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A Sense of Place: A Treatise on Prostitution in Seventeenth-Century Paris

Naomi Miller

Introduction

- 1 Published in 1883, centuries after the author's death, *La chronique scandaleuse de Paris ou Histoire des mauvais lieux*, was originally titled *Traité de la prostitution* or *Traité des Bordels*. Author Henri Sauval (1623–1676), historian, lawyer, parliamentarian, learned archaeologist, received a privilege for printing the work in 1654. His major opus, the monumental three volumes comprising the *Histoire et recherches des antiquités de Paris*, was only published posthumously in 1724.¹ Surely, the small tome under consideration was a result of Sauval's prolific research on all aspects of the history and geography of the city and the customs of its inhabitants.
- 2 There is nothing scandalous about this chronicle. Actually, we are struck by its matter-of-fact narrative and by its almost total reliance on archival documents, depositions, state council and parliamentary registers. Sauval's opening sentence "that history usually undertakes only the events of kings and the great and that it seldom descends to the adventures of the uncommon," combined with the emphasis on case histories, make this a remarkably contemporary work, albeit unedited. It may be classified as revisionist or social history or the history of everyday life.² Problems begin immediately in the listing of incidents that comprise the chronicle, for the items discussed appear to be taken from a series of notes, without regard to chronology.

Content

- 3 The focus of this paper will be on the *mauvais lieux*, the settings of prostitution where social control is exercised and marginal characters are the principal players. For fear of moral contagion, royal and city ordinances designated streets where *femmes folles* (and Jews) were separated from the rest of the population.³ Before 1560, prostitution was restricted to licensed sites, the rationale being the maintenance of order. To examine particular places within the city, we will study the legal regulations imposed by

governing bodies, as well as the theological implications for the toleration, even the triumph of prostitution. As the sub-title implies, the theme involves topographical boundaries and spatial divisions in the city proper.

- 4 Sauval's treatise is largely a series of vignettes that set the stage for the sites and conditions of prostitution. Attempts to declare prostitution illegal are recorded from the mid-thirteenth century, but only in 1560 did Charles IX issue an ordinance prohibiting brothels in Paris. This law lasted until the late eighteenth century, but its main effect was to give the police power to imprison unruly prostitutes.⁴ Four years later, the king ordered the provost of Paris to execute sentences against women in certain designated places, and bourgeois of Paris were forbidden to rent their domains to the lewd women. Following evictions, Sauval observes that as this population was dispersed, prostitutes were found throughout the entire city.⁵ Evidence that Sauval's fragmented text remains incomplete may be provided by the author's omission of the ordinance of 1644, in effect until the 1680s, which proposed a policy of moderation in dealing with prostitutes. Only in cases of violating the peace or disturbing neighbors were they fined or forced to vacate. A stricter policy to rid Paris of prostitutes was initiated by Louis XIV in 1684, with the opening of the Maison de Force at Salpêtrière, the female unit of the Hôpital-Général, a prison for convicted prostitutes.⁶
- 5 Boundaries prohibiting prostitutes to ply their trade in certain quarters were imposed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when, for instance, they were warned to keep from profaning a quarter dominated by religious institutions.⁷ Measures were also taken to prevent the debauched women from spending nights with students. Gates of access were closed, but removing public women from nearby streets was quite impossible. Sauval records the success of Louis de France, Duc d'Anjou in 1379, who decreed against the prostitutes of the rue du Renard near his hotel, where he was witness to the excess and ordure in which these women were steeped. The duc's protests led to a grand trial, and to his portrayal of the area, once occupied with wealthy and honorable people as now overflowing with filth and host to scenes of abominations.⁸
- 6 Not unexpectedly, Sauval's tome provides considerable data regarding the sites of prostitution. He divides the "settlements" where prostitution was practiced as follows:
 1. The oldest, designated by St. Louis for public debaucheries: the streets of Glatigny in the Cité; also, Abbeuvoir, Brise-Niche, du Huleu, Chapon, etc.
 2. Streets in the most frequented quarters of the city: Transnonain,⁹ Deux-Portes, Clopin, Bourg l'Abbé,¹⁰ and those in the densest university quarters.
 3. Streets on the Right Bank: Beaubourg, Maubée, and the rue du Louvre, where many small habitations were attached to the lower court of the palace and assigned to the debauched, sometimes cited as the Bordello of the King's House.¹¹
- 7 Earlier, eight streets had been fixed by Louis IX, where the "common ribalds" could engage in their trade. Ordinances decreed in 1254 and 1256 reserved certain streets for prostitution, apparently as a concession to the reality principle. No street was better known for debauchery than the rue Glatigny, a permanent theatre of legitimate depravity in the poor parish of Saint-Landry on the Ile de la Cité, called by Sauval "the most dissolute place in Paris."¹² The street ran from the rue Saint-Landry to the pont Notre Dame, between the river and the rue Marmousets and was in the shadow of the clegry of the Cité. Such was the fame of this center of vice that it was known as the "Val

d'amour," its denizens "*fillettes de Glatigny*."¹³ An effort by Charles V to void the women's franchise was in vain, when they produced letters of Saint Louis, scalloped in silk lace and sealed with green wax, granting permission to occupy this place. Charles VI in 1381 ordered the provost of Paris to remove them from this quarter and condemned the proprietors of the houses they rented, but all was futile. Even Guillaume Jouvenel des Ursins, chancellor of France under Charles VII and Louis XI, in his hotel bordering on the Val d'amour, could not avoid the sounds, cries, and laughs of the *femmes folles*.¹⁴ In 1401, the Prior of St. Denis ordered them to withdraw in the rue de Glatigny or pay a fine and be regarded as prisoners. This edict was probably not enforced, for by 1413, most of the houses of the Hauts-Moulins still served as places of corruption.¹⁵

