

Preface

THE VENAL WOMAN'S WEDDING

The historian of 19th century prostitution has many documents at his disposal: picturesque descriptions of whorehouses, testimonies of doctors or magistrates on the subject of venal women's health or behaviour, polemical texts from supporters or opponents of regulations governing prostitution, administrative inquiries into the prostitutes' conditionⁱ. Despite this profusion of information, the researcher knows hardly anything about specific erotic practices, modalities of male desire for the woman as sex professional, affective structures of the prostitute. In an era when many were obsessed by archival research and the writing of self-narrative, confidential works on sex are difficult to find, apart from the catalogue of perversions compiled by sexologists. This lack of source material makes Mirbeau's text that much more important.

From his adolescence on, Mirbeau was in the habit of frequenting "girls" and was probably initiated into the mysteries of sexual pleasure by a sex professional. The young Mirbeau lived in the heart of a "sexual ghetto" composed of bachelors from the Latin Quarter, who were regular clients of prostitutes. Later, Mirbeau elected to marry a courtesan. As the years passed, Mirbeau was required to play the role of an intellectual who's prostituted his writing as merchandise for sale. In short, Mirbeau was qualified to speak about prostitution as one knowledgeable about the facts. Rich in unexpected plot twists, filled with contradiction, Mirbeau's essay stands above all the other writing dedicated at that time to the debate over prostitution.

Unlike other writers who have dealt with the commodification of the body, Mirbeau insists on distinguishing prostitution from the other sexual behaviours. He refuses the old Augustinian theory of necessary evil, and rejects the metaphor of the "seminal sewer"ⁱⁱ. In his opinion, sex for pay is not only an outlet. He tries to analyse the specific modalities of masculine desire aroused by women sold at auction.

Mirbeau conceived his essay in the context of the discussion of the war between the sexes. The representational system structuring his reflection derives from the radical gynecophobia inherited from 18th-century naturalism. Obviously, the author believes in the "uterine furies" denounced earlier by Bienville. Readers can see that Mirbeau was familiar with the long history of feminine hysteriaⁱⁱⁱ. Woman, in Mirbeau's opinion, is dominated by her sex. There is no need to emphasise that point, since such a conviction was then very prevalent.

Mirbeau explicitly shows the prostitute as standing foremost among the first sex warriors. "Hatred for man" is a constituent part of her being. In her alcove, the embrace of the prostitute and her client looks like a duel. The hatred that she manifests is at the root of man's desire; her obviousness allows the agitation created by "the sensation to pass by an untameable and dangerous being". Better than anyone else, the whore provokes the fear that women inspired at that time^{iv}. For a moment, the "streetwalker" represents the temptation of the abyss; she is an incarnation of man's fascination for unfathomable things. * * *

Better than other women, the prostitute detects and responds to man's repressed desire. If the potential for perversion is to be found in every woman, it is reinforced in the prostitute's case by social experience. On that point, Mirbeau is different from Cesare Lombroso, according to whom sexual venality is an innate form of criminality in women^v. It would be interesting to know what ideas Mirbeau inherited from Sacher-Masoch and Krafft-Ebing regarding this matter.

Better than other women, the prostitute knows how to prepare for battle, using the weapon of her body, refashioning it, emptying it of its soul, turning it into a commodity shaped according to her client's taste. Distinct from her 18th century counterpart^{vi}, the prostitute becomes a "living machine," delivering pleasure "spasms" for money. As a consequence, she can only be seen as vulgar and common.

Unlike Joris-Karl Huysmans or Félicien Rops, who allegorize the threatening woman as syphilis^{vii}, Mirbeau hardly talks at all about venereal risks. Mirbeau's reserve may seem puzzling when one recalls that syphilis was considered a major social scourge at the time.

For Octave Mirbeau, the combination of fear and excitement is the motive for frequenting prostitutes. The success of the prostitute is not a consequence of the satisfaction she provides, but of the nature of the desire she inspires. What sustains the trade cycle is not the pleasure of consumption, but the “inexorable attraction” that is exercised by the merchandise.

