In 1905 the French medical doctor Julien Chevalier noted the sudden "explosion of lesbian vice" into public view and public space in his book on abnormal sexuality, observing that "for the past few years lesbosism [sic] has grown in disconcerting proportions in Paris and other [European] capitals; we can no longer pretend to ignore its existence, its influence, and its dangers."

The same phenomenon was noted by a number of French writers who, like Chevalier, trained their investigative lenses on Paris where "priestesses of the new cult have become legion." Much that we know about the public perception or representation of lesbians has come to us through the art and literature of the period, which were marked by a distinctive fascination with images of perverse women and female same-sex passion. A smaller amount of purported nonfiction material, including sexological studies, muck-raking exposés, and naughty guidebooks, dealt with aspects of lesbian Paris and instructed readers in the ways to locate and decode the sexualized


2 Ibid. Referring to women's same-sex love with allusions to the poet Sappho was common in epithets such as "sapphist" or "daughters of Sappho" or, as in this case, references to the island of Lesbos. "Tribade" was another contemporary term for lesbian.

communication between women, and thus eavesdrop on the same-sex commerce taking place in big city life. A reader of these books might learn that fashionable ladies "looking for a partner in vice" drove through the Bois de Boulogne in open carriages or scanned the passersby on the Champs Élysées. These women signaled their sexual preference with "a distinctive 'tell': it's the gorgeous poodle, a lapdog with curled hair, bedecked with pom poms and sometimes ribbons, that's always by her side on her strolls and drives." The pedestrians who returned the glances of the elegant women in carriages made another distinctive sign: a "rapid movement of the tongue and lips" to signal "I go with women." 

As the author of *La corruption fin-de-siècle* ominously noted, lesbianism was "spreading like an oil stain" throughout the French capital, making its way from legal heterosexual brothels to the homes of respectably married women. In part, he blamed high-priced brothels where male clients might bring their mistresses, "who were curious to see for themselves," to view exhibitions of simulated sex between women; these women "then imitate[d] what they saw." He also warned of the threat posed by prostitutes who left the sex trade; when they married their clients, these emancipated women would "spread their sapphist practices to their new female acquaintances." In this manner, by showing instead of telling, "the vice extends its ravages all the way to married women." This theme of the danger of seeing or displaying same-sex passion, highlighting the performative

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4 Books that sketch lesbian mores among other types of sexual deviance include Léo Taxil [pseud. Gabriel Jogand-Pagès], *La corruption fin-de-siècle* (Paris, 1891) and Ali Coffignon, *La corruption à [sic] Paris* (Paris, 1888). A number of guides to the Parisian sexual or bohemian underground that pinpointed lesbian cafes or restaurants were published during the period. These were often credited to anonymous or fanciful publishers and authors, such as Anonyme, *Guide des plaisirs à Paris* (Paris, 1899).


6 Taxil, *Corruption*, 263.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 261.

9 Ibid., 258.
aspect of sexual identity, recurs in much contemporary writing, along with the characterization of homosexuality as a threat from within, in this case the bourgeois home.

While condemning the "demi-monde" or Paris' legalized brothels, writers of such exposés also acknowledged that lesbianism was not circumscribed by the sex industry. Instead, "one encounters it everywhere" in Paris. A visitor might watch "mannish women" congregating in Montmartre and the Place Pigalle "in special brasseries and restaurants"; while strolling in the Latin Quarter one might walk unknowingly into the middle of a "fight between rivals over a girlfriend." The territory occupied by the daughters of Sappho extended into popular entertainment. For example, in December 1906, a theater column in the journal Le Rire reported that many of best seats in the Folies-Mavigny theater were occupied by female couples "rapturously applauding and whistling" as the dancer on stage, the writer Colette, performed in an artfully tattered costume that revealed her bare thighs.

