Suspect Physiognomy:
The Male Prostitute in Belle Époque Print Culture

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Scholars have long remarked on how, in texts aimed at a popular audience, a wide gallery of social types has served to people the French cultural imagination. From widely circulated prints through middlebrow novels, popular discourses relied on the classification and characterization of recognizable social identities. The panorama of modern life was imagined by means of familiar figures: the flâneur, the courtesan, the bohemian, the ragpicker. One type, though, has been marginal even to the cast of outsiders who preoccupy cultural historians. Here is his physiognomy:

Hair curled, face made up, neck bared, waist cinched to accentuate his curves, the fingers, ears, and chest covered with jewels, the most penetrating perfume wafting from the whole person, and in his hand a handkerchief, flowers or some needlework: such is the strange, repulsive, and by all rights suspect physiognomy that betrays pederasts.

This vivid description of the "pederast" is drawn from one of the founding works of nineteenth-century legal medicine, Ambroise Tardieu's 1857 volume, Les attentats aux moeurs (Outrages Against Morals). Tardieu's book was considered authoritative on matters of criminality and sexuality and was routinely cited as such well into the twentieth century. This particular passage had an especially vigorous afterlife, appearing as a direct quotation or in paraphrase in almost every printed discussion of pederasty.

1 Ambroise Tardieu, Les attentats aux moeurs (1857; Paris: Jérôme Millon, 1995), 173.
as male-male sexuality was most commonly termed – through the end of the Belle Époque. Although Tardieu's description purports to be of the pederast as a general type, he embeds it within and makes it exemplary of his broader discussion of male prostitution as an outrage against morals. The figure Tardieu outlines is not merely a pederast, but a pederast who sells his tightly-clad, bejeweled, and over-scented body.

Tardieu's easy and unselfconscious movement from a treatment of pederasty as a general social phenomenon to an examination of male prostitution is central to my current research, a reconstruction and analysis of the articulation and circulation of popular understandings of male same-sex sexuality in France between 1880 and 1914. Earlier scholars established that the fin de siècle was a coherent and privileged moment in the history of modern sexuality, particularly in the history of modern male same-sex sexuality. Their conclusions, though, were based on elite, expert, or official discourses and practices.2 My project examines whether a now-familiar narrative of steady movement toward our contemporary conception of "the homosexual" is confirmed if one looks at different kinds of evidence, at more ephemeral, less complex and ambitious, less self-conscious and

self-confident cultural artifacts. Lurking behind that query is a perhaps old-fashioned question: what did a general French readership know about desire between men during the Belle Époque?

What Foucault called the "putting into discourse" of male same-sex sexuality increased significantly, if unevenly, throughout this period, with the highest concentration of texts appearing between 1896 and 1911. While taken up in a variety of discourses, pederasty was not, for the most part, the central or primary topic of discussion within the texts I have identified. Popular discourse on male same-sex sexuality was, unsurprisingly, hostile, and it built upon earlier, more scattered but equally hostile representations of sexual dissidence from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Among all these discursive regularities, though, most striking is the pre-eminence of the figure of the male prostitute in discussions of pederasty and the elision of the distinction between sex between men and sexual commerce between men.

Consider a group of texts produced some forty years after Tardieu's work. While comparatively little medical writing was directed to a general public before 1900 and even less addressed sex between men, in the first decade of the twentieth century a flurry of popular manuals about sex appeared. Published in series under titles like The Popular Library of Medical Knowledge and The Collection of Elementary Medical Science and authored by pseudonymous physicians (Doctors Rhazis, Riolan, Désormeaux, Caufeynon, and others), these books were published in small formats on cheap paper at very low prices. The series ran between ten and twenty volumes and invariably contained a single volume devoted to pederasty. The guides are highly

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intertextual, at times little more than a tissue of brief quotations, attributed or not, from elite medical writers on sexuality. The volumes on pederasty routinely draw on recognized experts, but the passages from these authors supply the broadest and most salacious possible generalizations about pederasts, their behavior, and character. The details of any particular sexological model are largely effaced, and differences between theoretical formulations and stances are flattened. Tellingly, almost all of the volumes begin by declaring their subject to be pederasty in general but devote at least half their space to discussions of male prostitution. As one volume puts it, "Pederasty often assumes the character of prostitution, resembling to some degree feminine prostitution." This statement echoes Tardieu's claim that "the most common and dangerous circumstances in which pederasty is exercised are those of actual prostitution."

