The Eccentric Masculinity of Aristide Bruant

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The singer and songwriter Aristide Bruant (1851–1925) is now remembered chiefly through the poster produced by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in 1892 for Bruant’s appearances at the upscale café-concert, Les Ambassadeurs. The poster of Bruant is among the most recognizable of Lautrec’s images and has come to be emblematic of the Belle Époque in the popular imagination. Indeed, this widely circulated image and the related poster advertising the Chat Noir cabaret have come to stand as pictorial shorthand for French festive life of the later nineteenth-century. Bruant’s pictorial afterlife has had the effect of both exaggerating his centrality to the world of Parisian popular entertainment and obscuring the more irregular and provocative aspects of Bruant’s public persona, particularly his performance of an eccentric masculinity.

Robert Nye, in his path-breaking work, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*, outlines what we may take to be the normative form of masculine behavior and identity between the Revolution and the 1920s.¹ Masculinity was conventionally constructed around productive capacity, reproductive fitness, political and familial authority, and the public display of honor through dueling. Such a model of masculine identity is striking, not only for the ways in which it excludes women from participation in most domains of life, but for the ways in which it systematically excludes many (if not most) men as well. Nye’s account of the norms of male identity challenges us to consider how masculinity was experienced and

articulated by those men who fell outside the norms of contemporary masculinity. This essay, drawn from my larger study of the late nineteenth-century artistic subculture of Montmartre, takes up this challenge by examining how Aristide Bruant fashioned his self-presentation, performances, and songs to publicly construct a male identity outside of and in opposition to normative masculinity. Central to Bruant’s gender performance was his self-declaration as an active member of bohemia.

“Bohemia” is generally understood to be a subculture common to Western societies but with a distinctly French origin. Bohemia is a self-chosen community, loosely associated with social marginality, youth, poverty, devotion to art, and rebellious behaviors and attitudes. From 1881 through the First World War, the most prominent locus of French bohemian life was the Parisian neighborhood of Montmartre. The bohemians of Montmartre, including Bruant, drew upon the received traditions of bohemian life, but they were unusual in appropriating the tools of the modern consumer economy. They established their own cafés and cabarets, many of which published their own satirical newspapers. These publications promoted the work of

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the artists who frequented the establishments as well as the cafés themselves, trying to attract a public for both. The newspapers were a forum in which bohemian Montmartre constructed its image and identity for itself and for a wider, perhaps unknown, audience. Bruant was a major figure in bohemian Montmartre in the decade after 1883, and his cabaret, Le Mirliton, was one of the most influential and enduring institutions of that community.

Bruant always stood apart from his fellow bohemians, in more than appearance and manner, and his contemporaries understood Bruant's career and his creative work in relation to his life story. Unlike most members of bohemian Montmartre, Bruant had a limited education and direct experience of downward mobility, manual labor, and poverty. Bruant depended on this difference, and the air of authority it conferred upon him, to claim his position in the community. Given the pivotal importance of Bruant's biography, it is telling that the various accounts of his life are romanticized, conflicting, and incomplete.4

All accounts agree that Bruant was born the son of a small landowner in the village of Courtenay in the Loiret in 1851.5 His happy childhood was interrupted in 1863 by a reversal in the family's fortunes. One biography attributes the fiscal crisis to the death of Bruant's father, but the others maintain it was due to his father's incompetence, thus suggesting an oedipal subtext for


5 Both Marc and Zévaes contend, however, that the child's actual surname was "Bruand" and that the chansonnier later changed its spelling. See Marc, Aristide Bruant, 12; Zévaes, Aristide Bruant, 13. See also Anne de Bercy and Armand Ziwès, A Montmartre . . . le soir: Cabarets et chansonniers d'hier (Paris: B. Grasset, 1951), 39. De Bercy is the daughter of Bruant's frequent collaborator, Léon de Bercy.
Bruant's subsequent activities.\textsuperscript{6} In either case Bruant and his family were forced into reduced circumstances, and Bruant found himself in Paris working to earn his keep. There he held a number of jobs, including being apprenticed to a few jewelers.

