce women, presumably even "straight" women, and her long spiral into utter debauchery—everything from sado-masochism to orgies—, and argue that it was less suggestive or graphic than the censored novels treated in this chapter. What I would like to suggest is that censorship might have been, to some extent, a twist on the old phrase: "it's not what you know, but who you know." In the case of censorship, one might say it was not "what you wrote but who wrote it." Literary stature and recognition provided a certain amount of protection from the inquiring judiciary. As noted earlier, Mendès himself had been hauled before the court for his comic, *le Roman d'une nuit*; however, many years later, as an established writer, journalist, composer, his reputation as a solid fixture in the world of the literati made him less easy to attack. Certainly by the time of publication of *Méphistophéla* he was a well-known cultural commentator. Of the four authors who were censored for their works discussing lesbian relations, not one of them was considered a serious writer at the time of their trials. Even Rachilde, who was censored for her novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, was a young and unknown novelist when that happened in 1884.

To support this assertion one can consider famous authors such as Edmond de Goncourt or Jules Barbey d'Aureville. They pondered their own escapes from the legal morass of censorship trials, and they knew that literary stature and cultural significance probably played a role in their escape from the censor's heavy hand.⁸² Goncourt wrote about his own increasing anxiety about potential litigation surrounding his novel, *La Fille Elisa*, after the republican newspaper, *Le Tintamarre* published a satire of his work on April Fool's Day in 1877 and the newspaper's managing editor and sub-editor were immediately charged with "outrage aux bonnes mœurs."⁸³ This work was staunchly heterocentric but was denounced by French jurists as a crime against public decency because it was nothing more than "la suite d'actes de débauche et de prostitution, soit dans les sentiments exprimés, qui sont la glorification continuelle de ces actes, et tournent en ridicule les choses les plus dignes de respect."⁸⁴ But, Goncourt and Mendès were untouchable in the 1890s: the retelling of *La Fille Elisa* might have resuscitated legal inquiries into the transgressiveness of the acclaimed Goncourt's work and provoke "cause célèbre." Likewise, when Mendès published *Méphistophéla*, the watchmen of

⁸² In his correspondence of February 17, 1880, Barbey d'Aureville also wrote about his fear of being taken to court for censorship. Barbey, however, stated that "Pour moi, c'est pas la condamnation qui m'inquiète, c'est l'exhibition de ma personne (devant un tribunal) qui me fait vomir...." (Qtd. in Leclerc, *Crimes écrits*, 287).

⁸³ The Goncourt brothers had already been charged with *outrage aux bonnes mœurs* for an article published December 15, 1852 in the newspaper, *Paris*, called "Voyage du n° 43 de la rue Saint-George au n° 1 de la rue Lafitte."

⁸⁴ Zévaès, *Les Procès littéraires*, 375.

literary morality hardly blinked, because to do so would have been possibly to incite a maelstrom of condemnation from other writers, such as happened in the censorship trial of Louis Desprez for his novel, *Autour d'un clocher* when Zola and others publically condemned the court's actions. Rachilde, whose salon and own journalistic career were established by the mid 1890s was able to publish *La Jongleuse* or *L'heure sexuelle* even though they were hardly less gender transgressive than *Monsieur Vénus*; however, she, too, avoided further censorship. Justice was not so blind as to ignore the political consequences of a trial that was not confined to a tribunal but that could be carried over into the court of public opinion. It was much safer to prosecute an unknown writer, such as a young Paul Adam or a young Catulle Mendès, but the stakes were much higher once the author attacked was an accepted part of the literary establishment. It was not uncommon for authors of significant literary status to defend their colleagues, thereby drawing more attention to the potentially offensive material as well as denouncing restrictions on freedom of speech.⁸⁵ Literary cachet, celebrity, and recognizable literary friends probably all converged to protect certain authors from the moralizing of the French judicial system.

The evolution of social mores and shifting governments might also account for some of the discrepancies in the determination of exactly what could and could not be stated regarding same sex relations between women. The private space of the home and the perceived "female" spaces to which women had been regulated were no longer secure zones that enforced female fidelity. The spaces conventionally denominated as female such as the salon, boudoir, and boutique were no longer safety zones free from the threat of sexual temptation, because spaces of traditional female sociability could now become now potential locals of assignations. Unobserved and unregulated female bodies in close proximity and within traditionally permitted feminine spaces could now become the sites of female eroticism. Millinery shops, salons, tailor shops, carriages, and masked balls are but a few of the places that became associated with potential lesbian couplings. A woman's fidelity might be suspect no matter where she traveled and in whose company she was. The presumption that congregations of women pose no threat to male desire might no longer be valid. The articulations of such possibilities, while French male privilege, hegemony, and sexuality were being questioned, sufficed on occasion to draw the attention of the troubled Third Republic's legal apparatus.

In the final analysis, these trials dealt with transgressive representation and not with illegal sexual behavior...or did they? It is true that these unfortunate writers dared to pull aside the boudoir curtains, illuminate the quivering shadows, and portray a sexual conduct that was becoming a sexual identity, but perhaps the real cause for judicial concern was their blurring of art with social reality. These authors dared to name, depict and introduce into the sacred space of French literature the figure of the lesbian—who might have previously existed in the private space, but had no legal recognition or status in the public sphere. One must ask what these literary representations meant to the idea of a lesbian community or to its formation. Although some scholars have argued that censorship had a "chilling effect" on lesbianism so that it worked to repress and to erase to some extent the lesbian's existence, the equally pressing question might be: how did these permitted representations engender and promote lesbianism. The proliferation

⁸⁵ Mendès relates how many notable authors attended or supported him with their presence during the censorship proceedings, not the least of which were Flaubert, Baudelaire, and Léon Goslan. "Certes les maîtres...qui étaient venus à l'audience pour me donner un témoignage de sympathie dont je serai éternellement fier et pour me défendre par l'autorité de leur présence..." (Mendès, *Le Roman d'une nuit*, 22-23). See Sylvain Goudemare and Emmanuel Pierrat, *L'Édition en process* (Clamecy: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2003), 28.

of lesbian themed novels during the Third Republic, and especially during the Belle Époque, confirm the arbitrary nature of censorship during this time—at least with respect to lesbian representations. Censorship was inconsistent, ineffective, and random, but it was also a menacing tool to be wielded by the government or its citizens. The irony is that censorship was often not only ineffective but also counter-productive. Despite the desired chilling effect that censorship theoretically had, lesbian representations continued to flourish and to provide the readers with a window into the imagined intimate lives of lesbians. In the intersections between invisibility/silence and visibility/description did there exist a space of resistance for the lesbian that was more free and celebratory? Consideration of these censored novels allows us to see that numerous authors used a variety of different discursive registers or models to construct representations of lesbians. The legal system could not stamp out their literary existence. Yet, what is also clear is that these representations did more than describe non-normative sexualities: they were instrumental in the evolution of a sexual identity that became a cipher for numerous other social anxieties.

Chapter 2:
Imagining a New Gomorrah: Race, Politics, and the Enemy Within

“La peau blanche, veinée de bleu ou de rose, et faiblement ambré, par son analogie avec le marbre et certaines pierres légèrement teintées, me semble plus esthétique que toute autre.”
—Léon Daudet, *L’amour de femme*

Among the many discourses of power contributing to the construction of “lesbianism” one cannot overlook the importance of racial commentary.⁸⁶ Issues of race and the discourses surrounding race and/or ethnicity were fundamental to the organizing and creation of many of the bourgeois discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in political thought, law, and medicine. The slippage between the scientific definitions of “race” and cultural identities was inevitable as the international circulation of people and goods, including the particularly significant forms of circulation that were part of colonialism: increased economic, linguistic, sexual and cultural exchanges between various groups. The impulse to order and to “normalize” stemmed from representations of cultural dissonance that contravened accepted ideas of racial purity and sexual virtue, which were the ideological backbone of the Third Republic. Depictions of non-Europeans as intellectually and morally inferior, savage, pagan, and overly libidinous permeated the debates around race, and the idea of “métissage” became a cynosural preoccupation of France. The transgression of a bourgeois imperative grounded in white endogamy raised anxieties and virulent debate regarding, for instance, the race and the place of “mixed blood” children who were the result of “concubinage” and/or marriage. These cultural encounters and collisions fueled State debates that framed issues of national well-being in terms of normality and abnormality, bourgeois values/respectability and sexual deviance, and moral degeneracy and eugenic cleansing. George Mosse and Ann Stoler, among other scholars, have argued convincingly that the result of these intertwined and interdependent discourses was a demonization of non-heteronormative sexuality that made “unconventional sex a national threat, and thus put a premium on managed sexuality for the health of a state.”⁸⁷ Deviant sexuality was not only an object of medico-scientific discourse, but it was a powerful tool for the incitement patriotic and nationalist sentiments. As Todorov has pointed out, “racism flourished in the shadow of science,” and as a corollary I would add that the truth of “science” was also co-opted to promote political agendas.⁸⁸ Ann Stoler argues in *Race and the Education of Desire* that race and sexuality are always imbricated in the other. She points out that if Foucault did not adequately articulate and exhaustively explain the link between the technologies of sexuality and their imbrication in the construction of race through the biopolitical state, he does explicitly link them both to biopower. Thus, if one of the primary objectives of biopower

⁸⁶ I refuse the idea of race as an ontology, but use it in this dissertation, as a social and political construction whose criteria were protean according to the regime which created the categories.

⁸⁷ George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985), 936-968. See also Ann Lara Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 10-22, 59-60. For further discussion on race and sex, see Sander Gilman, *Differences and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 129.

⁸⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 157.

were to “normalize” society, especially to discipline and regulate the body, then sexuality would ostensibly be a primary target of its focus. Bound up in the need to normalize the body was the fear of cultural and phenotypical mixing that would weaken the French body politic through the production of less healthy citizens.⁸⁹ This “normalizing society” that systematically sought to increase its control over the body throughout the nineteenth century inevitably linked racism to sexuality because of a tenacious desire to safeguard ideas of “Frenchness.” As anxieties about racial purity and the maintenance of the essence of “Frenchness” increased with the awareness of *métissage* and the attendant problems of legal status, categorization, and other consequences for these “dissimilar” children of the Republic so did the implicit link between sexuality and race increase proportionately. France’s rapid colonial expansion and economic growth beginning in the early nineteenth century, along with the influx of European neighbors, subjected it to new social dynamics that contributed to cultural anxiety and a paranoia that centered racial discourse on the “internal enemy.”⁹⁰ Elisa Camiscioli argues in *Reproducing the French Race* that whiteness was a prerequisite for citizenship and that the anxieties around *métissage* were not merely racial but also became cultural. The shift in the treatment of indigenous women foregrounds a widespread belief that “colonial administrators increasingly viewed native women as contaminating elements with the power to purge European men of their civilized western mores.”⁹¹ For instance, a man with an African or Asian concubine was frequently accused of having “gone native,” which meant that he had relinquished his pure French identity. For the last decade scholars have begun to explore and to excavate the importance of racial theorizing and sexuality in colonial France. A leading historical scholar of colonial discourse and sexuality has commented on the dearth of research discussing the association between sexual practices and race outside of a heterosexual context.⁹² As one might imagine, the little existent research available is mostly centered on questions of male homosexuality rather than lesbianism.⁹³ While same-sex love among women in a colonial context occasionally merited a footnote or a paragraph, little inquiry was made into the subject. This should not be understood to mean that questions of race did not enter into the imagined and/or socially constructed concept of the lesbian. In fact, I would suggest that quite the contrary is true. This chapter will attempt to uncover the connections between assumptions about race and assumptions about lesbianism while situating those suppositions in their historical context. A look at the bourgeois ideas of race highlights their recombinant elements, this “va-et-vient” that nourished the socially constructed images of lesbians. In particular, a review of the literary depictions of these women between 1880 and 1940 provides an interesting panorama of the shifting French political and social views regarding other countries. The disparity between the manner in which male and female same-sex relations were treated in France, has led one leading scholar to write, “[s]i la

⁸⁹ Mary Louise Roberts does a wonderful job of discussing how the French legislatures appropriated the woman’s body for social regeneration. The Anti-Malthusian movement, laws taxing the unmarried, and the incentives for childbirth are but a few examples of how sexuality became a concern of the State. See Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Restructuring Gender in Post-War France, 1917-1927*.

⁹⁰ Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 10. See also Jarod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15-17.

⁹¹ Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 80-81.

⁹² Robert Aldrich, “Homosexuality in the French Colonies,” in *Homosexuality in French History and Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Merrick and Michael Sibalís (Binghamton: Harrington Park Press, 2001), 201.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

pédérastie ne sied guère au coq gaulois, il semblerait que les Français aient plus de facilité à admettre un lesbianisme de salon ou de trottoir, avec une indulgence qui doit tout au mépris.”⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the discourses of many socio-political institutions still labeled lesbianism as an essentially imported vice that could circulate, contaminate, and insinuate itself into the fabric of French society. The nationalities and geographic regions change in the literary landscapes of different novels, but the insistence that this is the vice of the “Other,” this etiological alterity, is indicative of the deep ambivalence towards lesbianism and “Others” in various segments of French cultural life from the political to the artistic.⁹⁵ However, this chapter does not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue of French novels that provide examples of the crossing of racialization and lesbianism. Rather, I have chosen certain novels whose content provides windows into how sexuality and racial identity politics can be read in the construction of the lesbian as a literary object.

My purpose is to show that the specter of lesbianism not only haunted the Third Republic, but it was emblematic for many of an underlying political destabilization. A primary preoccupation of this chapter is to illustrate how certain political discourses influenced literary conceptions of the lesbian as coming from “elsewhere.” Why was the lesbian often “coded” as being of another race or ethnicity, and how might her racial otherness reflect France’s socio-political climate? The identity politics of lesbianism reflects various French anxieties about national aspirations, security, and nationalism. The mapping of racial/ethnic difference inscribed in lesbian representations speaks to cultural anxiety about the legibility of sexual difference as well as its “foreign” component, which make the lesbian suspicious and possibly treacherous. In particular, it offers an analysis of the mimetic relationship between lesbian representation and various political/sexual scandals that particularly marked the lesbian as Germanic or Jewish.

I. From Greece to Gomorrah: Crossing the Classical Isthmus

One of the earliest commercial successes in the period I am considering dealing with Sapphic love was Pierre Louÿ’s set of prose poems, *Chansons de Bilitis*, which claimed to recuperate lesbianism’s Classical heritage through the allegedly newly discovered poems of Sappho’s lover. Although the subject of lesbianism had been steadily working its way onto the literary stage for more than twenty years, at the time of the publication of *Chansons* in 1894 this collection of prose poems marked a stark departure from the already established trope of the lesbian as a sensationalized curiosity—a pathologized being from the margins of society. While the poems were clear about the lesbian relationships they portrayed, they were not the typical adventure on the seedy side. (Some critics have argued that the poems did still cater to a predominately male audience for their titillation.)⁹⁶ Pierre Louÿs attempted to legitimize this alternative sexuality through tracing a lyrical reminder of the ancient origins of Sapphic love. This collection of poems found great literary success due, in part, to Louÿs’s claim that it was

⁹⁴ Laure Murat, *La loi du genre: une histoire culturelle du ‘troisième sexe’* (Paris: Fayard, 2006), 276.

⁹⁵ One can take the example of Charles Maurras, one of the leaders of the movement *Action Française* and his essay on *Le Romantisme féminin* in which he condemns four contemporary female francophone poets such as Renée Vivien for being “... in essence, ‘sexually different and racially impure’” because they are not French by birth or not French in spirit.” Elaine Marks noted that “... if they manifest any sign of the ‘risqué lesbien,’ they are a danger to the nation” (Elaine Marks, “‘Sappho 1900’; Imaginary Renée Vivien and the Rear of the Belle Époque,” *Yale French Studies* 75 [1988]: 178-179).

⁹⁶ Gretchen Schultz, “Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity,” *GLQ* 7, no. 3 (2001): 377-389.

merely a translation of the poetry of a courtesan and contemporary of Sappho. The “translation” of these poems, which includes sections of elegies and of epithets, creates a sympathetic celebration of lesbianism; however, it was Louÿs’s erudition and elegant sensuality that made the book memorable and assured his place in French literary history. Despite Louÿs’s flattering treatment of lesbianism, his reliance on Classical antecedents as the narrative framework still displaced lesbianism both temporally and geographically as essentially a Greek import.

The next year, Louÿs followed up the successful *Chansons de Bilitis* with his novel, *Aphrodite*, which is also set in Classical times. Using lesbian characters as a leitmotif or as a backdrop for the exploits of the great courtesan, Chrysis, Louÿs explores the fluctuation of sexuality through Chrysis’s occasional peccadillo with other women. These works are noteworthy for at least two reasons: first, neither of Louÿs’ works labels lesbianism as a psychological manifestation of genetic weakness, and secondly, he does not attempt to provide moral admonitions against this “vice.” Bilitis and Chrysis both move through life “with no particular distinguishing characteristics except the sex of their lovers. Louÿs is as far from the psychopathology of sexuality as it is possible to be.”⁹⁷ The temporal distance and grandeur of an ancient culture provide a less restrictive space for Louÿs’ idyllic and joyous concept of same-sex desire to flourish. Even though positive representations of lesbianism were rare, the portrayal of its “Otherness” through divergent national or ethnic origins was common, and this foreign element reflected different social and political anxieties in France. The Hellenic and classic legitimacy bestowed on “Sapphic” love by Louÿs provided a safe historical distance from which the reader could admire the beauty of the female form and same-sex sexual interaction while safely interjecting himself into the story without contemporary codes of moral censorship being activated. For despite some of the soft eroticism of some of Louÿ’s prose poems (for example, “Le Désir”, “Les Seins de Mnasdika” or “Tendresses”) Louÿ’s erudition and elegant writing not only stayed the censor’s pen but also justified a reader’s interest in the subject matter as cultural rather than merely prurient.

Still, within the classical setting of *Aphrodite* that Louÿs used to legitimate its lesbian subplots, one can detect subtle inflections of anti-Jewish ideology that was consonant with the anti-Dreyfusard movement of the time. The idea of the Jew as a traitor was approaching its zenith, and the narrative of *Aphrodite* is a warning about the consequences of misplaced trust in the assimilation of a non-affiliated foreigner. *Aphrodite* was written and published during the opening years of the Dreyfus Affair in which the festering anti-Semitism in France spewed onto the national and international stage revealing deep fissures between the Third Republic’s ideals of universalism and the deep currents of racism of its citizens. The fallout from this *cause célèbre* shaped French political and cultural life for decades, and it concatenated questions of race (Jewishness) and subversive sexuality (homosexuality) in a very clear manner.

Louÿs’s deft description of the main protagonist as a beautiful, blond, blue-eyed Galilean woman (Jewish) who comes from the “Aryan” race that hails from “beyond the sands” might appear a gratuitous esthetic choice even to the careful reader. While Louÿs seems on the one hand to collapse the Aryan and the Semitic races in the character of Chrysis, he also reinforces her Jewish origins by revealing that her birth name was Sarah. The choice of such a traditional name reminds the reader of the Biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, who at 100 and 90 years old respectively had a son, Isaac, and thereby became the progenitors of the Jewish people.

⁹⁷ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 63.

Examining these ostensibly innocuous details in a broader historical context offers a more nuanced reading in which Louÿs is playing with the very legibility of race—a concern in late nineteenth-century France as ideas about race were increasingly contested. Jonathan Freedman has argued the idea of race is particularly problematic for Judaism, because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Jewishness had become a site of profound ambiguity and anxiety for elements of French society. French born Jews, who were able to look and act like their Gentile counterparts, were juxtaposed to the immigrating tide of Eastern European Jews who clung to their language, their religious practices, and their traditional dress. The Jews' resistance to definition or categorization rehearsed fears within France about Frenchness, loyalty to the State, and by extension the debates around colonialism and *métissage*. Nowhere was this clearer than in the trial of Alfred Dreyfus for treason.

II. The Semitic Scare: Sexuality, Spies, and the State

The *Dreyfus Affair* allowed for a clearer expression of a number of anti-Semitic ideologies of the French population that had been present implicitly for decades. In one version of anti-Semitism the Jew was considered an internationalist without a country, and thus, without any national loyalty. Since the 1791, when the Jews were granted French citizenship, many had become increasingly more assimilated, losing their accents, their distinctive clothing, living in non-Jewish neighborhoods, etc. Assimilated Jews were able to pass, that is, to interact in French society without the traditional markers of their cultural and religious differences. Ironically, it was the very demands of the Republic—to assimilate—that rendered them suspicious to some eyes, because the ability to dissimilate and to ingratiate oneself were also necessary characteristics of spies. The nineteenth century's mania to make the body legible to the State was not limited to detecting deviant sexualities but also applied to Jewishness. The newspaper *Libre Parole* described Jews in the following way as late as 1891:

The principal signs by which a Jew may be recognized are thus: the famous hooked nose, frequently blinking eyes, teeth tightly together, ears sticking out, fingernails that are square rather than almond shaped, a torso too long, flat feet, rounded knees, extraordinarily protruding ankles, the limp and melting hand of a hypocrite and traitor. They frequently have one arm longer than the other.⁹⁸

This was all the more disconcerting in light of the fact that Dreyfus himself had blue eyes and blond hair! His failure to fit the culturally imposed stereotype of racial characteristics inculpated rather than exonerated him; for his blond hair and blue eyes were only further evidence of a Jew's ability to pass—to dissimilate his origins—and to deceive the “French” while insinuating himself into the virile symbol of French protection and defense—the army.

Thus, Chrysis offers a more stereotypical representation of Jewishness than one might think originally. She, like Dreyfus, speaks several languages, which allows her to trade easily among the various peoples who visit Alexandria, and this reflects the prevalent stereotype that Jews were multi-lingual so as to better profit from others.⁹⁹ The Jew's linguistic skills allow for easier cultural access and power, which will further allow him or her to feign adherence to a

⁹⁸ Qtd. in Erin G. Carlston, “Secret Dossiers: Sexuality, Race, and Treason in Proust and the Dreyfus Affair,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 944.

⁹⁹ Pierre Louÿs, *Aphrodite, mœurs antiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 48.

country, to a people, to a community to which they have no real affective bonds. This was an accusation leveled against Dreyfus and one that is predominant in *Aphrodite*.¹⁰⁰ In fact, this beautiful seductress and courtesan is able to rise to the highest levels of Alexandrian society, mixing with nobles, politicians, and great leaders, but it is her greed, her uncontrollable lust for material wealth, that leads to the murder of a high priestess and the theft of priceless religious objects belonging to the goddess, Aphrodite. Thus, this blond, blue-eyed Chrysis who is considered the incarnation of Aphrodite is the cause of the ultimate sacrilege—the defiling of the temple. The invaluable religious objects are hidden in the temple of Hermanibus, which is emblematic of the miscegenation of cultures, Greek and Egyptian, thus Western and Eastern. Interestingly, this cultural/religious amalgamation represents a dangerous hybridity in which deities from two different cultures are grafted together with disastrous results. Chrysis (Sarah) is ultimately a Jewish courtesan who defiles the temple of her patron goddess, Aphrodite, attempts to usurp her place, and then as a result of her conniving and rapacious sexuality betrays the people in the land where she has made her home and riches. Even the most innocent and rehabilitative classical setting that might justify lesbian elements of the novel is thus interwoven with a textual coding that ties sexuality with race.

Less sympathetic male authors contemporary with Louÿs were more explicit in linking lesbianism to Judaism. As the racialization of the lesbian moved across the Mediterranean basin, migrating from Lesbos to the Israelite city of Gomorrah, the very term Gomorrah became coterminous with lesbianism. The purported Semitic origins for this deviant sexuality were reproduced in the titles of such period novels as Catulle Mendès *Zo'har*, Apollinaire's *La Fin de Babylone*, or Souillaic's *Zé Boïm, étude des mœurs*. This apocalyptic signifier became the linguistic isthmus from Hellenic Muse to Jewish lesbian—a metonym for traitor, sexual invert, and wily master of disguise.

Frequently intertwined with the imagined menace of foreign nationals eager to corrupt French polity was another enemy: the lurking specter of the stateless Jew whose moral degeneracy indubitably engendered disloyalty and sexual deviancy. In late nineteenth-century France various psychosexual-racial discourses codified Jews as liars, perverts, hysterics, and traitors who composed a nation within a nation.¹⁰¹ The commonalities between literary representations of lesbianism and Jews as unfaithful and moral are also reproduced in such novels as Jean Lorrain's *Le Tréteau* and *Maison pour Dames* or Félicien Champsaur's *Dinah Samuel*.¹⁰² Both Lorrain's and Champsaur's literary characters were often modeled on recognizable artists, demi-mondaines, and socialites, and the main protagonists in *Dinah Samuel* and *Le Tréteau* are ostensibly based on Sarah Bernhardt.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ This was the tenth item in the articles of accusation. See Carlston, "Secret Dossiers," 944.

¹⁰¹ Jan Goldstein, "The Wandering Jew and the Problem of Psychiatric Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-Siècle France," *Journal of Contemporary History*, no. 20: 521-522. See also Pierre Birnbaum, *Anti-Semitism in France: A Political History from Léon Blum to the Present*, trans. Miriam Kochan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 147-177.

¹⁰² Jean Lorrain, *Le Tréteau* (Paris: Jean Bosc et Cie, 1906). Jean Lorrain, *Maison pour dames* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1908). Félicien Champsaur, *Dinah Samuel* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1882).

¹⁰³ Although, neither Linda Monti nor Myrhine are specifically coded as Jewish, the transparent modeling of the main "La Monti" on Sarah Bernhardt invites the reader to make this connection. This assumption is further encouraged by the reproduction of a signed photograph of Bernhardt at the end of the book. Paul Dean provides a detailed analysis of the cryptonyms of various artists used in *Dinah Samuel* and excerpts from Louÿs' own chronicles that form part of this novel. See Paul Smith, "Art and Literature," *French Studies* LXI, no. 1 (2007): 8-9.

In *Dinah Samuel*, the protagonist “sleeps with rich men for economic reasons and with women for pleasure,” but Dinah Samuel embodies the sexual insouciance, that I argue, comes to be hallmark of the Jewish lesbian.¹⁰⁴ Throughout the novel, Dinah defies normative social conventions and mores without serious consequences because of her tremendous talent and bravado. She openly admits to her male lover that she sleeps with other female artists, models, and women of society.¹⁰⁵ She often dresses in men’s clothes and parades around with the female models she paints or she convenes her coterie of lovers to see who will be the most generous when she is in financial straits.¹⁰⁶

In *Le Tréteau*, the great actress’s lesbian sister, Myrhine, successfully orchestrates the demise of her sister’s lover while he is at the zenith of his young career. This vice-ridden beauty, in a tour-de-force, is also able to sabotage her sister’s happiness through her confabulations with her sister’s enemies. The results are disastrous: her sister’s lover is debilitated in a duel, thus ending his brilliant career in the theater, while her sister abandons her career in Paris to perform abroad, too bitter and too sad to remain in the city she blames for her unhappiness. Lorrain’s Myrhine exemplifies the dangers of the Jewish lesbian whose perfidy knows no limits—even the bonds of kinship cannot prevent her treachery. Through Myrhine, Lorrain paints a picture of a lesbian visibility that parallel’s Champsaur’s: both their lesbian characters are open and *sans souci* regarding the opinion or opprobrium of French society. Myrhine comes and goes to the theater, restaurants, and other social events in the company of her “troupeau de damnées.”¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Lorrain’s own antipathy towards Jews is well documented. One commentator citing passages in Lorrain’s *Heures d’Afrique* wrote that “...envers les Juifs il témoigne d’une haine féroce, en accueillant et en exagérant jusqu’à l’extrême tous les clichés du plus sinistre antisémitisme. Yeux chassieux, faces blafardes, gorges flasques, fesses énormes, ‘faces envahies par la lympe juive.’”¹⁰⁸ Lorrain reveals his own conflation of race and sexuality in his anti-Semitic portrayals of the Jew when he writes

Dans toutes les boutiques, des têtes rusées à l’œil oblique, des têtes sémites enturbannés ou coiffées de chéchias, vous donnent partout, où vous regardez, l’obsession et l’horreur du juif. Cela tient à la fois du malaise et du cauchemar: le juif se multiplie comme dans la Bible, il apparaît partout, dans la lucarne ronde des étages supérieurs comme dans l’échoppe à niveau de la rue...Chose étrange dans cette race, quand la bouche n’est pas avare, elle est bestiale, et sous, le nez en bec d’oiseau de proie, c’est la fente étroite d’une tirelire ou la lippe épaisse et tuméfiée d’un baiser de luxure.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 47.

¹⁰⁵ Champsaur, *Dinah Samuel*, 209.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 200-201, 130-238.

¹⁰⁷ Lorrain, *Le Tréteau*, 42.

¹⁰⁸ Liana Nissim, “L’Exotisme perversi de Jean Lorrain,” in *Jean Lorrain: Produit d’extrême civilization*, ed. Jean de Palacio and Éric Walbecq (Rouen: Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009), 24-25. See also Jean Lorrain, *Heures d’Afrique* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1889), 166-167, 252.

¹⁰⁹“In all of the stores, crafty faces with slanted eyes, Semitic heads wearing turbans or fezs, cause you, wherever you look, to be obsessed and horrified by the Jew. It all comes from an uneasiness and nightmare: the Jew multiplies like in the Bible, he appears everywhere, in the round skylight of the upper stories as well as in stalls on the street...The strange thing in this race, when their mouth is not greedy, it is animalistic, and under their hooked

This short quote from *Heures d'Afrique* is teeming with racial stereotypes that give full measure to contemporary images of the Jew as greedy and lustful while his physical appearance discloses the very vices he wishes to conceal. The paradox of anti-Semitic rhetoric is that the Jew is dangerous precisely because of his disingenuousness and craftiness yet his vices are knowable and legible. The twin attributes of vice and visibility would seem to be shared in anti-Semitic discourse on Jews and in discourse excoriating sexual deviance. The shared attributes encourage a particularly potent conflation of Jewishness with sexual deviance—and we can observe this conflation in the representations of Jewish lesbians. Indeed, the sexual insouciance of Lorrain's Myrhine in *Le Tréteau* as well as Champsaur's *Dinah Samuel* contributes to the evolution of the Jewess as a marker of lesbianism. Even if the protagonist is not Jewish herself, one can often find Jewish influences corrupting her or having precipitated the character's moral decline. Thus, the idea of corruption through contact with other races or nations becomes a common trope in literary imaginings of the lesbian. It might seem strange to us in a contemporary context to see tropes of Jewishness and tropes of Germanness overlapping in this way and serving similar ideological functions, but it was not so unusual at the time. Nothing prevented rising French anti-Semitism from melding into a French nationalist hostility to all things German. Moreover, although the sexually non-normative population may not have been diplomatic spies, its hidden sexuality that threatens to contaminate and erode the bourgeois ideals of the Third Republic that makes it a threat to the State. Anti-Semitic writers such as Édouard Drumont reinforced the conflation of sexuality, race, and disloyalty through their writings. In *La France Juive*, Drumont spent several pages recounting a historical chronology of Jewish perfidy, notably listing Jew as traitors or spies.¹¹⁰

Texts such *La France Juive* and newspapers such as *Libre parole* etched in the French imaginary the figure of the Jew as untrustworthy, dangerous, and most importantly, devoid of national allegiance. The “wandering Jew” becomes a site for national paranoia and suspicion, and Drumont's emphasis on Jews as traitors working on behalf of England, Russia, and Germany is symptomatic of the anti-Semitic climate within France that created the conditions for the Dreyfus Affair.

The crystallization of these tropes is found in the novel, *Gomorrhe*, by Henri d'Argis, published in 1889. This apocalyptically titled novel is the story of Mme Sonnet, a beautiful blond woman, whose salon serves as an unofficial epicenter of French diplomatic life. At her mansion ministers and foreign dignitaries mix and mingle, all under the spell of this epitome of French womanhood. Mme Sonnet's access to the inner workings of world powers, her accessibility to governmental secrets, and her Machiavellian powers of persuasion and intrigue, all of which are predicated upon her sexual allure and beauty, set her up as a nineteenth century *Mati Hari*. Mme Sonnet catches the eye of Léopold Desalle, the naïve scion of an illustrious judge, who represents

noses, is the thin slit of a piggybank or the thick and swollen lipping of lustful kisses” (Lorrain, *Heures d'Afrique*, 166-167). (Translation my own.)

¹¹⁰ Drumont writes, “Le Juif Lewis Goldsmith sert d'espion à Talleyrand en Angleterre pendant le premier empire, le Juif Michel est guillotiné pour avoir livré à la Russie des documents militaires. Un autre Goldsmith dérobe, il y a trois ans, les plans du grand État major prussien. On sait le rôle qu'a joué la Païva avant la guerre. Qui ne se rappelle les tentatives faites par la juive Krulla pour surprendre nos plans de mobilisation? Qui a oublié Esther Guimont et son fameux salon politique?” Édouard Drumont, *La France Juive* (Paris: Marpon & Flammarion, 1886), 39.

the French bourgeoisie in the novel. Because of his lust for Mme Sonnet and her political connections, he becomes her pawn. Driven by his ambitions and sexual desire for Mme Sonnet, he becomes embroiled in her intrigues. He believes that he is seducing her, while, in fact, she is using DeSalle to get close to his sister in order to seduce her. This novel's joint portrayal of "perverse" sexuality and politic intrigue offers a captivating examination of ways in which sexuality is imbricated in political discourse. The author, Henri d'Argis, coyly alludes to a sexualized relationship between Mme Sonnet and her African servant early in the novel without having to develop any meaningful analysis of it simply by stating that "la négresse était à son service intime"—a cryptic statement that invites the reader's fantasies.¹¹¹ Yet, as the story progresses it is the African Marie-Antoinette who serves as a foil to the young bourgeois man's desire and participates in diplomatic conspiracies.