Sex-segregated environments like prisons and brothels had long been identified as breeding grounds and refuges for female same-sex lovers, as in Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet's lengthy study of prostitution published earlier in the century. Turn-of-the-century doctors like Chevalier agreed, but he found that lesbianism had now become almost "chic" in the sector of society that "we call 'le high-life." An article he published in a forensic medical journal asserted that women were rejecting "the mediocre joys of healthy love" in favor of

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10 Ibid.
11 Chevalier, Aberrations, 504. He uses the term "femmes-hommes," literally "women-men" in this passage.
12 Snob, "Les Potins de Paris," Le Rire, 15 December 1906. The column by the pseudonymous Snob noted Colette's appearances in the Symbolist play Pan first "in a ragged, very short skirt" and later "in a very short, very tiny tiger skin."
13 Alexandre Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris considérée sous le rapport de l'hygiène publique, de la morale, et de l'administration publique (Paris, 1836).
Clearly, he was reacting to evidence of a burgeoning lesbian subculture in Paris, populated by women artists and patrons like Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, and exposed to public view by journalists, novelists, and performers. Iconoclastic dancer-choreographers like Loie Fuller also began performing in Paris theaters at this time, often in popular music halls, where, as dance historian Julie Townsend observes, she presented work characterized by "a poetics of woman-centered eroticism." The presentation of unconventional sexuality, or of self-declared lesbian lovers, was at the center of two theater controversies in 1907 and 1908, each described in bold newspaper headlines at the time as "scandals." On 3 January 1907, a performance at the Moulin Rouge by Colette and her then-lover, Mathilde de Morny, of a twenty-minute pantomime called Rêve d'Égypte closed after only one night because of an audience protest and public and private pressure on the theater management. In 1908 another short pantomime called Griserie

14 Chevalier, Aberrations, 504. He also claimed that "sapphism is rare in the aristocracy, the nobility, or high finance, hardly known in the bourgeoisie, viewed with horror by the working class, [and] not even suspected in the countryside" but is "the vice of the theatrical world, of false art and flirtation."


d'Éther (Ether Intoxication) was cited for "public indecency" by a police agent. However, it ran for several weeks at the Little Palace Theater before it was closed. The performers and the theater manager, charged with violating public decency, stood trial twice during the next year.

France at this time no longer had official theater censorship (though cinema was still censored) because a legislator had managed to end funding for the office of theater inspectors in 1906. Yet, in the spring of 1908, Griserie d'Éther and several other shows were subjected to police inspection because of a public pressure campaign waged by the editor and writers for a right-wing newspaper called L'Autorité. It regularly featured articles and editorials about "Pornography" and "Nudes in the Theater" and used a variety of tactics to recruit more adherents to its cause. Aided by Senator René Bérenger, the purity campaigners challenged the Paris police prefect to investigate more than a half-dozen shows, including a realist play with the provocative title Passion Perverse ou l'Invertie, but a disappointingly moralistic story line. As a result of this campaign, charges of "offending public decency" were filed against the employees of three small theaters. Two of the theaters had presented a dance or tableau vivant performed by scantily dressed young women; the third had featured an offending performance in which two women mimed caresses and kisses. Newspaper reports of the trial included a detailed description from the police report:

The misses Lepelley and Bouzon played a scene of drunkenness and lesbian passion. Lepelley fell back on an armchair, baring her breasts and torso, while Bouzon sat near her and also bared her breasts and torso, wrapped her arms around her and hugged her, put her mouth on hers, caressed her breasts with a hand that also wandered further down below; the embrace only ended to let Lepelley express through facial expressions and shivering body movements the erotic excitement these caresses provoked. At the end of the scene, Bouzon stood up, letting her chemise fall below her knees, and grasped a bouquet of flowers, holding it in front of her genitals. Such a display of nudity, accompanied by these poses, gestures, embraces, and kisses, whether simulated or real, are only intended to display

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perverse passions and call forth the most troubling and dangerous lubricity.\textsuperscript{17}

Focusing on live performance here explores its distinctions from other modes, such as fiction, painting, or sculpture, since when we examine dance and performance, we must take into account the performer's physical presence as well as its emotional and expressive power. As dance historian Jane Desmond writes, "The live presence of the performer in the same space as the spectator . . . [both] sharing this time and space is a crucial component of the experience."\textsuperscript{18} Colette captured this interplay between performer and audience, and desire and vulnerability, in her novel \textit{La Vagabonde}, in which she drew on her experiences as a dancer and music hall mime. In one passage the narrator and main character, Renée Neré, a music hall performer, described the emotionally and sexually charged atmosphere of her dance performance at a private party where, Neré realized, some of her ex-husband's male friends and ex-mistresses were in the audience. One was seated