During this period, his biographers stress, Bruant was engaged in a more important apprenticeship, his study of working-class masculinity as it was expressed in the life and language of the streets. Bruant recounted that, as his family moved from one working-class neighborhood to another, he learned the strengths and poetry of working-class speech: "colorful, animated, brutal, cynical, but rich in picturesque metaphors, in bold neologisms, and in imitative harmonies."\textsuperscript{7} Bruant recalls being so seduced by this slang that he would wander the streets of working-class neighborhoods, speaking with and learning from everyone he met.

Bruant's dual apprenticeship was interrupted by the Franco-Prussian War, during which he returned to Courtenay for that most typical of male rites of passage, military service. After France's defeat Bruant returned to Paris, his former employment, and his "long nocturnal peregrinations in the outlying areas."\textsuperscript{8} In 1875, Bruant entered the offices of the Chemins de Fer du Nord as a clerk. This position provided the respectability and financial stability Bruant's family had long sought but he continued to frequent working-class neighborhoods by night. By his own account, Bruant had by then mastered the language of the Parisian lower classes and had begun to use this accumulated knowledge and experience to write songs. Encouraged by his friends, he began to sing his compositions in local establishments. Bruant made his café-concert debut at the Concert des Amandiers in Belleville, "before the thugs and streetwalkers of the area."\textsuperscript{9} An enthusiastic reception by that difficult audience led to engagements elsewhere, building to the

\textsuperscript{6} The death of Bruant's father is asserted in Zèvaes, \textit{Aristide Bruant}, 15.
\textsuperscript{7} Bruant, "Aristide Bruant par lui-même," 45.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{9} Mouloudjii, \textit{Aristide Bruant}, 12.
more sophisticated Concert de l'Époque, then to La Scala, and eventually to the zenith of the cafés-concerts, the Concert de l'Horloge on the Champs-Élysées.

Bruant's repertoire at this stage was very much within the mainstream of the genre of café-concert. Most of his songs were lightly humorous or patriotic. They had titles like "The Drum Major's Baton," "A Drole Adventure," "A Very Happy Boy," and "The Boulevard of Students." Like most performers in the café-concert, he was celebrated more for his characterizations than for his material. In these songs Bruant employed the persona of the man he might have been without his office job: a young Parisian, a former soldier, who labors with his hands. It was a familiar "type" among male café-concert performers.

Around this time, Bruant developed the distinctive costume that would thereafter be his trademark: a black corduroy suit, the pants tucked into black boots, a red flannel shirt, large black hat, long red scarf, walking stick, and at times a black cape. Bruant's sartorial self-fashioning was the first crucial way in which he distinguished himself from both his audience and his fellow performers. While Bruant's clothing is unquestionably male in its semiotics, it does not conform to any conventional style of dress. Comparing Bruant's outfit to those of other café-concert performers, we can see how eccentric his wardrobe must have appeared. His outfit is not based on evening clothes or the respectable suit associated with social elites; it does not conform to contemporary norms for the urban working-class male, the mismatched remnants worn by the socially marginal, or the practical clothing of the peasant. Details like the tucked-in boots, hat, extravagant scarf and walking stick suggest the archaic or the foreign without making any specific reference to national costumes or period apparel. Bruant's visual self-presentation,

10 See Zévaes, Aristide Bruant, 21.
then, places him outside the normal sartorial markers of class-based masculinity and identity.

T. J. Clark, in his well-known essay, makes the argument that as a form of mass entertainment the café-concert produced new class identities, manufacturing both images of the "popular" classes and an imagined social position for the petite bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{12} The former was produced by performers, who in their lyrics and especially their delivery embodied a narrow range of clichés about the working class. The audience, confronted with these representations of the popular classes, simultaneously identified with and kept their distance from them.\textsuperscript{13} Clark’s analysis is helpful, but he misses some of the complexity of the position of performers like Bruant. His focus on only the largest and most elegant of the cafés-concerts ignores the many smaller, simpler local establishments. In these locales performers like Bruant sang of working-class life to a working-class audience. As Jacques Rancière suggests, such venues were: “A place of emulation . . . and if people came firstly as spectators, they could also hope to sing there, or have their own songs performed, and this led to a proliferation of people who secretly wanted to become \textit{artistes}.”\textsuperscript{14} Of course, the songs they performed were products of a highly conventional genre, and the singers were set apart from their audience (or not) by ability and ambition. Still, in order to win the approval of these audiences, performers had to project an experiential knowledge of the spectators' lives, to present an image of conduct and concerns in which the audience could recognize its own. The most successful of the café-concert performers brought to their later audiences an air of authenticity born of this "popular" approval. Bruant traded


\textsuperscript{14} Rancière, "Good times or pleasure at the barriers," 49.