Gomorrhe plays on certain colonial and racial discourses that framed indigenous women as degenerate and dangerous. Indeed, part of the book's interest lies in the transgression and destabilization of patriarchal values it portrays through the actions of this foreign lesbian. The novel replays the old saw that it is once again the "stranger" who will seduce and infect French women and, thereby, remove them from the reproductive service of the State. Often referred to as "la négresse," she is marked as other not only by the color of her skin but by the associations her name would evoke with the last queen of the Ancien Régime, Marie-Antoinette of Austria. Thus, this personage is a double signifier for the otherness of lesbianism recalling both Germanic and African locales—the European and the colonial empire.

Although Marie-Antoinette wields sufficient power to be her mistresses's co-conspirator and co-actor in her political intrigues and debaucheries, it is the French lesbian, Mme Sonnet, who is identified as a *quisling* who is secretly allied with the Germans. Even in 1889, literary imaginings of the lesbian often depicted her as a traitor, a spy allied with the enemy state—very often Germany, and Mme Sonnet is no exception. Thus, this novel fits in a literary genealogy linking lesbianism to treason that would continue at least until the outbreak of World War II.

As her sexual orientation is revealed to Desalle, he also becomes aware that Mme Sonnet has had dealings with Germany as a diplomatic envoy. Having been the intimate of French ministers, including the foreign minister, Deville, she seemed to have the requisite credentials for a secret diplomatic emissary—fidelity to the State and an impeccable cover as the confidant and lover of high-ranking government officials. But Gladiaux, a former ambassador and member of the diplomatic corps, who is intimately familiar with Mme Sonnet, confirms that she had been an agent for Germany for most of her adult life rather than a loyal emissary for France. Gladiaux's revelations regarding the history of Mme Sonnet's boudoir reveal how deftly Mme Sonnet could move from the salon to the bedroom in her efforts to obtain information useful to France's political adversaries. Her early adolescence spent with a successful couturier, Wersheimer, and her subsequent affair with a German spy by the name of Meyer provides links to Germany and to Jewishness.¹¹² Both characters have old Jewish names, and both men succeed in corrupting Mme Sonnet. Through her affiliation with Wersheimer's couture shop, she is introduced to lesbians and to prostitution. As Meyer's companion, he initiates her into the world of espionage, and she becomes a German spy. In fact, Mme Sonnet and Meyer disappear from Paris days before the

¹¹¹ d'Argis, *Gomorrhe*, 113.

¹¹² For other discussions of the links between sexual deviance and Jewish and Germanic identities, see Carlston, "Secret Dossiers" and Jonathon Freedman, "Coming Out of the Jewish Closet," *GLQ* 7, no. 4 (2001): 521-551.

outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war, and she does not resurface for several years.¹¹³ Argis further completes the profile of a spy by highlighting the linguistic abilities that have allowed her to entertain so many diplomats by stating that she spoke “toutes les langues de l’Europe, ce qui ne s’improvise pas” even though her first two foreign languages were German and English.¹¹⁴ Through Mme Sonnet’s contact with the foreign, the German, the Jew, and the colonial other, she turns against her country and her “natural function” as a woman. Wersheimer and Meyer, with their Jewish and Germanic who precipitated Mme Sonnet’s descent down the slippery slope to treason and prostitution. Through them she is linked to France’s archenemies—Germany and Austria—and the relationships make clear that her affective choices are linked to national allegiance.

This novel illustrates how fact and fiction are often confounded in novels of the late nineteenth-century when the fait divers riveted readers. Certainly, urbane Parisians were familiar with the courtesan, La Païva, whose own story so closely resembled Mme Sonnet’s life. The convergences between this novel and the carefully cultivated story of this Parisian socialite situate the novel in a richer cultural context and illustrate how reality and narrative combined to produce literature that fueled the French imaginary.

La Païva began life as Esther Lachmann in Moscow, the daughter of a Jewish tailor, who early in life abandoned her husband and baby to flee to Paris. While a young woman in Paris, Lachmann become involved with the composer Henri Herz and bore him a child. Although rumored to have married Herz, there was never any proof of this, and after he left France to make his fortune in America, his family kicked Lachmann out of the house. Following this disastrous romance, Lachmann is said to have engaged in more lucrative romantic liaisons that built her reputation as a great courtesan. She met and married the Portuguese marquis, Païva-Araujo, in 1851 but spent only one night with him and never lived with him. However, after this “marriage,” her lifestyle and Parisian salon were successful enough that she became known simply as La Païva. The brilliance of her salon was only equaled by the expensive jewelry she habitually wore in public—which was rumored to be about 2 million francs worth at any given time. In 1871 she married one of Europe’s wealthiest men, the German aristocrat and industrial magnate, Guido Henckle von Donnersmarck, who offered her the famous Donnersmarck yellow diamonds. However, the final patina to the aura of mystery and intrigue that she so encouraged was the rumor that she was not only a lesbian but also a spy for Germany!¹¹⁵

The parallels are numerous. Lachmann is the daughter of a Jewish tailor while Mme Sonnet gets her start working for a Jewish tailor; both have nefarious pasts. They amass their fortunes and position through their powers of seduction and intelligence. Mme Sonnet uses her salon and “patrons” to gather sensitive government information ranging from military plans to diplomatic missions while Lachmann was accused of using her salon as marketplace for sensitive government information. In this light *Gomorrhe* forms part of new constellations of cultural intelligibility that illustrate the interdependence between literature and the cultural myths.

Other cultural forces are at work to demonize Germany as a center of sexual

¹¹³ “...un jour les amis de Meyers, sans avoir été prévenus, apprennent avec étonnement que lui et sa maîtresse sont partis brusquement; quelques jours après, la guerre de 70 éclate, et on les oublie” (d’Argis, *Gomorrhe*, 324).

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 320, 322. English and German are also the languages of France’s historical enemies and against whom France was vying for colonial domination in Africa and Asia.

¹¹⁵ Laure Murat relates the case of an English woman detained for prostitution who tells the police about La Païva’s demands for lesbian sex (*La loi du genre*, 73).

deviance during the French Third Republic, further establishing non-normative sexualities as indigenous to other soils...but not France's. The Dreyfus affair is but one among several politico-sexual scandals that influenced French literature and resonated in other forms of cultural production. Other scandals outside of France also shaped ways of think about sexuality within French society. Several such scandals took place in Germany, and one in particular amalgamated sexuality and ethnicity in the French imaginary and fueled the Germanophobia that had been simmering since the Franco-Prussian war.

Even at the turn of the twentieth century, still smarting from the loss of Alsace-Lorraine thirty years previously, many in France were sensitive to questions of their nation's virility and its capacity to defend itself. Germany's increasing military might, economic prosperity, and high birthrate, was troubling for those who feared Germany's increasing status as a world power and its imperial aspirations. France's uneasy relations with Germany were based, in part, on a general distrust of Germany. This paranoia created the conditions for a scandal that would rock the very foundations of the Third Republic. This *cause célèbre* provided the ground swell of Germanophobia that France witnessed after the Franco-Prussian war with an increasingly vocal anti-Semitism. The target was a Jewish captain in the army, Alfred Dreyfus, who was accused of passing military secrets to the Germans. The judicial process lasted for years, and his trial, retrial, and appeals shook French society to its foundations. Fears about French masculinity and true "Frenchness" were subtexts in Dreyfus's trial, and the scandal's enormous impact was due, in part, because it revealed the fracture lines in Republican ideals around questions of race, citizenship, and sexuality. However, France was not the only country to experience a military scandal that placed in the spotlight the same times of questions around sexuality, masculinity, and the military. Germany's equivalent of the Dreyfus Affair came in 1907 with the German scandal, the Eulenberg Affair, which similarly captivated French society as evidenced by the journalistic coverage it received and the numerous lampoons, jokes, and commentary it inspired. Because of the immense media coverage of the Eulenberg affair, the link between deviant sexualities and Germany was firmly solidified in the French imaginary and contributed to the Germanizing of the lesbian.

This complicated political fiasco was actually a series of inter-locking libel trials whose repercussions echoed across Europe and hastened the fall of Germany's Wilhelmine government, the Second Reich. Some scholars have even argued that it was a factor in the onset of the Great War.¹¹⁶ Although Eulenburg lends his name to this scandal, the revelations and innuendos that followed in the wake of allegations of homosexual relationships produced several courts-martials, five libel trials, and numerous ruined careers.¹¹⁷ The scandal shook the foundations of the Germany government and

¹¹⁶ For example, Maurice Baumont, *L'Affaire Eulenburg et les origines de la Guerre Mondiale* (Paris: Payot, 1933). See also, James D. Steakley, "Iconography of a Scandal: Political Cartoons and the Eulenburg Affair," in *Hidden From History*, ed. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vincus, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 235.

¹¹⁷ Steakley points out that in the three years preceding the first Eulenburg trial courts-martial had "convicted some twenty officers of homosexual conduct, and 1906-1907 witnessed six suicides by homosexual officers ruined by

became a national crisis and a publicity nightmare on both sides of the Atlantic. “Just a few days after the opening of the first trial in the three year scandal, a leading Berlin daily described it as ‘a forensic drama claiming universal attention at home and abroad.’”¹¹⁸ Because of the notoriety of the parties involved, including members of the Kaiser’s intimate circle of friends (from top level diplomats to the chief of the Military Secretariat to General Mokto) this scandal received international attention—particularly in England and in France—and it provided the occasion for a great deal of rhetoric suggesting that non-normative sexualities were the vices of other races and nationalities.¹¹⁹

Prince Philipp Eulenburg was a close associate of Kaiser Wilhelm, and his political views tempered the aggressive imperialist and nationalist views of the Kaiser’s *Weltpolitik*. Eulenburg’s own politics were more in line with Bismark’s views of *Realpolitik* that advocated foreign policy restraint. As the preeminent non-military figure in Wilhelm’s entourage during the 1890s, he exerted tremendous influence on crafting a foreign policy that pursued a workable *détente* with France or as detractors claimed—a policy of accommodation. His views and his intimacy with Kaiser Wilhelm II won him the enmity of many politicians, the upper echelons of the Foreign Office and the military as well as of many aristocrats—including the Kaiser’s sister—not to mention the hawkish Gallophobes.¹²⁰ However, at the heart of the scandal was the implication that Eulenburg and Wilhelm were sexually intimate. This led one observer to state that the Kaiser “loves Philipp Eulenburg more than any other living being.”¹²¹ Even Bismarck believed in the untowardness of their relationship, which prompted him to write to his son that the relationship between the Kaiser and Eulenburg was such that it could “not be confided to paper.”¹²² Bismark’s own complicity in the revelation of this scandal is often ignored despite his having put Harden on Eulenburg’s trail. The former prime minister confided to Harden his suspicions that not only were Eulenburg and the Kaiser sexually involved but that the military was rife with homosexuals. Harden waited fourteen years to make these allegations public. But in 1902, he threatened Eulenburg with exposure of his sexual relationship with General Moltke if he did withdraw from public life and leave the diplomatic corps. Eulenburg quickly relinquished his ambassadorship to Vienna, but he returned to public life three years later to participate in the Algeciras Conference much to Harden’s surprise. Harden was infuriated by Eulenburg’s role in the negotiations, which effectively ceded to France Germany’s influence and claims to Morocco. The *de facto*

blackmail. One of the officers was actually a blood relative of the Kaiser’s (Steakley, *Iconography of a Scandal*, 239).

¹¹⁸ Steakley, “Iconography of a Scandal,” 247. The newspaper in question is the October 27, 1907 edition of *Vossische Zeitung*.

¹¹⁹ Maximilian Harden, the journalist/litigant involved in the Eulenburg trials, made comments about Eulenburg that showed his crime was triply transgressive because he had not only slept with men but had crossed both class and national lines. Eulenburg’s close relationship with the French counselor at the French Embassy in Berlin was directly implicated in the scandal. During the scandal Lecomte was dubbed “the king of the pederasts” (Ibid.). This confirmed for Harden that the homosexuals were like the Jews—an association of individuals without a fatherland. Furthermore, “. . .homosex is associated with foreignness. It is a link that does not even need to be explicit,” as pointed out in Simon Shepard, *Coming on Strong: Gay Politics and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 217.

¹²⁰ Steakley, “Iconography of a Scandal,” 237.

¹²¹ Ibid., note 12, p. 236

¹²² Ibid., 238.

withdrawal of German from Morocco left France's sphere of influence practically uncontested, which eventually led to Morocco becoming a French protectorate in 1912. Angry and betrayed, Harden wrote two articles in 1906 denouncing the relationship between Eulenburg, "this unhealthy late-romantic visionary," and the military commandant of Berlin, General Kuno Count von Moltke.

A series of libel trials ensued with much legal posturing and a plethora of witnesses, including the renowned sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. As Steakley points out in "Iconography of a Scandal," Hirschfeld's testimony only served to strengthen the associations between deviant sexualities and Jews in the Germany imaginary and elsewhere. The desire to synthesize Jewishness with unpatriotic behavior is evidenced by some members of the German and French press who were quick to point out that Harden himself was not a "pure German"—his legal name was Isidore Wittkowski—and that his defense (Eulenburg accused his accuser of libel) relied on a coterie of Jews, including his lawyer and his star witness, Hirschfeld.¹²³ More than twenty years after the scandal erupted, Wilhelm II bitterly claimed that the Eulenburg scandal had been orchestrated by "international Jewry" and was the initial stage of a conspiracy that led to Germany's defeat in 1918 and to his abdication.¹²⁴ The series of trials only ended in 1921 with the death of Eulenburg after an indefinite adjournment by the German magistrate.

In France the effect of the Eulenburg Affair was the occasion for further public discussions of homosexuality, linking it the French imaginary with political intrigue as well as with anxiety regarding sexual roles and gender. The amount of interest in this drama within France following the greatest scandal of the Second Reich far exceeds mere *schadenfreude*. One observer finds in the Eulenburg affair a "paradigm of the use of homophobia as a political weapon, a use so frequent and so influential in Proust's day that it amounts to a hallmark of the era."¹²⁵ What came to be known in France as the "German Vice" (*Le Vice allemand*) usually referred to same-sex relations between men while simultaneously giving voice to a profound Germanophobia. The image of the strong German soldier who was secretly attracted to men and who allowed himself to be "used as a woman" apparently offered some solace to a devirilized France that was suffering from its own gender trouble. Recall that Dreyfus's accusers had relied to a great extent on a secret dossier that implied that Dreyfus was a homosexual—rendering him a double traitor: both as a French soldier and as a man.¹²⁶ The correspondence of the gay German officer implicated in the Dreyfus Affair, Schwartzkoppen, was the centerpiece of this secret file in the Dreyfus prosecution because of its overt homosexual eroticism and its alleged possibility of containing secret codes. These love letters between Schwartzkoppen and an Italian diplomat, Panizzardi, were full of sexual references and feminized nicknames, which were somehow transparent enough to the prosecution to allow them to (mistakenly) inculcate Dreyfus, but were too opaque for French institutions such as the military or the "magistrature" to understand such sexual

¹²³Henri de Weindel and F.P. Fischer, *L'Homosexualité en Allemagne, étude documentaire et anecdotique* (Paris: Félix Juven, 1908), 32-33.

¹²⁴ Steakley, "Iconography of a Scandal," 235.

¹²⁵ J.E. Rivers, *Proust and the Art of Love: The Aesthetics of Sexuality in the Life, Times and Art of Marcel Proust* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1980), 129-130.

¹²⁶ Carlston, "Secret Dossiers," 946.

terms as “bourrer.”¹²⁷

As one scholar pointed out:

It is equally plausible that they [French officers involved in the case] would have been disturbed by the implications that the French army could have been vanquished in 1871, by, so to speak, a nation of pansies. By disciplining and exiling one effeminate, alien body, then, they could symbolically master the much larger problem of France’s military inferiority to Germany.¹²⁸

Those French who saw their defeat to Germany and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine as symptomatic of France’s devirilization could at the time of the Eulenburg scandal avenge themselves by mocking Germany and projecting their anxieties onto France’s archenemy. The number of lampoons in newspapers, circulars, and magazines attests to the willingness of French society to accept male homosexuality as something that happens elsewhere, but not at home.¹²⁹ The desire to mock the homosexual and to label him a foreign element was well entrenched in French culture by the end of the Eulenburg Affair.

Various forms of cultural production thus heavily contributed to the French imaginary’s view of Germany as a breeding ground for deviance and espionage. As a consequence, Germany became ineluctably conflated with homosexuality, Jewishness, and diplomatic double-dealing. In France the long-standing association of Jewishness with sexual deviance combined with this fomenting Germanophobia to mark the lesbian as Jewish and/or Germanic. Inscribed in her literary representations were political and ideological realities that mirrored tense Franco-German relations. Piecing together this vast archive of discursive and pictorial representations surrounding the Eulenburg scandal provides a framework within which to reread texts for different meanings and to make connections that might not be readily apparent. As I illustrate in my analysis of some of Proust’s treatments of lesbianism in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, politico-sexual scandals formed part of the cultural matrixes from which novelists drew their inspiration. Although literary scholars have easily drawn connections between the Dreyfus Affair, Jewishness, and Germany in Proust’s gay male characters, Proust’s subtle shading of lesbians as foreign, Germanic, and Jewish have gone largely unmentioned.

Proust’s portrayals of homosexual men and women are always complexly related to political and social tensions that interrogate questions of national identity and ethnicity. Although rarely analyzed at length, the few pages dedicated to Bloch’s sister and cousin in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* provide interesting material for understanding what lesbian characterizations in French literature were generally, and for appreciating the ongoing subversive polyvalence Jewishness. Edward Hughes comments that “perversely,

¹²⁷ The verb “bourrer” means literally to stuff, but in this context literally referred to Schwartzkoppen’s sexual position in the couple that made him the “top.”

¹²⁸ Carlston, “Secret Dossiers,” 946.

¹²⁹ John Grand-Carteret, *Derrière ‘Lui’: L’Allemagne et la caricature européenne en 1907* (Paris: Bernard, 1907). As a French scholar recently noted, “Les interactions existent entre la presse française et allemande: au moment de l’affaire Eulenburg, des journaux comme *Fantasio* n’hésitent pas à reproduire, à côté de leurs propres caricatures, certains dessins parus dans la presse allemande, afin de donner au lecteur français un aperçu du scandale ‘d’Outre-Rein’ et se délecter ainsi de l’affaiblissement relatif de la puissance rivale” (Florence Tamagne, “Caricatures homophobes et stereotypes de genre en France et en Allemagne: la presse satirique, de 1900 au milieu des années 1930,” *Le Temps des médias* 1, no. 1 [2003]: 43).

it is the most prominent homosexual of all, Charlus, who plays the old card of fierce national pride and uncompromising moral orthodoxy in an attempt to conceal, and yet also obliquely to express, his sexual preferences.”¹³⁰ Conversely, it is the Jewess, the potentially treacherous chameleon whose national loyalty is always suspect, who defies moral orthodoxy and boldly proclaims her sexual deviance in Proust’s work. Proust’s treatment of the Bloch family’s sexuality provides a microcosm in which to examine the imbrication of Jewishness with sexuality and, in particular, to gain more nuanced understanding of how Proust envisioned lesbianism.

III. All in the Family: The Bloch Girls as Guides to Gomorrah

While many of the gay male characters in *La recherche* such as Saint-Loup, Morel, Jupien, Vaugoubert, are French, Proust deliberately uses the Jewish Bloch cousins as an occasion for his most lengthy descriptions of lesbianism. Noteworthy is his portrait of them as seductresses of bourgeois French women, possibly Albertine, and their willingness to serve as guides to Gomorrah for unsuspecting females. These two cousins—Esther and the unnamed sister of Marcel’s friend, Albert Bloch, act as inverted mirrors of their male counterparts. While Charlus, the exemplar of French nobility and conservatism, passes as fiercely heterosexual through the first several volumes of *La recherche*, he is always concerned that his cover might be blown.¹³¹ While Charlus hides in the closet behind tough nationalist discourse, masculine bravado and aristocratic snobbery, the Bloch girls flaunt their sexuality, thereby complicating ideas of the insidiously ingratiating Jewish deviant circulating at the time. The Dreyfus Affair crystallized some of the Jewish stereotypes that were common currency during the Third Republic, and their examination provides background to a reading of Proust’s depictions of Esther Bloch and her cousin.

Just as French Jews are alleged to take on the national characteristics of their host country in order to pass, rumored lesbians such as Albertine, Andrée, or Odette can also “pass” as heterosexual by adopting heteronormative strategies of conduct. Yet, Bloch’s sister represents a certain transparency and contra positive of Jewish stereotypes as secretive and double-dealing even though Proust explores and reinforces Jewish stereotypes elsewhere in the novel by conflating treason, sexual deviancy, effeminism, arrivisme, and hysteria with Jewishness.

While the Jewish male may serve as an example of concealed loyalties, inscrutable motives, impenetrable mysteries, or disavowed homosexuality, the Jewish lesbian functions differently in Proust’s work. This is most apparent in the Balbec ballroom incident in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* that forms the bookend to the famous Montjouvain scene between Mlle Vinteuil and her lover in *Du côté de chez Swann*. In this later scene Marcel is once again the voyeuristic spectator. The narrator recounts the scandal Bloch’s sister

¹³⁰ Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature from Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 56.

¹³¹ Here one might think of Charlus during the scene at the Prince de Guermantes’s ball when the Marquis de Vaugoubert mincingly speculates about the sexual orientation of the young valets. The Marquis’s temporary behavioral shift from repressed homosexual to an overt effeminate disturbs Charlus. Edward Hughes comments that “perversely, it is the most prominent homosexual of all, Charlus, who plays the old card of fierce national pride and uncompromising moral orthodoxy in an attempt to conceal, and yet obliquely to express, his sexual preferences” (Ibid).

provokes when she essentially makes love to her actress girlfriend on a couch in the grand ballroom in front of the hotel guests:

Vers cette époque se produisit au Grand-Hôtel de Balbec un scandale qui ne fut pas pour changer la pente de mes tourments. La sœur de Bloch avait depuis quelque temps, avec une ancienne actrice, des relations secrètes qui bientôt ne leur suffirent plus. Être vues leur semblait ajouter de la perversité à leur plaisir, elles voulaient faire baigner leurs dangereux ébats dans les regards de tous. Cela commença par des caresses, qu'on pouvait en somme attribuer à une intimité amicale, dans le salon de jeu, autour de la table de baccara. Puis elles s'enhardirent. Et enfin un soir, dans un coin pas même obscur de la grande salle de danse, sur un canapé, elles ne se gênèrent pas plus que si elles avaient été dans leur lit.¹³²

The sexual frankness and insouciance of Bloch's sister despite societal conventions and opprobrium undercuts ideas of assimilation and passing. Proust underscores the difference between visible (feminine) and secretive (masculine) modes of conduct in the subsequent paragraphs of this episode as he explains how the Bloch cousins' uncle, the Jewish businessman Nissim Bernard, is able to quiet the scandal his niece provokes. These subsequent passages rely on the kind of stereotype of the rich Jewish financier pulling strings that we might expect to find, for example, in Zola's *L'Argent*.

Nissim Bernard is sympathetic to his niece's shocking antics because he is himself involved in a homosexual relationship. The juxtaposition of the queer uncle's secretiveness and double life with his lesbian nieces' behavior highlights Proust's conscious manipulation of Jewish stereotypes. Bernard conceals his sexual identity behind the façade of the virtuous family man despite his tenacious fidelity to his young lover.¹³³ While his niece flaunts and confirms her sexual proclivities, Bernard remains the stereotypical Jewish master of dissimulation:

C'était le plaisir de M. Nissim Bernard de suivre dans la salle à manger, et jusque dans les perspectives lointaines où sous son palmier trônait la caissière, les évolutions de l'adolescent empressé au service, au service de tous, et moins de M. Nissim Bernard depuis que celui-ci l'entretenait, soit que le jeune enfant de cœur ne crût pas nécessaire de témoigner la même amabilité à quelqu'un de qui il se croyait suffisamment aimé, soit que cet amour l'irritât ou qu'il craignît que, découvert, il lui fît manquer d'autres occasions. Mais cette froideur même plaisait à M. Nissim Bernard par tout ce qu'elle dissimulait. Que ce fût par atavisme hébraïque ou par profanation du sentiment chrétien, il se plaisait singulièrement, qu'elle fût juive ou catholique, à la cérémonie racinienne.¹³⁴

Bernard delights in his paramour's cold behavior in public, a behavior that contrasts with his niece's affinity for public displays of affection and that so easily deflects any suspicions about the nature of their relationship with the young man in question. Proust here reinforces the idea that the gay Jewish man is a chameleon whose true face remains cleverly hidden; through his portrayal of Bernard, he casts the Jewish male as a subversive outsider, explaining his conduct either as result of his Semitic roots or of his profanation of Christian sensibilities. Whatever Bernard's motivations, the Jew remains configured as the conveyor of dangerous perverse sexualities, but there is a cleavage along gendered lines. While Proust often makes use of

¹³² Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 236.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

stereotypes that paint Jews as highly sexualized, his invocation of these stereotypes evidences a certain ambiguity. Jewish characters, such as Bloch's sister, provide a comprehensible visibility that is not decoded through the discrete gestures of the gay male characters, which are often only discernable by other members of this international "freemasonry." Rather, their comportment is a bold departure from the Jewish closet in which the male characters such as Bernard seek refuge.¹³⁵ If the Jewish male is in the "closet" regarding his Jewishness or his sexuality, his female counterpart has most definitely blown off the closet door.

Esther Lévy is also positioned as another incontrovertible example of lesbian transparency. Proust confirms Esther as another sexual "outlaw" whose visible sexual proclivities reinforce the oppositional valence that he attaches to the Jewish lesbian vis-à-vis her male counterparts. When Marcel sends his own spy, Aimé, to "dig up dirt" on Albertine, he learns that Aimé has seen Albertine in the company of another woman at Balbec. Based on his investigations, Aimé confirms that Albertine is "du mauvais genre." After speculating on a list of possible lesbian paramours with whom Albertine could have deceived him during her stay, Marcel settles on Esther, the blond-haired cousin, who had so publicly and candidly, to use the vernacular, "picked-up" a married woman in the hotel casino at Balbec. Rivaling her cousin's own shocking public display of affection, Esther reinforces the idea of the visible Jewish lesbian who counters the camouflaged homosexuality of the Jewish male. Esther, like Dreyfus, is a blond "passer" whose considerable physical beauty flies in the face of Jewish stereotypes.¹³⁶ Contrary to myths about Jewish males, Esther is not linked to a treacherous and opaque cabal of sexual deviants. Rather than reflecting the characteristics of dissimulation and ruse associated with Jewishness and spies, Esther is scrutinized because she is too conspicuous and discernable. Proust's description of Esther's lesbian "mating dance" at the casino is much more cursory than his recounting of the seduction scene between Jupien and Charlus that opens *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, and it emphasizes insouciance and visibility in contradistinction to shadows and furtiveness. Charlus's seduction of Jupien is a ritual charged with linguistic libidinal energies and veiled meanings playing off a *double entendre*. Charlus asks for a "light" for his cigar, and Jupien replies that if he comes into his boutique he will find everything that he requires. The sexual reference is evident, but interestingly the rest of the seduction remains invisible to the narrator while the Jewish lesbians render seduction transparent. When Esther's encounters a married woman in the Grand Casino at Balbec, the presumptively heterosexual wife wastes no time in expressing her desire through coded language. But here ends the parallels between Sodom's mating rituals and those of Gomorrah. While Jupien and Charlus retire to a private space and remain obscured, the married woman immediately sits next to Esther and they begin to play "footsies" and then their hands and legs become a "confused heap."¹³⁷ Although the bumbling Dr. Cottard opines to Marcel that the practiced eye can detect the phosphorescent train emitted by lesbian desire—which suggests the potential detectability of lesbian desire—Proust's coding of these "Israelites" as openly and unabashedly lesbian leaves no doubt as to their sexual orientation.

¹³⁵ Proust likens the international dispersion of these "race maudites" to the freemasons whose secret associations traverse geographic and ideological borders so that they form secret communities that transcend national identities.

¹³⁶ Proust refers to Bloch's sister and cousin as "fort jolies."

¹³⁷ "Mais sous la table on aurait pu voir bientôt se tourmenter leurs pieds, puis leurs jambes et leurs mains qui étaient confondues" (Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 246.).

Witnessing how effortlessly and effectively Esther is able to seduce the married women, Marcel later interjects her into an imagined lesbian seduction scene in which she lures Albertine into an illicit sexual relationship. Playing off leitmotifs common to lesbian representation, Proust portrays Esther as a sexual temptress and her cousin as the lover of an actress. Esther's legible sexual orientation marks her as the "out" Other capable of audaciously seducing a married French woman right in front of her husband, which panders to fears that "foreign," in this case Jewish, lesbians would pervert, debauch, and "detrribalize" France's women. In essence, a French woman who succumbs to lesbian seduction refuses her regenerative role in French society while simultaneously disavowing her citizenship in a French kinship system. The "recruited" or "seduced" heterosexual woman becomes a member of this metaphoric and imagined international sisterhood that threatens to undermine France's well-being. To link the Jewish lesbian to this menace rehearses the anti-Semitism of the period, mythologizes further the decadence and perversity of the Jewess, and dramatizes the vulnerability of French women.

IV. Albertine, Austria, and the New Gomorrah

Just as quickly as Proust can mold a character from a certain stereotype, he can explode the stereotype and send the character in another direction. By examining Proust's use of geographic space, I now wish to show how, through a circuitous textual voyage, Proust subtly links Semitic and Germanic influences to lesbianism and, in particular, to Albertine. For reasons previously discussed, anti-Semitism and Germanophobia became intertwined with non-normative sexualities in the French imaginary, and they often saturate their literary representations.

As *La recherche* progresses, Germany becomes more distinctly a "breeding ground" of sexual deviance. Proust slowly reveals the extent of a homosexual contagion infecting the Guermante's bloodline through their German ancestry. Proust's deliberate dénouement spans the final volumes of *La recherche* until one by one the men in the Guermante family are exposed as closet homosexuals—from Charlus and Saint-Loup to the Prince de Guermante and the Duc de Châtelleraut.¹³⁸ But, unlike the accused spy, Dreyfus, this nomadic tribe of "inverts" is not passing on State secrets—their crime is simply "passing" as heterosexual. Indeed, Saint-Loup crystallizes the paradoxes of this supremely clever "*race maudite*": not only is he dashing handsome, seductively appealing to women, and an inspiring soldier, but he also loves to visit male brothels and have sex with men. Saint-Loup explodes homosexual stereotypes of the effeminate and cowardly "*tante*" while at the same time reinforcing the idea of the homosexual man as a foreign infiltrator, foreign in both his sexual orientation and in his German roots. What is less apparent is that Proust's *Gomorrah*, "the pale counterfeit of *Sodome*," is also geopolitically envisioned as Germanic.¹³⁹ One can read Albertine as a double agent, trained by the Germanic adversary, and able to perform heteronormativity convincingly in French society. Her apparent heterosexuality allows her access to salons and eventually to the most elite aristocratic circles through her relationship with Marcel. Albertine's initial introduction into the world of Mme Verdurin's salon occurs through a subterfuge in which she plays the role of

¹³⁸ During the Belle Époque, homosexuality was often referred to as "le vice allemand" because of the number of politico-sexual scandals and the amount of "scholarly" work in Germany on non-normative sexual behavior.

¹³⁹ This is how Colette refers to the lesbian portrayals in *À la recherche*. See Colette, *Le Pur et l'impur* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 136.

Marcel's cousin.¹⁴⁰ In the following volume, *La Prisonnière*, Albertine's assimilation into the Verdurin's network is so thorough that she piques Marcel's jealousy when she announces her plans to visit Mme Verdurin alone. Given the whisperings in earlier volumes about Mme Verdurin's own bisexuality, including her possible affair with Odette, Marcel begins a long indictment of Albertine's conduct over the years in which he focuses on her potential lesbian relationships or possible cruising. Albertine remains inscrutable, which prompts Marcel to fume:

N'avais-je pas deviné en Albertine une de ces filles sous l'enveloppe charnelle desquelles palpitent plus d'êtres cachés, je ne dis pas que dans un jeu de cartes encore dans sa boîte, que dans une cathédrale fermée ou un théâtre avant qu'on n'y entre, mais que dans la foule immense et renouvelée? Non pas seulement tant d'êtres, mais le désir, le souvenir voluptueux, l'inquiète recherche de tant d'êtres...N'importe, cela avait donné pour moi à Albertine la plénitude d'un être rempli jusqu'au bord par la superposition de tant d'êtres, de tant de désirs et de souvenirs...et maintenant qu'elle m'avait dit un jour 'Mademoiselle Vinteuil,' j'aurais voulu non pas arracher sa robe ou voir son corps, mais à travers son corps tout ce bloc-notes de ses souvenirs et de ses prochains et ardents rendez-vous.