In trying to understand this recurrent conflation of the pederast and the prostitute, I have previously stressed the centuries-old association of same-sex sexuality with vice, crime, and criminality or speculated that popular writing on sexual deviance had been overly-influenced by contemporary legal and juridical institutions and informants. While both factors contributed to this persistence, discussions of them tend to naturalize this category confusion rather than analyze it. This identification is emblematic of an epistemological problem, one crucial both to the nineteenth-century construction of "sexuality" and to our twenty-first-century attempts to construct histories of that earlier construction of sexuality.

It is productive, first of all, to consider the relative pre-eminence of the male prostitute in popular texts as indicative of the invisibility of sex and desire between men in nineteenth-century French culture in general. The Penal Code of 1810, as is

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4 Désormeaux, 25.  
5 Tardieu, 160-1.  

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well known, "did not outlaw pederasty and sodomy in and of themselves. It merely criminalized sexual assault, public offences against decency, encouragement of debauchery, and corruption of young people of either sex." What was not expressly forbidden by law was allowed, and for the most part, non-coercive private sexual acts were not prosecuted. It was at moments of emergence – when same-sex sexual relations were made public or occasioned official intervention – that they could be perceived and described. Enclosed homosocial institutions such as the boarding school, the barracks, and the jail and crimes like theft, blackmail, and prostitution could make visible activities and persons that would otherwise pass unseen.

Thus, the social history of pederasty must rely heavily on police records, trials, accounts of scandals, memoirs by police, prison, and military officials, and prescriptive texts rooted in legal medicine. William Peniston's recent book, *Pederasts and Others*, wonderfully illustrates how contemporary historians can make productive use of the investigations of these nineteenth-century observers without reproducing their values and assumptions. Peniston's study of a ledger kept by the Paris morals brigade in the 1870s demonstrates that the police's interest in identified pederasts exceeded any mere attempt to solve or prevent crimes. Rather, arrest or interrogation provided an opportunity for the police to acquire a wide-ranging knowledge of social relations between pederasts; Peniston uses the ledger to reconstruct precisely such networks. He also indicates how the appellation "pederast" was applied to men with varying degrees and kinds of involvement in same-sex sexual activity.

Peniston's social history, then, makes clear the difficulties nineteenth-century authorities faced in mapping male same-sex sexuality. Theirs was a conceptual as well as evidentiary poverty. Not only were the police inclined to generalize from too few cases,

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8 Peniston, see esp. Part II.
but the model upon which they drew for understanding consensual but unsanctioned, non-reproductive sexual relations was heterosexual prostitution. The lack of homology, of "fit," between what knowledge observers had of pederasts and what knowledge they had of heterosexual prostitution did not go unnoticed. The imperfect homology itself generated a series of texts that struggled to delineate a more accurate taxonomy of pederasty, to explain both why different sorts of men become pederasts and how relations between pederasts could be like those between prostitute and customer.

The basic outlines of this identification between prostitution and pederasty were formally established in two memoirs written by former officials of the Paris police, Louis Canler and François Carlier, published or republished in the 1880s. Both memoirs identify pederasty as a major social problem, and the two texts are marked by a consistent effort to explain the phenomenon of pederasty as the inverted double of prostitution. While both authors accept Tardieu's basic division of all pederasts into "active" and "passive," Canler proposes that they can be further divided into four groups, the names for which are purportedly and perhaps actually provided by the men themselves: the persilleuse (female parsley seller), the honteuse (shameful woman), the travailleuse (working girl), and the rivette (slut). The consistent use of a feminine ending for each noun works against Canler's effort to sort pederasts into the passive, those who sell their body, and the active, those who buy.

The same fascination with criminality and taxonomic impulse also characterized later books that styled themselves as works of popular sociology, guides to the urban underworld such as Charles Virmaître's Trottoirs et lupanars (Sidewalks and Brothels) (1882) and Paris impur (Impure Paris) (1900) and Ali Coffignon's La

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10 See Peniston, 53-64.
Corruption à Paris (1889). The influence of Canler and Carlier on these guides to the underworld is quite direct. Not only do the authors acknowledge their debt to the writings of the police officials, but they aspire to a similar level of expertise and "insider" knowledge. They list the many slang terms used to indicate pederasts and detail the settings in which pederasts might be found. Both offer suggestions on how to spot a pederast and in which professions they are most commonly to be found. Virmaître even provides his estimate of the number of male prostitutes working in Paris in 1900: 4,500.