\textit{The Proceedings of the Western Society for French History}
on this badge of popular appeal and acceptance, insistently characterizing himself as a popular singer-songwriter (*chansonnier populaire*).

Interestingly, Bruant’s success at the highest level of the café-concert circuit is presented by his biographers as something of an impasse, one broken only by Bruant’s entry into the company of the Chat Noir cabaret in 1883. The Chat Noir was the first and most important of the “artistic cabarets” at the center of bohemian life in Montmartre. At the Chat Noir, Bruant abandoned his café-concert repertoire and began to perform the songs and monologues with which he established his mature reputation. Bruant’s performances were a contrast to the usual Chat Noir entertainment. His songs earned the designation "realist" for their depiction of the harshness and inequality of life on the margins of French society. Bruant also wrote what became the cabaret’s signature tune, "Around the Black Cat," a simple, almost folkloric song celebrating the pleasures of bohemian life. Although Bruant quickly became one of the most acclaimed performers at the Chat Noir, he was less accepted by the literary group who controlled the cabaret’s newspaper, *Le Chat noir*, who almost never printed songs by any authors in the paper. Bruant's first appearance in the paper came in 1884. The music and lyrics of the chorus to "Around the Black Cat" are inset in a full-page drawing by Steinlen of gamboling bohemians, not mentioning Bruant. Bruant's subsequent appearances in the Chat Noir paper were quite infrequent. He instead took another route to publication, beginning to print and sell the sheet music to his most popular numbers. We may glimpse here tensions between Bruant’s notions of identity and those of other bohemians. Bruant cared less that his work be

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17 See the advertisement, "Les Refrains du Chat Noir, par Aristide Bruant" in the 15 November 1884 issue of *Le Chat noir*. The advertisement lists eight songs available from Bruant; half are from his new bohemian repertoire, half are songs of military life. The advertisement continued to appear regularly in *Le Chat noir* through June 1885.
considered “literature” and was more frankly commercial in promoting his own production.

Bruant’s songs and monologues were as particular to his self-fashioning as was his costume. Rendered at least partially in Parisian slang, generally using the first person, Bruant’s songs describe the lives of the impoverished, of criminals, pimps, and prostitutes. The songs’ titles chart a social geography of Paris, naming the urban periphery that had, since the early nineteenth century, been associated with the “laboring and dangerous” classes. A staple of Bruant's new repertoire was "At Batignolles," a song whose style and narrative are typical of his work:

Her mama was called Flora.
She never knew her papa.
So young she went to school
   At Batignolles.

She sprouted up like a mushroom,
Despite getting nothing but slaps,
At night when leaping around
   At Batignolles.

Her manners were pretty good.
Her hair was done pretty cute.
And she sang like a little loon
   At Batignolles.

When she strolled under the blue sky,
With her flame-red hair,
You believed you'd seen an aureole
   At Batignolles.

I loved her as much as I could,
But I could've done more at the moment I knew
That she'd deceived me with Anatole
   At Batignolles.
It had to happen, sooner or later,
'Cause Anatole is such a sneak . . .
The pimp's woman goes for the snitch
At Batignolles.

Now she's left me,
But God gave me my revenge:
She's going to die of small pox
At Batignolles.

The moral of this oration here,
Is that little girls with no papa
Should never go to school
At Batignolles. 18

Employing the persona of Flora's former pimp, the song suggests that, born into poverty, she had no chance for any other sort of life. Bruant uses similar tactics throughout his repertoire. Depicting a Paris in which productive labor is absent, he describes poverty, violence, and sexual commerce as pervasive and inevitable. His characters’ lives are depicted concisely, stoically, with a casual misogyny. As narrator, Bruant positions himself between his audience and those whose experiences he sketches; he is a privileged intermediary whose creativity,