Marcel's jealousy is due, in part, to his recognition that Albertine might be moving undetected between porous sexual cultures while his inability to decipher the relevant codes prevents him from apprehending her true nature. Albertine is a palimpsest of superimposed identities that serve as passkeys to different social milieus. Suddenly, sites of knowledge and power from which she would have been excluded are open to her. The possibility of a lesbian or bisexual double life provides her with supplemental codes of behavior and knowledge that circumvent or undermine French heteronormativity, at least as imagined by Marcel. Having witnessed Charlus and Jupien's mating dance, Marcel realizes that different codes might exist among this other "race," and in a moment of jealousy at Balbec, he alludes to this other form of sexual hermeneutics when he describes a beautiful female swimmer who catches his attention. He realizes that she pays him no heed but incessantly stares at Albertine, which causes him to muse about ways that lesbians might cruise one another.¹⁴¹ Thus, Albertine is like a double agent that Marcel just cannot quite catch, who, despite her bumbling contradictions and half-truths, can never be proved a traitor to the heteronormative values of France's bourgeois society. If we consider the Dreyfus Affair as an organizing motif that infuses the text with questions of Jewish loyalty to the State, and then by extension to the loyalty of the "race maudite," then Marcel's preoccupations with Albertine's sexual orientation transcends his own personal stakes and can be read as mirroring larger anxieties about sexuality. Throughout *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, there are consistent indications of Albertine's double life: her suspected lesbian relationship with Andrée, her use of Morel to seduce straight women, her relationship with the laundress of Touraine, her

¹⁴⁰ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 500.

¹⁴¹ "Tout au plus le visage de cette belle jeune femme était-il passé au rabot invisible d'une grande bassesse de vie, de l'acceptation constante d'expédients vulgaires, si bien que ses yeux, plus nobles pourtant que le reste du visage, ne devaient rayonner que d'appétits de désirs. Or le lendemain, cette jeune femme étant placée très près de nous au casino, je vis qu'elle ne cessait de poser sur Albertine les feux alternés et tournants de ses regards. One eût dit qu'elle lui faisait des signes comme à l'aide d'un phare. Je souffrais que mon amie vît qu'on faisait si attention à elle je craignais que ces regards incessamment allumés n'eussent la signification conventionnelle d'un rendez-vous d'amour pour le lendemain...La jeune fille aux yeux rayonnants avait pu venir une autre année à Balbec. C'était peut-être parce qu'Albertine avait déjà cédé à ses désirs ou à ceux d'une amie que celle-ci se permettait de lui adresser ces brillants signaux" (Ibid., 245).

intimate relationship with Mlle Vinteuil's lover and Léa. His concerns about Albertine's passing as heterosexual and her allegiance to heteronormative values closely parallel high profile questions embedded in the Dreyfus Affair, which conflated ethnic background, sexuality and loyalty to France.

Lingering questions about Albertine's heterosexuality fuel Marcel's obsession, and Proust also shades her portrait with subtle Germanic markers that further gesture to the Otherness of the "race maudite" that infiltrates French culture as treasonous spies.¹⁴² As noted earlier in this chapter, the association of the lesbian with espionage against the Republic for its archenemy, Germany, dates back at least to 1885 and the publication of Henri d'Argis's *Gomorrhe* where the lesbian protagonist is portrayed as a spy for Germany and a protégée of the Jews precisely because she has been able to penetrate circles of power. Albertine was always meant to be of Germanic origins. In previous versions Proust envisioned her as Dutch and envisioned Amsterdam as the original meeting place between Albertine and Mlle Vinteuil.¹⁴³

Earlier in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in what appears to be a mere superfluous detail, Proust writes of a farm named Marie-Antoinette where Albertine's band of girls would go to picnic while summering at Balbec. The name of this hideaway where these girls suspected of being "du mauvais genre"—lesbians—often gathered is a fitting reference since it evokes another famous Austrian forever associated with lesbianism, political intrigue, and ultimately, the ruin of the State. To continue this parallel, Albertine was raised in Austria and after she is repatriated to her native soil does she admit her affinity for Austria and the life she led there, which she describes as the "happiest years of her life." Her clear expression of her yearning for Austria and her ties to its people further call into question her loyalty to France.¹⁴⁴

Albertine's origins and background, so often obscured and questioned within Proust's narrative, are suddenly elucidated in the final pages of *Sodome et Gomorrhe*. The reader learns of her childhood as a result of her conversation with Marcel regarding music. Returning from an evening at the Verdurin's summer home, La Raspalière, Marcel expresses his desire to return to Mme Verdurin's to enlist her help in locating more music by one of Marcel's favorite composers. When Albertine offers to aid Marcel, he condescendingly rebuffs her saying that she could not help him find other music by Vinteuil. Albertine laughingly tells him that he is mistaken, because she knows his work well. Then, Albertine unthinkingly condemns herself in Marcel's mind as a lesbian through her admissions that she had lived in Austria not only with Mlle Vinteuil's lover, but that she knew Mlle Vinteuil almost as well. Thus, she could give him in fact all the information that he wanted without Mme Verdurin's help. Marcel is devastated as Albertine continues:

Vous vous rappelez que je vous ai parlé d'une amie plus âgée que moi qui m'a servi de mère, de sœur, avec qui j'ai passé à Trieste mes meilleures années et que d'ailleurs je dois dans quelques semaines retrouver à Cherbourg, d'où nous

¹⁴² It might seem strange to us in a contemporary context to see tropes of Jewishness and tropes of Germanness overlapping in this way and serving similar ideological functions, but it was not so unusual at the time. Nothing prevented rising French anti-Semitism from melding into a French nationalist hostility to all things German. Moreover, although the sexually non-normative population may not have been diplomatic spies, its hidden sexuality that threatens to contaminate and erode the bourgeois of the ideals of the Third Republic does make it a threat to the State.

¹⁴³ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 209. See also, note 1, page 499.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 499.

voyagerons ensemble...hé bien! Cette amie (oh! Pas du tout le genre de femmes que vous pourriez croire!), regardez comme c'est extraordinaire, est justement la meilleure amie de la fille de ce Vinteuil, et je connais presque autant la fille de Vinteuil. Je ne les appelle jamais que mes deux grandes sœurs.¹⁴⁵

Among the many reasons this passage is significant is the fact that it reinforces the idea of Germanic contamination as a source of lesbianism. A French citizen by birth, Albertine is a hybrid creature raised in Austria and infused with its culture, which renders her sexually suspect because of her connections both to Germanic culture and to a "professional Sapphist."¹⁴⁶ She admits that she spent the happiest days of her life with her "big sister," Mlle Vinteuil's lover, in Trieste where she will now travel to spend her Christmas holidays.¹⁴⁷ The importance of Trieste as a site of cultural instability linking Albertine to Germanic and Jewish cultures will be discussed further, but I want to concentrate on the import of her "confession" regarding Mlle Vinteuil's lover. The revelations about Albertine's youth serve as an inverted mirror of the opening pages of this volume when Charlus's true sexual orientation is revealed. Consequently, in a few often overlooked passages interspersed throughout *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, Proust effectively links Germanic culture and sexual deviance to Albertine in much the same way he does with Charlus. Although Charlus's kinship affiliates him with Germany, it is Albertine's childhood that links her to Germanic cultures.¹⁴⁸ Albertine and Austria are so conflated in Marcel's mind that he states:

La passion mystérieuse avec laquelle j'avais pensé autrefois à l'Autriche parce que c'était le pays d'où venait Albertine (son oncle y avait été conseiller d'ambassade), que sa singularité géographique, la race qui l'habitait, ses monuments, ses paysages je pouvais les considérer comme dans un atlas, comme dans un recueil de vues, dans le sourire, dans les manières d'Albertine, cette passion mystérieuse, je l'éprouvais encore mais par une inversion de signes, dans le domaine de l'horreur. Oui, c'était de là qu'Albertine venait.¹⁴⁹

Albertine's identification with a specific geo-political space reminds the reader of her foreignness and impenetrability. In her comportment Marcel thought he was able to distinguish a set of legible signs that corresponded to and heightened his desire. She was this "race" whose "ways" he thought he understood, but he realizes that the transparency of this race is quite deceptive. The "peculiarities" of this race, of this geographic space for which Albertine is the metonymic substitute, are not recognizable or apprehendable. Albertine's very humanity becomes foreign to the narrator, and Proust returns to the topology of traitors, spies, and race in discussing Albertine

comme une femme qui m'eût caché qu'elle était d'un pays ennemi et espionne, bien plus traîtreusement qu'une espionne, car celle-ci ne trompe que sur sa nationalité, tandis qu'Albertine c'était sur son humanité la plus profonde, sur ce

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 500.

¹⁴⁷ The use of big sister was often a coded term to refer to someone with whom one had had a lesbian relationship.

¹⁴⁸ The dichotomous representations of Charlus's and Albertine's relationships to Germanic cultures—one through bloodlines and the other through cultural contact—reflects Proust's theorization of homosexuality as both genetic and acquired. Moreover, Charlus and Albertine are Germanic derivatives par excellence. Charlus recalls Charlemagne while Albertine recalls Albert the Great.

¹⁴⁹ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 504.

qu'elle n'appartenait pas à la humanité commune, mais à une race étrange qui s'y mêle, s'y cache et ne s'y fond jamais.¹⁵⁰

While the kinship ties between the Guermantes and Germany are obvious, Proust's decision to situate Albertine in Austria provides a better representational model for the dangers of racial, ethnic, and cultural heterogeneity. A few short decades before the turn of the century, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire ruled over such diverse groups as Italians, Poles, Czechs, Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. The empire's ethnic heterogeneity spawned growing nationalist sentiments over the following decades, growing tensions involving nationalist ambitions led to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and the outbreak of World War I. Moreover, Austria had been a member of the victorious allies who invaded France in 1814, so Austria also had a history as an invader of French soil, resembling in this regard Germany, who invaded during the Franco-Prussian War. Austria's particular history, the hybridity of its demographics, and its recent European dominance cast it as another Germanic threat from the East. Thus, Proust's choice of Austria as a haven of lesbianism where Albertine "could find in any house a woman with whom she could assuage her passion" is a calculated gesture to the political and historical currents of the time.¹⁵¹ Interestingly, Proust writes that when all external artifice is stripped away and Albertine is naked, from certain angles she looks like a spy. "Il y avait que, quand elle était tout à fait sur le côté, un certain aspect de sa figure...semblant révéler la méchanceté, l'âpreté au grain, la fourberie d'une espionne, dont la présence chez moi m'eût fait horreur et qui semblait démasquée par ces profils-là."¹⁵²

Proust gives Albertine a Germanic patina through her geographic wanderings, but it is through his use of Trieste, an Austro-Hungarian port city, that he cleverly binds up Jewish and Germanic elements with lesbianism. Albertine's planned Christmas rendez-vous with Mlle. Vinteuil's lover in Trieste epitomizes his careful attention to detail. Trieste was a free city, imbued with ambiguity and complex allegiances and identities, and much more than Amsterdam represented a geo-political site resistant to nationalist allegiances because of its centuries old status as a free city.¹⁵³ Officially a part of Austria for most of six centuries, Trieste had longstanding cultural ties to Germanic and Jewish cultures. It was literally a crossroads between Western Europe and Eastern Europe as well as a linguistic crossroads between the Latinate and the Slavic/Germanic. The Jewish associations between the geographic space, which dates back to the eleventh century, also make this city an interesting choice. Jewish contributions in insurance, banking, education, and commerce had fueled Trieste's remarkable economic growth in the nineteenth century. Indeed the construction of the famous Great Synagogue of Trieste in 1910, which made the news throughout Europe, further established Trieste as a "Jewish" city. By situating Albertine's clandestine meeting with Mlle Vinteuil's lover in Trieste, Proust succeeds in infusing the text with the specter of the Jewish and the Germanic so that notions of race and ethnicity further nuance issues of sexuality, deviance, and the fluidity of national

¹⁵⁰ Marcel Proust, *Albertine disparue* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 109.

¹⁵¹ In his fit of jealousy following Albertine's confession that she knew Mlle Vinteuil's lover well, Marcel imagines that in Austria she could find lesbian women everywhere with whom she could have a sexual encounter (Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 500.).

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁵³ See generally, Lois C. Dubin, *The Port Jews of Hapsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999). See also Nicholas Howe, "Trieste, Trieste: The Secret Center of European Commerce," *New Republic* 4572 (2002): 31-37.

identity. Trieste represents a type of heterotopia where sexual, racial, and religious deviance converge at the intersection of East and West: a melting pot for the marginalized. Thus, Trieste becomes a perfect metaphor for Albertine's unknowability because it was, as the Viennese playwright, Hermann Bahr, described it, a city out of time, out of "nowhere."¹⁵⁴

As French citizen by birth, Marcel cannot quite apprehend Albertine's hybridity due to her upbringing and contact with Austrian culture. She resists the Third Republic's litmus test of affiliation that viewed people through the binary optic of insider/outsider or foreigner/citizen. These fracture lines formed the underpinnings for the sexual dichotomy of homosexual and heterosexual that routinely associated various kinds of otherness with deviant sexualities. Albertine incarnates the confluence of questions about race and sexuality that were bound up in the polemic of "Frenchness." The novel even draws an analogy between Trieste and Gomorrah when Marcel states "je pensais maintenant à Trieste, mais comme à une cité maudite que j'aurais voulu faire brûler sur-le-champ et supprimer du monde réel."¹⁵⁵

Most critics do not consider threats to the French State as part of Proust's novelistic preoccupations, but his work nonetheless drew a great deal from the social and political currents of his time. Proust's inclusion of certain ethnic or racial groups to shade lesbian representation speaks volumes regarding French national aspirations and France's politicized ideas pertaining to threats to its national identity. Powerful countries whose cultural, political, or economic power threatened French dominance were often constructed as fertile grounds for lesbianism and other non-normative sexualities.

And yet, even if the lesbian was conceived of as the seductress who came from elsewhere to corrupt and redefine French values, perhaps she was nevertheless emblematic of a certain futurity. As Réda Bensamaïa asked:

Was the contagion of lesbianism the harbinger, the totem of the prescient prophets, who foresaw the future impermeability of borders, hybridity of cultures, and the emergence of global ethnoscaples, those "transnational" spaces of identity that take up an increasingly important place in the politics of old nation-states?¹⁵⁶

Although Proust reiterated the contemporary algebra of Jewishness, sexual deviance, and national identity in his characterizations of lesbians, their very visibility invested them with a certain amount of hope and chutzpah. The luminosity of their desire may shoot up phosphorous flares that serve as beacons "in every town, in every village, to reunite its separated members to rebuild the biblical city..."¹⁵⁷ During the decades that Proust wrote his tomes, the increasing presence of evolving lesbian communities began to lay the groundwork for a future society in which overt same-sex desire would trump issues of shame, fear and class. At the intersection of vice and visibility various authors were imagining a new Gomorrah—always foreign and menacing—and literary figures such as the Bloch cousins and Albertine were its adept tour guides.

¹⁵⁴ Jan Morris, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 17.

¹⁵⁵ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 505.

¹⁵⁶ Réda Bensamaïa, "On Khatibi's 'Professional Traveller'," in *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads*, ed. Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2000), 296.

¹⁵⁷ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 245-246.

Chapter 3: Class and Space: Parisian Geographies of Sapphic Desire

“Un paysage hante, intense comme l’opium”—Stéphane Mallarmé

“Parmi des merveilles instables, voilée, mieux que vêtue, de noir ou de violet, à travers la nuit odorante des salons barricadés de vitraux, dans un air épaissi de rideaux, de fumées d’encens, Renée errait.” In this passage Colette describes the lesbian poet, Renée Vivien in her home on the avenue du Bois—a home full of low tables from the Far Orient, enormous Buddhas, cloying incense, Chinese masks, and ancient musical instruments. Colette’s acute attention to minutely cataloguing Vivien’s décor does far more than merely recreate a remembered ambiance. Implicit in this recreation is an understanding that these details function as potent discursive clues that locate Vivien in a symbolic and cultural space and that work upon the reader, orienting textual interpretation by pointing to directions laden with cultural referents. The adage that “location is everything”, often heard in relation to real estate, is equally relevant when examining lesbian space.

In arguing the importance of geography in understanding literary imaginings of the lesbian, I consider the constellations of place, social customs and codes, and how they functioned to create a recognizable topography that has both social and political determinants. Thus, an inquiry into the geographic locations in which both literature and other cultural artifacts locate the lesbian provides a fruitful way of understanding various kinds of meaning and value associated with lesbians and lesbianism during the Third Republic. A study of the geographical spaces associated with lesbians and the spheres in which they moved may reveal something of how they may have lived and interacted and certainly reveals how their lives were represented in the French imaginary. Where lesbians socialized, met, and even ate meals has social implications and allows us to begin to perceive a system of cultural relationality. Representations of lesbians as circulating in brothels and brasseries as opposed to salons reveals the way various writers imagined the lesbian as well as the types of discourses that influenced their writing. A discussion of the emergence of nascent lesbian communities in Paris quickly moves beyond questions of mere visibility to encompass the evolving types of social networks, ways of being, and kinds of social capital that could be accumulated and exchanged between women who loved women. From a look at these geographic spaces we can begin to construct a map for better understanding lesbian cultures during the Third Republic. These spaces of encounter in which desire trumped class became porous and blurred, and while the spheres in which lesbians moved sometimes intersected and blurred, other “paths of desire” allowed admission only to women with a certain economic or social status.

As lesbians became an identifiable group, and as the idea of an existent and widespread lesbian community—or as Proust puts it, “a race”—entered the French imaginary, the community became a literary object. However, as discursive representations illustrate, the idea of an emerging lesbian community was not merely linked to increased visibility but to ideas of a developing sense of community that was predicated on the forging of new social networks and relationships. Even though eighteenth-century authors wrote of the *anadrines*, an imagined and secret lesbian community composed of aristocratic women, the nineteenth century witnessed a sharp shift in the imaginings of the lesbian that continued through the end of the 1930s. She was no longer located in the rarified and closed social sphere of the salons, but she congregated in

cafes, dance halls, and other public places she and others like her moved freely. Consequently, different types of cultural codes developed, such as linguistic and fashion codes, which allowed women to find one another and to feel that they shared a certain acquaintance and forms of recognition. The woman sporting short hair and a monocle might be readily recognizable to other lesbians as well as the woman riding alone in her carriage down certain allies in the Bois de Boulogne at certain hours. The association of various geographic spaces with lesbianism both in literature and in other cultural artifacts, such as paintings, newspapers, and magazine illustrations underscores that women were congregating in sufficient enough numbers to draw the authors' attention. I claim that these geographic spaces demonstrate that lesbians were for the first time competing with men for public space, and that the increasing interweaving of these social networks heightened same-sex visibility. This increasing conspicuousness provided a wider cultural representation and larger discussion about lesbianism within France and outside the hexagon. Furthermore, as we shall see, the linking of certain sites over five decades with lesbianism provides an unexplored narrative of lesbianism in France beginning with the classical and legitimizing island of Lesbos in fin-de-siècle France and extending to the transgressive space of public dances during the Jazz Age and to the idea of a New Gomorrah.

It is important to remember in a discussion of lesbian space that some of the women who journeyed down these paths of desire would not be considered "lesbians" by our contemporary definitions. If citizenship in Lesbos-sur-Seine required that women be the exclusive object of desire as a condition of membership, many notable women who did not meet that requirement nonetheless associated with this coterie of lesbians. Many of these women such as Liane de Pougy, Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Elizabeth de Gramont, Musidora, and Suzy Solidor were easily recognizable, but their marriages or long-term relationships with men might exclude them from contemporary definitions of lesbian. Yet, these women indisputably contributed to the formation of lesbian communities and identities by virtue of their participation in non-normative sexual relationships. Their notoriety often facilitated the creation of an association between certain spaces. One of the primary ways that this occurred was through literary works that described the spheres in which the lesbian moved. Novels such as *Nana*, *Deux Amies*, *Zé'boïm*, *Notre-Dame-de-Lesbos*, or *Idylle saphique* provide readers with discursive postcards that publicize lesbianism as a tourist attraction if not a final destination.

Even though many prominent writers based their portrayals of lesbians on their own observations after having traveled in those spheres, they also drew extensively from newspapers and other forms of popular culture to create their narratives. Novels were usually designed to relate a story that would appeal to a paying public, and thus they work as gauges of the public's interest in and preoccupation with sexuality. One of the interesting dimensions of literary representations of Sappho and her sisters during this period is that novels, because of their reliance on and integration of social, medical and legal discourses, were taken to have "truth" value. Unlike legislators or physicians, many of the novelists who wrote about lesbianism had birds-eye views of the various lesbian milieus they represented. Their representations then provided further accessibility to the burgeoning sexual cultures in these salons, dance halls, or cafés. Considering illustrations, newspapers, art, and other cultural productions that informed literary production, this chapter elucidates how many writers' descriptions of lesbians contributed to the creation of queer cities and sites while mapping urban spatial organization, lesbian experiences, and perceptions of everyday life.

I. The Return to Lesbos: The Classical Inspiration for Lesbian Identity

Lesbos aux flancs dorés, rends-nous notre âme antique,
 Ressuscite pour nous les lyres et les voix,
 Et les rires anciens, et l'ancienne musique
 Qui rendit si poignants les baisers d'autrefois,
 Toi qui gardes l'écho des lyres et des voix,
 Lesbos aux flancs dorés, rends-nous notre âme antique¹⁵⁸
 —Renée Vivien

The very term “lesbian” has its roots in a Classical heritage that proposes an origin story of same-sex attraction and romance between females in Western culture. Therefore, in (re)imagining the lesbian, French writers rehearsed a need for a foundational narrative, one that would compete with those legitimated by rational Enlightenment thought. The polemics surrounding the tenth muse’s, Sappho’s sexual relationships with her female students on her native island of Lesbos or whether she was involved with men, had been ongoing for centuries in France.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, this fictional origin of same-sex desire among women was actively haunted by the heteronormative—some historians and writers claimed that Sappho committed suicide because of her failed romantic relationship with Phaon—thus, Lesbos was always/already a conflicted and contingent space.¹⁶⁰ As the term lesbianism was gaining currency as the medico-judicial name for same-sex relations between women it was replacing another term, Sapphism: either term has its roots in the same particular historical moment. Various discursive works from gossipy newspapers displayed in train stations to high brow publications offered through private catalogues popularized the island of Lesbos as the epicenter of same-sex relationships between women during the late nineteenth century. Writers of all calibers, from the scurrilous and sensational journalist/author Catulle Mendès and the popular Pierre Louÿs to more serious poets such as Renée Vivien and Apollinaire, claimed Lesbos as the mythic birthplace of lesbianism. These writers’ various audiences highlight how the origin story of Sappho as progenitor of lesbian desire traversed socio-economic classes. Catulle Mendès situates the isle of Lesbos as the birthplace of same-sex desire among women in an origin story that recounts the seduction of Aphrodite by the nymphs, Peristera and Kypris. The portrayal in novels and

¹⁵⁸ Lesbos with the golden sides, give us your classical soul
 Revive the lyres and voices for us,
 And the ancients laughter, and the ancient music
 Which made the kisses of yesteryear so poignant
 You who guard the echo of the lyres and voices,
 Lesbos with the golden sides, give us back our classical soul

¹⁵⁹ Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 53-231.

¹⁶⁰ Gabriel Faure’s comments exemplify the debate around her sexuality (the ex-Inspector General of Historical Monuments) regarding Sappho that she was “not a sick woman since she first loved a man, since we know she was married and had a daughter...since she died for Phaon. She didn’t [practice ‘sapphism’] for money or out of need. It seems that she epitomized the perverse woman.” Nicole Albert, “Sappho Mythified, Sappho Mystified, or the Metamorphoses of Sappho in Fin-de-Siècle France,” in *Gay Studies from the French Cultures: Voices from France, Belgium Brazil, Canada and the Netherlands*, ed. Rommel Mendès Leite and Pierre Olivier de Busscher (New York: Haworth Press, 1993), 91, 95.

magazines of lesbians returning to Lesbos, as some sort of pilgrimage, supposes, without locating it, a kind of lesbian diaspora whose migrations had crisscrossed Europe. Numerous authors such as Paul Arène, Catulle Mendès, and Pierre Louÿs as well as illustrators for newspapers such as *Le Rire* or *Fantasio*, imagine women who love women migrating back to the island, if not to take up residence, then at least as a pilgrimage.

Renée Vivien, who was renowned for her love of Classical Greek poetry and her fascination with Sappho, wrote a poem titled *Retour à Mytilène* (Return to Mytilene) in which she offers an example of the powerful attraction Lesbos held in the French imaginary.¹⁶¹ In this particular poem Vivien invokes the island of Lesbos as the welcoming and sheltering progenitor of lesbian love.

Reçois dans tes vergers un couple féminin,
 Île mélodieuse et propice aux caresses,
 Parmi l'asiatique odeur du lourd jasmin,
 Tu n'as point oublié Psappha ni ses maîtresses,
 Île mélodieuse et propice aux caresses,
 Reçois dans tes vergers un couple féminin¹⁶²

The poem describes Lesbos's golden flanks, her mountains with their noble silhouettes, and the fertility of the land in which the poetess can melt and dissolve. In short, Lesbos becomes the inviolable shelter for the lesbian subject where the ancient soul of lesbian love merely awaits for her handmaidens to return to revive the sacred love that inspired artistic production. In this version of a return to Mytilène (a city on Lesbos), Vivien's reference to Asia reminds the reader of the otherness of the lesbian who comes from "elsewhere." Lesbos is configured as queer not merely because of non-normative sexualities but also because the island serves as a type of artistic commune full of female authors, actors, painters, musicians, and poets who are simultaneously subverting both the natural and aesthetic orders. Lesbos and its capital, Mytilene, are hubs of female creative and physical energy unrestricted by patriarchal discipline. In this idealized vision of Lesbos Vivien creates a lesbian genealogy/history that is both spatial and ideological, where women escape the male gaze to create and to love in harmony. However, some contemporary male writers conceived of this space—the isle of Lesbos—in apocalyptic terms that alluded to a lesbian diaspora.

For a lesbian writer such as Vivien or Nathalie Barney, Lesbos represented a return to the motherland, while for many male writers it was a space of retribution for its transgressions against compulsory heteronormativity. In a short story entitled "Tremblement de Terre à Lesbos", Paul Arène recounts the story of two female lovers reading a newspaper account of an earthquake on Lesbos. A male scholar/psychologist who overhears their conversation explains how Lesbos was originally destroyed (much like the fabled city of Gomorrah) because Sappho and her students refused to love men. Arène calls lesbian love "sterile" and writes "les gens

¹⁶¹ Although Renée Vivien was English and American, she was educated primarily in France, spent most of her adult life in France, and wrote and published most of her works in French. Her status as a "French" poet earned her comparisons with Baudelaire.

¹⁶² Take in your orchards the maiden couple
 Melodic island, favorable to caresses,
 Among the Oriental smell of heavy jasmine,
 You have not at all forgotten Sappho nor her mistresses,
 Melodic island, favorable to caresses,
 Take in your orchards the maiden couple

disaient que c'était là une vengeance de l'Amour sur ce pays où par orgueil de leur beauté, les femmes s'étaient fait un cœur stérile."¹⁶³ However, unlike Gomorrah, Lesbos survives to inspire women to return so that they may enjoy "cent Cléopâtres sans Antoine."¹⁶⁴ In 1901, another writer, Gabriel Faure, penned a similar story of doom in which four years after the suicide of Sappho, Aphrodite's temple is completely destroyed in punishment for Sappho's wanderings from heterosexuality. Clearly, Lesbos could be presented in different ways for different ideological purposes. For heterosexual male writers such as Faure and Arène, the recounting of the total destruction of Aphrodite's temples can be read as divine punishment for claiming Aphrodite (the exemplar of heterosexuality) as a Sapphic symbol of love. The appropriation of Aphrodite for Sapphic purposes was a sacrilege that demanded divine retribution, and allegedly Aphrodite's own complicity in Sapphic love games merited the destruction of her "profaned" temples. The destruction of her cult, which is survived only by Eros, the fruit of her loins, symbolizes the dominance of patriarchal sexual paradigms in which male pleasure is primary and heterosexual.

Lesbos could thus be invoked to celebrate or to condemn sexual relations between women. Its use in this way would continue through the 1930s and beyond. Newspapers and magazines continued to make reference to Lesbos as a nod to this marginalized sexuality, and the reference would come to be widely understood by the common reading public as the years went by.¹⁶⁵ Thus, despite the male-authored narratives of the destruction of Lesbos and of the women who practiced love amongst themselves, this space gradually acquired the characteristics of a place of return, of homecoming, of eternal escape from patriarchal hegemony.

II. The Temple of Friendship: Barney's Salon and Sapphic Muses

The classical origins and mapping of lesbianism not only informed male writers who wrote on the subject, but this mythical origin story had an immeasurable impact on women who would help to build "Lesbos-sur-Seine." I map lesbian space from Lesbos to the Temple of Friendship, a replica of a Greek temple, used by Nathalie Clifford Barney. A famous American ex-patriate lesbian, who spent most of her adult life in Paris, Barney was the lover, friend and muse of Renée Vivien for many years, and the famous Amazon for Rémy de Gourmont. The neo-classical temple at the back of her garden was a cozy space complete with rugs, chaises-lounges, a fireplace, and room for intimate dinners. It was situated so that anyone in the sitting room of her *pavillon* could look through the garden to the "temple." Four Doric columns supported an entablature that said "à l'amitié." As one scholar remarks, "20 rue Jacob became the architectural embodiment of Barney's ideal of *amitié*, which she described as a 'pact above passions, the only indissoluble marriage... combining nineteenth-century ideals of friendship and Sapphic eroticism which were understood together as the necessary basis for productive artistic creativity."¹⁶⁶ This particular space is important for several reasons. First, it symbolizes one of the prevalent visible strands of lesbianism at the turn of the century linking it with a vision of

¹⁶³ Paul Arène, *Les ogresses* (Paris: Charpentier, 1891), 16-17.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Newspapers and magazines such as *Le Rire*, *Fantasio*, *L'Assiette au beurre*, *Gil Blas*, often used references to Lesbos or depictions to make innuendo about lesbianism. In 1931, Edouard Romilly entitled his book, which had lesbian themes, *Sappho, La Passionnante. La Passionnée*. See Edouard Romilly, *Sappho, La Passionnante, La Passionnée* (Paris: Figuière, 1931).

¹⁶⁶ Lorraine Dowler, *Gender and Landscape: Renegotiating Morality and Space* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 158.

sisterhood and artistic production. This space, which was for the most part accessible only to those of a certain social pedigree, is heavily inflected with issues of class. Nevertheless, it served as a visible community for lesbians for decades, and as such, it merits discussion.¹⁶⁷

The importance of this space must be understood in terms of the women who gathered under its dome. Some of the greatest female literary talents of the first half of the twentieth century congregated there. In this Temple of Friendship on the rue Jacob, women from the imagined “diaspora” of Lesbos gathered to celebrate, if even for a short time, same-sex desire among women. Colette gave her first public acting performance before a small gathering in this intimate setting. Celebrated writers such as Lucie Delarue-Madrus, Djuana Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Anna de Noailles, Radclyffe Hall, and Rachilde also regularly frequented Barney’s salon. While not all participants identified as lesbians, this place provided nonetheless a space in which non-normative desire could be explored and expressed freely. For instance, Mireille Havet, the precocious child poet and lesbian, described in her journal how H  l  ne Bertholet took advantage of Barney’s salon to approach her and express her interest in an affair with Havet. Bertholet was at the time involved in a heterosexual relationship with Maigret, a Parisian socialite, but soon after meeting Havet they became lovers.¹⁶⁸ Havet’s access to salon society allowed her to find other lovers, among them, La Baronne Clauzel and La Comtesse Sforza.

Barney was celebrated as the Amazon, and many of the great writers of the early twentieth century such as Gide, Val  ry, Aragon, Cocteau, Anatole France, and Mac Jacob visited her salon. Barney’s Temple of Friendship served not just as a literary hub but also as a gathering place for the great intellectuals of the period. Its rich intellectual life and social prominence placed it in the same distinguished category as the salons of French nobles such as the Duchesse du Maine, the Marquise d’Alembert, Comtesse Diane, Duchesse D’Uz  s, the Princesse Mathilde (Napoleon’s niece), and the Comte Robert de Montesquiou.

At least two of era’s most famous courtesans, Liane de Pougy and Emilienne d’Alen  on, were salon regulars and also Barney’s lovers. Pougy’s best-selling novel, *Idylle saphique* was modeled on her relationship with Barney, and R  my de Gourmont’s public correspondence with Barney in *Le Mercure de France* made her part of the popular cultural landscape.¹⁶⁹ Gourmont’s 222 letters published in the newspaper introduced Barney and her Sapphic world to a much larger French audience, and they were later collected and made into a book entitled *Lettres   *

¹⁶⁷ When I refer to the Temple of Friendship it is both the actual Classical temple replica on her property as well as the intellectual salon that both Barney and her home represented. The great friend and biographer of Barney seems to conflate both the salon and the Temple as parts of the whole. See Jean Chalon, *Portraits of a Seductress: The World of Nathalie Barney* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1979), 2.