... in the front row. All the available space has been used for seating, and her chair is so close to the platform that I'm on that I could ruffle her hair with an ironic caress ... She looks back at me with terror in her eyes. Through me, she sees her sin, her despair ... Seated behind her, I see another woman, another one. They pretend not to know me, but something betrays the fact that they've recognized me, because one takes on a distracted air and chats with her neighbor, while the other exaggerates her near-sightedness ... Come now, this won't do. I'm too clear-headed tonight, and if I don't take hold of myself, my dance is going to suffer. I dance and dance. A beautiful serpent coils itself along the Persian carpet, an Egyptian amphora tilts forward, pouring out a cascade of perfumed hair, a blue and stormy cloud rises and floats away, a feline beast springs forward, then recoils, a sphinx the color of pale sand, reclines on the sand, propped on its elbows with hollowed back and straining breasts, I have recovered myself ...

\textsuperscript{17} Georges Claretie, "Le Nu au théâtre," \textit{Le Figaro}, 28 July 1908.

\textit{Proceedings of the Western Society for French History}
In this excerpt from the novel, the narrator-dancer's inner monologue communicates her feeling of control not only over herself, but over her audience, even as she makes herself vulnerable to the crowd of spectators. Her body is on display since for this scarf dance she is dressed "only in a veil, of blue and violet measuring fifteen yards around . . . a bluish chrysalis."\(^{20}\)

Colette had recently separated from her first husband Willy, with whom she had written the best-selling *Claudine* novel series, and, while she continued freelance writing, she began a stage career at the age of thirty. She took small parts, mainly non-speaking dance or pantomime roles, and joined a husband-and-wife mime troupe, composed of Georges Wague and Christine Kerf, and toured France's music halls for seven years. The Moulin Rouge performance in 1907 occurred early in her stage career. *Rêve d'Égypte* depicted an Egyptologist (Morny) who was seduced by a mummy in his collection (Colette). The two women enacted a sexual/sensual awakening in the pantomime as the mummy suddenly came to life, unwound its wrappings, and danced for the single spectator. At the end of the skit, the two women exchanged a long and frankly erotic kiss. Press accounts tell us and publicity photographs show us what they wore. Colette's costume consisted of a calf-length gauzy skirt, golden breastplates and a headdress, and bracelets decorated with entwined snakes; her legs, midriff, and feet were bare. Mathilde de Morny wore a brown velvet suit, a tie, and manishly-styled shoes from "her own wardrobe," as more than

\(^{19}\) Colette, *La Vagabonde*, trans. Enid McLeod (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 40. This type of "scarf dance," in which the performer manipulated translucent colored fabric to form patterns and shapes with the play of light upon her body and the stage, was made famous by the innovative choreographer Loie Fuller, but copied by many on stage and in films. The woman's nude or near-nude body would be alternately concealed and revealed by the fabric.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
one journalist noted disapprovingly. 21

The show provoked editorial writers and audience members not simply because a woman dressed in men's clothing played a male role in an on-stage duet, but also because the couple's off-stage relationship introduced a threatening reality to the performance. A vigorous public relations campaign had been conducted by the two women and some of their closest associates. For instance, leaked stories in the theatrical press spread the news that Morny, who used the title "Marquise" and was the daughter of the Duke de Morny and the estranged wife of the Marquis de Belbeuf, was taking pantomime lessons from Colette's stage partner, Georges Wague, and had been rehearsing various pantomimes with Colette. Colette, Morny, and Colette's ex-husband Willy gave interviews separately and together to writers from Paris' daily newspapers and the theatrical press. Interviewers often emphasized Willy's odd-man-out role, as he paternally encouraged the two women in their new endeavor; they often contrasted Colette's girlish energy with Morny's mannishly cool demeanor and accessories: "Colette shook her fingers mockingly above her curly hair [while] the Marquise de M...., Missy, focused on the smoke rings she produced, puffing out her lips around her fat cigar." 22 Press coverage also focused on "Missy's" aristocratic heritage by tracing her family tree in detail. There were rumors, too, of the Morny family's disapproval of her upcoming public exhibition, which prompted Colette to express defiance in distinctively modern terms: "The Marquise is an independent woman . . . She loves the theater . . . My word, it would be ridiculous if the fact of belonging to the nobility prevented a woman from doing what she wanted!" 23

Adding fuel to the fire, the Moulin Rouge theater manager had the Morny family's coat of arms printed on posters along with her stage name "Yssim"; the name was a rather simple anagram

22 Georges Michel, "Chez Colette," Gil Blas, 1 February 1906.
or inversion of her nickname "Missy." Not surprisingly, the opening night performance was sold out.