- 8 Glatigny, named after the fief of Glatigny in 1241, had become a labyrinth of narrow, dirty alleys, when in 1518, Francis I at the request of his queen, wishing to remove the public women from this locale—a presence there for over 200 years—resorted to destroying the entire street. Here and in the rue du Louvre, midst luxury boutiques, the women kept their doors open and exercised their shameful trade during the day, departing in the evening to avoid a fee by breaking the curfew. Contrary to the custom of artisans, they opened their shops and pursued their business on holidays and solemn feast days, when this practice was forbidden and fines were levied, half destined for the king and half for the poor. Penalties for trafficking with these women were severe and landlords, who leased space to prostitutes, forfeited their rents. Poor artisans dealing with these women, in the sartorial guise of honest folk, were punished or imprisoned.
- 9 Victor Hugo, who drew on Sauval for scenes of crime and prostitution in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, cites both the rue Glatigny and the Cour des Miracles as havens for villains and beggars.¹⁶ The latter site was known as the Huleu (rue du Grand-Huleur), where patrons were greeted by locals with jeers and cries of derision¹⁷. Its court was a large square with a long alley behind the convent of the Filles-Dieu, a labyrinthine seventeenth-century slum.¹⁸ In his *Antiquités*, Sauval notes that to gain access to this court, "one must lose oneself in the narrow, wretched, stinking unfrequented streets; to enter it one must descend a long, tortuous slope."¹⁹ Deemed the most scandalous site of the Parisian underworld (where the "crippled and diseased" returned from their begging chores, miraculously recovered), it housed the city's "crime syndicate," the guilds of purse cutters and beggars. But in 1667, the crown abolished the principal Cour des Miracles in a siege under the command of Nicolas de la Reynie, the first lieutenant of police in Paris.²⁰ Fifty years older than Glatigny, the Heuleu was located in one of the extremities of the city, a downtrodden neglected quarter inhabited only by artisans in a small street, which descended from the rue Bourg l'Abbé in the rue St. Denis. Among the houses of this street, five were listed in the census of the convent of St. Magloire "where the poor debauched women found refuge under the ordinance of St. Louis, dated 1254."²¹
- 10 Religious institutions are cited as scandalous venues, although from the time of Philip Augustus the monasteries and convents are noted as places where public women came to do penitence. Many incestuous girls and women were confined, mostly in the Filles-Dieu, established under Louis VIII and St. Louis. Some became exemplary models of deportment, for during their sentences, they asked only for bread and water until the end of their days. Sauval refers to a case in 1497, when Simon, bishop of Paris, drew up statutes of the Filles-Pénitentes that included an oath testifying to the women's

willingness to reform and participate in a virtuous life and abandon prostitution.²² He also introduces us to debauched women converted by sermons and skilled preaching. By the fifteenth century, some prostitutes incorporated themselves into a guild, which had its headquarters in the Church of the Madeleine, as the nuns there received the dissolute whom Parlement condemned to life imprisonment, and provided instruction for those whose chastity was suspect, wavering, or corrupted. If they wished to transform their lives, they were accepted into the order.²³ Other women even contributed to the embellishment of chapel windows in Notre Dame, but Bishop Maurice was opposed to a type of alms, equated with the wages of sin.²⁴