¹⁶⁸ Mireille Havet, *Journal 1918-1919*, ed. Pierre Plateau (Paris:   ditions Claire Paulhan, 2003), 83.

¹⁶⁹ For instance, Gourmont made the bold statement in his letter entitled “Survivance” that “...dans l’amour tel que nous avons recr  e par tant de si  cles de civilisation, il n’est plus de distinction possible entre le naturel et l’anormal...nos centres nerveux secondaires se substituent l’un    l’autre nous aimons avec ...celui de nos sens, celui de nos organes qui a le r  le le plus important dans notre physiologie particuli  re, si bien que, de l’amour mystique    l’amour saphique et    l’amour platonique, s’il y a la diff  rence de moyen, il n’y en a pas dans le but, qui est la conqu  te de la joie parfaite. See R  my de Gourmont, *Lettres    l’Amazone* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1927), 144. In his “Le Plaisir” Gourmont talks about the Amazon’s (Barney’s)   lan towards beauty and love and their imbrication in physical pleasure—ideas which reinforced the idea of lesbians as sensualists and artists (Gourmont, *Lettres    l’Amazone*, 45-53). Elsewhere, he talks about the commonalities between an Amazone’s love of women and heterosexual romance as in his letter entitled, “L’Amour nu” (Gourmont, *Lettres    l’Amazone*, 90-91). Nathalie Clifford Barney, *Adventures of the Mind*, trans. John Spalding Gatton (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 55.

l'Amazone. Barney and Vivien both shared a vision of establishing an artistic colony for women on the island of Lesbos, and they made a pilgrimage in 1904 to this mythic locale. Once there, these poetesses' idealized vision of Lesbos was shattered, because they found neither pretty women nor the Classical setting of their dreams. For a brief time Lesbos provided a heightened sense of intimacy, romantic fervor, and creativity which allowed the two women to believe that they had at last found each other. Although they talked of establishing a women's colony on the two villas that they rented, these dreams never came to fruition. Nevertheless, the lingering memory of their time on Lesbos strongly colored their future artistic visions and relationships. Barney's reputation as an "*amazone*" and her overt lesbianism inspired lesbian characters in books such as Flossie in Pougy's *Idylle sapphique* (1899), Evangeline Musset in Djuana Barnes' novel, *Ladies Almanack* (Evangeline Musset), Laurette in Lucie Delarue-Mardrus' *L'Ange et les pervers* (The Angel and the Pervers), and Flossie in Colette's *Claudine s'en va*. As well as inspiring lesbian fictional characters, she also founded an *Académie des Femmes* whose founding provided a space in which women writers gave readings from their works.¹⁷⁰ And, of course, she was an author in her own right, publishing works such as *Pensées d'une Amazone* in 1920.

Barney's address at 20, rue Jacob, was indubitably a lesbian space in which male privilege and domination of intellectual, artistic, and political capital were contested. It was the men who coveted an invitation to this space as temporary tourists, while the women were the "natural" habituées of this sphere of intellectual activity that valorized lesbian artistic and intellectual production. French tradition had long considered the salons as privileged centers of intellectual exchange and cultural production as well centers of political and social intrigue.¹⁷¹ *Le Temple de l'amitié* subverted these ideals in several ways. First, as an American, Barney's salon displaced the French aristocracy as an influential mediator of "culture." Second, as a very publicly self-proclaimed lesbian, Barney eschewed certain of the bedrock values of the French bourgeoisie and extolled the virtues of her sexuality. She offered lesbianism as a social alternative as well as an inspiration for an artistic mode of production despite the vocal public condemnation of lesbianism in social and political discourse.¹⁷²

Radclyffe Hall described Barney thus:

There she was, this charming and cultured woman, a kind of lighthouse in a storm-swept ocean. The waves had lashed around her feet in vain; winds had

¹⁷⁰ The Académie des Femmes may undoubtedly be read as one Barney's subtle criticism of French masculine privilege that shunned women in the arts. Although the venerable bastion of French thought, the Académie française, had been in existence for hundreds of years, no woman had been admitted at the time Barney founded her own academy. As of the writing of this dissertation, the French Academy has only accepted four women into its hallowed halls: Marguerite Yourcenar (1981), Jacqueline de Romilly (1988), Florence Delay (2000), and Assia Djebar (2005). All of these "immortals" have been elected within the last thirty years.

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Antoine Lilti, *Le Monde des salons: sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

¹⁷² Feminists such as Madeleine Pelletier and Madeleine Guépet were either ambivalent about or else denounced lesbianism even though Pelletier was accused of being one herself. Various writers, moralists, scientists, and politicians also condemned same-sex desire between women. Kraft-Ebing classified homosexuality as a degenerative disease. See, Esther Newton, "The Mything Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984): 557. On the importance of Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis on French medical and literary thought, see Vernon Rosario, "Inversion's Histories/History's Inversions: Novelizing in Fin-de-Siècle Homosexuality," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 88-107.

howled; clouds had spewed forth their hail and their lightning; torrents had deluged but had not destroyed her.¹⁷³

The “Pope of Lesbos” presided over her exiled colony of Lesbos with a benevolent tyranny that captivated some of the great minds of the period that frequented her salon.¹⁷⁴

For her wit was the articulation of an original mind that quickly seized the complexity of an idea, her charm an intuitive response to people who interested her. Men of ideas—scholars, philosophers, statesmen, critics—found her remarkably easy to talk to and capable of establishing close rapport in short order.¹⁷⁵

I have dwelt on this ex-patriate American and her salon, because her decades of involvement in the best connected artistic *milieux* of Paris made her a confidant and important figure in the lives of so many important names in French culture, both males and females. The unapologetic presence of lesbianism in her salons, her life, and her writings provided a constant reminder that the vestal virgins of Lesbos were indeed tending to the temple’s fires along the Seine. Although 20 rue Jacob became synonymous with Barney and Barney with lesbianism, the physical details of such a geographic space are also important because they reveal much about certain extant conceptions of lesbian space and culture and how they were represented by means of, or within, Barney’s salon.

Barney’s residence itself became an imagined lesbian Mecca, which both Radclyffe Hall and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus described in convincing detail in their books. Their generous reliance on the details of Barney’s home in their novels, *The Well of Loneliness* and *L’Ange et les pervers* (The Angel and the Perverts) highlights the continuing influence of this salon on some writers’ imaginations through the 1920s and 1930s. The various treatments of this interior are interesting for several reasons: they give a fictionalized, but apparently fairly accurate account of the actual interior space, which allows us to visualize the scene for these lesbian gatherings and also illustrate the significance of this lesbian “protectorate” in the imagining of the lesbian in two novels written by women who identified or lived as lesbians.¹⁷⁶ Mardrus presented it as a place of refinement and creative activity, a stark contrast to the heterosexual bourgeoisie represented by a worldly journalist:

At Laurette’s...one talks art, music, even love with respect and ceremony. Beauty and money are never discussed in the same sentence. For dirty pervers, they are decidedly clean-minded. While that other fellow, that journalist, who looks like a traveling salesman on a spree, imagined Laurette’s home to a house of ill repute. I’d like to see him at one of her salons, attending a string quartet or

¹⁷³ Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Hammond, 1956), 126.

¹⁷⁴ Later in the twentieth century the literary critic, Claude Mauriac affectionately referred to Barney as the Pope of Lesbos, and the name stuck. Joan Schenkar, *Truly Wilde: The Unsettling Story of Dolly Wilde* (London: Virago, 2000), 174.

¹⁷⁵ Chalon, *Portraits of a Seductress*, 107.

¹⁷⁶ Lucie Delarue-Mardrus was married to the famous translator J.C. Mardrus; however, she divorced him and maintained a long-term relationship with the Jewish opera singer, Germaine de Castro. As Anna Livia and others have argued, her primary sexual/affective relationships were with women. See, the Anna Livia’s translator’s introduction to Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *The Angel and the Perverts*, trans. Anna Livia (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 47.

forced to listen to the poetry reading these professionals have been unable to put on.¹⁷⁷

The emphasis on creative production as co-terminous with lesbianism marks a radically different discourse around lesbianism, shifting it from degeneracy, prostitution and the gutters to intellectual and artistic production. The Temple of Friendship was a reminder that the arts and marginalized sexualities shared a common interest in challenging and expanding bourgeois ideologies that often sought to control and repress them. In a backhanded manner, Mardrus inverted the prevalent bourgeois paradigms that valorized heteronormativity and equated lesbianism with prostitution. In this reversed social order, the “dirty perverts” are the guardians and architects of artistic production, which was so essential to conceptions of French identity, while the prurient interests of society are indicted through the figure of the journalist who wishes to sensationalize and exploit this group of women.

III. From Elysian Fields to the “Woods”: Sites of Lesbian Cruising and Other Haunts of Desire



L'Almanach des Parisiens, 1893 “Bords de Marne”

Women such as Barney and Vivien certainly contributed to lesbian visibility as women who loved women became increasingly part of the Parisian landscape during the Belle Époque. However, before they hit the “scene” in 1900 lesbians were already firmly ensconced in the French imaginary as numerous literary works, illustrations, and other cultural artifacts attest. Written and visual representations gestured to the idea that lesbians had voracious sexual appetites, a conception that fed in to the ideas of “cruising” and seduction, which were essential parts of the psychological make-up of the imagined lesbian. Because lesbians were frequently cast as sexually insatiable, writers to criminologists claimed that lesbians had developed their own rituals and semiotics so as to recognize each other and to cruise for sexual encounters. Essential to decoding these rituals was discovering the spaces or “habitats” in which they allegedly “cruised” for sex.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 115.

The 1893 illustration in the *Parisian Almanac* can be interpreted as a cliché of lesbian “cruising”, and its composition is emblematic of many of the common conceptions about lesbianism during this time period.¹⁷⁸ Although one might view this illustration with an innocence that merely sees two women interested in fashion, it is precisely its ambiguity and the illustrator’s wink to contemporary understandings of lesbian sexuality that warrant comment. My analysis proposes a less innocuous reading, because of the subtext that is semaphored to many readers and that relies on already established conventions regarding lesbian cultural life. Even the caption to the illustration is equivocal and invites a variety of readings. The brunette slyly asks how the strolling blond likes her outfit while she only offers her backside to be admired, and the admiring blonde, eyes glued to the posterior of the sportswoman, appreciatively states, “a little severe, but correct.” One instantly notices the masculinized female with short dark hair, riding pants, who recalls a certain kind of Amazon, with her straw hat, tie, and pocket square. She is every inch the dandy—the female who performs female masculinity a hundred years before Judith Halberstam theorized this type of gender enactment. She is looking directly at the feminine blonde’s face, and the illustrator relies on the already culturally embedded dichotomy of a masculine/feminine binary for the lesbian couple that has continued to survive in the French imaginary.

The blond woman, *coded* as feminine, by her long dress, elegant hat, carefully styled hair, earrings, and elaborate hat, appears to be ogling the “dandy.” All the more dangerous and subversive because she could pass as heterosexual, it was she who approved of the masculine dressed female while openly leering at the brunette’s prominent *derrière*. The blonde’s parasol held tightly behind her back and pointing directly at the brunette’s *derrière* functioned on several levels. First, it operated as the phallus, erect and ready for penetration, which illustrated the blonde’s arousal and desire. However, it would simultaneously remind the reader of the commonly held bourgeois belief that there could not be “real” sexual relations between women, because there could not be penetration by a penis. Nevertheless, the phallic parasol aimed at the brunette’s behind is also a wink at other deviant sexual practices, especially anal sex. In Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Albertine alluded to this sexual practice when she tells Marcel that she wanted to “se faire casser le pot.” The leering blonde’s posture causes her breasts to protrude and gives her the animalistic air of a strutting rooster. Meanwhile, the brunette’s *derrière* attracts the viewer’s attention, much in the way that a male peacock’s fan is displayed to seduce. These postures of rutting animals are a reminder that the lesbian is ubiquitous and camouflaged—but potentially legible—and that her hypersexuality can corrupt French women and turn them from their traditional duty of marriage and motherhood. As these women cruise each other, the visual warning is clear: they are walking near a precipice—both literally and figuratively. A wooded glade and precipice, like the representation of Paris’ famous cruising space, the Bois de Boulogne, frames the image on the left-hand side.

In the late nineteenth century when representations abounded of lesbianism as a “vice” of the well heeled or the aristocracy, journalists, novelists, and social pundits mused that these women loved to cruise in the Bois de Boulogne. The Bois de Boulogne operated as a chic park signposted with issues of class. Aristocrats, the wealthy, and the bourgeois considered this the

¹⁷⁸ The *Almanach des Parisiennes* discussed at length women’s sporting attire, but the connection between non-normative sexualities and sporting women was clear. One journalist wrote in *Le Gaulois* that “la bicycliste...constitue un troisième sexe.” Albert, *Saphisme et Décadence*, 126-130.

place to see and to be seen.¹⁷⁹ During the fin-de-siècle the “Bois” was a literal beehive of activity, with its numerous paths, luxuriant vegetation, numerous cafés, restaurants, and grand alleys, which served as the perfect stage for voyeurs and exhibitionists. The park’s thirty-five kilometers of serpentine paths and twenty-nine kilometers of riding paths provided ample space to watch the comings and goings of Parisian notables, which were detailed in gossip papers such as *Gil Blas*, *L’Écho de Paris*, *L’Assiette au beurre*, among others. In this way the Bois de Boulogne served a dual purpose as both a type of “theater” in which the performances of non-normative sexual seduction (cruising) could take place and also a refuge in which these assignations could transpire. Numerous authors relied on the “Woods” as a backdrop for lesbian encounters because it was a literal crossroads where urban sociability intersected with all types of sexualities, and public space was configured as private space. Although the avenues and trails became networks of cruising, they were not as fixed as certain other traditional male cruising spots of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as urinals, but rather they had a certain fluidity that defied observation by the authorities. Sites of gay cruising such as public restrooms or a bathhouses permitted intense surveillance by police because of their fixity, but the bourgeois or aristocratic lesbians who cruised in their carriages traversed space and obscured the gaze, and thus frustrated certain kinds of surveillance. The shelter of the carriage arguably provided more cocoon-like private space within a public space, which provided an accessible venue for gay, lesbian, and straight dalliances. Léo Taxil decried this protection in his book, *Corruption fin-de siècle*:

Nothing can be done...it’s distressing. Sapphism is not an offence foreseen by the Code Napoléon. Purveyors of tribadism take care not to accost young girls or let themselves be caught at their obscene practices in a place declared public by law; it is an offence, for example, in a thicket, in a railway carriage; but, if these practices are done in a private dwelling out of the neighbors’ view, and between majors, the law is powerless. The public prosecutor cannot employ force preventively...Precisely the opposite happens in the case of Sapphism, and the unfortunate women who allow themselves to be corrupted never come to complain, even when the debauchees who abuse them bring them within two fingers of death.¹⁸⁰

Unlike the railway car referenced by Taxil, the carriage is a semi-private extension of the private sphere, a propelled extension of the home, which afforded protection as well as a panorama. From inside an enclosed carriage the voyager’s gaze is at once shielded from observation and free to observe. Zola privileges the versatility of the carriage as potentially sexual space, for instance, to accentuate the rapacity of Nana’s sexual appetite. The Count Muffat, who is Nana’s lover (“protector” in the courtesan’s idiom), assuaged his ferocious jealousy by pushing Nana to spend her free time with Satin, her female lover, but Nana even cheats on her.

Nana deceived Satin as she deceived the count, let herself indulge monstrous caprices, picking up girls on street corners. Driving home in her carriage, she would

¹⁷⁹ In 1930 Paul Morand remembered how important the Bois de Boulogne was as a center of social activity for the Belle Époque. In his work, *1900*, Morand describes in detail how “tout Paris est là, et sauf les palefreniers anglais, un Paris vraiment français...” Paul Morand, *1900* (Paris: Flammarion, 1930), 183.

¹⁸⁰ Leo Taxil, *La Corruption fin-de-siècle* (Paris: G. Carré, 1894), 262.

sometimes take a fancy to a little slut spied on the pavement; her senses fired, she would take the little slut in her carriage, pay her, and then send her on her way.¹⁸¹

The obvious implication is that Nana, unwilling or unable to take the little “sluts” to her sumptuous mansion or find other possible accommodations, took her pleasure in her carriage before depositing the girls back on the street. Moreover, this passage can be read as an indication of certain classes of women who were more available and willing to participate in intimate sexual acts with other women than one might have imagined at the time.

The enduring perception of the Bois de Boulogne as a Sapphic playground is later recalled twelve years after the publication of *Nana* in the Maurice de Souillac’s novel, *Zé’boïm*. Madeleine, the primary protagonist, is living a fairly open lesbian lifestyle in Paris with her lover, and her beauty combined with her visibility elicits commentary in the Parisian gossip sheets. One “journal grivois” minces no words and states:

Tout Paris connaît la belle Madeleine, éblouissante comme une courtisane de Sigalon. Elle fait prime, en ce moment, au Bois, où son succès balance celui des mississippiennes les mieux cotées. La ‘gente Madelonette’ est presque toujours chaperonnée par une femme qu’on dit être sa cousine. Mais si nous en croyons quelques indiscretions d’antichambre, la dite cousine serait, bien qu’appartenant au sexe—‘à qui nous devons notre mère’—le plus parfait, et le moins platonique des amoureux...Mystère et Saphisme!...¹⁸²

Madeleine, who enjoys flaunting her sexuality, chooses the Bois de Boulogne as the most advantageous place to see and to be seen. Although she is “chaperoned” by her lesbian “cousin,” they both realize that this locale forms part of a lesbian social network—it is a social ritual—and they visit it regularly. The importance of the Bois as a lesbian haunt is further affirmed in a latter passage when Madeleine’s former lover, Hélène de Terville, unexpectedly runs into Madeleine unchaperoned and riding horseback *à l’Amazone*.¹⁸³ Thus, the gossip rag’s snippets about a socialite function as a type of *mise en abyme* of contemporary journalistic practices reflecting particular cultural assumptions of the period about sexualities and space.

Well-known authors and journalists such as Jean Lorrain or Catulle Mendès wrote articles that alluded to or explicitly discussed lesbianism and/or lesbian relationships. These journalists and others of their ilk performed a type of cultural analysis of the growing fascination with non-normative sexuality that sold gossipy, tabloid-like papers—at least it appears that these types of exposés likely increased the revenues of the publications.¹⁸⁴ Mendès wrote a series of articles in the paper, *L’Écho de Paris*, in 1891 including an October 28 article describing the practice among certain women of parading through the Bois de Boulogne with dolls in their carriages. These dolls, which Mendès wryly confirmed could not be an overt sign of a women’s lesbian attachment to a particular woman but rather a sign of their relationship’s durability, not only appeared in carriages but also in the boxes or loges of certain women. Although Mendès is

¹⁸¹ “Nana trompait Satin comme elle trompait le comte, s’enrageant dans des toquades monstrueuses, ramassant des filles au coin des bornes. Quand elle rentrait en voiture, elle s’amourachait parfois d’un souillon aperçu sur le pavé, les sens pris, l’imagination lâchée; et elle faisait monter le souillon, le payait et le renvoyait” (Zola, *Nana*, 444).

¹⁸² Maurice de Souillac, *Zé’boïm* (Paris: Piaget, 1887), 256.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

¹⁸⁴ See Michael Lucey, “Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust,” (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 120-122.

careful not to discuss lesbianism directly, his article is a nod to the practice among some lesbians of signaling their sexual orientation through the use of a doll placed next to them in their carriage as they traversed the Bois de Boulogne. Thus, the Bois de Boulogne is both a location of lesbian ritual and generator of its own “secret codes.”

The “Bois” was known to be a prime spot for lesbian cruising in the morning between 10am and noon, especially along the *Allée des Poteaux*. Its many restaurants and cafés were also scenes of lesbian activity throughout the day.¹⁸⁵ Catherine Van Casselar gives the example of Romaine Brooks’ anecdote from her unpublished autobiography in which she describes being “picked up” at the Pavillon Chinois, a restaurant, in the Bois de Boulogne, by a very beautiful, fashionably overweight woman whose brazen seduction included an invitation to take a ride in her carriage.¹⁸⁶ Liane de Pougy and Emilienne d’Alençon, the last great courtesans of the Belle Époque who were also well known for their lesbian relationships, were frequent visitors to the “woods” and were admired by both men and women. In Barney’s early naive days in Paris, she first laid eyes on Liane de Pougy while strolling through the Bois de Boulogne with respectable bourgeois expatriates. She quickly learned the cartography of lesbian space and became a part of it, physically and metaphorically. Her daily routine for decades was to take a morning ride through the Bois de Boulogne, which just conveniently coincided with the lesbian rush hour for cruising. However, as Barney’s biographer, Jean Chalon notes about her early adult time in Paris, “although no longer innocent, she was still completely in the dark about the geography of Paris-Lesbos and had to be content with stylish public promenades like *l’allée des Acacias* in the Bois de Boulogne....”¹⁸⁷ Jean Lorrain indicated the cultural operation of this particular space when he wrote, “...but once it became fashionable, all Paris followed: one had to be seen at the Acacias. Everyone was there, *prurient* Paris, artistic Paris, Liane de Pougy, just back from Switzerland and Germany, like Boldini, on his return from America.” (emphasis mine)¹⁸⁸ Reading Chalon’s comments in conjunction with Jean Lorrain’s account of this particular avenue in the “Woods” we see that the Bois de Boulogne is a microcosm of Parisian society “whose physical and cultural organization informed a distinctive microgeography, predicated upon the interplay between public and private” to cite the words of Matt Houlbrook, writing about a similar topic but in a different place and time.¹⁸⁹ Understanding the different implications of a stroll down the *allée d’Acacias* and one down the *allée des Poteaux* was to understand the dynamics of socio-sexual space and to understand the signposts for either Cythère or Lesbos. While same-sex cruising could take place on the *allée d’Acacias*, one would certainly find the

¹⁸⁵ Catherine Van Casselar, *Lot’s Wife: Lesbian Paris, 1890-1914* (Liverpool: Janus Press, 1986), 16.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. Van Casselar retells Brooks’ account as follows: After her bicycle had broken down during her ride through the Bois de Boulogne, Brooks decided to have a glass of lemonade at the Pavillon Chinois. Brooks states that she was about to leave when a beautiful woman, fashionably overweight, and covered with jewelry, came up to her table. She had the most alluring eyes ... ‘they actually dazzled me.’ The woman ... fixed Romaine with a compelling look. She sat down at Romaine’s table without a word. She ordered an apéritif, and keep looking at me as she drank it....” Van Casselar continues, “Romaine did not send the beautiful stranger away in indignation... She knew perfectly well what was involved when the stranger, with a ravishing smile, courteously suggested that they go for a drive in her carriage, and she could not have been too surprised to find herself lunching with her new companion.”

¹⁸⁷ Chalon, *Portraits of a Seductress*, 17.

¹⁸⁸ Jean Lorrain, *La Ville Empoisonnée* (Paris: Crès, 1936), 211.

¹⁸⁹ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasure in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 54.

other *allée* a shortcut to the pleasures of a new Gomorrah. In describing the first meeting between Liane de Pougy and Barney, one author wrote, “The Bois de Boulogne was a pastoral setting for women of the carriage class in the mood to meet a perfect stranger. Open landaus, proceeding at a slow trot down the Passage des Acacias and the rue de Seine, gave one the leisure to exchange long looks and half smiles in passing.”¹⁹⁰

Liane de Pougy’s bestseller, *Idylle saphrique*, published in 1899 with the advice and help of Barney details her seduction by and affair with Barney. Pougy’s alter ego, Annhine, complains about the grinding routine of a famous courtesan’s life in the opening remarks of the novel saying, “quelle aridité dans ma vie! Toujours le même programme: le bois, les courses, les essayages; puis, pour finir une journée insipide; le dîner!” The incorporation of the “Woods” as essential to the everyday life of Pougy/Annhine accentuates its cultural significance an important local for bourgeois rituals while also illustrating how different subcultures can subvert heteronormative social practices and spaces through their own reappropriation and resistance.

Other public spaces embodied the interstices between public and private spheres where non-normative sexual practices existed and even thrived. Another Parisian landmark, the Champs-Élysée, was also singled out as a particular site productive of queer space. Similar to the Bois, the broad avenue of the Champs-Élysée with its numerous commercial facilities allowed for a great deal of anonymity as one strolled along the storefronts, cafés, and theaters. This avenue also had a great deal of green space interspersed among commercial establishments so that the throngs of people allowed the lesbian to mix in the heteroclitic crowd in which she could simultaneously remain invisible and visible.¹⁹¹ Cultural commentators portrayed the lesbian as chameleon like, relying on a set of codes of behavior that made her sexuality legible to other lesbians while camouflaging her cruising from potential disapproving passers-by. Leo Taxil claims to have broken part of this mysterious lesbian code of conduct when he writes about lesbian cruising in this fashionable area. I quote his passage at length because it gives a flavor of the male heterosexual fantasy and opprobrium working concomitantly to queer a site:

In the Champs-Élysées, the observer easily notices the maneuvers of elegant lesbians in search of a comrade in vice. You notice the superb horses and carriage: inside, a single woman, quite sumptuously dressed, with the inevitable poodle next to her. Driving down from the Place de l’Étoile, this woman scrutinizes the female passers-by attentively, particularly between the round about and the Place de la Concorde. A passer-by sees the woman with the poodle and exchanges looks with her while making a rapid movement with the tongue of the lips; this is the conventional sign used by tribades to say: ‘I am interested in women.’ Soon the carriage does an about-turn, goes up the avenue again and the lady with the poodle, ordering her coachman to stop for a moment, picks up the

¹⁹⁰ Diana Souhami, *Wild Girls, Paris, Sappho and Art: The Lives and Loves of Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁹¹ Michael Sibalis states that the now well-known Champs-Élysée did not refer to the actual avenue but to the wooded fields that bordered it, while the actual avenue was called l’Avenue de Neuilly. However, the general area was still referred to as the Champs-Élysée as early as 1860 when merchants along this boulevard joined to form the Syndicat d’Initiatives et de Défense des Champs-Élysée which Louis Vuitton later changed to an association in 1916. Their goal was to promote the avenue for its chic commercial image. See Michael Sibalis, “Paris,” in *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories since 1600*, ed. David Higgs (London: Routledge, 1999), 17.

unknown passer-by, as if she were a friend, whom she was taking off to dine with her....¹⁹²

Taxil believes that he has deciphered the complex set of symbols and gestures of lesbian cruising based on some type of insider knowledge of lesbian practices or rituals. The use of dogs as part lesbian iconography continued through the end of the Third Republic and beyond.

These alleged practices and/or products of male fantasy unmask French bourgeois fear of the lesbian's unobstructed perambulation and cruising while contemporaneously attempting to limit lesbian circulation to a small number of such spaces. The Champs-Élysée, situated in the sixteenth arrondissement (one of the most affluent and chicest neighborhoods in Paris) reveals a correlation between lesbian cruising and the wealthy bourgeois or aristocratic classes that would have been apparent to a novelist's, such as Catulle Mendès's, readership. However, the cartography of lesbian space extended far beyond the more rarified area of the sixteenth arrondissement to create a geographic network of lesbian sociability that crisscrossed Paris and extended across class lines.



“Au Cabaret” in *Gil Blas*, October 14, 1894.

IV. Dining In or Picking Up: Cafés, Cabarets and Other Spaces of Fantasy

I start this section with an image from the front page of *Gil Blas*, the gossip newspaper, from the October 14, 1894. This image visually reproduces certain discursive tropes of the lesbian-themed novels that were so common at that time. It is simply entitled, “At the Cabaret”, and as in so many novels depicting lesbians, the couple is a study in opposites. One woman is brunette while the other is fair-haired, and the brunette is the corrupting seductress. The blond represents light, innocence, and purity, while the brunette is insistently leaning towards her in a protective yet proprietary way. The use of both a dark haired woman and a fair-haired woman to

¹⁹² Taxil, *La Corruption fin-de-siècle*, 263.

symbolize the temptress and the tempted was an established trope.¹⁹³ The brunette's hand amorously grasps her companion's hand in a romantic and tender pose. The butch/femme dichotomy, which was already well entrenched in the socio-literary constructions of the lesbian, shows through the horizontal lines of the brunette's cape and draws the reader's attention to her masculinized attire. Her tie and dark vest stand in stark contrast to the flowing and light-colored skirt and blouse of the blond French woman, which recalls the idea of the French maiden who is susceptible to "corruption" if not carefully managed by her father, husband, or other wise male relation. The women are seated at a table in a corner of a cabaret—an intimate and candlelit space that is further coded as a romantic site with a couch lightly outlined in the background while a fireplace embellished with a large bouquet guards the lady's back. Two bottles of wine are placed in front of the dark-haired woman who, occupying the masculine space, will presumably serve the woman she hopes to seduce. These details complete the tableau's idea of romance and seduction. This staging of seduction graphically encapsulates the discursive representation and construction of the lesbian during the Belle Époque, which saw an increasing number of women socialize without male supervision in public space. Marcel Prévost's accompanying narrative recounts the attempted seduction of Cécile by the aristocratic brunette—a countess. Returning from her cousin's marriage, Cécile shares a train compartment with the countess and strikes up a conversation in which she regales the countess with details about her life in the convent.¹⁹⁴ Upon arriving in Paris, her parent's valet informs Cécile that her parents have been unexpectedly detained on their trip. Overhearing this news, the countess invites the innocent blonde to a cabaret, *Chez Voisin*, which has a private dining room. Once safely ensconced in this intimate setting, the countess gets her drunk and attempts to seduce her. With each glass of wine Cécile becomes more inebriated, and the countess takes the opportunity to begin to undress Cécile until she is down to her camisole. Sewn into this garment are medals of different saints. Upon seeing these emblems of religious faith, the countess is reminded of her own days at the convent and her discovery of same-sex desire. These religious medals remind her of her lost innocence, and she brusquely puts an end to the seduction and sends the girl home, but not before giving her a warning to avoid being picked up by strangers. Prévost's story and its accompanying illustration in *Gil Blas* offer a vivid example of the ways that writers and illustrators exploited contemporary associations of cabarets with lesbian activity. As I will discuss below, the cabaret, café, or brasserie became suspicious sites as lesbians increasingly joined in "café society" where they could mingle and circulate.

An important chronicler of the early years of the Third Republic's emerging lesbian communities was Émile Zola, who, while writing his novel, *Nana*, took copious notes regarding the lesbian "scene" in Montmartre. When Nana's future lover, Satan, takes her out for an evening she chooses a café owned by a lesbian named Laure. This fictional lesbian is inspired by Zola's own observations of Louise Tallandier's *table d'hôte* at 17 rue des Martyrs in the 18th arrondissement where Louise reigned over the porous social strata that comprised her clientele.

¹⁹³ A sampling of novels that reenact the brunette/blond dyad as a gesture to the complementarity of lesbian relationships is: Mendès, *Méphistophéla*; Vaudère, *Les Demi-sexes*; Zola, *Nana*; Maizeroy, *Deux Amies*; Lactrelle, *La Bonifas*; Colette, *Claudine en ménage*; Belot *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*.

¹⁹⁴ "La comtesse parut s'intéresser si vivement à cela: elle me questionna sur le couvent, me demanda si j'y avais de bonnes amies, si elles étaient jolies, comment les dortoirs étaient installés, si les grandes et les petites étaient ensemble: je commençais à croire qu'elle dirigeait un pensionnat, tant elle voulait des détails." Marcel Prévost, *Lettres de femme* (Paris: Lemerre, 1892), 20.

Although Zola drew on journal notes from various lesbian milieus, his choice of the *table d'hôte* at Laure's café is interesting in that it not only typifies various kinds of non-normative space but also serves as a crossroads where various social classes mingle and social distinctions are blurred. The cafés were a microcosm of French society from elite aristocrat ladies down to the young flower girls who worked the streets in hope of a "patron." Zola's unflattering and misogynistic description of Laure and her clientele underscores an almost palpable hostility to this nascent community of women who sought solace and camaraderie among others of their ilk:

Cette Laure était une dame de cinquante ans, aux formes débordantes, sanglée dans des ceintures et des corsets. Des femmes arrivaient à la file, se haussaient par-dessus les soucoupes, et baisaient Laure sur la bouche, avec une familiarité tendre; pendant que ce monstre, les yeux mouillés, tâchait, en se partageant, de ne pas faire de jalouses. La bonne, au contraire, était une grande maigre, ravagée, qui servait ces dames, les paupières noires, les regards flambant d'un feu sombre. Rapidement, les trois salons s'emplirent. Il y avait là une centaine de clientes, mêlées au hasard des tables, la plupart touchant à la quarantaine, énormes, avec des empâtements de chair, des bouffissures de vice noyant les bouches molles; et, au milieu de ces ballonnements de gorges et de ventres, apparaissaient quelques jolies filles minces, l'air encore ingénu sous l'effronterie du geste, des débutantes levées dans un bastringue et amenées par une cliente chez Laure, où le peuple des grosses femmes, mis en l'air à l'odeur de leur jeunesse, se bousculait, faisait autour d'elles une cour de vieux garçons inquiets, en leur payant des gourmandises.¹⁹⁵

Zola's "realist" view of lesbians as monstrous, corpulent, swollen, middle-aged masses who gather around these "host's tables" suggests a lesbian sociability that is far removed from the aristocratic circles of Paris-Lesbos of the 1890s and Belle Époque that Vivien or Barney would come to embody at the turn of the century. In his description, Zola inscribes on the lesbian body the prevalent social-scientific masculine traits that were believed to be indicative of the lesbian, who as an invert had a male soul in a female body.¹⁹⁶ However, in Zola's meticulous notes, one detail does seem particularly salient and more grounded in keen observation than in bourgeois masculine fantasy—the importance of the *table d'hôte*.

