

## **From Red Light to Red Meat? A Social Study of Parisian Prostitutes, 1750-1789**

The Enlightenment marks a pivotal era in the movement away from the traditional view of women as unruly temptresses toward the emergence of more ‘modern’ constructions of women as, above all else, chaste wives and mothers. French writers—most notably, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—heralded a shift in constructions of femininity in a novel way; Rousseau popularized the view of women as a collective, and talked about the nature of women in general, rather than simply women of a certain social status. At the same time, however, an influx of young single women migrated to Paris in search of work in a labor market that quickly became oversaturated, leaving them no choice but to turn to prostitution, either periodically or permanently, to make ends meet. My project investigates how the change in gender ideology of the eighteenth century affected the social realities of Parisian prostitutes from 1750 to 1789. My research will take place in Paris at the *Archives de la Bastille* from mid-June to early August, and seeks to better understand the relationship between gender ideology and social reality.

In the eighteenth century prostitutes were increasingly considered to be outside the sphere of womanhood. While earlier conceptions held that prostitutes, like all women, were slaves to their libidos, the Enlightenment transformed these ideas into charges of deviance. As the century progressed, more and more Parisians began to talk about ideas of femininity in relation to the public sphere as newsheets and pamphlets on the subject proliferated and literacy rates in the city increased. This was especially true in light of the Diamond Necklace Affair of the 1780s, when a prostitute impersonated Marie Antoinette, raising questions about the place of women in the public sphere.

Meanwhile, contemporary writer Louis-Sébastien Mercier observed that there were at least 30,000 prostitutes in the city who thought that laws such as Louis XIV’s 1684 ordinance on vice did not apply to them.<sup>i</sup> In the late 1760s 2,069 women were arrested for prostitution, and by 1789 around 13 percent of females aged between 15 and 50 were engaged in sex work.<sup>ii</sup> Elisabeth Julie Lacroix, for example, was a 49-year-old woman arrested in 1778, who had been abandoned by her husband, out of work four to five days, and without food for one day. Her story is replicated countless times, and it is women with stories like these who I wish to study.

There is a wealth of secondary literature on the topic of prostitution in eighteenth-century Paris, but nowhere are the changes in gender ideology and the social realities of prostitutes analyzed within a collective framework. Current scholarship tells us that prostitutes were seen as outside the sphere of womanhood, and, as consequence, they are not sufficiently treated in studies of changes in gender ideology. Indeed, historians have argued that prostitutes were part of a marginalized group to whom the standards of femininity did not apply. Historians have generated extensive scholarship illuminating the importance of Rousseau’s writings on women<sup>iii</sup>. Others exposed what contemporary Parisians were thinking about prostitutes and prostitution, and Erica-Marie Benabou has written a thorough study of the social realities of prostitutes’ lives<sup>iv</sup>. Most of this work, however, fails to bring together women’s history with the history of gender ideologies. Feminist approaches to prostitution stress the need to recognize the institution within the wider context of gender ideology, social organization, and economic developments; I propose to do exactly this in the case of eighteenth-century Paris<sup>v</sup>. I will merge the two

separate spheres of literature on the subject to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between the new gender ideology and prostitutes' lives. My approach aligns with the current direction of the historiography, that is, to reincorporate 'the social' in eighteenth-century France, and I hope that my research will be on the forefront of this new scholarship.<sup>vi</sup>

I will travel to Paris this summer and closely analyze police records in the *Archives de la Bastille* at the *Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal* to explore the intersection of gender ideology and the social reality at the ground level. Prostitutes did not leave behind their own writings, so I must rely on the police records – based on daily interactions between police and prostitutes—as a medium through which to gain access to their lives. By reading police reports on prostitution I expect not only to learn about what happened to prostitutes on a daily basis, but also to determine the degree to which Rousseauian ideas trickled down to the police, and possibly the prostitutes themselves. Were the police exposed to the changing gender ideology, and did they invoke these new ideas in their own discourse? If so, did it affect the way they wrote about prostitutes? Did they try to enforce these new ideas on them? How much control did prostitutes have of their own activities, vis-à-vis brothel proprietors and the police? Did these women, at the bottom of society, challenge the monolithic discourse on women articulated by the male literary elite and invoked by the police? If the police did not see the prostitutes as within the sphere of womanhood, could they live in a freer or less restrained fashion than their more reputable counterparts?

To answer these questions, I will mine the police records in the *Archives de la Bastille* (please see appendix for a specific list). Rather than approaching the documents to learn about prostitution as an institution, I will approach the documents with a mind to discover the realities of prostitutes' lives through their daily interactions with the police. The *Bastille* documents are more than simple records of arrests. Indeed, eighteenth-century Paris witnessed an information-gathering craze in which police spies gathered comprehensive information reports on various segments of the population; for prostitutes these included anecdotes describing daily events, notes on the habits, appearance, requests, and sometimes conversation of their clientele, as well as short biographies of the women. Records such as these from at least seven brothels in the 1750s and 1760s survive in the *Archives de la Bastille*. In conducting my social study I will examine materials I have already identified as potentially useful and evaluate these women seriously as social actors.

I took a research seminar with graduate student Britt Petersen on the Old Regime in France in which I specifically studied prostitution, and I have also taken classes in both eighteenth and twentieth-century French history at Rice and Northwestern universities. I can read, write, and speak French comfortably, and was pleased to participate in the *Rencontres Internationales des Jeunes* program—an all-expenses paid trip to Paris awarded by the Chicago French Consulate—last summer, which allowed me to experience French culture firsthand. My advisor, Professor Sarah Maza, has written a letter of introduction to Bruno Blasselle, the director of the archives on my behalf, and he has agreed to let me work there. I have also been in contact with historian Lisa Graham, who has extensive experience working with the sources I am interested in at the *Archives de la Bastille*. She will be conducting research in the *Arsenal* this summer, and has offered to meet with me while I am there. I am therefore prepared to spend time on my

own living and conducting research in Paris. I also have experience conducting archival research, which I gained as an intern for the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation last summer where I researched the history of a block in the East Village at the New York City Municipal Archives. This skill has whetted my appetite to do more archival work and has acculturated me to the trials and rewards of such an endeavor.