We know more about the audience and reception of this scandalous performance than we do about Griserie d'Éther or the exotic dances and tableaux performed on Paris stages the following year. Many in the Paris press turned out for this premiere. Le Figaro described an "ultra-elegant audience" in the hall "packed to the rafters. The boxes and orchestra seats were shimmering with tuxedos and evening gowns." Another newspaper, Gil Blas, noted hyperbolically that the audience was "stunning . . . Everybody who is anybody was there, the blue-bloods and the big names." The audience disruption began as soon as the curtain rose and the orchestra played its first notes. One theater reviewer described it as "a half-hour of non-stop shouting, of unprintable insults and catcalls, from a crowd that was out of control, like a pack of rabid beasts." Another, in Gil Blas, noted the disruptions that built from:

... a few derisive whistles...[to] the sound of walking sticks being thumped in unison on the wooden floorboards. [But] when the curtain went up and the audience recognized [the Marquise] in her brown suit, shouts and whistles erupted from all over the hall....The din doubled in volume when Colette Willy came to life in her sarcophagus ... People shouted "Get off the stage!" ... and other, unprintable insults ... Ladies in front row seats tossed various projectiles, including their seat cushions, onto the stage. At the end the entire audience got to its feet and booed them in a final paroxysm.²⁴

Keeping up their public relations campaign and iconoclastic public images, Colette, Morny, and Willy all issued defiant statements after the show's tumultuous debut. Nevertheless, the pantomime was removed from the late-night bill, and, for the

two women involved, the audience hostility and the private application of official pressure served as an object lesson, perhaps, of the danger of incarnating an imaginative construct—the butch femme couple—on their own terms. For Mathilde de Morny, the press' critical, moralizing editorials and the abusive, mocking audience brought home the risks of inhabiting a gender-inverted identity in public.

As we know, the next year a pressure campaign led by Guy de Cassagnac, the editor of the right-wing newspaper L'Autorité, and soon joined by the moral crusader Senator René Bérenger, resulted in the closure of three shows by the Paris police. Six female performers and three male theater managers were charged with public indecency. The performances took place in small theaters or music halls (the Folies Pigalle, the Folies Royale, and the Little Palace). At the Folies Pigalle, a dancer who used the stage name Aymos performed a solo dance called Dans un rêve in a revealing costume; one writer described it as "a few gold rings and a necklace held in place by a cord threaded the length of her groin." At the Folies Royale, three women posed in a series of tableaux vivants, and the last scene, Trois Grâces, meant to replicate a famous sculpture, was the focus of the police complaint. The draped fabric on the young women's upper bodies slipped down to reveal their breasts as they stood in their pose. At the Little Palace, two women dressed in evening gowns enacted the short pantomime in which they became inebriated by eating strawberries dipped in ether, loosened their corsages, and shared a kiss.

This disparate group of plaintiffs went through two trials, the first a civil trial in July 1908, and the second in January and March 1909 in the appeals court, which re-examined the original judge's ruling. The actual degree of female nudity on stage and the content of the performers' choreographed movements were at issue in the judges' questioning and the witnesses' testimony in both trials. The aim was to determine the intent: Was the performance artistic or simply arousing? In fact, although many newspaper headlines dubbed these cases "The Nude on Stage," it seems that none of the performers appeared entirely nude. A
period cartoon called "The Nude and the Government Censor" marked out the danger zones on a woman performer's body: the breast, nipples, and a narrow band around the crotch. Those three areas had to be covered and thus rendered "invisible" to an audience, by a G-string, make-up, jewelry, or even flowers. The cartoon, of course, was mocking this convention or unwritten rule; as we learn from the testimony in court, the theater managers, choreographers, and dancers on trial all claimed they had tried their best to comply with it. Bérenger, Cassagnac, and their associates had targeted these performers in their campaign against what they called "pornography," which even included the publication of graphic accounts of the trials. In articles, open letters to officials, and public speeches, they urged readers to attend the shows they singled out and disrupt them, warning repeatedly in print about "a rising tide of garbage and sewage." Cassagnac's rationale for suppressing the music hall entertainment reprised the trope of "infection" to characterize public displays or representations of same-sex love; he argued that these performances would spread from the cosmopolitan capital and the popular theaters to the healthy provinces. "We have to repress them quickly before they contaminate all of France." The titillating shows relied on an intimidated public who wanted to appear fashionably tolerant or sexually sophisticated: "Of course, I know that in chic salons people say 'Ah, my dear, that was really something. Have you been there? Yes, have you? Oh, I'm going tonight.' And that's how it is." The scandalous shows defied not only conventional gender roles or the boundaries of good taste, but also the Catholic Church. Cassagnac denounced a music hall number that seemed to parody a mass, using a nude woman's body as an altar: "At the Casino de Paris . . . an undressed woman—yet one more!—stretched out on an altar, receiving the adoration of priests and echoed by chorus girls dressed as children in the choir." He predicted that failing to fight this battle against "obscenity"