Around this table women who love women defied embedded social expectations that women prepare meals at home and consume them in the private sphere. If respectable women did go out to restaurants or cafes, men most often escorted them. As Sara Ahmed has explained so eloquently, "the table here is something 'tangible' that makes a sense of relatedness possible. Tables...are kinship objects; we relate to other relatives through the mediation of the table."¹⁹⁷ Around these tables, women gathered to express their desire for each other, to connect in some communitarian way regardless of how brief, and to make visible a certain sexual positionality that placed them outside the heterosexual matrix. Thus, the table became a marker of a different grid of knowledge. The surface upon which these women ate might have recalled other tables,

¹⁹⁵ Zola, *Nana*, 264.

¹⁹⁶ The idea of "*anima virilis in corpore muliebri inclusa*" (a man's soul in a woman's body) was foundational to Karl Heinrich Ulrich's theory on lesbianism. He believed that lesbians were male souls trapped in a female body, which explained lesbians' essential "masculine" qualities and demeanor. Ulrich's studies in sexology were influential on Havelock Ellis, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Richard Krafft-Ebing. See Vernon A. Rosario, "Novelizing Fin-de-Siècle Homosexuality," in *Science and Homosexualities*, ed. Vernon Rosario (New York: Routledge, 1997), 88-103. See also Elisabeth Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁹⁷ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 81.

that placeholder of bourgeois values regarding the family, where many of these women had shared meals with their biological kin. These *tables d'hôte* created spaces for alternative ideas of family meals, ones in which women came together not because of shared biological links, but because of shared affective yearnings. Not every woman who ate at a *table d'hôte* was a lesbian or would claim to love only women, but it did mean that whether she claimed citizenship in Paris-Lesbos or was merely a curious tourist passing through, she was sure to find camaraderie and perhaps more if she so chose. Although the *table d'hôte* clearly resignified an important kinship object, it also functioned to break down class barriers and allow for a more egalitarian mingling.

These modest establishments also hosted the same lesbians from more socio-economically advantaged groups that one might find at Barney's salon and who were not adverse to "slumming" with the working class. Zola captures the coalescence of classes in his 1880 novel when he writes, "...she (Nana) grew more easy as she noticed no one she knew amongst that very mixed crowd, in which faded dresses and weather-beaten bonnets were to be seen side by side with the most elegant costumes in the fraternity of the same corruption." This account of Nana's first incursion into lesbian space provides a remarkable window into the mores and attitudes of a fledgling, but hearty, lesbian community.

However, a decade later the cafés' *table d'hôte* were replaced by brasseries (restaurants with alcoholic beverages and a limited menu), and "while some of them were actually brothels for a male clientele, in which the waitresses did double duty, others took the opposite track" as the historian, Leslie Choquette notes.¹⁹⁸ The double duty of these common eateries where men and women could find more than a hot meal evinces the infiltration of the lesbian into the fabric of public life and the creation of affective arteries that began to draw and connect a lesbian population scattered throughout the city. This was an important phase in building an efficient underground network of communities and spaces for themselves. The frequentness of these restaurant rendez-vous inspired the journalist, Jules Davray to write an article about a brasserie near the Place d'Anvers that would remind the readers of Louise Taillandier, the model for Zola's Laure in *Nana*, because of her decidedly masculine appearance. Duvray also seems to be as fascinated as Zola that the female patrons of this brasserie "exchange kisses on the mouth," grope one another without shame, and are indiscreet enough that a voyeur, such as Duvray, reporter and author, can listen at will to their conversations. Lesbian space is marked as visibly more affectionate and effusive than bourgeois society: these lesbian spaces were without the restrained sexuality that so defined bourgeois public practices. The lesbian brasseries illustrated an even further erosion of class distinctions and a consequence was that lesbians claimed a greater visibility in one of France's most sacred spaces—the culinary. Now the restaurant (brasserie or café) served as both a place to dine in and/or to "pick-up."

More than fifty years after Zola described lesbian "café society" in *Nana*, Colette revisits these favored gathering places in Montmartre's basements, these friendly little dives ("*petits tripots amicaux*"), in her work, *Le Pur et l'impur*. Undoubtedly drawing from her memories as the Marquise de Belbeouf's lover, she recalls how women dressed as men under their overcoats would slip into "safe cellar restaurants and bars with their 'petites amies'" to socialize and live as lesbians. Aristocratic women were able to take care of lower class actresses and shop girls, and by doing so they emulated the male aristocracy and bourgeoisie that had supported the *demi-*

¹⁹⁸ Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City," 158.

mondaines. These lugubrious hideaways belied a continued marginalization of lesbians in the spatial construction of social networks, but in those dimly lit bars tucked away in corners of Paris famous bohemian quarter, lesbians were able to manifest their sexual orientation in an explicit manner and with a certain sense of safety and acceptance. Canonical authors' treatments of lesbianism confirm that lesbian visibility and circulation occupied a growing role in the French imaginary as various spaces came to evoke not only images of class but also of specific types of sexual behavior. While women literally vied for places in the cafés, brasseries and nightclubs where men stood, ate, cruised, and inhabited, a power struggle ensued for this social space that lesbians sought to claim as their own. A consequence of the competition for public space with bourgeois society, and in particular, heterosexual males, was increased visibility and some grudging acknowledgement of their right to such space.

Representations of lesbian "café-society" reflected a clear set of codes and signals invented among lesbian or bisexual women that permitted them to co-opt particular types of public spaces. The appropriation of some of these locales such as *la Souris*, *Le Rat Mort*, *le Hanneton*, to name just a few, provided a respite from the oppressive social and moral codes of the Third Republic and contributed to the formation of lesbian social networks. However, this struggle for visibility was not easily accomplished. For example, even the mythical liberality of the bohemian culture of Montmartre did not necessarily welcome this competition for its social space, and various Montmartrois *fin-de-siècle* newspapers ran articles that brought to light and publicized this uneasy truce between lesbian clientele and heterosexuals.¹⁹⁹ Even though bohemians sometimes visited known lesbian venues out of curiosity, out of defiance of bourgeois values, or for inspiration, "it was quite another matter, though, when lesbians visited larger, more public establishments, especially those the bohemians thought of as 'theirs,' such as the Tambourin and the Rat Mort."²⁰⁰

In the 1880s lesbians were becoming visible, not only as literary and medical objects, but also as women in the streets. Paris held an *exposition universelle* (World's Fair) in 1889, which the right-wing pundit and writer, Maurice Barrès, once said "mixed lemonade with prostitution."²⁰¹ Unlike the 1878 World's Fair in Paris, this one was profitable and openly republican in ideology to the point of being almost openly anticlerical.²⁰² The changed tone highlights a shift in national consciousness or imaginary, one that is geared toward flaunting the supremacy of French science and its civilizing mission. Thus, it is not surprising that during this period of "enlightenment" when science was preoccupied with all matters sexual, a "naughty guidebook for visitors to the World Fair," *Nuits à Paris* (Paris Nights) alluded to gay male prostitution, and also included other queer venues where the tourist could witness lesbian *tableaux vivants*.²⁰³ In particular, The Rat Mort is mentioned as a place where one can see young women initiated into the secret practices of Sappho and who eat "tête à tête, gentiment." The author goes on to say that "grandes dames" also frequent the venue, where they can pick up a girl for an hour without the "*inutiles fatigues préliminaires*."²⁰⁴ By the end of the century such

¹⁹⁹ Montmartrois newspapers such as *Le Chat Noir* often alluded to the growing gay and lesbian subcultures in the district and the Bohemians uneasy reactions. See Wilson, "Sans les Femmes," 202-206.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 204-215.

²⁰¹ Patrice Higonnet, "Paris: Capital of the World," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 357.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 358.

²⁰³ Choquette, "Homosexuals in the City," 157.

²⁰⁴ Rudolphe Darzens, *Nuits à Paris* (Paris: Dentu, 1889), 93.

establishments as the Souris and the Hanne-ton were renowned gathering spots for lesbians and constituted part of the “Grand Duke’s” Tour—a tour of Parisian nightspots for the well-heeled slummers, and writers and journalists such as Jean Lorrain and Catulle Mendès were making a cottage industry out of chronicling lesbian communities and fostering fantasies about them. These guidebooks are compelling evidence of the commodification of the lesbian as a tourist commodity as opposed to merely a medico-juridical object of study or trope for literary production. The marketing of the lesbian targeted a predominately male audience that had the libido and the capital to invest in this lesbian touring club. Writer’s imaginings about lesbians not only rendered them more socially conspicuous but also mapped them as tourist attractions. This type of commodification of the lesbian epitomizes the social tensions at stake in the emergence of lesbian communities—libertine fascination pushing against bourgeois respectability. As it turned out, the tourist did not need the guidebook to find lesbians performing sexual acts. Many of the better bordellos of Paris featured these exotic “*nouveautés*” as they were called.

V. Playgrounds of Pleasure: Sapphic Sisters and the Sex Palaces

Few institutions were more ancient and more ensconced in patriarchal privilege than the brothel, which existed to provide pleasure for men who could afford its services. With this in mind, it is intriguing to discover that the “experts,” particularly sexologists and criminologists, linked lesbianism to brothels, when the two would logically seem to be mutually exclusive. In my first chapter, I discussed at length the genealogy in France that linked lesbianism with criminality, such as Parent-Duchâtelet’s work, *La Prostitution à Paris au XIXe siècle*, or later works such as Taxil’s *La Corruption fin-de-siècle* and Ali Coffignon’s *La Corruption à Paris*, all of which conceived of the brothel as epicenters of lesbian activity. These “specialists” on the subject strongly influenced literary representations, and literary representations informed their studies.

Returning again to *Nana*, a novel which serves as an exemplar of the naturalist movement’s study of corrupt sexuality, we there find that Nana—the courtesan *par excellence*—is not satisfied with her numerous male lovers and her primary female lover, Satin. Instead Zola relates how, not satisfied with cruising the streets for “little sluts,” she sometimes dresses as a man, and as a man, she joins in the orgies in bordellos or sex shows, which allows her to ease her boredom.²⁰⁵

Courtesans were the elite of French sex workers as nobles, financiers, and other wealthy and powerful men competed for their attentions and the honor of being their “protector.” Some of these women served as the pre-cursors to pin-up models, and their comings and goings were

²⁰⁵ Zola, *Nana*, 444. Although *Nana* was published five years before my historical period begins, I refer to this novel because it served as a template for many of the novels using lesbian characters or discussing lesbianism. Zola’s connection between sexual behaviors and genetic and moral degeneracy informed many of the subsequent novels published in 1880s and 1890s. The lesbian as prostitute, sexually rapacious, and aggressive were all tropes that can be found in *Nana*’s behavior even though her sexuality does not fall neatly into that taxonomy. She does embody certain later ideas about lesbians, such as the prostitute who turns to women because they have been too brutalized and too abused by men to find solace in “normal” relations. My reading also differs from the historian, Leslie Choquette, who asserts, “...Zola had discovered but declined to reveal in *Nana* that women as well as men patronized brothels.” I think the quote makes clear that *Nana* did indeed transgress not only sexual codes but spatial and gender codes as well.

chronicled regularly in newspapers; yet, despite acting as the exemplars of male heterosexual desire and fantasy, these women were portrayed as decidedly more sexually ambiguous.²⁰⁶

When Marguerite Bellanger, the former mistress of Napoleon III, published her memories in 1882 she was not reticent about confirming that courtesans of her stature were like “society ladies”—they all visited brothels.²⁰⁷ Courtesans who did “double duty”—had both male and female lovers—became even more incorporated into the myth of the courtesan. Yet, the fact that these icons of female desirability chose to seek pleasure with other women in the Frenchman’s private playground when not “on duty” was scandalous. The French bourgeoisie was incensed, morally outraged, and somehow titillated. The brothel was reconfigured to have different social utility than the one already assumed, specifically, that it existed for the benefit of heterosexual, predominately white, males. Bellanger’s confessions were the first of several courtesans’ *mémoires* in which they teased the public with possible disclosures of intimate details of their lives while being careful to not commit “outrage aux moeurs” with too much revelation.²⁰⁸ One might read *mémoires* with a degree of skepticism knowing that an author might embellish to entice readership. However, Bellanger’s claims of bourgeois women’s patronage of bordellos was documented when a noted prostitution expert testified to the Paris Municipal Council that the Chabonais, the premier deluxe brothel in Paris located in the first arrondissement, had quite a large clientele of bourgeois women. He affirmed that this “vast sampling of women” came with the unique aim of satisfying normal tastes with the feminine personnel of the establishment.”²⁰⁹ And, in 1881, the former chief of police of Paris wrote his memoirs in which he confirmed that during the Second Empire women as well as men were patronizing brothels.²¹⁰

During the late nineteenth century the prostitute became almost synecdochal for lesbian in French culture. As I explained in my first chapter, the novel, *Chair Molle*, is a boilerplate example of how male writers imagined the interior life of lesbians living in bordellos (*maisons closes*). Disgusted with their carnal commerce with men, these women take solace and pleasure in each other, establishing affective relationships that include intense physical relationships. Women who might otherwise be heterosexual but who are desperate to earn a living are potential “converts” to lesbianism. The bordello is a site of disaffirmation of bourgeois male privilege as it works to cater not only to a competing clientele but promotes an affective and sexual shift that might decrease the availability of desired male heterosexual commodity—the female body. When Albertine goes cruising for sex with Morel in *Albertine disparue*, a male companion who helps her to seduce women, Proust posits the possibility that this place of pleasure might be shared in a mutually beneficial way. Marcel learns after Albertine’s death that Morel acted as a

²⁰⁶ For instance, Nathalie Clifford Barney admitted to taking a photo album of Liane de Pougy back to America so that she could “look at her” when her father recalled her to the United States. Having glimpsed Liane in the Bois de Boulogne, Barney had to content herself with the photo album until she could return to Paris to woo the most celebrated courtesan of the period. She succeeded. See Chalon, *Portraits of a Seductress*, 44-46.

²⁰⁷ Marguerite Bellanger, *Confessions de Marguerite Bellanger: mémoires anecdotiques* (Paris: Librairie populaire, 1882), 141.

²⁰⁸ Liane de Pougy published *Mes Cahiers bleus*, *Idylle saphrique*, and *L’Insaisissable*, all of which treat aspects of her life as a courtesan.

²⁰⁹ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 155.

²¹⁰ *Mémoires de Monsieur Claude chef de la police de sûreté sous le Second Empire*, vol. 7 (Paris: 1881-1883), 203. Zola himself had written of brothels in his notebooks, “People go there to dyke it up with the whores. (Zola, *Nana*, *Dossiers préparatoires*, folio 260.)

procurer of female sexual partners for Albertine in other ways as well. A very handsome man, Morel would pick up working class women, take them to a private spot, and begin to seduce them. Albertine would appear and enter into the sexual play, and even though the women were not lesbians, they would have sexual relations with her for fear of losing or displeasing Morel. He even manages to sneak a young woman into a bordello in Couliville where four or five of the prostitutes join Albertine in having their way with the girl Morel has seduced. The brothel is no longer fractured along the fault lines of sexual desire: the concession of masculine space to accommodate lesbian desire appears to benefit everyone even if the potential result is a bacchanalian scene of debauchery.

Perhaps even more subversive was the idea that women would simply refuse to share this pseudo-private space of the *maison close* with men at all. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries women in France began to earn more money outside the home as formerly forbidden professions and careers were opened up to them. Financial autonomy allowed women to pursue pleasures without the consent of their husbands or other male authority figures. Why shouldn't women have their own locales of pleasure just as men did? This is the question that Eva Moineff, the protagonist in *Deux Amies*, has in mind when she solicits contributions from her former female classmates from her convent school days and the salons and balls she has attended. Her goal is to create a club that will provide an exclusively female space for their pleasure—a space that affords women complete sexual liberty. For much of this time period married women could not even open their own checking account, so it is not difficult to imagine the difficulty they might have if they appeared at a hotel with another woman and asked to rent a room, especially if they had no baggage.

The rules of the secret society leave no doubt in the reader's mind as to the *raison d'être* for this group. Eva writes the by-laws of the society, which are described as “the rules...nothing more, from the first page to the last, than an erotic call, a pleasing enumeration of libertine details and almost the ridiculous childishness that remained from the memories of the convent. The hotel ended up becoming a true brothel.”²¹¹

The literarily imagined intimate social networks and cliques of women seeking sexual pleasure/companionship with other women formed the narrative framework for *La Gynandre*, a 1891 novel by Joséphin Peladan. In an “Orientalizing” move reminiscent of Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (Persian Letters), Tammuz, the narrator, arrives from the East to spend a year in Paris analyzing “life and soul in motion.” He is inexplicably drawn to the study of lesbianism, and he hypothesizes that “Lesbos can be classed amongst the ways of taking pleasure, not the ways of loving. Lesbos can be catalogued under the subject Lust not Love.”²¹² He sets out to prove that women do not and cannot love each other, but that their attraction is merely physical. According to Tammuz “...the passion of women for women is an invention of journalists.”²¹³ Nevertheless, he discovers during his year in France that Paris has rival bands of lesbians, hierarchically organized gangs of rich or noble women. Important to this discussion is the idea

²¹¹ “Un règlement...et n'était, de la première à la dernière page, qu'un appel érotique, une énumération complaisante de détails libertins mêlés d'enfantillages presque ridicules où demeuraient des ressouvenances du couvent. L'hôtel finit par devenir une véritable maison interlope” (Maizeroy, *Deux Amies*, 41).

²¹² “Lesbos peut se classer parmi les sortes de jouir, non pas au nombre des façons d'aimer; Lesbos peut se rubriquer à l'article Luxure, non pas à celui Amour; et voulez-vous que nous laissions ce mot inexact de Lesbos?” (Joséphin Peladan, *La Gynandre* [Paris: E. Dentu, 1891], 26).

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

that these women banded together to create networks of sexual opportunities, which while remaining in the private sphere, emerged into the public sphere now and then in search of new members. Léo Taxil, who continued to act as a self-proclaimed expert on lesbianism, wrote in 1891 that there were “véritables lesbian academies where they gave themselves to orgies without names” (de véritables académies lesbiennes, où on se livre en commun à des orgies sans nom.)²¹⁴ The combination of prostitution and lesbianism underscores the ambivalence with which many French observers treated this non-normative sexuality. Prostitution was often offered an apologia for lesbianism: women turned to another woman for tenderness and comfort only after having been mistreated and used by men. However, the conflation of prostitution with lesbianism reinforced the idea that it was a threat to family stability, and as such, it was also a potential threat to the Republic. They might not only cause the *père de famille* to stray, but she might also seduce his wife. From the sidewalks of the grand boulevards to the chicest brothel, one might always expect to find a lesbian lurking.

VI. From Musettes to Les Bals interlopes: The Queering the Dance Floor

Montmartre was singled out as part of the Lesbian archipelago, a safe harbor for lesbian trysts, cruising, and congregating. Whereas circulation in some spaces discussed in this chapter, such as Barney’s salon or a carriage in the Bois, implied a certain social status and/or a financial success, others worked to blur class divisions and were more easily accessible. One such place was the dance floor—and in Montmartre the dance floors were hopping with same-sex couples. By the 1920s same-sex couples were in each other’s arms from the Butte of Montmartre in the eighteenth district to various clubs in the fifth.

These imagined exotic novelties that were already staking a claim on public spaces in cafés and brasseries were also encroaching on another bastion of heterosexual libidinal investment: the public dances. The increasing popularity of musettes, *bal nègres*, et *bals interlopes* provided an even more convivial and sexual atmosphere for the production of lesbian space than did the Parisian cafés and bars or the *maisons closes*. Dancing by its very nature was a social activity that was designed in part to facilitate heterosexual courting. The dances of the Belle Époque through the 1930s were not merely expressions of individual subjectivity but part of a socially sanctioned grid of sexual and social knowability. These dances were not only a joyful exercise of one’s corporeality, of physical movement set to rhythm, but also more importantly they were a non-verbal form of communication dear to many nineteenth-century writers. As Felicia McCarren wrote, “Making thought visible, dance nevertheless creates a complex visual illusion in which it hides nothing and yet never shows—or ‘says’—everything. Using the body to ‘speak’ visually, and not speaking, nineteenth century dance stands as the image of the unsayable—whether sublime or grotesque, ineffable or unpardonable.”²¹⁵ The emergence of dance floors and events that allowed women who desired women to meet and dance together constituted a significant step in the formation of lesbian networks and lesbian sociability.

In one of Proust’s longer passages on lesbian behavior, Doctor Cottard explains to Marcel that he can tell that Andrée and Albertine are lesbians, “filles de mauvais genre” by the manner in which they dance. This fantastic alchemical moment where scientific knowledge, literary

²¹⁴ Taxil, *La Corruption fin-de-siècle*, 259.

²¹⁵ Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), 11.

production, and male fantasy converge to make lesbianism legible is not surprisingly communicated through the “language” of dance. Dance, like music, is something that is already queer because it escapes the confines of spoken and written language and “demarcates a space and time wherein gender and sexuality lose their clear definition.”²¹⁶ Dance employs the body to say what words may be incapable of expressing. In a novel in which the narrator is never fully able to imagine, to grasp, or to conceive of lesbian desire as a sexual economy complete with its own currency of gestures, codes, and spaces, it is quite fitting that Albertine and Andrée’s dance would provide a pedagogical intervention by Doctor Cottard for Marcel’s edification. He states:

Oui, mais les parents sont bien imprudents qui lui laissent leurs filles prendre de pareilles habitudes. Je ne permettrais certainement pas aux miennes de venir ici. Sont-elles jolies au moins? Je ne distingue pas leurs traits. Tenez, regardez” ajouta-t-il en me montrant Albertine et Andrée qui valsaient lentement, serrées, l’une contre l’autre, “J’ai oublié mon lorgnon et je ne vois pas bien, mais elles sont certainement au comble de la jouissance. On ne sait pas assez que c’est surtout par les seins que les femmes l’éprouvent. Et voyez, les leurs se touchent complètement.”²¹⁷

Although Doctor Cottard cannot really “see” or distinguish the women’s figures without his “lorgnon,” he is nevertheless able to establish that the women are dancing so close together that their nipples are touching, and thus this close physical friction accompanied by the rhythm of the waltz has swept them to the heights of “jouissance” (pleasure or orgasm). The idea of women dancing so close together that their bodies meld together recalls Toulouse-Lautrec’s *At the Moulin Rouge*, but Dr. Cottard, a presumed heterosexual, passes himself off as an expert not only on lesbian legibility but on lesbian sexual practices. Speaking from his position as a physician and distinguished chair of medicine, he imagines himself able to make such pronouncements with the full weight of science behind him. This dance floor is in a small casino in Incarville, an out of the way summer resort, where the women were dancing with one another for lack of male partners (“faute de cavaliers”). Yet, the tight-knit clan of girls from *À l’ombre de jeunes filles en fleurs* with whom Albertine and Andrée cavorted and the ever-present suspicion that they are actually girls of a “mauvais genre”, i.e., lesbians, implies that the lack of gentleman partners was not mere happenstance. Keeping in mind the growing lesbian dance culture in Paris, which, as I will discuss further, became a permanent part of the lesbian landscape. It is very plausible that this band of young women was simply queering the dance floor.

The importance of dance sites as a place of queer congregation, both sexually and class wise, is found in a scene from Jean Lorrain’s scabrous novel, *La Maison Philibert*, published in 1904. Lorrain provides revealing and salient insight into the world of the “popular” balls or dances that were an integral part of the French cultural landscape during the Third Republic. Proust’s dance scene takes place in an out of the way casino, and those who could afford to summer along the coast were usually more affluent than the *midinettes*, *pierreuses*, and *grisettes* so vividly described in Lorrain’s novel. The relatively short chapter, “Bal de vaches” in Lorrain’s novel, is about a public *bal* that takes place on the banks of the Seine in the southern most outskirts of Paris. Although this chapter is commonly interpreted as commenting on the long-standing social phenomenon of young working-class men and women providing sexual

²¹⁶ Suzanne Cusick, “On a Lesbian Relationship with Music: A Serious Effort Not to Think Straight,” in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, ed. Phillip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 1994).

²¹⁷ Proust, *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, 191.

favors to same-sex partners to supplement their incomes, it also provides an important window into a specific French cultural practice of that time. First, it illustrates how the *bal publique* could be a crucible for the mixing of classes, from the aristocrat who wanted to “slum” to the prostitute plying her trade. The celebrated *demi-mondain* might have just as easily been spotted as the shop girl who sold lingerie. Lorrain juxtaposes the under-belly of French society with the socially elite: the famous courtesan, Ludine de Neufelize, happens upon the attractive, but common prostitute, Mélie with her cohort of streetwalkers and the Duc de M. shares the company of the thug and pimp, le Môme l’Affreux. The social spheres of people whose socio-economic status and education would have normally prevented any interaction between them are portrayed as cavorting around with one another in a symbiotic social experiment: The thrill of “slumming it” with the lower classes for the bourgeois and aristocrat exchanged against the pecuniary and social benefits for the working class and riff-raff. To substantiate further the veracity of this novel’s documentary value regarding various contemporary sexual cultures, Lorrain most likely based some protagonists on easily recognizable public figures, such as the fictional courtesan, Ludine, who was probably based on Liane de Pougy, a close friend of Lorrain’s.²¹⁸

In addition to the novel’s value as a cultural kaleidoscope with its ever-changing configurations of social classes and sexualities, the novel provides other interesting observations on emerging lesbian culture(s). *La Maison Philibert* reveals the extent to which various types of dance spaces had become potential sexual marketplaces for the non-heteronormative at the turn of the century. For instance, Mélie audaciously berates the dangerous thug and pimp, le Môme l’Affreux, for confining “Fanny the ‘fem’” to work les Halles for him as a procurer for lesbians—an activity he was pursuing at the dance as well.²¹⁹ The presence of lesbians and “*tantes*” (queens) in almost totemic space of heterosexual desire cannot be glossed over. Lorrain’s description indicates to what extent these sexually liminal communities were beginning to creep into heterosexual spaces in recognizable form. This does not suggest that gay men or lesbian women did not circulate in these types of public spaces prior to the 1880s, instead it shows an increasing sense of a coalescing community and the establishment of new social networks that enable gradual competition for these now-contested spaces whether it was at public dances, in the brasseries or cafés of Montmartre, or in the bordellos of the first arrondissement.

As same-sex dance locales came into existence, they also became recognizable to a larger heterosexual community that often visited as “tourists.” As one scholar writes, “by the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, the traditional Mardi Gras masked ball had been appropriated by the gay and lesbian subcultures and turned into a public community celebration for both groups.”²²⁰ In Charles-Étienne’s *Notre-Dame-de-Lesbos*, published in 1920, the main protagonist, Julien Carel falls in love with an avowed lesbian during the interwar years. Early in the novel he makes a touristic foray into the world of *bals interlopes* where he discovers that many of the Paris intelligentsia are gay men who dress in drag for the Magic City ball, a well-known dance to celebrate Mardi Gras before the start of the penitential season of Lent. He is astounded to learn of this underground camaraderie of gay men in drag who tango and fox-trot

²¹⁸ Jean Lorrain, *La Maison Philibert*, ed. Noëlle Benhamou (Paris: Éditions Boucher, 2007), 248-250. See also Lucey, “Never Say I,” 88-89.

²¹⁹ Lorrain, *La Maison Philibert*, 249.

²²⁰ Choquette, “Homosexuals in the City,” 154.

their way through the mixed crowd of working-class heterosexuals, but his dismay increases when he spies numerous lesbians dressed in men's formal attire, wearing monocles, pearls, and mixing with the most celebrated demi-mondaines. The author, Charles-Etienne, relied on devices similar to those used by Lorrain when describing these courtesans in terms that evoke "Three Graces," the last three famous courtesans of the Belle Époque, of whom two had openly lesbian relationships in addition to their heterosexual clientele. This hodge-podge of sexual behavior(s) and identities can be taken to illustrate the extent to which men and women who desired their own sex had made in-roads into public spaces and public visibility after the Great War. Charles-Étienne emphasizes in this section of the novel the geographic spaces and classes that come together on the dance floor:

De l'avenue des Ternes au Parc Monceau, de la Musette au Trocadéro, la valetaille des arrondissements voisins était, également, accourue en bande à Magic." C'était un peu le bal des gens de maison, mais les escarpes et leurs gonzesses, s'étaient échappés, eux aussi, du Point-du-Jour et de la Vilette....²²¹

Thus, at least the valets, shop girls, and other working class members from the Right Bank were gathered at Magic City to dance with and among same-sex couples. The author uses the idiomatic word for "flunkeys" (valetaille) to highlight their appeal to the working class and their apparent tolerance of non-normative sexual behavior in these spaces. The references to specific Parisian locales known for their public balls, such as La Villette (nineteenth arrondissement) or Trocadéro (sixteenth arrondissement) attests to the attraction of the *bals interlopes* in which gays and lesbians gathered to celebrate their own sexuality. This was the beginning of the Jazz Era—*les années folles* (the Roaring 20s)—and jazz, bobbed hair, and dance became increasingly synonymous with social transgression.

Dormez, bonnes vieilles chansons,
Qui faisiez danser, sans façons,
Les filles avec les garçons!



Dans les bars chics qui les rançonnent,
En des poses qui s'abandonnent,
Ce ne sont plus que... des garçonnes!

Lys, *Fantasio*, September 15, 1925.

²²¹ Charles-Étienne, *Notre-Dame-de-Lesbos* (Paris: Éditions Curio, 1920), 69.

As I have argued, dance continued throughout the decades to shape lesbian space, and its role as a catalyst for lesbian community development came up in numerous narratives from the late nineteenth century till the last decade of the Third Republic. The above illustration appeared as part of an ironic lampoon of lesbian visibility that nostalgically lamented about the days when the “good old songs” caused the boys and girls to dance together without formalities. Now the “*garçonnes*” in their heels and bobbed hair completely occupy the illustration so that even the crowded dance floor is devoid of any male presence. The languorous, flirtatious and insouciant poses of these women impress upon the viewer the conspicuousness of the lesbian community and their appropriation of such a traditionally sexually normative space. The caption underneath the illustration further ironizes about the stylish lesbians congregating in the bar with the final lines: “even though the chic bars fleece them as they lose themselves in their poses, they are nothing more than tomboys.” Although many male writers used dances or dance spaces as places of lesbian sociability, these imaginings were not merely the product of male fantasy.

The recently rediscovered lesbian writer, Mireille Havet, writes about the iconic elements of the Jazz era—her bobbed hair, jazz, and dance—in her journals, describing the whirlwind of bars and dances that the bourgeois and aristocratic crowds frequented nightly at the end of the Great War and in the giddy days after Armistice. She details a date with an older woman who takes her to “le Restaurant Vatel” where they dance, drink an impossible number of martinis and champagne, and enjoy the privacy of a curtained “loge” that still allows them to listen to French-American jazz and to tangos.²²² Havet recounts how in their private room (le petit salon) her female love interest, Madeleine (La Baronne Clauzel), teaches her to tango. The sensual tension necessary in the execution of the tango required a closed embrace, i.e., continuous contact of the upper body, and indeed, the close proximity of her partner, the alcohol, and the ambiance formed a perfect scene of seduction.²²³ Havet was soon passionately kissing her female partner with the intent of further sexual exploration when she overheard snippets of conversation saying that there were lesbians in the neighboring “loge” from a man across from her “loge”. Apparently, he could see Havet and Madeleine in a mirror, fortuitously recalling for us Albertine’s surveillance of the Bloch cousins by way of a mirror at the hotel in Balbec during a discussion with Marcel about the girls of “mauvais genre.” Havet and Madeleine decided to leave when they saw a man poke his head through the curtains.²²⁴ This anecdotal scene provides certain pertinent information about the milieux and spaces I have been discussing. First, Havet states that there were other women dancing together who were readily observable, and; second, she notes that she and Madeline were not in the least disturbed by the arrival of the waiter who originally

²²² Havet, *Journal 1918-1919*, 139.

²²³ “Des femmes rient haut dans le salon d’en face, et dansent! Je suis bouleversée, heureuse, dans un rêve... Elle se lève: « Viens, je vais t’apprendre à danser! » Je me lève aussi, protestant « C’est impossible, Madeleine! Moi, danser avec toi, je ferais un scandale! » Elle rit, m’enlace. Nous sommes debout l’une contre l’autre, étroitement accolé mon poignet à sa taille souple! Elle m’entraîne, quelques pas marchés l’une dans l’autre, au rythme de l’orchestre, mais, à la sentir si près, mes jambes dans les siennes, je défaille et l’étreins. Nos lèvres se cherchent et se prennent. Ah! ne ris plus maintenant Madeleine, nos bouches sont confondues et leurs baisers opèrent leur miracle, son assouplissement... Nous sommes l’une à l’autre, les yeux clos, l’âme prise, les sens mêlés. Une porte étouffée s’entrouvre, le garçon est là, mais nous sommes si doucement enlacées que nous nous défaisons sans hâte, sans gêne, ayant simplement très envie de rire, et regardant, comme contenance, la salle éclairée entre les rideaux” (Ibid., 139-140).