Mirbeau clearly recognised that this irrepressible desire was specific; that it was radically different from the pleasure of aesthetic contemplation. The experience of beauty leaves the viewer cool and sober. Often inhibiting, the spectacle of beauty may evoke ideas of destructive femininity^{viii}. On the other hand, the prostitute’s body fascinates because of its animal appeal. The venal woman is an invitation to perversion. In this respect, Mirbeau’s text is illumined by the studies of turn-of-the-century sexologists, whose views, as Michel Foucault notes, were important of, in defining the notion of “sexuality”^{ix}.

It is as a connoisseur that Mirbeau analyses that specific desire. For him, sex for pay is an act of profanation, a means of exacting revenge on the idealised woman^x. Paradoxically, intercourse exorcises the fear which had provoked desire. Zola had earlier pictured the fantasy of cesspool copulation (some clarification of that term is needed); but, unlike Mirbeau, he had not recognised the need to degrade the woman’s soul by coupling with a soulless body.

It is this impulse to debase that the honest wife cannot understand. Availing himself of the prostitute’s services, the husband commits an act of infidelity incomprehensible to one who wrongly thinks that a man’s relationship with a prostitute is a hurried, fleeting love interlude. Disproving the theory that the prostitute’s appeal depends on honest wives’ reluctance to accomplish their conjugal duty, Mirbeau demonstrates that the two types of relationships are not, in fact, interchangeable.

Mirbeau also makes the innovative observation that the prostitute, a “priestess of atavistic instinct,” again legitimizes the quest for purely “animal satisfaction.” By triggering a “momentary destruction of consciousness” – the word is ambiguous – she reimmerses man in the irrational. Coloring Mirbeau’s text was the anxiety provoked by the two opposing risks of regression and degeneration^{xi}. To anthropologists of the time – neo-Darwinians, disciples of Benedict-Augustin Morel, Magnan, or Lombroso -- prostitution signaled the presence of the degeneration and regression at the heart of the social body.

Intercourse with the venal woman, restoring the lost force of “atavistic instinct”, has its own tempo, requiring the efficient quickness of the beast. With prostitutes, there is no need for strategies, shams, or tricks. With prostitutes, the social game of seduction is rendered obsolete. Paradoxically, there appears to be no war and no duel with a partner represented as the archetype of threatening femininity. But is that what the prostitute truly is in Mirbeau’s eyes?

Submission to instinct, specific to intercourse with a prostitute, is the very thing that society overlooks. Free to to unmask himself, the man enters into a relationship that authorizes participants to engage in “the complete and quick undressing” of their social identities. The prostitute’s client exposes his nudity before a woman still concealed by her professional mask. Seeking to reestablish contact with his primitive being, seeking to regain his strength, he is like the giant Antaeus in needing to set foot again on the ground he came from. In truth, the encounter is not a risky one. Standing before that feminine mask which is a guarantee of anonymity, the client knows that, in a few moments, he will be able to dress again and put his social identity back on. That is what allows him to confide in this temporary partner. At a time when people began to be obsessed by the need to be listened to, when psychiatry abandoned the Salpêtrière theatre in favor of the hushed consulting-room of Professor Janet^{xii}, Mirbeau recognised the importance of an anonymous confession that could be made freely to the prostitute.

Enjoying the sense of recovering a primitive identity lost in the distant past of the human race, the prostitute’s client rejoined a vast community of men linked by the universality of sexual desire. Prostitution allows man to act on Dionysian impulse, and, in so doing, enables him to reexperience a lost barbarism. The man can thus forge a forgotten social link, feeling again a primal passion that had hitherto been smothered. Operating under the influence of Sade, Mirbeau’s text anticipates the analysis by Michel Maffesoli^{xiii}. It is by bearing this in mind that we should try to understand Mirbeau when he writes that “pervert (perverse? perverted?) desire is an indestructible element of man’s mind”, “that only prostitution allows man the complete satisfaction of his

desires”, and that prostitution dissociates sexual intercourse from the idea of conception or maternity.