18 "Sa maman s'appelait Flora./ A connaissait pas son papa./ Tout' jeune on la mit à l'école/A Batignolles./ A poussa comme un champignon./ Malgré qu'elle ait r'çu plus d'un gnon,/ L'soir, en faisant la cabriole/A Batignolles./ Alle avait des manièr's très bien./ Alle était coiffée à la chien./ A chantait comme eun' petit' folle/ A Batignolles./ Quand a s'balladait [sic] sous l'ceil bleu,/ Avec ses ch'veux couleur de feu,/ On croyait voir eune auréole/ A Batignolles....Je l'ai aimée autant qu'j'ai pu,/ Mais j'ai plus pu lorsqu'a m'trompait avec Anatole/ A Batignolles./ Ça d'vait arriver, tôt ou tard,/ Car Anatol' c'est un mouchard../ La Marmite aim' ben la cass'role/ A Batignolles./ Alors a m'a donné congé./ Mais le Bon Dieu m'a bien vengé:/ A vient d'mourir de la variole/ A Batignolles./ La moral' de c't'oraison là,/ C'est qu' les p'tit's fill's qu'a pas d'papa/ Doiv'nt jamais aller à l'école/A Batignolles." Aristide Bruant, "À Batignolles," Le Mirliton 1, (1885).
intelligence, and sympathy are his alone, not available to either audience or characters. Bruant attempts to unite in his own singular persona two meanings of “bohemian”: The term was used interchangeably with “artist,” but in its older but still potent usage it denoted the socially marginal, those without fixed residence, identifiable employment, or discernible social standing.

When the Chat Noir changed location in June 1885, Bruant rented the vacated storefront and renamed the cabaret "Le Mirliton," the word meaning a reed pipe and, in argot, doggerel. This name emphasized the cabaret's ties to "low" culture, and Bruant's larger strategy was to differentiate his establishment from every other on offer in Paris. An evening's entertainment at the Mirliton was deliberately produced and orchestrated to emphasize particular aspects of Bruant's persona. Le Mirliton was open only very limited hours: from 10:10 p.m. to midnight, later to 2:00 a.m. To gain entry, customers had to knock conspiratorially at the door and request admission. Once inside, visitors were roughly directed by Bruant to a seat, told to squeeze together, and forced into uncomfortable proximity to the other patrons. Customers were subjected to a continuing stream of insults: "Attention, gentlemen, here come the girls! some whores, some beauties! In God's name, this time it's not the bidet slops; we have the trollop of choice, the deluxe courtesan to her three stars! These gentlemen following behind on foot, they are surely pimps or ambassadors."19

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19 "Attention, messieurs, v'là du ligne!...de le gerce, de la belle!....Nom de Dieu c'te fois c'est pas de la rinçure de bidet...c'est de la grenouille de choix...de la gonzesse de luxe...d'là trois étoiles!...Ces messieurs suivent à pied par derrière...ce sont sûrement des maquereaux ou des ambassadeurs." Aristide Bruant, "Cinq minutes chez Bruant," quoted in Jacques Castelnau, Belle Époque (Paris: Librairie académique Perrin, 1962), 105. Additional descriptions of the proceedings at the Mirliton and further examples of Bruant's abuse of his audience can be found in Zévaes, Aristide Bruant, 38-39; Michel Herbert, La chanson à Montmartre (Paris: La Table ronde, 1967), 249-53; de Bercy and Ziwès, À Montmartre . . . le soir, 31-38; and Francis Carco, La Belle Époque au temps de Bruant (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 11-13, 29-30. The
The sole beverage available at the Mirliton was beer, though its price could vary from customer to customer and all were regularly inveigled to order more. Bruant's performance of his songs and monologues was interspersed with constant demands from the singer for additional contributions and insistence that customers purchase his song sheets and journal. Those who chose to leave, at whatever point in the evening, were the targets of special invective, sung out of the establishment with the chorus:

All the customers are pigs,
La fari dondon, la fari dondaine,
Especially those who go away,
La fari don daine, la fari don don!\(^{20}\)

During the evening Bruant would cede the platform to his two assistants, Alexandre and Chopinette, and they would continue in imitation of Bruant's manner.

At the Mirliton the imagined “popular” community built around Bruant was coded as masculine: defined by rough speech, playful verbal abuse, and the use of argot; by physical discomfort and lack of personal space; by frank talk about sexuality and the undisguised demand for money. As a form of entertainment, the power of this environment lies in its clear rejection of those values termed bourgeois. To participate, visitors were forced to undergo an inversion of status, a temporary loss of status. Here, Bruant could tower over his patrons; in images of the cabaret, his body is massive, his stance assertive with arms akimbo and legs planted firmly apart. One deduces that his crotch is at the eye level of his female customers. The marginal is master here, but gender hierarchy is not effaced. Visitors to the Mirliton were "forced" by Bruant to participate in what were presented as the customs of an alien atmosphere at the Mirliton was recreated regularly in contemporary literature, most notably in Zola's *Paris* (1898).