would mean the end of France: "If our 'race' has lost its courage along with its moral health, France is finished!"  

The conduct and outcome of the two trials in the civil and appeals courts are instructive. The first before Judge Pacton focused on specific issues: how the women's bodies were exhibited and the types of gestures and movements they made. Several witnesses drew a distinction between the body in motion, presumably more erotic, and the body frozen in a gesture or at rest. At the trial's end, Judge Pacton rendered what many in the press called a "Solomonic verdict"; he found that only the performers and theater manager of the Little Palace's pantomime, were guilty. He sentenced them to two weeks in prison and a fine. He acquitted all the others and noted a distinction between "the esthetic nude" and "the obscene nude" in his decision. In the second trial, Judge Landry reviewed all the police reports and questioned all the plaintiffs again; his verdict found that all the plaintiffs were guilty as charged. He sentenced each theater manager to three to four months in prison, and all the women performers to two weeks each.

The dance historian Jane Desmond has described dance as "one of the most important areas of public physical enactment in which we can investigate how sexualities are inscribed, learned, rendered and continually resignified." She urges historians of sexuality and of theater and dance to continue these analyses. The examination of the public reception of these turn-of-the-century scandals uncovers historically specific, culturally defined links between bodies, movement, and sexuality. Written reports, testimony, memoirs, sketches, and photographs of these performances and performers provided specific instances of performers' manipulation of those signifiers. When we examine a live dance performance, or what was written or said about it, we can discover more about how non-normative sexuality is expressed in gestures and costumes, embodied by performers.

26 Guy de Cassagnac, "Le Flot qui Monte," L'Autorité, 3 April 1908.  
27 Claretie, "Le Nu au théâtre."  
and experienced by spectators.

In fact, the performers in *Griserie d'Éther* had tried to deflect the accusation that their movements represented same-sex desire on stage. In their testimony they offered an alternate interpretation of their actions, and they claimed that seeing homosexual desire in their choreographed movements or their self-presentation was a misreading of their intentions. One woman, described as a "chubby blonde, Jeanne Lepelley," testified that her "motions represented just the effect of ether and were not at all the reaction caused by her partner's caresses." Her partner Jeanne Bouzon gave a different argument. She testified that she had not actually given real kisses on stage; under the circumstances, that was impossible: "I couldn't have done so, because I was wearing make-up and that would have ruined my make-up."29 In a similar way, the self-proclaimed couple Colette and Morny complicated the reception of their pantomimed "sapphic embrace" in 1907. There is an echo of Mademoiselle Lepelley's defense of her simulated kisses in Colette and Morny's ambiguous response to a survey published in the weekly *Paris-Théâtre*. Exploiting the interest in the recent stage scandal the magazine conducted a referendum about "The Kiss On Stage" and posed a "burning question" to a number of celebrities. It printed the answers on its front page under the title "THE KISS ON STAGE: SHOULD IT BE FAKE OR REAL?" Colette and Morny replied to the survey, and their written answers are given a place of honor, printed first on the front page. Colette gave a cleverly double-edged answer: "Dear Sir, my opinion about 'stage kissing' is clear—never fake it. When you're on stage, pretend you're giving a kiss the way you pretend that you're in love." Morny added on the same notepaper "in her aristocratic handwriting and equally aristocratic writing instrument: 'My sentiments precisely!'"30

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