At the same time, submission to instinct allows the client to overcome his hesitation and disgust, enables him to ignore the risk to his health, permits him to disregard the predictable regret. Pleasure is derived, not from the violation of moral values, but from the overcoming of reserve and precaution. It is a form of transgression different from the one that leads to adultery.

Sex with a street-walker, as Mirbeau shows, creates *equality* and eliminates hierarchy, paradoxically diminishing the importance of money. Venal love establishes a masculine (do you mean that? Masculine in what sense?) equality based on instinct and desire, closing the gap between a man’s true nature and his “civic responsibilities”. For an individual belonging to the leading class, sex for pay is like an immersion in the life of the people. For the dropout, shared sex can be a sign, even an instrument, of social integration.

Because the prostitute unmask, because she reveals and conceals masculine identity, she appears to Mirbeau as an agent of social decay. In this respect, Mirbeau differs from Zola, for whom interaction with prostitutes facilitates the circulation of money. By threatening his social position, it compromises the prostitute’s partner. The venal woman enjoys a dreadful mobility, as she descends from the top downwards in the social pyramid.

However, there is an obvious contradiction in Mirbeau’s essay. Mirbeau acknowledges man’s demand for a staging of seduction, yet this observation is incompatible with other aspects of his analysis. Many prostitutes’ clients, Mirbeau says, seek signs of love; they wish to overcome the coldness that is the prostitute’s weapon. In order to satisfy them, the prostitutes sometimes feel bound to mimic their own pleasure.

There is also a utopian dimension to Mirbeau’s examination of prostitution, since he expects that congress with the venal woman *will afford man genuine relief*. Perhaps Mirbeau stands in the Romantic tradition of Tolstoi or Dostoyevsky. But such a conclusion might be a bit simplistic. In the same way, his project is different from the mystical experience suggested by Léon Bloy in *Le Désespéré*.

Mirbeau clearly demonstrates that a woman’s fear is a fear of her own sex. But the prostitute escapes the limitations that society imposes on women. There is no initiation (initiation to what? Initiation to the mysteries of sex?). The prostitute does not risk being overwhelmed by the discovery of her sexual pleasure. Like an ideal wife, she is spared the potentially dreadful metamorphosis of the wedding night, and so alleviates man’s fear that the innocent beloved might change into a woman in heat displaying all the symptoms of hysteria. In books about conjugal love, the threat of this transformation requires that the husband act as a regulator of the young couple’s emotions^{xiv}. With the prostitute, on the wedding night, the parts are reversed, and the threat is thereby averted.

Thanks to her long experience, the wife (the prostitute?) is in possession of the subtle secrets of masculine pleasure, free to draw on them without being overwhelmed by the telluric forces attributed to women. Knowing how to liberate man from all prohibitions (inhibitions?), the courtesan wife is ready to accompany her partner in the quest for spiritual love. An instrument of equality and freedom, she allows man to embark on a philosophical journey. The sovereign’s dream wife, she is truly the queen.

It is tempting to imagine that Mirbeau completed this journey, tempting to believe that his disappointing union with a courtesan has not robbed him of the capacity to describe this dream. Whatever the case may be, Mirbeau’s text reveals much about man’s affective structures (affective structures?), in a time when male identity was thought to be in a state of deep crisis^{xv}.

Analysis of the modalities of man’s desire, study of the real or imaginary consequences of intercourse with prostitutes, examination of the husband’s expectations of the courtesan: all are accompanied in Mirbeau’s essay, as he pictures the conditions of prostitutes and their psychology. Yet when considering the views of one who frequently proclaimed his conviction in the radical incomprehension of the two genders, readers may well question the words of the author when it comes to the study of the psychology of prostitutes.