²²⁴ Ibid., 140.

interrupted their passionate kissing and fondling. This restaurant/cabaret was a “safe space”, i.e., one in which it was possible to make visible their desire without fear of repercussions. Moreover, this restaurant was located in the chic area of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, which marks a slow shift of lesbian visibility from the Montmartre (eighteenth arrondissement) to the right bank of the Seine and eventually over to the Left Bank after the turn of the century.

The slow shift of lesbian visibility from the more Bohemian neighborhoods to the more traditionally bourgeois areas of Paris was due to some extent to the rising popularity of dance halls. The first arrondissement and the fifth, which were far removed from the artistic and bohemian culture of Montmartre, provided lesbians dance spaces where they could try out the tango or the Charleston in the 1920s. Havet’s journal emphasizes the important role of dance in the formation of lesbian communities and identity. Her published diaries provide a relatively uncensored and first-hand look at the life of this self-proclaimed lesbian, and the importance of dance to her. At the opening of her 1918 journal, she discusses her crush on an American expatriot, Edna Noll, who had been an ambulance driver near the Front. Edna’s daring and brazen behavior as a lesbian attracts Havet and elicits her admiration, but through a discussion of dancing, Havet shows two very different concepts of lesbian seduction. For her, dancing was more of a private, romantic matter, a form of seduction and social interaction, in which partners were often culled from women of the bourgeoisie or the elitist salons of the aristocracy or *culturati*; however, in one journal entry she describes how Edna preferred to cruise for women at the more public balls. As Edna and Havet race down the Champs-Élysée towards the Arc de Triomphe, she explains her regret at having left the night’s entertainments, even though it was seven in the morning, for Edna tellingly remarks, “J’aurais dû aller danser avec des filles du monde, c’est incroyable qu’elles sont vicieuses.”²²⁵ Edna’s stated preference for particular types of dance locales and their habitués emphasizes the growing recognizable presence and network of lesbians after World War I. Towards the end of the first journal that ends in 1919, Havet details other places that she frequented with a clique of lesbians or bisexual women, including numerous theaters, cabarets and dance halls, all of which provide a remarkable topography of lesbian Paris covering both sides of the Seine, including ostensibly “straight” venues such as Le Moulin de la chanson where women of various social classes danced together and where Havet even danced with a woman who looked like her dairymaid—a far cry from the aristocratic or artistic crowd with whom she normally danced as a prelude to other physical activity. The transgression of class lines was a hallmark of non-normative sexual culture(s). The link to common working-class women as members of a surging lesbian presence in Paris is apparent throughout Havet’s 1918 journal, but Edna’s penchant for prostitutes is even more evident in the journal when Havet writes on January 24, 1919, “Petite Edna, je vous envie car les grues vous suffisent, mais moi! Moi, je désirais la baronne Clauzel...”²²⁶ Indeed, Edna’s experience demonstrated that female sex workers and brothels continued to play an integral role in the conception of lesbian space. The dance floors also became increasingly queered, that is to say they could become the staging ground of non-normative sexual behavior and serve as a node through which many queer pathways—individuals with various sexual itineraries and modes of

²²⁵ Ibid., 74.

²²⁶ Ibid., 77.

being in the world—could pass, jostling to the pulsating rhythms of a rapidly changing and expanding France as they formed a patchwork of social networks, mores, and music.²²⁷

VII: Conclusion

Lesbian space as imagined and described in the French novel and other texts and images during the Third Republic was almost ubiquitous, running from one end of Paris to the other. Through appropriation of male-dominated urban social space lesbians were able to create social networks that were the underpinnings of a nascent lesbian community. The lesbian circulated in the public space and the private sphere, from the convent to the café, from the music halls to the salons of aristocrats. As Jean Lorrain said of Montmartre, “one could dine in Lesbos,” if one wanted to venture to the eighteenth arrondissement, watch the *La Goulue* or other “music hall” girls dance at the Moulin Rouge, or pay for the pleasure of an upscale brothel in the first arrondissement on the rue Chabannais to watch a lesbians have sex in a staged “tableau vivant.” What is apparent from these various sources is that lesbians were beginning to be noticed and accounted for as a group, and as a consequence, certain spaces became heavily identified with lesbianism or non-normative sexual behavior. Montmartre with its artistic and bohemian reputation was quickly associated with lesbians and other sexual thrill seekers, but other places became imagined spaces for deviant sexual practices. I have illustrated some of the diversity of these imagined spaces as they spanned several decades, but these illustrations are by no means exhaustive. I have not dealt with other notable spaces that captured the French imaginary: convents, schools, prisons, theaters, and opium dens also contributed to the archipelago of imagined spaces, “life environments” that resulted from the polyphony of the various participants voices, their life experiences, their sexual practices, and their own sexual politics.²²⁸ What these lesbian spaces confirm is that no class was absent from membership in Lesbos-sur-Seine, and no stable utopian ideal of “community” existed. Whatever the individual’s interest was, whether to cruise for lesbian sex, to socialize with other lesbians, or merely to satiate one’s curiosity, Paris offered a plethora of pleasure avenues that crisscrossed the city. Paths of desire were opened across the Paris from the arcades to the public gardens to the most privileged of male’s private space, the brothel. Women who loved women became a part of the cityscape, an invention of modernity, and for some authors, such as Baudelaire, and later Louÿs, the very symbol of modernity. Lesbian space was not just the verdant, inviting, and chic open spaces of the Bois de Boulogne or the Champs-Élysée, nor was it the closed space of the convent where the bride of Christ was to be prepared, nor the common carousing of the café-concerts. Lesbian space was as close as the book in the reader’s hands and the imagination that the author inflamed.

²²⁷ Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 3.

²²⁸ Using the theoretical model proposed by Berlant and Warner, they define “lifeworlds” as different from communities or groups because lifeworlds “necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright. See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 558.

Chapter 4: “Family Values”: Lesbian Representation as Epistemological Challenge to Marriage

In June 2004, Noël Mamère, the mayor of Bègles in France “married” two gay men in at the city hall. In an article in the French newspaper, *Le Monde*, a journalist wrote that Bègles “made it possible for each of us to reflect, reevaluate and even call into question our understanding of notions as fundamental as marriage, family, kinship and sexuality.”²²⁹ The journalist’s invitation to rethink marriage and kinship in the context of this particular wedding ceremony supposes that this same-sex union is somehow innovative. This chapter claims that lesbian and bisexual writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had already created an epistemological challenge to traditional understandings of marriage and kinship through their representations of same-sex relationships. When I write about marriage I am referring to both the legal (civil) act in France as well as the religious sacrament. The contours of marriage and its ideological investments were in great flux during the nineteenth century as notions of marriage shifted from that of an alliance (*mariage de raison*) to a socio-legal acknowledgement of romantic love (*mariage d’amour*). Much of the recent scholarship on “marriage” has examined marriage as a strictly heterosexual construct and has focused on changes and tensions produced in a heteronormative context.²³⁰ While marriage may have only been legally possible between a man and a woman during the French Third Republic—this is still the case— I propose that one should also consider the ways that non-normative relationships complicated and contributed to ideas about marriage as a form of legal commitment. Marriage was the social institution par excellence in which many of the social anxieties that plagued France during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found themselves reflected one way or another. One can find in debates about marriage questions ranging from the importance of procreation and natality rates to miscegenation, colonial aspirations, and the health of the State.²³¹

In her book on Victorian England, *Between Women*, Sharon Marcus argues that scholars were hampered for decades by twentieth century prejudices that “obscured the facts of nineteenth-century female marriage, and as a result it has only recently become possible to identify the role that female marriage played in political, social, and intellectual life.” This chapter pushes this assertion further in thinking about the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France and elucidates how representations of lesbian relationships expanded and critiqued contemporary understandings of marriage. Marcus states further that more recent scholarship, while establishing the sexual nature of some of these relationships between women, has insisted too much on the women’s marginality and opposition to marriage.²³² Marcus is concerned primarily with Victorian England and its literature, which did not have the plethora of

²²⁹ *Le Monde*, April 22, 2004.

²³⁰ Patricia Mainardi, *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers: Marriage and its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) and Nicolas White, *The Family in Crisis in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²³¹ Rachel Mesch, “Housewife or Harlot?: Sex and the Married Woman in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Human Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (January 2009): 65-66. Mesch’s focus is on the eroticization of marriage, but she does discuss marriage and its imbrication with natality rates and the health of the State.

²³² Sharon Marcus, *Between Women* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 226.

lesbian characters and representations of same-sex relations that French literature had during the period that interests me. Thus, while considering British Victorian literature may add to a helpful comparative aspect to an analysis and understanding of sexualities, marriage, and lesbianism in the French novel, the political, cultural, and social contexts remain quite distinct. What is unique to French literature is that despite the impulse of some male writers to use the lesbian as a pretext for titillation or instructive moral lessons about French expectations of proper sexual conduct and service to the State, there were literary works that did not equate heterosexuality with the real nor banish the lesbian from the text soon after her appearance, nor did they relegate her to insignificant narrative devices or oppositional footnotes to heterosexuality.²³³ Balzac, Gautier, Zola, Belot and many other authors had already begun to explore the place of same-sex desire in French social networks well before the fin-de-siècle.

On occasion, cultural critics and thinkers such as Johann Bachofen would explicitly link lesbianism to modern enlightenment and French writers such as Pierre Louÿs would advocate more freedom in marriage for women as well as provide literary models of same-sex marriage. Yet, the preponderance of scholarship has focused less on gestures such as these, and more on heterosexual models, thereby obscuring alternative paradigms for marriage and other kinship relations that existed at the time. Judith Butler argues in her article, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?,” that “it is important to mark how the field of intelligible and speakable sexuality is circumscribed, so that we can see how options outside of marriage are becoming foreclosed as the unthinkable, and how the terms of thinkability are enforced by the narrow debates over who and what will be included in the norm.” This chapter undertakes to spotlight ways that lesbian and bi-sexual writers actually inscribed in the French imaginary alternative relationship configurations that “fall outside the purview of sanctifying law” so that they are no longer “illegible” or “untenable.”²³⁴ In other words, these authors did conceive of “marriage” outside of the reproductive matrix that underpinned the institution of traditional marriage. Here I investigate how they did so. These authors (Renée Vivien, Nathalie Barney, Colette, and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus) contested the idea of marriage as the primary locus generative of kinship relations. The fiction of “family” was that marriage created kinship networks through the couple’s reproduction, thus binding two previously distinct groups together through bloodlines. The authors I look at here showed that the fiction of kinship need not be based in reproductive marriage—that it was not and should not be the privileged fiefdom of heterosexuality. Marriage could be considered as an expression of affective commitment that need not necessarily mime the heteronormative model. Their lives and discursive representations were early attempts to wrench the idea of family and marriage from patriarchal models, thereby offering new options for kinship.

²³³ See generally, Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). Marilyn R. Farwell, “Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Towards a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space,” in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Galsgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 91-103. Judith Ruth, *Come As You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²³⁴ Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 106.

I. Unions of the Soul: Rethinking Marriage and Love

Today when one thinks of “gay marriage” one tends to see it as a phenomenon of the late twentieth century, but this is inaccurate. Even male writers such as Pierre Louÿs in the late 1890s, imagined and described same-sex marriage between women. However, I would argue that it was a band of women, many of whom identified as lesbians, who challenged heterosexual conceptions of relationships and kinship through their reinvention and reinterpretation of what a committed relationship is or what it means to be “married.” This chapter examines various writers’ descriptions of these non-traditional relationships and works to situate those descriptions in a particular cultural moment in order to form a legible narrative. As argued in previous chapters, lesbianism served as a signifier for a variety of other cultural anxieties during the Third Republic, but it was a particularly common short-hand method of discussing the rethinking of gender roles in France and their relation to ideas of marriage and the bedrock of Third Republic ideology, the family. Nicholas White noted that the family was in crisis in the late Nineteenth-Century, and “the most conspicuous sign of crisis in family life towards the end of the century was...the debate on divorce which culminated in the *Loi Naquet* of 1884...In France this was a trigger in the modern process to borrow Anthony Giddens’ terms, and translated marriage into ‘a signifier of commitment, rather than a determinant of it.’”²³⁵ The shifting of symbolic value White identifies made space for further challenges to the social conception of marriage and ideas about its utility.

The idea of same-sex marriage can be seen working its way into French literary production in the 1890s, when certain writers in France were already beginning to think about the affective bonds that held same-sex couples together and to describe their relationships. These relationships, some of which endured for years, and even for lifetimes, posed an epistemological challenge in that there was not a readily available cultural vocabulary to define them. The economic and social underpinnings of heterosexual marriage became increasingly eclipsed by the idea that love and desire should be the motivating factors for couples. In this way heterosexual marriage began more closely to mirror lesbian relationships in that they were no longer primarily bound by questions of family alliances, dowry, or social standing.²³⁶ The increasing visibility of lesbian couples in major cities, particularly Paris, was even, as I will argue, a catalyst for the reorganization and cultural nuancing or redefining bourgeois concepts of marriage.

Perhaps one of the most moving and salient examples of lesbians reconstituting the bourgeois rules of amorous relationships would be Natalie Barney’s and Elisabeth de Clermont-Tonnerre, who shared a relationship that lasted decades. Particularly striking is the realistic recounting they provide of the inherent pitfalls that they encountered in their romantic and loving relationship. Also remarkable is their willingness to acknowledge the soulful complementarity they experienced each in the other. A marriage contract that they signed in 1918 provides an intimate and historically important insight into the ways that two women reimagined a loving and committed relationship. Eschewing traditionally held notions about what a committed

²³⁵ White, *The Family in Crisis*, 176.

²³⁶ Lesbian characters in novels such as Mendès’ *Méphistophéla*, Maizeroy’s *Deux Amies*, or Souillac’s *Gomorrhe* all set up *ménages* or enter into relationships with women who are not of the same social class and who are less well-situated economically. Actual long term relationships such as Colette’s and Missy’s, Suzy Solidor’s and Parisian socialite Yvonne d’Ars, or Mireille Havet’s and Baronesse de Clauzel crossed social and economic classes.

relationship meant, these two women did not attach value of their relationship to notions of monogamy or to the imprimatur of a religious sacrament. Their contract stated:

Marriage Contract stipulated after nine years of life together, joys and worries shared, and affairs confessed. For the survival of a bond that we believe—and wish to believe—is unbreakable, since at its lowest level of reciprocal emotionalism that is the conclusion reached.

The union, sorely tried by the passing years, failed doubly the faithfulness test in its sixth year, showing us that adultery is inevitable in these relationships where there is no prejudice, no religion other than feelings, no laws other than desire, incapable of vain sacrifices that seem to be the negation of life itself.

We are, however, strong in the knowledge that we can, without delusion or exaggeration, live or die for each other. So much that while we recognize that one is not sufficient for the other, we are indispensable one for the other. Our love passion—which knew no obstacle, pure, exclusive, devouring, free as fire—has become love—another sort of beauty, a different purity; mature, patient, pitiful, supple, cruel, logical, human and complex as is life.

We accept it as such, since a mutilated victory is better than no victory at all—and we believe that time affords only mutilated victories (which are the only living and durable ones. Ours has lost its freshness, but not its dominating faith, nor its purity, nor its wings).

Being free to choose and not free to choose, we chose: a continuity that seems to us preferable to a mosaic. And who has either of us found to be preferable in the long to the other? It has often been clear and proven to us that as we change so must our love change—that our love involves indestructible habits that we must keep out of danger, above momentary fluctuations. This love that we know is the only one worthy of representing our hearts, minds and bodies at the same time, asks us, all three (heart, mind and body) coming together here, to protect it against our predictable whims, wanderings and changes through the following resolutions:

Since the danger of affairs is ever present and impossible to foresee, one will just have to bring the other back, neither out of revenge, nor to limit the other, but because the union demands it

No other union shall be so strong as this union, nor another joining so tender—nor relationship so lasting

As a token of this promise let us place our ring as wide as the universe around the horizon of the future and of ourselves.

This exclusive ring must be green, shining and unbreakable. And the one I marry shall not be called my wife, nor my slave, nor my spouse, which are sexual terms for fleeting times—but my one, my eternal mate.²³⁷

In sharp contrast to contemporary ideals of marriage, both parties acknowledge and accept the other's infidelities in an honest and unhypocritical manner. French literature of the nineteenth century was of course often preoccupied with notions of marriage and the family, with adultery being one of its privileged tropes. As Zola wrote in the February 14, 1881 issue of *Le Figaro*:

²³⁷ Natalie Barney, "Correspondance," in *Fonds Natalie Barney* (Paris: Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet, 1918).

[les romans et surtout les drames]...sont toujours plus ou moins bâtis sur l'adultère, et ils ont tous des dénouements inacceptables, coups de couteau, coups de fusil, violences inutiles et odieuses. Du moment qu'on pourra lâcher sa femme, je compte qu'il ne sera plus permis de la tuer. Voilà donc notre répertoire détruit.

Thus, it is all the more striking that Barney and Gramont-Tonnerre clearly accept infidelity as part and parcel of their "union," and what is even more unorthodox, is that they conceive of their eternal bond as one that will be interrupted by trysts and love affairs, which might threaten the stability of such a union. Instead, they relied on the sincere belief in the worth of their union to convince the other's wondering affections to return "home." Zola's musings on heterosexual couple's infidelities illustrates the difficulty of narrating relationships such as Barney's and Gramont's, because vocabulary and conceptual tools for articulating their idea of a union were not part of the French imaginary.

Another noteworthy aspect of their marriage contract is that both women, totally bilingual in English and French chose the word, mate, to signify their affective relationship.²³⁸ This contract is one of equals where the parties demand a union that transcends sexual desire, patriarchal convention, and Christian dogma. Those who are somewhat familiar with Barney may be surprised to learn that Barney made this contract after her partner, Romaine Brooks, was already in her life. The truth of the matter is that Barney and Gramont-Tonnerre remained deeply involved and committed to each other until Elisabeth Gramont-Tonnerre's death in 1954.²³⁹ Their correspondence, some of which has only relatively recently been made public, attests to an abiding love and union, but their commitment to a life-long relationship is complicated by Barney's relationship with Brooks. Barney's addiction to seduction and her many affairs did not appear to bother Gramont-Tonnerre, but rather she demanded the same liberation from convention and sexual freedom, once writing to Barnes, "I didn't intend to, but I let myself be dragged into a wild physical passion for F.,... I am frank with you—I am telling you about it—I've always been careful not to interfere with your little games. And naturally, I expect you to behave in the same manner."²⁴⁰ The terms of their relationship refuse the imperative of sexual fidelity as an underpinning of love; yet, they are also keenly aware of the deleterious effects that a prolonged sexual and emotional attachment to another might have on their union.²⁴¹ To believe that this "understanding" or arrangement was easy would be to ignore the myriad affairs and adventures in which Barney engaged and which formed part of her reputation.

Barney's relationships and myriad liaisons are as important to her legacy as her literary contributions, and her notorious love life influenced representations of lesbianism transnationally. Both male and female authors— gay, straight, and lesbian—

²³⁸ Elisabeth Gramont-Tonnerre was bilingual in English and French. Her grandmother was Scottish, and she had raised Elisabeth as a small child. See also, Francesco Rapazzini, "Elisabeth de Gramont-Tonnerre, Nathalie Barney's 'Eternal Mate,'" *South Central Review* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 6-31.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*: 24.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: 18.

²⁴¹ My intention here is to gesture to the romantic idea, founded in Judeo-Christian thought, but which informed many ideas about relationships in Western Europe that when one is truly in love or committed to another in the eyes of God that he/she does not have sex outside of the relationship.

modeled characters after her. As the most visible lesbian *femme fatale* of the early twentieth century, her romantic relationships challenged and supplemented ideas about love, whose ultimate expression was legalized marriage and offspring.

The earliest depiction of Barney is in Liane de Pougy's *Idylle sapphique* in which Pougy fictionalizes her relationship with Barney and offers an apologia for her "foray" into the cult of Sappho, one in which she claims she is never quite able to participate fully. Pougy's protestations against her own lesbian desire by means of the main protagonist, Nininhe, are certainly contradicted by her life. As late as 1922 she was involved in a *ménage à trois* with Nathalie, Elisabeth (Lily) Gramont-Tonnerre, despite having married the Romanian Count, George Ghika in 1920. Although Barney actually participated in the writing of some of the novel's scenes, including the one that recounts the true incident in which Barney dressed as a page to woo Pougy, the novel seems more preoccupied with indulging in the stereotypes of lesbian pathologization rather than with offering a realistic portrayal of her lesbian relationships. Pougy paints Barney as a relentless seductress who pursues her prey with remarkable assiduity; yet, Barney is not left emotionally jaded or blasé by the procession of lovers and fleeting conquests she has had. When recounting their initial encounter, Pougy inserts the actual story of how Barney cried when she found that her proclamations of love to Pougy had been made to an imposter while Pougy hid behind a screen and observed the scene.²⁴² Still, Pougy is often careful to paint Barney's character in more noble colors such as when she denounces the injustice of patriarchal laws that repress women. Her character sees lesbianism as a "religion of the body, whose kisses are prayers," one that exalts same-sexuality not as a perversion but as "conversion" —a conversion that permits women to break free from socially imposed constraints.²⁴³

Among the French women writers Barney influenced (Mardrus, Pougy, and Colette) perhaps Mardrus was the most marked by Barney's infidelities. In 1932 Mardrus's wrote *The Angel and the Perverts*, a semi-autobiographical account of her relationship with Barney. The protagonist modeled on Barney, Laurette, is a female Cassanova, romantically fickle but remarkably generous, whose beauty is only surpassed by her genuine interest in aesthetic pursuits. Through the Laurette's character, Mardrus pays homage to Barney's fostering of intellectual and artistic endeavors. She emphasizes her importance in creating a space where creative forces could mingle and find inspiration. Mardrus also uses descriptions of Laurette's seductions to articulate divergent views about marriage. When Laurette request's the main character, Marion, to help her woo back a lover, she reluctantly agrees. Laurette's former lover had left her husband for Laurette, but because of Laurette's infidelities she became involved in a relationship with another woman. Marion states, "...you make a toy of love. At heart you're just a bunch of schoolgirls—dangerous schoolgirls, moreover, because somewhere in all this is a man who loved his wife and who has lost her, a woman quietly living her life now launched on illicit affairs." To this Laurette replies, "It was *before* that she was illicit."²⁴⁴

Mardrus succeeds in crystallizing two very opposing views of marriage and kinship through Laurette (Barney) and Marion (Mardrus). It is no secret that Barney, like Renée Vivien,

²⁴² Suzanne Rodriguez-Hunter, *Wild Heart: A Life: Natalie Barney's Journey from Victorian America to Belle Époque Paris* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 91-92.

²⁴³ Pougy, *Idylle sapphique* (Alteredit: Chatenay-Malbrey, 2003), 51, 277. Colette briefly sketches Barney as Miss Flossie in her *Claudine* series, extolling Barney's beauty and her radiant smile, but once again Barney's character is the impudent seductress whose insistent gaze Claudine cannot hold.

²⁴⁴ Delarue-Mardrus, *The Angel and the Perverts*, 124.

eschewed marriage as a patriarchal institution used to enslave women.²⁴⁵ Barney never married and was proud of her “virginity,” proud that no man had possessed her. Thus, for Laurette’s assertion that the bourgeois heterosexual marriage of Aimée was illicit highlights an ideology among certain groups of lesbians that marriage was designed to oppress women, that it is was merely a brutal patriarchal institution that enslaved them. Yet, in the same passage, Marion defends the French bourgeois notion of marriage as something inviolate and sacred, and she defends the righteous indignation of the man who loved his wife and whose heart is broken by his wife’s adultery. Mardrus captures her own ambivalence regarding the tension between bourgeois values of matrimonial loyalty and lesbian iconoclasm.

The reality of Barney’s life is that she never equated commitment or love with physical fidelity. This fact alone sets her apart from the prevalent moral codes, if not the practices, of the Third Republic. Her devotion to Elisabeth Clermont Tonnerre evidences this, but Barney’s life further subverted contemporary views on love by tacitly advocating polyamory. Her long-term contemporaneous relationships with both Romaine Brooks and Elisabeth reinforce Barney’s conception of “marriage”—of “union” to use her term—as an affective relationship that must be molded and remain malleable to the changing needs of the parties but which retains a constant dimension of devotion, passion, and solicitude.

Barney appears to have lived true to her values—she continued her peccadilloes well into her eighties, eventually causing the permanent break between her and her partner of decades, Romaine Brooks. Equally apparent was the steadfastness of her idea of the “union” of two beings—the psychic, affective, and physical investments that one makes in a primary relationship—for Barney never stopped wooing her, imploring her to reestablish contact. Barney’s view of marriage incorporated the Enlightenment idea that the “bond of affection and not duty should hold the *family* together” (italics added).²⁴⁶ It was indeed this deep affection that kept Barney so invested in Elisabeth de Gramont until her death in 1954, and in Romaine until her own death in 1972.

This chapter has begun with a discussion of Barney’s and Gramont’s “union,” of the ways their marriage contract challenged contemporary understandings of marriage. Now I wish to turn to Colette’s discussion of the Ladies of Llangollen in *Le Pur et l’impur* as embodying this idea of a female “union.” Here, my analysis is limited to Colette’s treatment of “marriage” between two women in the context of Barney’s “union” with Gramont. Other aspects of Colette’s work will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter. The possibility of long-term, socially valued, and emotionally fulfilling relationships between women of the same-sex is unquestionably possible in Colette’s sexual “cosmology,” at least as it is conveyed in this section of the *Le Pur et l’impur*, which comes almost three decades after the *Claudine* novels.

In the Ladies of Llangollen portion of *Le Pur et l’impur*, Colette expounds on the differences that she sees in same-sex relationships between women who love women and their heteronormative homologues. For her, the idea of life-long unions between women is reflected in an entry in Lady Eleanor Butler’s diary—“my beloved and I went on a delicious walk.” Colette delicately writes of Lady Eleanor Butler’s and Lady Sarah Ponsby’s five decade long relationship. It stands as an exemplar of two women who love each other passionately and

²⁴⁵ “Marriage, as she had come to view it annihilated independence; it was stifling, restrictive, debilitating” (Rodriguez-Hunter, *Wild Heart*, 49).

²⁴⁶ Mainardi, *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*, 4. See especially chapter two “The Rise and Fall of the Good Father” in Lynn Hunt, *Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

intimately beyond the first excited flushes of mutual desire and who withstand the normalizing pressures of a confounded society that cannot understand this attraction. The surviving diaries of Lady Eleanor are mementos of a “fairytale” in which “she relates only what ordinary mortals can believe.”²⁴⁷ Colette most certainly believed in what their lives came to emblemize—love without boundaries, love unfettered by exigencies of a restrictive and heterocentrist society. In a moment of tender sentimentality Colette writes of Lady Eleanor’s and Lady Sarah’s “union” that

Peut-être cet amour, qu’on dit outrageant pour amour, échappe-t-il aux saisons, aux déclinés de l’amour, sous la condition qu’on le gouverne avec une sévérité invisible, qu’on le nourrisse de peu, qu’il vive à tâtons et sans but et que sa fleur unique soit une confiance telle que l’autre amour ne puisse ni la sonder ni la comprendre, mais seulement l’envier, telle que par sa grâce un demi-siècle coule comme ‘a day of sweetly enjoyed retirement.’

Colette’s treatment of lesbianism can be gentle and approving, as when she explains that women in love with one another do not avoid physical pleasure and sensuality.²⁴⁸ But she does not see sexual attraction as the magnetism that holds these relationships together: “c’est cette sensualité plus éparsée que le spasme, et plus que lui chaude. C’est cette sensualité sans résolution et sans exigences, heureuse du regard échangé, du bras sur l’épaule, émue de l’odeur de blé tiède réfugiée dans une chevelure, ce sont ces délices de la présence constante et de l’habitude qui engendrent et excusent la fidélité.”²⁴⁹ Although Colette’s conceptions of the lesbian couple may seem myopic and outdated, she does envision the durability and the viability of same-sex relationships between women—these unions of “*semblables*” borne from the “noble season” of feminine passion.²⁵⁰

Although this chapter focuses primarily on lesbian or bi-sexual female authors and their lives, one cannot dismiss the importance of the rare male authors who also imagined same-sex marriages between women. Among these male writers, I am most interested in Pierre Louÿs. His interest in lesbian representation has provoked a lively critical discussion. Inarguably, he had an important part in emerging lesbian visibility, whatever his motives may have been. Both Barney and Vivien were avid fans of his book of prose poems, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, and Barney was a life-long friend of his. His works inspired and influenced Barney’s, Vivien’s, and Colette’s literary works and thinking.

²⁴⁷ Colette writes that these entries are “infantile adventures, fairylands of love—and much that she dared not say...No she relates only what ordinary mortals can believe,” because this was Lady Eleanor’s journal entry the day she heard of the French Revolution. Rather than record the importance of such news, she writes of a walk with Lady Sarah to Blaen Bache. Colette, *The Pure and the Impure* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000), 129.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁴⁹ Colette, *Romans-Récits-Souvenirs (1920-1940)* (Paris: Laffont, 1989).

²⁵⁰ “Two women very much in love do not shun the ecstasy of the senses, nor do they shun a sensuality less concentrated than the orgasm, and more warming. It is this unresolved and undemanding sensuality that finds happiness in an exchange of glances, an arm laid on a shoulder, and is thrilled by the odor of sun-warmed what caught in a head of hair. These are the delights of a constant companionship and shared habits that engender and excuse fidelity. How marvelously compact, the repetition of days, repeated like the reflections of a lamp in a perspective of mirrors! Perhaps this love, which according to some people is outrageous, escapes the changing seasons and the wanderings of love by being controlled with invisible severity, nourished on very little, permitted to live gropingly and without a goal, its unique flower being a mutual trust such as that other love can never plumb or comprehend, but only envy; and so great is such a love that by its grace a half century can pass by like ‘a day of delicious and exquisite retirement’” (*Ibid.*, 119-120).

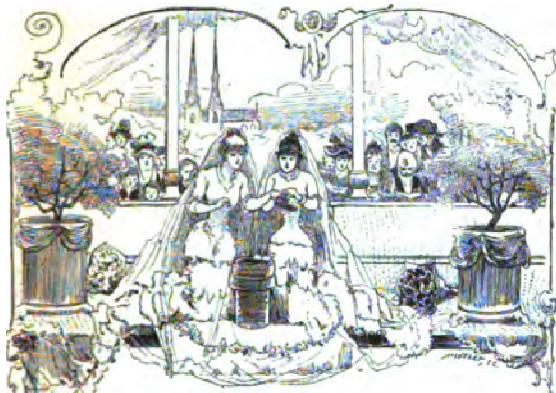
What I would like to draw attention to in both *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and in his subsequent novel, *Aphrodite*, is Louÿs naturalization of same-sex marriage between women without any reference to pathologization or degeneracy. In both works love between women is acceptable, and they are free to take steps to formalize their relationship within their particular societies; thus, Louÿs not only references a particular historical context, but in doing so he also asks the reader to imagine the possibility of same-sex marriage. In fact, one of the very few same-sex marriage scenes in any French novel during the Third Republic takes place in *Aphrodite* when two young flautists from Ephesus, Rhodis and Myrtocleia, confide in the main protagonist, Chrysis, that they are in love and wish to be married according to the law of their homeland. Louÿs provides an imaginative description of this same-sex marriage ritual à l'Éphésienne, thereby encouraging a reexamination his contemporary social structures as well as the strictures that denounced same-sex relations in general. Myrtocleia recounts that in Ephesus when two virgins fell in love they would first go to the temple of Athena to surrender their belts, remit an interwoven lock of their hair to Iphinoë, and then obtain a small gold knife and white linen cloth from the temple of Dionysius with which the more masculine of the pair takes the virginity of the other and stanches her blood. That same evening the fiancée is carried to her new house on a chariot festooned with flowers seated between her “husband” and the “best man”, surrounded by torches and flautists.²⁵¹ Whereas moralists and social commentators often based their arguments for the primacy of heterosexual marriage, in part, on a historical tradition grounded in Judeo-Christian teachings, Louÿs attempts to trump this argument by foregrounding customs and usage regarding marriage that predate Christianity. Thus, the idea of same-sex marriage and relationships would not be products of nineteenth century pathologies but rather elements of a sexual continuum that can be traced for millennia. Throughout his career Louÿs attacked bourgeois constraints on sexual expression in favor of the pursuit of sensual pleasures, and his influence on future lesbian writers and their literary production is well documented.²⁵² His work influenced lesser known works such as *Les Tendres Épigrammes de Cydno la lesbienne*, which is an obvious pastiche of the marriage between Mnasidika and Bilitis in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and of Myrto and Rhodis in *Aphrodite*, right down to the description of the deflowering of the “more feminine” of the two women. In *Cydno* the dark-haired Polyxène marries the blond Antigone (once again we see the motif of complementarity), who is the less masculine of the two women, and thus it is Antigone who has her hymen pierced by a faux phallus.²⁵³ Louÿs was arguably less opportunistic in his portrayals of lesbianism than other male writers such as Adolphe Belot, Catulle Mendès, and Jean Lorrain despite his commercial

²⁵¹ “À Éphèse, dans notre pays, quand deux jeunes filles nubiles et vierges comme Rhodis et moi sont amoureuses l’une de l’autre, la loi leur permet de s’épouser. Elles vont toutes les deux au temple d’Athéna, consacrer leur double ceinture ; puis au sanctuaire d’Iphinoë, donner une boucle mêlée de leurs cheveux et enfin sous le péristyle de Dionysos, où l’on remet à la plus mâle un petit couteau d’or affilée et un linge blanc pour étancher le sang. Le soir, celle des deux qui est la fiancée est amenée à sa nouvelle demeure, assise sur un char fleuri entre son « mari » et la paranymphe, environnée de torches et joueuses de flûte. Et désormais elles ont tous les droits des époux” (Louÿs, *Aphrodite*, 103-104). The original publication was in 1895.