This project fits into my academic career because I will use the summer research to write a senior thesis next year. I intend to pursue a graduate degree in history in the future, and hope to find a career that will allow me to continue studying the lives of women who have traditionally been relegated to the margins of history.

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<sup>i</sup> Mercier, Louis-Sébastien. Le Tableau de Paris. Paris: F, Maspero, 1979. Page 114. ; Riley, Philip F. “Michel Foucault, Lust, Women, and Sin in Louis XIV's Paris.” Church History 50 (1990): 40.

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis, Gwynne. France 1715-1804: Power and the People. Harlow, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2004, p. 135.

<sup>iii</sup> Desan, Suzanne. The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004.; Gutwirth, Madelyn. The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992.; Hunt, Lynn. The Family Romance of the French Revolution. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.; Trouille, Mary Seidman. Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> Cheek, Pamela. “Prostitutes of ‘Political Institution’” Eighteenth-Century Studies 28 (1995):193-219; Conner, Susan P. “Public Virtue and Public Women: Prostitution in Revolutionary Paris, 1793-1794.” Eighteenth-Century Studies 28 (1995): 221-240; Conner, Susan P. “The Pox in 18th Century France.” The Secret Malady. Ed. Linda E. Merians. Lexington, KY: The UP of Kentucky, 1996; Norberg, Kathryn. “From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802.” The Secret Malady. Ed. Linda E. Merians. Lexington, KY: University P of Kentucky, 1996; Benabou, Erica-Marie. La Prostitution et la Police des Moeurs au XVIIIe Siècle. Paris: Libr. Academique Perrin, 1987.

<sup>v</sup> Holmes, Rachel. “Selling Sex for a Living.” Agenda 23 (1994): 36.

<sup>vi</sup> Desan, Suzanne. “What's After Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography.” French Historical Studies 23 (2000): 165.

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## APPENDICES

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**PRIMARY SOURCES TO BE CONSULTED—**

**ARCHIVES DE LA BASTILLE AT THE BIBLIOTHEQUE DE L'ARSENAL**  
RECORDS OF INTEREST

1. 10,234
  - a. 4ième cahier (1 janvier 1752-8 mai 1753)
  - b. 5ième cahier (9 mai 1753- 15 juillet 1754)
  - c. 6ième cahier (16 juillet 1754-30 septembre 1756)
  - d. 7ième cahier (1 octobre 1756- 10 février 1757)
2. 10235-10237
  - a. daily papers for Lieutenant de Police
3. 10,238-10,242
  - a. (bulletins rédigés par l'inspecteur de police Meusnier sur la vie des filles galantes de Paris les plus remarquées, 1749-1758)
4. 10,243
  - a. notes, rapports, et papiers de l'inspecteur de police Meusnier, chargé de la partie des mœurs; notes sur la ville galantes de Paris, 1748-1755
5. 10, 244
  - a. notes, rapports, et papiers de l'inspecteur de police Meusnier, chargé de la partie des mœurs
  - b. 1ième cahier
    - i. quelques aventures galantes (1750-1754)
6. *Rapports sur les prêtres débauchés*, Arsenal, Bastille mss. 10246
  - a. Brothel reports focusing on the clergy
7. 10,248
  - a. notes, rapports, et papiers de l'inspecteur de police Meusnier, chargé de la partie des mœurs; papiers de l'inspecteur Meusnier de son successeur à la surveillance des mœurs, l'inspecteur Marais
  - b. 1ième cahier
    - i. surveillance des particuliers. Aventures galantes. Signalements (1750-1757)
  - c. 2ième cahier
    - i. notes de l'inspecteur Meusnier sur les plaints et réclamations portées à la Lieutenant de police (1749-1757)
8. 10,252-10,253
  - a. des rapports venus des maîtresses de maisons de débauche
  - b. 1ième cahier
    - i. rapports des inspecteurs de police charges de la partie des mœurs, particulièrement des inspecteurs Meusnier et Marais, sur les "petites maisons situées aux environs de Paris, avec les noms des propriétaires et de ceux qui les occupant (1749-1758)

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- c. 3ième cahier
    - i. rapports des inspecteurs de police charges de la partie de mœurs, particulièrement des inspecteurs Meusnier et Marais, sur la vie privée de quelques gentilshommes et hauts personnages des Paris (1749-1771)
    - ii. 4ième cahier
      - 1. rapports adressés au Lieutenant général de police par les maîtresses de maisons de débauche (1752-1755)
  - d. *Rapports venus des maîtresses de maisons de débauches*, Bastille mss. 10252-53.
    - i. Two boxes of material from the Bastille, now kept at the Arsenal.
      - 1. Arsenal, Bastille mss. 10252, 120
        - a. Inspectors reported on themselves and other police agents fairly casually
    - ii. Arsenal, Bastille mss. 10253, 19.
      - 1. October 1757 letter to the General Inspector of Police from a brothel proprietor complaining that Inspector Marais visited too frequently
  - e. *Rapport d'inspecteurs de police sur les aventures galant*, Arsenal, Bastille, unpaginated mss. 10252, 35
9. 10256, 10259-10267
  - a. les sodomites
10. 11069-12149
  - a. Dossiers de prisonniers
11. 12692-12695
  - a. Salpêtrière 1719-1765