Coffignon attempts his own classificatory system for pederasts, dividing the two primary classes into three subdivisions: active pederasts are either amateurs, entreteneurs (sugar daddies), or souteneurs (pimps); passive pederasts are divided into the petit-jésus (pretty little boy), three varieties of jésus (pretty boy), and the tante (auntie). These nine categories far exceed the four basic types Canler detailed and even the six types Carlier identified. In attempting greater fidelity, Coffignon's delineation of sexual roles and identities creates greater confusion. His taxonomic categories are not derived from ascribed gender – that is, activity or passivity – alone. Age, class, and financial need form important vectors, as do innate orientation and acquired taste. The incoherence derives not only from the competing claims of what Eve Sedgwick has called universalizing and minoritizing views of homosexuality, but from the uneasy mapping of male same-sex behavior onto the presumed roles of prostitute, pimp, and customer.

Indeed, Coffignon himself seems to recognize that this system lacks coherence. In trying to account for what unites the spectrum of pederasts, he abandons his previous classificatory criteria and has

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12 Virmaître, Paris impur, 234; and idem, Trottoirs, 155.
13 See, for instance, Virmaître, Paris Impur, 236.
14 Virmaître, Trottoirs, 155.
15 Coffignon, 332-6.
16 Sedgwick, 82-6.
recourse to an affective state, ferocity, by which he seems to mean an excess of emotion, irrationality in private relations, and a lack of personal control. In this context, ferocity can be deployed to describe behavior across gender role, age, experience, and class. This stress on ferocity signals something of these authors' interest in the allegorical dimension of pederasty, in its amenability to narrative inscription. Despite their sociological ambitions, these texts devote surprisingly little space to the "factual" description of male same-sex activity or pederasty. Instead, they tell stories – inevitably cautionary tales – about it.

This stress on narrative suggests the second way in which to think about the persistent conflation of the pederast with the male prostitute: insofar as his figure consolidates gender inversion with the travesty of legitimate commerce, the male prostitute makes legible for contemporaries the seeming disruption of social order. Here again, discussions of pederasty are conceptually dependent on discourses about heterosexual prostitution. Scholarship has established the prominence accorded to heterosexual prostitution in the imagination and social relations of nineteenth-century France and the ways it became the focus of a variety of official, medical, legal, and artistic discourses. The comparatively rare discussions of male prostitution situate it socially as adjacent to or intermixed with the world of female prostitution and treat both forms of sexual commerce as a symptom of broader cultural problems.

In Fléry d'Urville's 1874 "moral autopsy," Les Ordures de Paris (The Filth of Paris), for instance, pederasts can only be understood as "these cretins of Parisian civilization" among whom those most easily identified by sight are likely to be the least depraved. D'Urville was most disturbed by those who "often dissimulated their shameful trade behind the semblance of a profession": waiters who actually serve up their sexual favors, hairdressers who have their own false front, and street vendors.

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17 Coffignon, 336.
with more than legitimate goods to sell.\textsuperscript{20} These men are – to use a common trope – like Freemasons, recognizable to one another by secret signs. Given to "all forms of prostitution" and "a new form of commerce," pederasts have, d'Urville declares, given birth to "a social evil," the threat of which could not be ignored.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1881 the pseudonymous Dr. Cox-Algit takes up the precise nature of this threat in a fourteen-page pamphlet: "The prostitution of man by man forms a vast network, the links of which tighten and entangle to suffocate humanity."\textsuperscript{22} The source of this "evil" is, he feels certain, education and its stress on social isolation. As he puts it, "Solitary habits are the point of departure for prostitution in general."\textsuperscript{23} While the vocabulary of Cox-Algit's text is explicitly moralistic – he speaks repeatedly of "vice," "corruption," and the "aberration of moral sense" – his evidence is demographic. Men engaged in pederastic prostitution have no need of women, much less of offspring: "This explains why the population is no longer growing, why the family no longer exists, why so many wives are corrupt!"\textsuperscript{24} The depopulation crisis, changes in family relations, and the specter of adultery all have a common origin for Cox-Algit in the "hideous cult" where men sexually exploit other men.

Thus, for many contemporary observers, male prostitution made legible a hidden, socially disruptive network with causal links to other manifestations of social dysfunction. Jules Davray describes male prostitutes as "the most active soldiers in the army of vice" since, in addition to their sexual commerce, "every pederast is a master blackmailer" and "the pederast is always a thief."\textsuperscript{25} To trace the illicit relations of the male prostitute is to traverse the organizational structure of the army driving honesty

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 69-70.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{22} Docteur Cox-Algit, \textit{Anthropophilie, ou Étude sur la prostitution masculine à notre époque} (Nantes: Morel, Librarire-Éditeur, 1881), 5.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 14.
from public life. Léo Taxil even suggests that when the male prostitute signals he is available — the common allusion, he claims, is "Je m'occupe de politique" ("I'm in politics") — he simultaneously indicts the "disgusting bourgeois attracted to this vice" and the system of police surveillance that uses known male prostitutes to gather information.26 While Taxil condemns male prostitutes — he considers them more shameful than female prostitutes27 — his analysis of sexual commerce stresses the corruption of the Parisian police force and the betrayal of social justice by its activities, and his book ends with a call for an end to the morals brigade and a reorganization of the Prefecture of Police. In all these cases, once a writer could read the code of pederasty, he felt could discern the other hidden systems for which it was a key.