²⁵² For instance, in 1914 Louÿs published an article in *Comoedia* in which he stated that in order to understand *Aphrodite* one had to read the entirety “‘comme une sorte de plaidoyer’ pour la prééminence de la volupté sur la passion” (Hans-Roland Johnsson, *Le Conte de la Lyre Brisée: Significations et Structures dans les Oeuvres en Prose de Pierre Louÿs* [Stockholm: University of Stockholm Press, 2000], 103-104).

²⁵³ Ibykos de Rhodes, *Les tendres épigrammes de Cydno la lesbienne* (Paris: Bibliothèque internationale d’édition, 1911).

successes. Still, Mendès, despite his customary disparaging and sensational depictions of lesbians, was able to offer a more flattering picture in the short story, “Au vingt et unième siècle,” even if it is a story that should be probably read as ultimately ironic. In this short story, Mendès perhaps anticipates the polemics surrounding gay marriage in the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries when he recounts the marriage of two young Parisian women. These women are not the “détraquées” so often found peppering his works: they come from the very best Parisian society—the families are “princières,” rich and of the highest social standing—and their marriage is attended by “le Paris illustre et mondain.” The blond, Laure, and the raven-haired Jane, as a result of their long-suffering devotion and chaste love, are able to win both their families’ and society’s approval. The women are described as “honnêtes fiancées qui voulaient se conserver intactes pour le lit nuptial.” Their families are not against the marriage on moral grounds but because of family interests.²⁵⁴ However, these two women gain society’s respect through their open devotion and faithfulness to each other, which becomes legendary. “A cause de cette légende on les aime et on les honore. Tous se découvrent lorsqu’elles passent, et des chuchotements sympathiques, de toutes parts, les environnent. On a tort de dire que Paris est égoïste et frivole...; il sait rendre justice à l’honnêteté, aux sincères amours, et se réjouir des vertus récompensées.”²⁵⁵ The illustration below reflects the tone of Mendès short story in that it conveys the “normalcy” of same-sex marriage and its reconfiguration of the bourgeois ritual of heterosexual marriage.



Fernand Besnier, “Au vingt et unième siècle.”

The illustration echoes the very banality of the same-sex marriage through the repetition of standard visual codes associated with heterosexual marriage. This is a marriage à la bonne bourgeoisie. Both women are dressed in long white wedding gowns with veils to indicate both their modesty and chasteness, *de rigueur* in any nineteenth-century Christian marriage ceremony whether Protestant or Catholic. The visual representation of a same-sex marriage illustrates its mimetic relationship to heterosexual marriage: there appear to be two sides to the wedding party, complete with parents and children. Each bride has a bridal bouquet and they are exchanging rings. The event is festively decorated and conveys a celebratory air while a large book, perhaps the Holy Bible, rests prominently between them on a table as they exchange rings. The illustration combined with Mendès’s prose work together to promote a picture of same-sex

²⁵⁴ Catulle Mendès, *Pour lire au bain* (Paris: Dentu, 1884), 81.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

marriage that is both “normalized” and morally acceptable without the snide vilification and “righteous indignation” so common in Mendès writings on lesbianism.²⁵⁶ Whether Mendès’ short story can be taken as satirical or not does not diminish its subversive potential as a manifestation of the challenges that lesbian relationships were posing for the understandings of marriage current in his time. Although the argument that these authors did nothing more than reappropriate existent relationship models that provided no radical revisions of their structure or dynamics is common, such an argument underestimates the importance of appropriation as a first step towards innovation. Lesbian representations did not merely ask readers to imagine that same-sex couples could marry but also to consider that they could participate wholly in society as fully vested citizens. Yet, lesbian representations did more to subvert traditional concepts of marriage than just imagining same-sex couples, some authors queered heterosexual marriage by advocating female lovers as innocuous supplements. Their assertions added a new dimension to the typical romantic triangle with the man as the outsider and asserting that a female on female relationship would not and could not be adulterous. The typical romantic triangle had a new angle.

III. Queer Triangulation: Marriage and Lesbian Affairs

Many scholars have interpreted representations of lesbianism as reflecting an antithetical relationship between heterosexuality and lesbianism. As Sharon Marcus writes on the subject,

Without meaning to, I had assumed that all relationships between women had to refer to lesbianism and be external to male-female desire. As a result, I sought to define relationships between women solely in relation to sexual desire, the glue that binds masculine to feminine in the heterosexual matrix. My assumption that relationships between women must oppose dominant heterosexuality had made it seem like a contradiction that people who were repulsed by lesbian sex in French literature encouraged and praised other intimate bonds between women.²⁵⁷

Marcus’s observation is relevant not only to the Victorian English cultures she is studying, but also to my discussions of French culture in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of the important female figures of France’s *Lesbos-sur-Seine* will know that two of France’s greatest female writers during the Third Republic, Colette and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, claimed sexual and affective citizenship or, at the very least a permanent visa, since both were married to men but had numerous same-sex relationships while married. Both their lives and their writings should complicate and nuance our understanding of French representations of lesbianism and its place in French cultural and literary history. Because Colette has become more canonical and thus more easily recognizable to a larger audience, I will begin with a discussion of her work and life.

Colette once said that she was against feminists and would whip them if she could; yet, in many ways, Colette embodied many of the principles so closely identified with Western ideas of feminism. Her disparaging remarks about feminists are troubling when one considers that she led one of the most unorthodox lifestyles of her era and worked as an actress, mime, journalist, screenwriter, author and business woman, just to name a few of her careers. Although she was

²⁵⁶ In other novels, such as Mendès’s *Méphistophéla* or Francis Lepage’s *Les Fausses Vierges*, same-sex marriage between women is imagined and recounted, but marriage is the result of young girl’s budding desire transposed into religious fervor, rather than the consequence of a reasoned decision born from self-awareness.

²⁵⁷ Marcus, *Between Women*, 19.

married three times and had a child, she quite openly had affairs with such prominent lesbians as Natalie Clifford Barney and the Marquise de Belbœuf (“Missy”). Despite the variety of amorous frameworks in which she participated, she wrote at one point that she felt that same-sex relationships between men were the most desired or the best example of an amorous couple. Her comment is unsurprising when one considers that Colette’s life epitomizes a certain questioning of traditional kinship categories—mother and wife. Most of her life reenacts the tension between bourgeois respectability and the freedom to reinvent affective bonds. The paradox of Colette’s life—this pull between conformity and rebellion, submission and freedom is personified in her work, *Dialogues des bêtes*, which Natalie Barney stated perfectly represented these tensions in Colette’s personality and work. Barney says that Colette chose an English bulldog and a cat because of “their striking resemblance to their mistress. For wasn’t her character composed of those two animal natures? Obedient and devoted to a master, but secretly drawing on the instinct of the wild creature who escapes from all domination.”²⁵⁸

When Colette’s husband, Willy was cajoling her to write *Claudine à l’école* in 1900 he encouraged her to spice up the manuscript. Her first book grew into the *Claudine* series, which according to the editor of the Pléiade edition of Colette’s works became one of the greatest successes in French literary history.²⁵⁹ The enormous success of this cycle is evidenced by the cottage industry that grew up around it. Spinning off of the *Claudine* series came plays, songs, vestimentary fashion, hairstyles, etc. *Claudine à l’école* recounts the schooldays a provincial girl, Claudine, who reports on her voyeuristic habits in a provincial village. The reader learns of Claudine’s own sexual desire for the new schoolmistress, Aimée Landry and her unsuccessful attempt to woo her. Claudine loses Aimée to the head schoolmistress, Mlle Sergeant who treats Claudine as a rival. Colette further complicates this love triangle by having the headmistress admit later in the novel that she had desired Claudine who could have occupied the favored position of Aimée if only she had been willing.²⁶⁰ The amorous relationships between the girls, women, and their intermittent commerce with men, speak to a fluidity of sexual desire that subverts the orthodox paradigm already well in place in 1900 of heterosexual/homosexual or healthy/degenerate. Aimée becomes engaged, Mlle Sergeant has a relationship with the school inspector, and Claudine falls in love and marries Renaud in the subsequent novel. These works contest the assumption that same-sex desire between women necessarily excluded men or was antagonistic to heterosexuality. Indeed, one can read the *Claudine* cycle as a set of meditations on sexual desire fluctuating between marriage and relationships among women.

The seminal example of the elasticity of desire and the complexity of marriage takes place in the third novel, *Claudine en ménage*, in which Claudine finally succumbs to her same-sex attractions. The novel is preoccupied with the development of the physical attraction between Claudine and Rézi, a Viennese beauty, and the consequences of that attraction for Claudine’s marriage. Claudine’s interest evolves into friendship and finally the mutual attraction between the two women becomes sexual. The husband himself posits that sexual intimacy between women can serve to enrich and solidify heterosexual affections. In Colette’s *Claudine*

²⁵⁸ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Random House, 1999), 138. However, many of the other female writers considered in this chapter seemed to share this psychological need to seek and enter relationships in which a partner’s domination would eventually suffocate the author. One can easily think of the examples of Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and her husband as well as of Renée Vivien and the Baroness Van Zuylen.

²⁵⁹ Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, lxvii.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

novels almost without exception the women who experience same-sex desire nevertheless remain part of the heterosexual economy. Nowhere is this more stunningly apparent than when Claudine's husband expresses his revolt at his son's homosexuality but defends same-sex desire between women. He says to Claudine:

Vous pouvez tout faire, vous autres. C'est charmant, et c'est sans importance... "C'est entre vous, petites bêtes jolies, une... comment dire?... une consolation de nous, une diversion qui vous repose... ou du moins qui vous dédommage, la recherche logique d'un partenaire plus parfait, d'une beauté plus pareille à la vôtre, où se mirent et se reconnaissent votre sensibilité et vos défaillances... Si j'osais (mais je n'oserai pas), je dirais qu'à certaines femmes il faut la femme pour leur conserver le goût de l'homme."²⁶¹

This passage merits closer examination for the alternative attitudes about marriage, sex, and fidelity it reveals. First, Claudine's husband makes a clear distinction between male same-sex desire and female same-sex desire—sexual relations between women have potential social utility while men's same-sex desire inspires derision and opprobrium. Second, lesbianism, as Claudine's husband conceives of it, is possibly integral to a woman's heterosexuality. Some might consider the incorporation of lesbianism into the heterosexual economy of desire is a queer move indeed! Renaud justifies his statement by claiming that women can find rest or consolation in each other (he does not say from what), but he appears to base his rationale on a type of narcissistic satisfaction that women (these beautiful creatures) experience in looking for a more "perfect partner" that more closely resembles their beauty.²⁶² Colette's descriptions of Rézi and Claudine follow the idea of the brunette/blond lesbian dyad and while one has eyes the color of Havana tobacco the other's eyes are grey. Claudine's athletic frame and love of the country is complemented by Rézi's petiteness and her grace.²⁶³ Claudine is the active partner while Rézi plays a more passive role.²⁶⁴ Even Colette reinscribes these stereotypical binaries of lesbian representation so often found in male-authored writings.

²⁶¹ Ibid., vol. 1, 453-454. Colette's argument mirrors Louÿs' argument in *Aphrodite* when the philosopher, Naucrâtès, visits Chrysis and finds Myrto and Rhodis, the young female lovers in her bed. Chrysis defends same-sex love between women stating that "la femme est, en vue de l'amour, un instrument accompli. Des pieds à la tête elle est faite uniquement, merveilleusement, pour l'amour. Elle seule sait aimer. Elle seule sait être aimée. Par conséquent ; si un couple amoureux se compose de deux femmes, il est parfait ; s'il n'en a qu'une seule il est moitié moins bien." The philosopher replies to Chrysis that he is really not indignant about her sleeping with the two flautists, and he agrees with Chrysis' analysis in words that eerily anticipate Renaud's defense of lesbian sexuality. "Il y a quelque chose de charmant dans l'union de deux jeunes femmes, à la condition qu'elles veuillent bien rester féminines toutes les deux, garder leurs longues chevelures, découvrir leurs seins et ne pas s'affubler d'instruments postiches... Oui, leur liaison est remarquable parce que leurs caresses sont toutes superficielles, et leur volupté d'autant plus raffinée. Elles ne s'étreignent pas, elles s'effleurent pour goûter la suprême joie" (Louÿs, *Aphrodite*, 152-153).

²⁶² This idea of complementarity and/or of Narcissism as inherently implicated in lesbian desire is found in numerous nineteenth century works. In Baudelaire's *Hippolyte and Delphine* one finds the line "la beauté forte à genoux devant la beauté frêle." The combination of the blond (typically feminine and weaker) and brunette (often masculine and dominant) lovers was a common trope in novels such as *Méphistophéla*; *Mademoiselle Giraud, ma femme*; *Demi-sexes*; *Les Deux amies*, to name but a few. The idea of complementarity not only relies of ideas of physical opposition but of gender roles. Thus, Renaud's comment resonated with an obvious fantasy in the French imaginary during the Third Republic.

²⁶³ In fact, Renaud comments on their complementary looks just before the two women leave for their first tryst. He says, "Et vos deux beautés se complètent. Ton ambre ne craint pas l'éclat de sa blancheur..." (Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 482).

²⁶⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, 498. Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 498.

Thirdly, Renaud's consent, if not encouragement, of the lesbian affair is a moment of fantastic gendering of adultery. According to Renaud's philosophy two women sleeping together *cannot* cuckold their husbands nor can their feelings for each other threaten heterosexual marital bonds. Adultery is relegated to carnal corporeal acts between a man and a woman because it is based on male penetrative intercourse.²⁶⁵ Other possible forms of women's sexual pleasure are devalorised and dismissed not to mention the intense affective bonds that might inspire a physical relationship or result from it. Renaud's comment echoes Peladan's comment in *La Gynandre* when the narrator, Tammuz, states, "Lesbos can be classed amongst the ways of taking pleasure, not the ways of loving. Lesbos can be catalogued under the subject Lust not Love."²⁶⁶

If Renaud believes that lesbian liaisons are not only harmless but also possibly salubrious for happy heterosexual relationships, one might still argue that his approbation stems from his own voyeuristic tendencies. Whatever his motivations for his willingness to aid his wife in her relationship with Rézi, Colette makes it clear that Claudine's wish is to have Rézi exclusively for herself, thereby excluding her husband. She attempts to compartmentalize her sexual/affective relationships and to shield her sexual relationship with Rézi from Renaud's prying eyes. Her insistence that only she and Rézi use the rented garçonnière that Renaud procures for them underscores this wish for affective separation.

As Renaud tells Claudine, "Ma petite fille charmante, tu auras ta Rézi, Rézi aura sa Claudine, ne t'occupe plus de rien,—que de patienter un jour, deux jours au plus c'est long, dis? Embrasse ton grand qui veillera, aveugle et sourd, au seuil de votre chambre murmurante!..."²⁶⁷ However, Renaud's complicity in his wife's sexual affair is even more amazing, for he escorts the ladies to each and every rendez-vous in a carriage, accompanies them to the apartment and often dallies longer and longer with each visit to talk with Rézi and Claudine. His insistence on increasingly ensconcing himself in Claudine's and Rézi's love nest belies his apparent disinterest in his wife's amorous adventures with women. As Claudine becomes more and more enamored of Rézi, or at the last obsessed, Renaud becomes the outsider in this triangulated relationship.²⁶⁸ Renaud eventually seduces Rézi without Claudine's knowledge, and when she discovers her husband and mistress in *flagrante delicto*, she leaves Paris and her husband to return to her native Burgundy. Seconds before her suspicions are confirmed and her husband opens the door behind which he and a half-naked Rézi cower, Claudine remembers her best-friend Claire

²⁶⁵ Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 3-18. In nineteenth-century novels from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et Le Noir* to Zola's *Pot-Bouillie* adultery is always considered a heterosexual prerogative. In novels such as Belot's *Mlle Giraud, ma femme*, the husband never consummates his marriage because of his wife's lesbian lover, and in Mendès' *Méphistophéla*, it is only after the brutal rape of her wedding night that Sophie realizes her sexual desire for her childhood friend. These "adulterous" acts do not rise to the same level of cuckoldery that heterosexual adultery involves. Adultery in French literature remained staunchly heterosexual. Even in novels such as *Deux Amies*, the husbands are often more complicit or forgiving than disapproving.

²⁶⁶ Peladan, *La Gynandre*, 26.

²⁶⁷ Colette, *Oeuvres complètes*, 482.

²⁶⁸ Claudine's assertion that she is unhappy because she loves both Rézi and Renaud and cannot choose between the two testifies to her real affection for Rézi and sustains Colette's argument for polyamory as possibly essential to marriage. "Ah! comme je suis loin d'être heureuse! Et comment alléger l'angoisse qui m'opprime? Renaud, Rézi, tous deux me sont nécessaires, et je ne songe pas à choisir. Mais que je voudrais les séparer, ou mieux, qu'ils fussent étrangers l'un à l'autre" (Ibid., 493).

saying, “Life’s just like in the books, isn’t it?” Anyone who has read Colette’s novels will notice this self-reflexive moment—one that Colette herself lived several times. Many of her works are like fun-house mirrors—the reflections may be a bit distorted but they are nonetheless modeled on the author. One can also think of Colette’s protagonist, Rénée Neré, in the opening of *La Vagabonde* when she stares at herself in her looking glass as she removes her makeup in a moment of serious self-contemplation. These are the moments that concretize the ways that Colette’s own reflected images and experiences so richly infuse her work.

Thus, the importance of Willy and Colette’s marriage, both standing on its own and as a narrative inspiration, cannot be underestimated. In fact, it would be difficult to discuss the *Claudine* series and some of Colette’s subsequent work without including and analyzing her life as a public figure. For indeed, her personal life often was transposed in the mosaics of her works. As the *Claudine* series became a tremendous commercial success, her husband, Willy, actively participated by cultivating the image of a happy *ménage à trois* between Colette, himself, and Polaire—the actress that portrayed Claudine in the stage version of *Claudine Married (Claudine en ménage)*. “He had identical suits and dresses made for them, and paraded them around Paris to restaurants, openings, and the races like a couple of ‘gussied up animals’ according to Colette, or ‘a pair of trained dogs,’ according to Polaire, creating the publicity for the sensational *ménage à trois* depicted in the novel.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, according to Colette and to her biographer, Judith Thurman, Willy not only expected Colette to entertain his female lovers but also to be their sexual partners.²⁷⁰ While some critics might argue that this depiction of family life is indicative of Colette’s and Willy’s desire to “*pimenter*” (to spice up) her works for titillation, it also is a very real reflection of their own relationship and of many others of the period. Willy once wrote in one of his novels that “adultery is the foundation of society, because in making marriage tolerable, it assures the perpetuation of the family,” which might explain why none of his marriages lasted since he never had any children with his wives.²⁷¹ His numerous affairs along with his domineering personality significantly soured their marriage, but he also served as an impetus and painful muse for her work—without Willy there might have been no great Colette, the writer! Not only did Colette’s *Claudine* series push the orthodox bourgeois understanding of marriage and family life by considering lesbian affairs not to constitute adultery, but the mimetic relationship between her own work and her personal life (so closely chronicled in the public domain) further contributed to the rethinking of what marriage and family relations were.

While still married to Willy, Colette began a well-documented and very public relationship with a renowned lesbian, Mathilde de Morny (“Missy” or “Max”), la Marquise de Belbœuf. Although some critics have incorrectly linked Colette’s “adulterous” relationship with Missy to the initiation of divorce proceedings between Colette and Willy, the evidence to the contrary is substantial. Not only did Colette and Willy continue to cohabit for the next year, but they also remained intimate during that time. They “shared hotel rooms when they traveled, wrote passionate and possessive letters to and about one another until 1908, and they were still collaborating on his fiction for a year after that.”²⁷² What is of particular interest, and what played out in public view, was the apparent application of Renaud’s philosophy that a lesbian

²⁶⁹ Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*, 130.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁷¹ Willy, *Suzette veut me lâcher* (Paris: P. Lamm, date unknown).

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 154.

affair was not only not adulterous but inconsequential, because, at least at the beginning, Willy seem to tolerate quite readily his wife's overtly lesbian relationship with Missy since he was having his own extra-marital affairs. Willy's good-natured acceptance of his wife's extra-marital relationship with Missy became increasingly antagonistic over time as Willy lost more and more control over Colette's life and her literary production. The *coup de grâce* for their marriage was Colette's discovery that Willy had signed over the rights to all of the *Claudines* and the *Minne* novels, and Colette took this as his greatest act of treachery. The ultimate betrayal was not a romantic/affective indiscretion but an artistic/proprietary act of treachery. As she explained to her friend, Léon Hamel,

...given the conditions under which [Willy] gave away the four Claudines, one has to say that he...wanted to assure himself that forever, even after his death, I would never regain possession of those books which are mine. I was profoundly overwhelmed, dear friend, and I told him so. He responded to my cry of despair with a cold letter, almost menacing, and I think that after the necessary elucidation, which will take place after his return from Monte Carlo (day after next), everything will be finished between us.²⁷³

Soon after Colette's *La Vagabonde* was published in 1908, Willy published a novel in response to Colette's acerbic portrayal of Willy as the philandering ex-husband and painter, Taillandy, in which he attacked both Colette and Missy.²⁷⁴ The novel, *Les Imprudences de Peggy*, is almost a pastiche of *La Vagabonde* and *Claudine à l'école* in both themes and structure.

Willy, by way of Meg Villars, recounts the story of an English orphan raised by a mean aunt named Sidonie-Gabrielle-Anastasie—one can already see where Willy intends to go by using his wife's given names. Peggy falls in love with a French novelist Robert Parville, who serves as Willy's alter ego, and recounts to him her love affairs while at boarding school. Parville then tells her the story of his "poor friend" Taillandy who had fallen in love and married a country girl who is shrewd and intelligent. The only problem is that she does not like conjugal relations for fear of becoming pregnant; moreover, she really prefers the "priestesses of Sappho" to male company, particularly that of her husband. Eschewing all pretense of originality, this novel is a vindictive indictment of Colette, but Willy's literary riposte works on other levels pertinent to this discussion. First, his novels reveal how acrimonious his divorce was because both his and Colette's novels were vehicles for publically airing their grievances against one another. This aspect of their work was unsavory in and of itself in a country where the distinction between the public and private sphere was strictly guarded by the law. To judge by nineteenth century literature, a husband taking a mistress was a common enough practice but for a woman to take a mistress with her husband's consent and active complicity was quite different.²⁷⁵ The very carefully cultivated image of Willy and Colette's marriage as remarkably open and modern in the sense that both took lovers with the other's knowledge did not endure the strain of divorce.²⁷⁶ Willy's and Colette's carefully constructed public image of their

²⁷³ Colette, *Lettres de la vagabonde*, ed. Claude Pichois and Roberte Forbin (Paris: Flammarion, 1961), 30.

²⁷⁴ Willy allegedly "translated" the novel by his mistress (later his wife) subsequent to his divorce from Colette, Meg Villars née Marguerite Maniez. However, most agree that he wrote the novel. An interesting sidebar is that Meg might have very well been drafted to make a threesome with Colette and Willy. See Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh*, 149.

²⁷⁵ White, *The Family in Crisis*, 100-103, 129-130.

²⁷⁶ A marvelous example of the public attention to their marriage can be found in letter dated November 25 and published in the December 2, 1906 edition of the *Cris de Paris* in which Colette publicly responded to innuendos about the foursome of Meg, Willy, Missy and Colette. The article was entitled "En Famille." Colette's response

marriage crumbled under the character assassinations and accusations of abuse. After learning that Willy had sold the rights to her novels without her knowledge or consent, she wrote *La Vagabonde* in which she portrays Willy as a philandering and hedonistic cad incapable of fidelity and emotional investment. Colette's own published words regarding her personal life and affair with Missy make very clear—her “je m'en foutisme” for social convention and her disregard for bourgeois morality.

My goal here is to highlight how both Colette's novels and her literary works challenged preconceived notions about marriage. While still married she openly engaged in a lesbian love affair which drew a great deal of press, not least of which, was the result of her short-lived acting stint with Missy in *Rêve d'Égypte* that was a *cause célèbre* in the tradition of Hernani the century before.²⁷⁷ By way of her character Renaud, she offers a type of apologia for lesbianism without using any specific pathologizing nomenclature. In fact, she naturalizes same-sex attraction among women as something that is practically normative or commonplace. Particularly, in *Claudine s'en va* she proposes at times an alternative model for bourgeois marriage unfettered by bourgeois Judeo-Christian doxas equating physical fidelity with the cornerstone of marital unions. Just as her subsequent novels, *La Vagabonde* and *La Retraite sentimentale* insisted on a woman's right to physical pleasure outside of the conjugal bed and asserted sensual/sexual pleasure as a women's right, in *Claudine s'en va* she foregrounds the polymorphism of desire as well as the easy integration of non-normative sexualities into a heterosexual paradigm. Even though Colette's depiction of lesbianism in her *Claudines* almost never completely removes the female characters that are attracted to women from the heteronormative sexual economy, she does carve out a place for same-sex attraction that is neither pathologized nor condemned.

IV. Marriage as Art: Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, J.C., and Germaine

Although one might be tempted to consider Colette's works as anomalies at their time, in fact, other novels existed in which women cheated on their husbands with other women. Although, I will address some of those novels later in this chapter, I will first examine one of Colette's contemporary female writers and friends whose own life and works provide productive parallels and contrasts to Colette's. In the last decades of her life, Colette was an example of bourgeois domestic stability, and it was Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, the quiet beauty with the poetic soul, who became the sexual renegade. After her marriage to J.C. Mardrus, her only husband, she never again sought the submission, acceptance or justification through heterosexual romantic relationships that marked Colette's life and works. Indeed, after her divorce from Mardrus in 1915, she engaged exclusively in lesbian relationships, and the last years of her life were spent

illustrates concisely how audacious and transgressive her “married” life was. She wrote, “I read your insertions with pleasure, a frequent pleasure, because for a while now you've been spoiling me. What a shame that you should have called one of your wittiest ones “*En Famille*.” That gives to Willy, who is my friend, to the marquise and me, and to that kind and serene English dancer whom Willy calls Meg the air of a sordid commune. You have certainly hurt the feelings of the three among us. Do not combine so...intimately in the minds of your numerous readers two couples who have arranged their lives in the most normal fashion that I can think of: according to their pleasure.

²⁷⁷ Colette and Missy took to the stage for the presentation of this pantomime on January 3, 1907 at the Moulin-Rouge. For an interesting analysis of *Rêve d'Égypte* and its cultural importance see Lucey, “Never Say I,” 100-113.

with the Jewish opera singer, Germaine de Castro; however, Lucie admitted that her passionate feelings for women began at the age of six.²⁷⁸

Once considered by some critics to be a greater female writer than Colette, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus's first literary notoriety resulted from her poetry. Much like Colette, she garnered attention and honed her writing skills at the urging of her husband, the famed translator of *A Thousand and One Nights*, J.C. Mardrus. He was to be a mentor and influence on her work for decades, and unlike Colette, Mardrus was not locked in a room and forced to write in order to help pay the bills. Her relationship with her husband was not as fraught with betrayals and vengeance as Colette's and Willy's marriage. As other scholars have noted, their relationship was much less sexual and much more intellectual.²⁷⁹ However, much like Colette, Mardrus married and remained with her husband for many years. Her husband, like Willy, knew of Lucie's attachments and sexual relationships with other women (with Natalie Barney in particular) and seemed unfazed. In fact, one could claim rather confidently that they both seemed to encourage their wives' expeditions into "Lesbos." His attitude towards Lucie's female romantic interests seems to have been one of tolerance if not complicity, which calls to mind Willy's "encouragement" *vis à vis* Colette. His acceptance of and into his wife's lesbian circles has become part of French lesbian lore. One story recounts how he asked Barney to carry a child for him and Lucie because his wife was much too "delicate" for childbirth. His novel request had unorthodox implications for contemporary ideas of kinship and family life. He wanted his wife's female lover to carry his child so that he and his wife might raise it. As I will discuss later in this chapter, one sees echoes of this incident in her later novel, *The Angel and the Perverts*.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Mardrus's treatment of lesbian relationships in *The Angel and the Perverts* was not particularly sympathetic despite her own lesbian inclinations. Speaking through the character, Marion, who was loosely based on Mardrus, these same-sex relationships appear to be comprised of perverts. The angel is the hermaphrodite who remains sexually pure and whose heart remains uncommitted to either male or female lovers. I would claim that in the novel, Mardrus critiques the milieu in which these liminal groups circulate rather than their sexual orientation. Mardrus makes quite clear her disapproval of the mercenary nature of bourgeois life epitomized by the journalist angling to attend one of Laurette's salons, while she extols the virtues of the "noble" lives of the non-heteronormative who value the arts, artistic production and the life of the mind.²⁸⁰

Mardrus's own sexual history is complicated, and it undoubtedly colors her representations of lesbianism. Her relationship with Barney had left her disillusioned and hurt, although the two women remained dear friends until Lucie's death and shared their intimate thoughts and detail about their lives. As Barney's biographer, Jean Chalon, writes: "A bond was established between Natalie and Lucie 'that wavered between love and friendship,' then resolved itself in continuing mutual appreciation and support." Indeed, it was Lucie who found the

²⁷⁸ Delarue-Mardrus, *The Angel and the Perverts*, 18. In 1910, Mardrus penned *L'Acharnée*, a novel in which she explores her own passionate attachments to women beginning in childhood. Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *L'Archarnée* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1910).

²⁷⁹ Translator and critic of Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Anna Livia, writes that Lucie believed that her future husband's sudden desire for her was "tout intellectuel." See Delarue-Mardrus, *The Angel and the Perverts*, 14.

²⁸⁰ A short but useful analysis of Mardrus's work can be found in Gabriele Griffin, *Who's Who in Lesbian and Gay Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 54. Gabriele Griffin's *Who's Who in Lesbian and Gay Writing*, which provides a good bibliography of some of the writer's most important works. It also provides an excellent introduction to those works.

property that became the famous Barney salon for the next half century.²⁸¹ Her relationship with Barney was to mark her for life, and her ambivalent description of Laurette emblemizes her complicated relationship with Barney. In 1957, twelve years after Mardrus's death, Natalie Barney posthumously published a collection of Mardrus's poems entitled *Nos secrètes amours*, in which she wrote of her desire for Barney and of Barney's love, infidelity, and ultimately, her rejection. These poems illustrate the extended romantic tension between Barney and Mardrus; and, although they were published after her death, they do shed light on the coincidence of heterosexual marriage and lesbian relationships within Mardrus's affective life. Because Mardrus's husband often edited her works and offered literary advice, he might very well have read these poems or parts of them. One does not find in them the motifs of salvation through art and sisterhood that are so prevalent in Vivien's poetry. Rather, many of these poems display a frank sexuality and other physical elements that are more sensual. Poems such as "La Bête" are clear indications of her passionate physical love and attraction to Barney. Verses such as "nous pencherons sur toi notre corps et notre âme,/Bouche intime, nudité de la nudité,/Tendre et mystérieux repli de la beauté,/Rose coquille où vit la passion des femmes!" illustrate the unabashedly sexual dynamic of their relationship. Mardrus may couch her love-making to Barney in verse, but her words evoking the tender and mysterious folds of beauty—the pink shell where women's passion lives—clearly make reference to Barney's genitalia. "Bouche intime" might initially be read as Barney's mouth, but the following stanza makes clear the meaning when Mardrus writes, "Lorsque, pour t'adorer, nous plions le genou,/L'odeur de tout l'amour exalte nos narines,/Et, sous notre baiser, ton plaisir a le goût/Des goémons mouillés et des bêtes marines." This poem's reference to genital-bucal sex is much more descriptive or evocative than most discursive representations of lesbian love-making in the first decade of the twentieth century, and marks it as exceptional. J.C. Mardrus may or may not have read this particular poem of his wife's. In any case, it evidences a strong physical, romantic relationship between his wife and Barney about which he was very aware, and more importantly it allows us to revisit how marriage was viewed and lived by various strata of French society during the Third Republic.

In *Mes Mémoires*, Mardrus discusses her last long term relationship with Germaine de Castro in terms of artistic collaboration and mutual sympathy, providing a framework that is similar to Vivien's sororal creative community, one that supplants marriage as the ideal expression of love. Writing of Germaine, Mardrus muses, "une page de ma vie se terminait, une autre commençait."²⁸² Indeed, this artistic and affective collaboration sustained and inspired the last decade and a half of Mardrus's life, during which she wrote her novel, *Une Femme mûre et l'amour*.²⁸³ Mardrus does not call Germaine de Castro her lover or use some other affective appellation that would connote their romantic relationship, but her memoirs describe her unflagging efforts to resuscitate Germaine's declining singing career. Mardrus spent great sums

²⁸¹ Chalon, *Portraits of a Seductress*, 88. See also Natalie Clifford Barney, *Souvenirs indiscrets* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), 157.