\(^{20}\) Bruant,"Cinq minutes chez Bruant," 106.
culture; of course, their participation was entirely voluntary and the experience was a carefully constructed simulation.

Bruant insisted that his performances were a strike against the bourgeoisie, calling his audience:

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\ldots \text{the pile of idiots who do not understand what I sing to them, who cannot understand, not knowing what it is to die from hunger, those who have come to the world with a silver spoon in their mouths. I revenge myself in insulting them, in treating them worse than dogs. That makes them laugh to tears; they believe I joke when, often enough, it is a breeze from the past, miseries submitted to, dirtiness seen, which remounts on my lips and makes me speak as I do.}^{21}
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Other observers were less convinced. Émile Goudeau, one of the founding figures of bohemian Montmartre, wrote:

Strange, let me say in passing, the public's curiosity about stories of pimps and whores, told with a base working-class accent. It rests on an illusion and on a critical error. The public believes it must be seized by the reality of the imitation, which it reads as the difficulty of rendering it and as the conscience of the declaimer or singer in the composition.\(^{22}\)

Worldly success—the audience at the Mirliton became much more middle-class and Bruant increasingly affluent—made the tensions between authenticity and artifice in his eccentric masculinity more open to notice and criticism. Bruant’s substantial property in his home village of Courtenay was well-known enough to merit its own postcard. Rumors circulated that Bruant instructed his servants never to address him as “sir” but as “popular singer-songwriter.”\(^{23}\) The anarchist art critic Félix Fénénon, leaving the Mirliton one night, declared: "The money that fellow used to collect in one evening during his heyday

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would have guaranteed a year's work to one of our people."24
Bruant had begun in the early 1890s to "recreate" the Mirliton on
the stages of the largest cafés-concerts, notably Les
Ambassadeurs and Eldorado. After 1895, Bruant ceased
performing at the Mirliton, and the venue was renamed the
Cabaret Aristide Bruant. In 1896, Bruant's assistant, Alexandre
Leclerc, left the Cabaret Bruant to open his own establishment,
the Cabaret of Noisy Alexander (Bruyant Alexandre), where he
insulted his clients and performed Bruant's repertoire while
wearing a copy of Bruant's famous attire. Bruant sued Leclerc
for unfair competition and won.25 Most immediately, this lawsuit
concerned Bruant's ability to retain control over his repertoire
and image, the "trademarks" of his performance. However, we
may also see in it Bruant's effort to reassert the authenticity of
his masculine self-expression against the mere performance of its
signifiers.

We should not read too much into the self-fashioning of a
single man, particularly one who earned his living as a
performer. On the other hand, Bruant’s cultivation of a highly
specific masculine persona in public performance—that is, in
distinction from his professional peers and in dialogue with
multiple audiences—may suggest what choices of masculine
deportment were available and viable at the fin-de-siècle.
Bruant’s example indicates that certain forms of contestatory
manhood could be envisioned. Bruant’s contestation was based
in linguistic and behavioral mimicry, an imaginary occlusion of
social class, and a monopoly on creativity. As a model of
manhood, this proved far too dependent upon and imbricated in
wider notions of “authentic” experience to be stable or imitable,
particularly in the face of fame and fortune. It also left in place
(where it did not exaggerate) assumptions of male privilege and

24 Fénéon quoted in Joan Ungersma Halperin, Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and
Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,
25 See Zévaes, Aristide Bruant, 101-03; and Herbert, La chanson à
Montmartre, 396. Herbert claims Bruant won only the symbolic victory of
requiring that Leclerc wear a different sort of hat.
female inferiority. We can now see in Lautrec’s images the tensions inherent to Aristide Bruant’s eccentric performance of masculinity: Bruant’s challenge to the placidity of bourgeois manhood was figured in the familiar terms of blunt physicality, phallic expansion to fill available space, and virile activity in the public sphere—a challenge that time has rendered flat and decorative.