Mirbeau’s text features the whole range of stereotypes made popular before by Parent-

Duchâtelet. The prostitute still appears to him as fixed in a childish state. Images that associate the “whore” with mud are rooted in an ancient past. And, for Mirbeau, the prostitute is “made of mud”; she swallows mud; she “works” in the mud. Prostitution is “an issue of street maintenance”, as Gambetta claimed in 1878. While Mirbeau makes many similar comparisons about street-workers, he refrains from assimilating the working girl to a corpse, refuses to associate her with venereal disease.

Like many of his contemporaries, Mirbeau was haunted by the fantasy of the vicious girl who becomes the object of an old man’s obsession. Mirbeau’s originality came from his desire to make sex for hire an element of chained (chained? Unionized? Not the right word here) trade practice, foreseeing its progressive emergence as an independent profession (is that what you mean?).

Like so many before him, Mirbeau insists on the misery that weighs on the prostitute. Along with his anarchist friends, he deplores the exhaustion suffered by a woman who performs a true work of the body, remarking on the poor physical condition of the prostitute^{xvi}. In harmony with the taste of the public for the blood displayed in judicial chronicles and popular novels, Mirbeau stresses the risks incurred prostitutes, continually exposed to the danger of rape and sadistic murder. Judith Walkowitz has effectively analysed the social functions of the media and their insistence on sexual violence^{xvii}. The fantastic topology of prostitution evoked by Mirbeau shows that, in addition to the familiar sites of the ditch, the bank, and the hut – are the dangerous fortifications (is that the same word in English?) and modern metal bridges.

References to contempt for the “whore”, to the importance of the other’s look in the construction of the venal woman’s identity, to the prostitute’s disappearance from memory and her consignment to an anonymous grave do little more than repeat themes found in Hugo.

More interesting and original is Mirbeau’s understanding of the prostitute’s psychology. “The force of her character”, “her incredible endurance” despite misery and social opprobrium add a new dimension to the literature of prostitution. In the street-walker, Mirbeau identifies a “philosophy of despair”, a quiet adaptation to the cosmic order. The prostitute is, in his opinion, “the creature who best gets used to universal decay.”

A quarter of a century after the denunciation of the pétroleuses (you might want to define that term) and the excesses of the Commune, Mirbeau recalls the presence of prostitutes in times of revolution. But the revolt of the venal woman is based on something different. She lays claim to the right to freely display her sexuality, as compensation for the abuse to which her body is subjected. Handing to a procurer the money left by a client, the prostitute devalues it by the casualness with which it is surrendered. According to Mirbeau, the procurer reveals the true nature of prostitution. Sexual intercourse with him makes the abjection of lovemaking endured with clients fade away. It is a way of redemption, a means of forgetting the degradation that the honest woman does not have, the woman unwillingly involved in the mercantile process of matrimony^{xviii}.

Recalling the social project of Gabriel Tarde or Paul Robin^{xix}, Mirbeau advocates involvement in the feminist struggle. Mirbeau dreams of a contract between men and women which would put an end to the war of the sexes. When peace is made on the issue of prostitution, a general reconciliation will become possible. This contract implies recognition of the function of prostitution, requires that protection be granted to prostitutes, necessitates an end to the stigma on prostitution, and fosters a promotion of their status.

Based on rich personal experience, Mirbeau’s complex essay contrasts with the colourlessness of other prostitution literature of the time. An acknowledgement of gender conflict, Mirbeau’s text describes the problem of feminine sexuality, notes the urgency of male desire, denounces the hypocrisy of a moralistic and prohibitionist abolitionism, while still advancing the project of the prostitute’s genuine social integration. At the end of a century tormented by obsessions with sex and venereal danger, Mirbeau makes an ideal of the woman victimized by the tragic nature of male desire.