²⁸² Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *Mes Mémoires* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 310., "Cette nouvelle amitié dans laquelle j'entrais sous les couleurs de l'enthousiasme (et que, tous les jours satisfait, mon amour de la musique situait dans le domaine de l'ineffable), je n'ai pas à l'analyser ici. Tout ce qui m'attache à Germaine de Castro, sa magnifique générosité ; la désinvolture de son courage ; sa tendre sensibilité ; ce que manque de mesquinerie total, presque stupéfiant qui fait que, sachant comme on l'a traitée, elle a laissé ses calomniatrices où je les ai laissés moi-même c'est-à-dire dans le royaume des ombres...."

²⁸³ Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *Une Femme mûre et l'amour* (Paris: Ferenczi, 1939).

of money on advertisement for Germaine's concerts, accompanied her as her pianist, went on tour with her, and even did a speaking tour with her.²⁸⁴ She described Germaine's attraction as something that "occupait mon esprit. Je me sentais secouée, rajeunie par cet enthousiasme. Sa nature à l'emporte-pièce, le contraire même de sa voix, m'intéressait prodigieusement." For Parisian society, artists, journalists, publishers, and her public, Mardrus's unwavering loyalty to Germaine, despite her friends' misgivings, and sometimes her own, formed an implicit claim that marriage between man and a woman was not the *nec plus ultra* of committed relationships.²⁸⁵

Mardrus's idea of infidelity as enunciated through Marion stands in direct opposition to Colette's in the *Claudine* series. Clearly Barney had no qualms about sleeping with or having long-term romantic affairs with married women—the greatest example being her great love, Elisabeth de Gramont Clermont-Tonnerre who was married to Philibert, Duke of Clermont Tonnerre. One can also add to that list both Colette and Mardrus who were married women when they succumbed to Barney's seduction. However, Mardrus remained essentially a monogamous woman who did not flit from bed to bed or lover to lover; it is true that Liane de Pougy wrote about Mardrus that "elle sculpte, monte à cheval, aime une femme puis une autre, et encore une autre. Elle a—heureusement—pu se libérer de son mari et depuis cette expérience n'a jamais entrepris un second mariage ou la conquête d'un autre homme."²⁸⁶ Despite Pougy's declarations about Mardrus's serial monogamy, her biographers do not frame her relationships in such an unflattering light. Mardrus's ultra bourgeois upbringing and values may have put her at odds with her sexuality as she came to terms with her own attraction to women. After a long marriage and sad divorce, Mardrus's life provided a template for same-sex devotion and affection that belied the myth that lasting love could only exist between members of the opposite sexes. While Colette may have only had a tourist visa to Lesbos, Mardrus's life as an open lesbian showed that heterosexuality might be a brief detour rather than a destination.

IV. The Oracle of Sappho: Renée Vivien and the Denaturalization of Marriage

By the turn of the century ideas of traditional marriage were in a state of rapid evolution. Colette had proposed that same-sex affairs between women were tolerable, if not desirable, and Louÿs and Mendès showed that same-sex marriage had already begun to enter the realm of "thinkability" in French society. However, among the writers examined in this chapter, it is Renée Vivien who went the furthest in challenging social understandings of marriage.

The works of the female authors discussed heretofore had at some point an interest in either marriage or some hybridized form of commitment akin to marriage. Vivien, however, was a precursor a vein of the lesbian feminist movement that advocated eschewing men in general. Her poetry and other literary works call for a strict disassociation from men, at least in any physical, romantic, or sexual sense. Vivien urges a separatist way of life in which lesbians form a sisterhood based on the Classical models of Sappho's gynaceum or the cult of Artemis. While

²⁸⁴ Delarue-Mardrus, *Mes Mémoires*, 302-332.

²⁸⁵ Mardrus wrote to a friend, Miss Trot: "Je ne suis pas heureuse avec mon amie. Depuis six moi, je me crève pour elle, à faire tout ce qu'elle veut...avec mes chansons composées pour sa voix magnifique. J'ai ensuite monté son numéro dans une boîte de nuit...et elle fait semblant de ne pas comprendre ce que j'ai fait pour elle...ce que j'ai donné pour elle, mon nom, mon influence, ma personne et ma fatigue, et les nuits passées hors de la maison et le manque de sommeil et l'impossibilité d'écrire mon roman...Mais demain, je recommencerais. Je l'aime encore."

²⁸⁶ Liane de Pougy, *Mes Cahiers bleus* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 280. Pougy wrote this assessment of Mardrus in a letter dated September 19, 1932.

many female authors vacillate between denunciations of patriarchal inequities and often a blatant complicity with the heterosexual norm, Vivien proposed some of the most radical reconfigurations of women's lives of any of the female authors during the Third Republic. Vivien's recurrent radical reappropriation or retelling of cultural myths and narratives anticipates later feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous or Monique Wittig, who argue for new language or a new symbolic order.

A telling example of Vivien's penchant for reframing patriarchal narratives is provided in an interesting short story entitled "Le Voile de Vashti" based on the Old Testament story of Esther, who replaces Queen Vashti.²⁸⁷ Vivien follows the Biblical story quite faithfully in giving the background for her retelling. King Ahasuerus was a mighty king who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. In the third year of his reign he hosted a magnificent feast attended by all of the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes. While the King entertained the men, his queen, Vashti, entertained the women. After seven days of revelry, a drunken King Ahasuerus commands that the Queen come before the men in order "to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold." According to the book of Esther, Queen Vashti refuses but nothing more is said of her actions or motivations. Vivien imagines Vashti's reactions and words. Her recasting of this story is a powerful example of the ideologies, the nascent feminism, which so marked Vivien's work. Vivien imagines that upon hearing of the King's immodest command, Queen Vashti speaks to her noble guests and states

Ce n'est pas seulement en songeant au roi Ahasuérus que j'ai agi... Car mon action parviendra à la connaissance de toutes femmes, et elles diront: Le roi Ahasuérus avait ordonné qu'on amenât en sa présence la reine Vasthi, et elle n'y est pas allée. Et, dès ce jour, les princesses de Perse et de Médie sauront qu'elles ne sont plus les servantes de leurs époux, et que l'homme n'est plus le maître dans sa maison, mais que la femme est libre et maîtresse à l'égal du maître dans sa maison.

In this conscious act, the Queen asserts her sovereign agency and her right to dignity, which transcend the whims of even a king. Her brazen response challenges not only the divine right of a King but also the very hierarchical organization of patriarchal society that viewed women at best as servants and at worst as chattel. Vivien's version of Vashti's response is a conscious call to sedition that aims to radically alter society for all women and to initiate a radical reversal of social power dynamics. Upon learning of her impudence and recognizing the potential fallout of such rebelliousness, King Ahasuerus banishes Queen Vashti from the land. Seemingly unfazed by the loss of every creature comfort—of security, power, and stature—Queen Vashti responds:

Je vais dans le désert où les êtres humains sont libres comme les lions. J'y périrai peut-être de faim. J'y périrai peut-être sous la dent des bêtes sauvages. J'y périrai peut-être de solitude. Mais, depuis la rébellion de Lilith, je suis la première femme libre. Mon action parviendra à la connaissance de toutes les femmes, et toutes celles qui sont esclaves au foyer de leur mari ou de leur père m'envieront en secret. Songeant à ma rébellion glorieuses, elles diront: Vasthi dédaigna d'être reine pour être libre.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ Renée Vivien, *La Dame à la louve* (Paris: Lemerre, 1904).

²⁸⁸ I am going into the desert where human beings are free like lions....I shall perish there perhaps of hunger. I shall perish there in the teeth of savage beasts. I shall perish there perhaps of solitude. But, since the rebellion of

Through Vashti's voice, Vivien returns to one of her foundational motifs: women's liberation from man. While many writers of the nineteenth century debated whether marriage should be "marriage of reason" or a "marriage of inclination, Vivien advocated no marriage at all.²⁸⁹ Vivien is one of the most radically feminist and lesbian writers of her era, and nothing was more radical about her ideological framework than her disdain for heteronormative sexual relationships. As Gayle Rubin wrote of Vivien in her introduction to *A Woman Appeared to Me*, "there is no poet who wrote as openly, as single-mindedly, and as prolifically of lesbian love," and within Vivien's vision of this lesbian world there existed, little, if any, place for men.²⁹⁰ Unlike earlier nineteenth-century female authors such as George Sand, Caroline-Stéphanie Genlis, or Flora Tristan, Vivien did not just critique the institution of marriage as a repressive patriarchal apparatus that viewed women as property, she actively preached against marriage in favor of female friendship. I say friendship, because although Vivien had numerous sexual relationships with women, there is an element of chastity, of sisterhood, of transcendental love that infuses both her poetry and her prose. Passionate friendship stands in for marriage as the ideal social relationship for the expression of love. For instance, in the short story, "L'Amitié féminine," she compares the love between David and Jonathon with that of Naomi and Ruth. Challenging a male author's declaration that true friendship between women could not surpass the friendship shared by men, Vivien explains that there is something particularly homoerotic, even homosexual, in David's great love for the fallen Jonathon that makes it less powerful than the love between Naomi and Ruth. About David's words at Jonathon's funeral, "Tu faisais tout mon plaisir. Ton amour pour moi était admirable, au-dessus de l'amour des femmes,"²⁹¹ Vivien comments, "Je ne crois pas que ce soient là de blanches larmes d'amitié douloureuse. J'y reconnais plutôt les larmes de sang d'une ardeur veuve." Above this passionately romantic Vivien places the true friendship and devotion of Ruth to her mother-in-law. Ruth's fervent request to return with Naomi epitomizes the self-abnegation and attachment inherent in friendship. Ruth says that she will go wherever Naomi goes and that her mother-in-law's people will be hers. Her willingness to forsake all that she has known and to remain with someone to whom she no longer owes any moral, affective, or legal duty is something that is for Vivien uniquely feminine, unsullied by passion or sexual desire. The strength of this "feminine friendship" is highlighted by the lack of commonalities between the women: they are not from the same family of origin, the same country, the same faith, or even the same land people. "Amitié féminine," which is central to Vivien's conception of the superiority of love between women, is based on women's capacity for self-denial, faithfulness, and adoration of each other. It is this particularly "female" ability for cohesion and love that animates Vivien's vision of a Sapphic community and that supplants traditional female roles of mother and wife with that of lover, artist, and lesbian.

Lilith, I am the first free woman. My action will come to the attention of all women, and all those who are slaves in the houses of their husbands or of their fathers will envy me in secret. Thinking of my glorious rebellion, they will say: Vashti disdained being a queen that she might be free.

²⁸⁹ I am using the marriage of reason and marriage of inclination as defined by Patricia Mainardi in her informative work on the institution of marriage in France during the nineteenth century. See Mainardi, *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*, 214-216.

²⁹⁰ Renée Vivien, *A Woman Appeared To Me* (Tallahassee: Naid Press, 1982), x.

²⁹¹ Vivien, *La Dame à la louve*, 183.

Much as Monique Wittig would do decades later in works such as *Le Corps lesbien*, Vivien often couches her ideological underpinnings within a retelling or rewriting of cultural myths. Some scholars have paid special attention to the student/teacher aspect in Sappho's lesbian relationships and then applied that model to Vivien's works. Yet, to do so is to miss completely Vivien's reappropriation of Sappho and attendant myths in order to proselytize for a more mature vision of love between women.²⁹² As Joan DeJean pointedly states in her brilliant book, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937*, Vivien as well as Barney rely on Sappho to envision a society that "choose to ignore the other world. And this must at least partially explain the total avoidance of their work in subsequent Sapphic commentary and fictions."²⁹³

Vivien weaves in her poetry and prose admonitions against marriage and against social life with men. An example of the deft reminders of Vivienian ideology can be found in her rendition of the story of Télésilla, the famous warrior of Argos who saved the city from invasion, in her work, *Les Kitharèdes*. A fragment of Télésilla's poetry has survived in which she evokes the hopeless love of Alphéos for Artemis. The remaining historical fragment of Télésilla states "Cette Artémis, ô vierges, fuyant Alphéos" which Vivien rewrites to say, "Cette Artémis, fuyant le désir mâle, ô vierges... foulant avec dégoût les couples enlacés." Suddenly the pure virgins are not fleeing Alphéos, they are fleeing all men whose rutting disgusts them. This subtle rewriting is a reminder of Vivien's disdain for heterosexual unions. In her poem "Psappha revit," she again repeats her contempt for heterosexual male desire: "Nous redisons ces mots de Psappha, quand nous sommes/Rêveuses sous un ciel illumine d'argent:/O belles, envers vous mon Cœur n'est point changeant.../Celles que nous aimons ont méprisé les hommes."²⁹⁴ Moreover, Vivien strains further against the yoke of bourgeois morality by declaring in her poem, "Ainsi je parlerai..." that if she had to answer for her life to Christ she would say "Seigneur, ta stricte loi ne fut jamais la mienne/Et je vécus ainsi qu'une simple païenne.../J'ai passé comme l'eau, j'ai fui comme le sable. Si j'ai péché, jamais je ne fus responsable." Her defiant justification of her life before God is a rejection of the Judeo-Christian condemnation of same-sex love even as she imagines that her sexual "otherness" could cost her salvation.²⁹⁵

These excerpts from Vivien's poetry are not only reminders of how central her sexual orientation and the Sapphic origin story were to her artistic production but how they worked together in her effort to challenge ideas about marriage and love. Perhaps the most sustained and explicit interrogation of heteronormativity and marriage can be found in *Une Femme m'apparut*. This prose work is biographical in nature, more of an emotional contemplation of events rather than a detailing of her life, which she wrote after her break-up with Barney and the death of her beloved childhood friend, Violet Shilleto. It appears to focus on the doomed love affair between two emotionally mismatched women; one who is loyal, romantic, contemplative, and pure while the other is beautiful, seductive, sensual and faithless. A deeper reading reveals the novella to be a manifesto of Vivien's ideas on artistic production and the ties that production and Sapphic

²⁹² Marie-Ange Bartholomot Bessou, *L'Imaginaire du féminin dans l'œuvre de Renée Vivien* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2004), 362-298.

²⁹³ DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937*, 285.

²⁹⁴ Renée Vivien, *À l'heure des mains jointes* (Paris: Lemerre, 1906), 5.

²⁹⁵ Vivien imagines in this poem that she has been stoned to death as a result of her love for another woman and for her refusal to submit to "normalizing" heteronormativity. "Comme je ne cherchais que l'amour, obsédée/Par un regard, les gens de bien m'ont lapidée./Ceux-là qui s'indignaient de voir mon front serein/Espéraient me courber sous leur pesant dédain" (Ibid).

love. Through the dialogues between Vivien and San Giovanni, her artistic alter ego, in *Une Femme m'apparut* the author is able to articulate her lesbian philosophy and her distaste for heterosexuality.²⁹⁶ She formulates her attack on marriage in a conversation with Petrus, the character based on J.C. Mardrus, and San Giovanni. Petrus assumes that because she is not involved with a man she must be a man-hater, and he asks her what the source of enmity is. San Giovanni replies: "What I hold against them is the great wrong that they have done to women. They are political adversaries whom I want to injure for the good of women. Off the battlefield of ideas, I know them little and am indifferent to them."²⁹⁷ Standing alone, this might be just one more indictment of patriarchal inequality à la George Sand or Flora Tristan. But Vivien goes further. Petrus engages in a heated debate regarding Sappho's true sexual orientation as he tries to recuperate her as interested in men—much in the same way that Joan DeJean has described other French male writers' efforts to do "heterosexualize" her. San Giovanni retorts that it would be impossible for a heterosexual man to conceive of the kind of love that Sappho offered—"...at once ardent and pure, like a white flame."²⁹⁸ The love that Sappho offered was "a thousand times more chaste than cloistered solitude which breeds obscene dreams and monstrous desires." She is referring to the types of lives of married women restricted to the "private" sphere as their husband's chattel. San Giovanni pushes further, "isn't it a thousand times more chaste than the cohabitation based on advantage which Christian marriage has become?"²⁹⁹ Unable to answer her scathing charges, Petrus can only counter that San Giovanni will undoubtedly end her love life in the arms of man just as Sappho did. Of any such desire to be reintegrated into the patriarchal order the narrator (Vivien) declares that it "would be a crime against nature, sir. I have too much respect for our friend to believe her capable of an abnormal passion."³⁰⁰

Vivien accomplishes several things in the few pages that first introduce the reader to Petrus (Mardrus). She situates the acclaimed translator and scholar as a vulgar heterosexist who refuses to accept same-sex love among women as natural, historical, and constant. She affirms that lesbians' erotic desires can achieve cultural significance without recuperation into a heterosexual economy in which women circulate as commodities for men's pleasure. In Vivien's eyes, Petrus profanes the Sapphic heritage by insinuating that Sappho had been sexually interested in me—wife and mother—and had committed suicide over a male lover, Phaon. Vivien's perception that this is a "sacrilege" completely reverses the moral axis of France's bourgeois value system. In a literary tradition that often treated lesbianism as a layover on the journey to heterosexuality, Vivien affirms that Lesbos is a final destination.³⁰¹ In a nod to the

²⁹⁶ In her 1976 introduction to the English translation of *Une Femme m'apparut*, Gayle Rubin describes San Giovanni as "Renée's better half, her common sense, the courageous poet of Lesbos: in short, the core of Vivien's identity which remained intact from the devastation of her unhappy passion. Sometimes San Giovanni is the wise Vivien of 1903 while the narrator is the innocent Vivien of 1900" (Vivien, *A Woman Appeared To Me*, xiii).

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁰¹ Numerous novelists during this time period either killed the lesbian protagonist or recuperated her back into a heterosexual matrix. Two notable examples are Marguerite's *La Garçonne* and Colette's *Le Pur et l'impur*. Marguerite's protagonist eventually marries at the end of the novel and in the sequel has a child. Colette recounts the story of a married woman having an affair with La Lucienne. The married woman eventually returns to her husband because La Lucienne could not "faire pipi" against the wall. Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 110. On page 109, Colette reinforces the idea that lesbian relationships are often transitory forays into the "cult of Lesbos"—

French literary genealogy of lesbianism, Vivien specifically references Catulle Mendès' *Méphistophéla*, which so assiduously portrays the lesbian as perverse, and takes on the pathologizing male-dominated discourse around "Sapphic love." Vivien reverses the binary of normal and abject by calling heterosexual desire "an abnormal passion" and naturalizing lesbianism, but she also envisions it as transcendental, mystical, and creative.

The idea of heterosexual desire and marriage as natural or normal is called into question throughout the novella. When San Giovanni is pressed to discuss her romantic history, she describes how at thirteen she first fell in love with a young girl with "beautiful, mournful eyelashes."³⁰² It was not until she was seventeen that she learned about "bestial sexuality"—animal intercourse. San Giovanni states that she was "wholly revolted by the grotesque shame of human lust" which opened her eyes to the "male tyranny" that made use of women and "awakened a proud spirit against oppression."³⁰³ Heterosexual physical intimacy, particularly intercourse, is something she finds base, animalistic, and perverse. Towards the end of the novella, the narrator falls in love with Dagmar, a bisexual poetess, who eventually leaves Vivien for a man. The day of Dagmar's wedding, she lay in bed inconsolable at the thought of the violation of Dagmar's "virginal grace" and the impending deformation of her body through maternity.³⁰⁴ Not only is heterosexual sex derided, but Vivien also attacks marriage as a type of prostitution—an accusation that certainly had a profound resonance with French audiences in 1903 when prostitution still preoccupied the French imaginary.

When Vally, the narrator's former love interested (based on Nathalie Barney) has a male suitor to whom she becomes engaged, San Giovanni writes an essay entitled "The Male Prostitute" based on Vally's fiancé, who is a penniless nobleman.³⁰⁵ Likening the man's quest to marry a moneyed woman to prostitution, Vivien denounces these legal and religious unions as nothing more than a trafficking of women and goods. In fact, she exposes marriage, the cornerstone of bourgeois family values as nothing more than a hypocritical and base institution grounded in lust and greed rather than in love and noble sentiments. She exposes how bourgeois morality and religion work together to "sanctify" this hypocrisy—the man is "blessed by the church, honored by convention, and protected by the law."³⁰⁶ When Vally asks San Giovanni if a woman had ever truly loved a man she gives a quite surprising answer even for Vivien. "I can hardly conceive of such a deviation of the senses. Sadism and the rape of children seem more normal to me. The Juliets, the Yseults, the Heloises were in love with Love, not with lovers."³⁰⁷ The female leads in some of the greatest love stories in Western tradition are extracted from the heterosexual matrix where their desire for their male lovers is nullified and is supplanted with a transcendental love. To call the romantic love of these iconic figures a deviation of the senses, a

perhaps even necessary for heterosexuality—by referring in this work to the Duc de Morny's idea that a "woman refines a woman, leaves her softened, more pliable, one might still better say, bruised."

³⁰² Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 14.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰⁴ "On her wedding day, I lamented for that virginal grace barbarously violated. Hideous maternity would deform that slim sexless body. And conjugal lust would soil that childish flesh so like the petals of eglantines. I lay inconsolable all night for that defloration of a dream..." (*Ibid.*, 54).

³⁰⁵ Natalie Barney was engaged to a man in accordance with her father's wishes. Her fiancé, Robert Cassatt, knew of Barney's lesbianism and agreed that it would be a marriage in name only provided that he could watch Barney make love to women. See, Rodriguez-Hunter, *Wild Heart*, 70-71.

³⁰⁶ Suzanne Rodriguez, *Wild Heart: A Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 22.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

pathological response—akin to the most violent and sadistic acts of human sexuality—simply because they loved men—is a boldly heretical move. Vivien asks the reader to reenvision the very foundational blocks of the Western literary tradition in which romantic love is understood to exist only between a man and a woman.

When Marcus claims in *Between Women* that lesbianism in France was viewed primarily as antagonistic to heterosexuality, one must think of Vivien, because no other author so virulently denounced heterosexuality as she did. She has often been referred to as the intellectual child of Sappho and Baudelaire, and her poetry and prose are the most visible and sustained lesbian writing to call for a new social order. Whereas heterosexism has been defined as an “ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship or community.”³⁰⁸ Vivien reverses these dominant social prejudices against non-heteronormative behavior, casting marriage and heterosexual love as perverse manifestations of desire. In essence, Vivien advocates a rewriting of thousands of years of history, reinscribing within it the idyllic and the matrilineal world of Lesbos, the Amazons, and the cult of the infinite mother who precedes God the father.

Perhaps the most unimaginable aspect of Vivien’s ideology is not her all out assault on marriage as both a natural and sacred institution, but the fact that she offered lesbianism as a religion rather than just an alternative to marriage and heterosexual desire.³⁰⁹ Lesbianism was a sisterhood of passionate lovers, but it was also a mode of artistic production, friendship, and morality. In Vivien’s almost utopian desire to return to or to recreate a world apart from “masculine” impulses and males, she envisioned a space where women were free from the chains of convention and tradition. Her rewriting of Biblical stories, her glorification of pre-Judeo-Christian mythologies and their rewriting as well as her denaturalization of heterosexual desire, institutions, and maternity illustrate how unorthodox her work and life were. Vivien was, a visionary, a pagan prophetess, who, like the prophet in the desert, Elijah, might be viewed as a rude fanatic. This errant prophetess called for a return to the gods of our mothers when Sappho’s music and poetry resounded in sacred groves and women lived together free—to dream, to create, to love without male interference. Vivien’s provocative vision of this “naturalized world” continues to influence and inspire generations of marginalized sexual communities who contest and reshape concepts of marriage and kinship. Those distant strains of Sappho’s music and poetry that so enchanted Vivien continue to reverberate even today.

This chapter has outlined the lives and works of a set of female authors offering varying concepts of marriage and affective bonds. While many scholars have cast French literary representations of lesbianism as primarily antagonistic to heterosexuality, some of the most important female writers, either lesbian or bi-sexual, offered much more nuanced representations of “Sapphic love.” An interesting aspect of their discursive portrayals of same-sex relationships is the ways in which these affective filiations challenged concepts of marriage and family as lesbian relationships were represented in terms of “marital acts” such as cohabitation, fidelity,

³⁰⁸ J. Roy Gillis, “Heterosexism and the Family,” in *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities in Families*, ed. Charlotte J. Patterson and Anthony R. D’Augelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 249.

³⁰⁹ “I have raised the love of noble harmonies and of feminine beauty to a faith. Any belief which inspires ecstasy and sacrifice is a real religion” (Ibid., 37). Elsewhere in the novella, Vally states that lesbianism is “a religion of the body, whose kisses are like prayers” (4-6).

financial solidarity, and mutual financial, emotional, and physical support.³¹⁰ Female authors who were fixtures on the literary scene such as Colette, Vivien, Barney, and Delarue-Mardrus significantly contributed to the questioning and reimagining of the boundaries between marriage and family. All of the female authors discussed in this chapter offered new ways of understanding and expanding ideas about what marriage was or should be. Their lives and their literary works refused normative ideas about marriage and women's roles as wives. For many of these authors and their husbands, same-sex relations among women did not constitute adultery or endanger the marriage. Their "donna con donna" relationships raised questions about how one could redefine marriage, fidelity, and adultery while some authors, such as Vivien, completely rejected the heterosexist paradigms and denaturalized heterosexuality. Their proposed models account for a sexual fluidity absent from traditional conceptions of marriage during the Third Republic and draw attention to issues of gender inequality, legal status, and social hypocrisy. Those authors, whose imaginations and passions were inflamed by the seductive strains of Sappho's lyre, expanded contemporary concepts of marriage not only through their writings but also in their public lives. They changed forever the bourgeois *idée reçue* that marriage could only be the privileged fiefdom of heterosexuality. These writers offered a vision of marriage not as a religious sacrament or civil state founded on sexual difference and procreation, but rather as a social contract based on economic interests, sexual desire, and spiritual love. They asked us to believe that love and mutual support are the linchpins of a new set of "family values."

³¹⁰ Marcus, *Between Women*, 49. Magnus Hirschfeld wrote in 1914 that same-sex couples created "'marriage-like' associations characterized by the exclusivity and long duration of the relationships, the living together and the common household, the sharing of every interest and of the existence of legitimate community property" (Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Homosexuality of Men and Women*, trans. Micael Lombardi-Nash [New York: Prometheus Books, 2000], 805).

Conclusion:
Emerging from the Shadows: Rethinking Lesbian Invisibility

When I first proposed this project some skepticism existed as to whether enough French literature with lesbian protagonists existed during the Third Republic to write a thesis on lesbian representation—a reaction that was indicative of the absence of academic knowledge regarding the widespread representation of lesbians during these years. Canonical works such as Denis Diderot’s *La Religieuse*, Honoré de Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, or perhaps Marcel Proust’s volume *Sodom et Gomorrhe* may easily come to mind, but these provide a very scarce idea of the richness of literary representations of lesbianism during the Third Republic. Colette claimed in *Le pur et l’impur* that Gomorrah (a signifier for lesbianism) was a pale counterfeit of Sodom—a reference to lesbian visibility as compared to gay males. Her observation seems less accurate than I originally assumed at the start of this project. While some scholars have claimed that the “history of lesbianism in French literature is one of isolation”, I would argue that some of these novels and the lives of the authors tell us a great deal about nascent lesbian communities in France and the ways in which social networks and affective affiliations were formed.³¹¹ Perhaps literary portrayals of lesbians have rarely formed the basis of novels that have come to be considered great literature, but as I have sorted through medical treatises, legal documents, police archives, travel guides, popular newspapers, illustrations, novels, diaries and many other forms of cultural artifacts, I have become convinced that the lesbian was a much greater part of the cultural landscape than one might believe. An entire consumer culture grew up around this emerging figure of the non-normative sexuality.

The famous Parisian cabaret singer, Suzy Solidor, commented on the importance of lesbian literature in the development of her sense of her own sexuality as she discussed her Pygmalion-like relationship with the renowned lesbian socialite Yvonne de Bremond d’Ars who “sculpted” her. Solidor explained, “All of the books that she put at my disposal celebrated the cult of Sapphism: . . . Verlaine’s *Femmes* nestled up against the poetic œuvre of Renée Vivien.” Describing literature as part of her “lesbian education” (or an introduction to lesbian “codes”) she recalled Yvonne exposing her to literary works dealing with same-sex love by authors such as “François Villon, Arthur Rimbaud, and Charles Baudelaire; manuscripts by Pierre Louÿs and Paul Valéry “vaunting the beauty of the lovers Bilitis and Chloé”; fragments of Sapphic poetry; Liane de Pougy’s *Idylle saphique*; Remy de Gourmont’s *L’Amazone*”, to name a few.³¹² Writers such as Adolphe Belot, Colette, or Renée Vivien who sprinkled various works with references to other lesbian themed literary works, are examples of the type of cultural currency that these lesbian representations exercised at the time. Literature not only provided a social mirror—accurate or not—that informed same-sex women about lesbian codes of being and living; it also provided women with a sense of a nebulous community. For contemporary writers such as Nina Bouraoui, it was literature that aided her in identifying her own sexual positionality, which has included relationships with other women, and this parallels the touching scene in Jacques Lacretelle’s *La Bonifas* when the protagonist, discovers that she is not the only woman who desires other women when she reads a hand-written note by another lesbian in a public

³¹¹ Waelti-Walters, *Damned Women*, 211-12.

³¹² Tirza True Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart: Portraits of Lesbian Paris* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 108.

library book. These anecdotes remind us of the central role that literary representations plays in numerous consideration lesbian personal and cultural histories.

The efflorescence of literary imaginings about women who loved women during the Third Republic began in the Belle Époque and certainly slowed down by the end of the Roaring Twenties. But from the 1880s to late 1920s, lesbians remained part of the literary landscape. Even though almost twenty-five per cent of all novels censored between 1885 and 1895 had lesbian themes, the public's interest in this non-normative sexuality continued to inspire authors to create lesbian characters and novels. It was not until the 1930s that the publication of lesbian-themed novels dwindled significantly. By the mid-1880s, medicine, psychology, and other social discourses had developed as purveyors of "truth," and the lesbian became an object of knowledge as well as a literary object. The consumer market that developed for lesbian themed novels for several decades attests to its titillating novelty.

The figure of the lesbian represented different things to various elements of French society, which demonstrates her importance in the cultural landscape of France's Third Republic. For those in medicine, science, criminology, such as Jean-Martin Charcot, Max Nordau, and Ambroise Tardieu, lesbianism was linked to degeneracy and pathology. For some writers of the Decadent and Symbolist movements such as Jean Lorrain or Paul Adam, women who loved women were emblematic of the sterility of artistic production and urban life. Even through the interwar years, depictions of lesbianism continued as a common literary trope, because the imagined lesbian functioned as a symbol of, and sometimes a scapegoat for, French anxieties around gender roles, maternity, family life, and French virility. Political upheaval, war, economic crises, and geographic expansion, and other social tensions were hallmarks of the Third Republic. Representations of lesbianism were an amalgam of desire, fantasy, anxiety and social critique, but as such, they were not static. Rather, they were always in a perpetual state of coming into being as depictions of same-sex desire reflected changing social concerns and critiques. For instance, a novel like *La Garçonne* written in the early 1920s was much less interested in the development of a lesbian protagonist than in excoriating the "modern woman" who refused not only the old notion of marriage as an economic alliance but who insisted on her economic and emotional freedom. The 1930s was the first decade in which women wrote more novels about lesbianism than men, but paradoxically there are substantially fewer novels. One author in particular, Jeanne Galzy included lesbian protagonists or subtexts in her literary works, but these characters and narratives were muted or underdeveloped. With the world in economic crisis and the storm clouds of war on the horizon, interest in sex between women lost most of its audience, and the fragility of this non-dominant community moved back further into the fringes of social consciousness. By the end of the Second world war, Barney's salon had declined, there had been an exodus of lesbian ex-patriates (Una Troubridge, Radclyffe Hall, Brhyer, Djuana Barnes) and the deaths of well-known lesbian authors such as Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Gertrude Stein. Some of the more prominent lesbian social networks linking some of France's greatest female cultural producers had been seriously weakened. Certainly, many of the male authors who had depicted and chronicled lesbian culture had also died or moved on to other topics—Catulle Mendès, Jean Lorrain, Marcel Proust, to mention but a few. Yet, their works illustrate how central literature was in the emerging conception of lesbian identity. It was not until the 1960s that French literature really again began to explore in a concerted way same-sex relationships between women.

Nevertheless, these novels from the historical period I have studied here helped to create a lesbian literary sensibility that exposes the interplay between sexualities and socio-political discourses in France. These representations are woven with bits and pieces of contemporary perceptions about race, space, family, and myriad other subjects so that they, like a rich archeological site, provide glimpses into a forgotten or lost past. Some critics have stated that there is no lesbian history, that lesbians were invisible, or simply, that they did not exist in ways that correspond to our contemporary way of thinking about same-sex relations. This work has gathered materials of different kinds—from the visual arts and literature to the scientific and medical—to prove that a very real lesbian history does exist, and that literature was instrumental not only in recording it but in helping us to recreate it. For in these novels fantasy, desire, and social critique are inscribed in the figure of the lesbian to assure that her traces are never completely erased and are her contributions to the following generations of more modern women never forgotten.

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