Given the repeated inscription of larger cultural meaning onto the figure of the male prostitute, the paucity of fictional treatments of this social type is somewhat surprising. Although fewer than a dozen novels with a pederast as the protagonist appear between 1865 and the First World War, no work of fiction has a male prostitute as its main character until Francis Carco's Jésus-la-Caille (Jesus-the-Quail), first published in 1914.28 This novel established Carco's reputation as a chronicler of "the milieu," the underworld of petty criminals and social marginals inhabiting lower Montmartre. At the beginning of the novel, Jésus' lover, Bambou, has just been arrested by the vice squad in a trap set by Dominique-le-Corse, a powerful pimp. As his nickname, "the quail," would suggest, Jésus is young, effeminate, and timid, with "the pretty face of a girl, hardly made up."29

Jésus, though, develops an unexpected alliance with Fernande, le Corse's lover. Fernande is intrigued by Jésus, though, develops an unexpected alliance with Fernande, le Corse's lover. Fernande is intrigued by Jésus,

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26 Léo Taxil, La Prostitution contemporaire (Paris: Libraire Populaire, 1884), 9, 356.
27 Ibid., 9.
29 Carco, 23-4.
attracted by his effeminacy, drawn to "his delicious and tempting ambiguity, this little kid, this spoiled and sentimental doll." Though Fernande is unsure of what their relationship could be – "He was too much a woman for a woman" – she and Jésus become sexually involved. Unbeknownst to both, le Corse is himself arrested as Fernande and Jésus spend their first night together. The relationship between the two is doomed to failure, not least because Jésus spends a good deal of his time in Fernande's company daydreaming about his romance with Bambou. Moreover, their coupling begins to take on the character of all Fernande's previous liaisons: Fernande supports Jésus, though he grows less interested in and violent towards her. Only the reappearance of Pépé-la-Vache, a rival thug who helped put le Corse in prison, enables Fernande to end the relationship with Jésus. She and la Vache begin a romance, and Jésus starts to live with the petit-jésus la Puce, who is the brother of his jailed lover, Bambou. The final third of the novel describes these parallel romances, the more enduring of which, surprisingly, is that of Jésus and la Puce. In the novel's tragic ending, le Corse returns from prison only to kill la Vache, a crime for which Fernande takes the blame in a desperate act of loyalty.

Carco's novel both incorporates and revises the thematics of male same-sex sexuality found throughout popular discourse. Jésus looks as Tardieu would expect; he could too easily be classified by Canler or Coffignon. However, his moving between same- and opposite-sex couplings and between passive and active roles does not admit of any conventional developmental narrative. Even more importantly, the narrative also describes at length the physical and affective dimensions of Jésus' same-sex relationships. These passages are remarkably frank in their recounting of sexual desire, particularly Jésus' attraction to Bambou, a former circus acrobat. They also link this desire with the habits of domesticity and emotional intimacy. The character of Jésus thus possesses an interiority, a represented subjectivity, explicitly positioned as equivalent to that of Fernande. The

30 Ibid., 42.
schematic doubling of Jésus and Fernande is itself an ambivalent move, stressing the emotional lability and social marginality of both characters and reiterating the trope of gender inversion. However hemmed in by what Carco calls the "instinctual hatred" of "Bambou, la Caille and those of their species," the novel expresses considerably more identification with and sympathy for such men than other popular sources can usually generate. Carco imagines a sexual identity for the pederast more fully than most French writers of this period, and he does so in part by locating his character in the demimonde of male prostitution.

The anomaly of Jésus-la-Caille suggests something about the way the representation of social types could work in the cultural imaginary of the Belle Epoque, the social construction of sexual identities during this period, and the obstacles to historical understanding. Historians of sexuality have been a little glib about what is, in Foucauldian shorthand, the shift in sexual knowledge from acts to identities. The persistent identification of pederasty and prostitution, though, shows this process to be dispersed, uneven, halting, and only partially coherent. Typologies and taxonomies proved to be more of a palimpsest than not. The accrual of meanings to this social type was unsteady and not entirely predictable. The figure of the jésus was recognizable by 1914 – recognizable as marginal, unnatural, criminal – but we should not be so sure we know what readers saw in him.

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31 Ibid., 16.