Alain CORBIN
(translated by Bérangère de Grandpré)

i These sources are the basis of our study *Les Filles de Nocés. Misère sexuelle et prostitution. XIX^e-XX^e siècles*, Paris, Aubier, 1978 et Flammarion, “collection Champs”, 1982. The same with Jacques Terneau, *Maisons closes de province. L’amour venal au temps du réglementarisme. Étude du Maine-Anjou...*, Le Mans, Éditions Cénomane, 1986; and with Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris*, Princeton University Press, 1985; and, about the vice squad: Jean-Marc Berlière, *La Police des mœurs sous la III^e République*, Paris, le Seuil, 1992.

ii An expression borrowed from Louis Fiaux, a tireless abolitionist activist, and contemporary of Octave Mirbeau. On the use of Augustinian texts, cf. Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, *La Prostitution à Paris au XIX^e siècle*. Text presented and annotated by Alain Corbin. Paris, Le Seuil, “L’univers historique”, 1981.

iii There is extensive literature on medical representations of woman in the 19th century including: Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet, *La Femme et les médecins*, Paris, Hachette, 1983; *Histoire de la vie privée* (sous la direction de Georges Duby et Philippe Ariès), volume IV: “De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre” (dir. Michelle Perrot), Paris, le Seuil, 1987.

iv On that issue, see Claude Quiguer, *Femmes et machines 1900. Lectures d’une obsession Modern style*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1979; and Bram Dijkstra, *Les Idoles de la perversité. Figures de la femme fatale dans la culture fin de siècle*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1992.

v Cf. Hilde Olrik, “Le Sang impur. Notes sur le concept de prostituée-née chez Lombroso”, *Romantisme*, 31, 1981, pp. 167-181.

vi As Erica-Marie Benabou has showed in *La Prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Librairie académique Perrin, 1987.

vii About the fear of syphilis at that time, see Alain Corbin, *Le Temps, le désir et l’horreur*, Paris, Aubier, 1991, and notably “L’hérédosyphilis ou l’impossible redemption” (pp. 141-171); and, by the same author, “La grande peur de la syphilis”, in *Peurs et terreurs face à la contagion* (edited by J.P. Bardet and others), Paris, Fayard, 1988. In the same volume: Patrick Wald Lasowski, “Syphilis et Littérature”. By the same author: *Syphilis, essai sur la littérature française du XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982.

viii On that aspect of the representations of woman in the 19th century, see Stéphane Michaud, *Muse et madone*, Paris, le Seuil, 1985. And, by the same author: “Idolâtries. Représentations artistiques et littéraires” in *Histoire des femmes* (edited by Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot), volume 3 (edited by Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot), Paris, Plon, 1991.

ix Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, volume 1, “La volonté de savoir”, Paris, Gallimard, 1976.

x On the representations of the prostitute in the 19th century, see the essential work by Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of III Repute. Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century France*, Harvard University Press, 1989; and J.T. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, New York, Knopf, 1984, “Olympia’s Choice”, pp. 79-147.

xi On all these topics, once more the bibliography is huge; let us only mention Jean-louis Borie, *Mythologies de l’hérédité au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Galilée, 1981.

xii On this point, Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *La Bataille de Cent ans. Histoire de la psychanalyse en France*, Paris, Ramsay, 1982.

xiii Michel Maffesoli, *L’Ombre de Dionysos. Contribution à une sociologie de l’orgie*, Paris, Librairie des Méridiens, 1982.

xiv Cf. Alain Corbin, “La petite bible des jeunes époux”, in *Le Temps, le désir et l’horreur, op. cit.*

xv Cf. Annelise Maugue, *L’Identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle*, Marseille, Rivages, 1987.

xvi On all these elements, cf. Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce...*, *op. cit.*

xvii Judith Walkowitz, “Jack l’Éventreur et les mythes de la violence masculine” in “Violences sexuelles”, *Mentalités*, n°3 (presented by Alain Corbin), Paris, Imago, 1990; also see, by the same author, in *Histoire de femmes, op. cit.*, volume already mentioned: “Sexualités dangereuses: la prostitution”, pp. 389-419.

xviii An obsession at the end of the 19th century.

xix Cf. Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce, op. cit.*