- 11 In terms of place, Sauval, citing Jacques de Vitry, demonstrates how virtue and vice inhabited the same quarters; the regents and dissolute women lived below the rooms where humanities were taught.²⁵ Schoolboys were especially susceptible to the ubiquitous debauchery, as witness a passage in *Pantagruel*.²⁶ Priests leave the arms of concubines to attend mass. As an example of his extended discourse on church corruption, Sauval notes that Father Dubreuil saw at the parvis of Notre Dame a priest on a ladder with writing on his back “Propter Fornicationem.”²⁷ Under Philip Augustus, a libertine-scholar Amaury, the county archivist, abused his learning by reinterpreting the “power of charity,” declaring that “prostitution was an innocent pleasure.” His casual doctrine led to a confession of his heresy before the Pope and the University, but he continued teaching his unorthodox doctrine, prior to his excommunication.²⁸
- 12 Chorister of Notre Dame Foulque, the chancellor of the Church of Chartres, the bishop of Paris, and others, tried to convert the public women to the holy life, whether by threats or by gentle coercion. Some became sufficiently frightened to marry, some tore their hair, and others expiated their crimes by pilgrimages and by austerities. Harsh restrictions were often imposed—for example, in cities, women could only “live in the back streets, separated from honorable people.” Thus places of refuge were established in Paris and in the most frequented streets, near the venerated sacred edifices of the Cité.²⁹ The Church was hardly the only institution that violated moral codes, as witness the Crusades, who committed unspeakable transgressions. On the pretext that they were under papal protection, many considered themselves immune from the laws of the kingdom and felt free to lead debauched lives.³⁰
- 13 Throughout the *Chronique*, Sauval demonstrates a sensitivity to women’s issues: Delving as far back as the chronicles of Louis XI, he condemns the maltreatment of honest women, who are never permitted to accuse their husbands of adultery, citing the lack of women’s rights and the greater degree of indulgence granted to men. He pinpoints the privileges of males in society, declaring “that the husband alone is allowed to accuse his wife of adultery.”³¹
- 14 Nor is Sauval insensitive to sumptuary laws. Discussions of the legal dress code of contemporary women find parallels in the art and literature of the fifteenth century in France and Flanders. Gilded belts, wide with rich ironwork, were the most popular of ornamental accessories; ordinances forbade public women to wear them, leading to the proverb “*Bonne renommée vault mieux que ceinture dorée.*” To mark the lowliness of their profession, the clothes of these decadent women must be simple. Not surprisingly, public women often imitated honorable women in the richness and variety of their dress. The Châtelet and Parlement were inclined to be lenient in this matter, declaring

that they were touched by the ill fortune of these women, thereby substituting pity for justice.³²

Conclusion

- 15 During the time span examined by Sauval from Philip Augustus to Louis XIV, there are shifts in patriarchal attitudes towards prostitutes marked by ambivalence between repressive regulation and permissive allowance. In a society dominated by the court, there is a wide divergence of sites for illicit behavior. Attempts to set aside specially designated streets for brothels were in vain as their location depended on patterns of settlement and expansion. Whereas the poor may have been confined to a limited number of houses and streets, mostly on the Ile de la Cité or on the periphery near the city walls, the royal domains were rampant with de facto prostitution. When Francis I suppressed the body of prostitutes attached to the court, he provided courtesans to take their place. Prostitution became a mainstay of the politics of Catherine de Médicis, and debauchery was even more pronounced during the Religious Wars.
- 16 Contrary to expectations, clues to the mores of Sauval's discourse are not present in earlier literary works such as the *Roman de la Rose* and the poetry of François Villon, for these represent more naturalistic responses to the courtly tradition. But Sauval's chronicle does call for further investigation of the role of monasteries, convents, hospices, and university quarters as sites of corruption, and that of pilgrimages as the prostitutes' quest for atonement and/or procurement. Above all, we are struck by the absence of attention to issues of public health and sanitation, a principal concern of later works on the subject.³³
- 17 "To write this history it was necessary to remove the ordure of all the streets and search in all the houses. And remember that the dissolute women claim that their métier is no longer worth anything since honest women meddle in it." For example, a very beautiful woman, publicly the mistress of a squire, superintendent of finances, was eulogized in the Place Royale as a woman of great virtue and worthy of esteem despite her former debaucheries.³⁴ Thus ends Sauval's treatise, in medias res.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Although the original manuscript has not been found, known copies are extant in Paris and in Rouen, and the present unedited edition, printed in 1883, is based on a composite of the two.

2. Henri SAUVAL, *La Chronique scandaleuse de Paris ou Histoire des mauvais lieux*. Brussels, J.J. Gay, 1883, p. 13. See, too, the foreword, p. 8, where it is noted that Richard Simon, erudite scholar and Hebraist, found Sauval's manuscript "si infame e si honteux à la nation, que je conseillai à l'auteur d'en faire un sacrifice à Vulcan."

3. P. L. JACOB, *Curiosités de l'histoire du vieux Paris*, Paris, A. Delahays, 1858, pp. 16–17.

4. B. GEREMEK, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. J. Birrell, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, p. 8. William W. SANGER, *The History of Prostitution*, New York: Eugenics Publishing Co., 1939; ed. Ams Press, 1974, pp. 119–120.
5. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 85–86.
6. LEON BERNARD, *The Emerging City of Paris in the Age of Louis XIV*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1970, pp. 181–82.
7. HENRI SAUVAL, *Histoire et recherches des antiquités de la Ville de Paris*, 3 vols., Paris, Moette & Chardon, 1724, I, p. 633, cites an ordinance demanding that public women obey the curfew in certain districts, such as Notre Dame.
8. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 75–76.
9. F. LAZARE and L. LAZARE, *Dictionnaire des Rues de Paris*, Paris, Félix Lazare, 1884, p. 640. The rue Transnonain was one of the first streets outside the wall of Philip Augustus. It was the site of a bloody massacre by soldiers of the dwellers in a workers' flat following their uprising—see Honoré Daumier's *Rue Transnonain*, a lithograph dated 1834.
10. LAZARE, *Dictionnaire*, 89, cites the reputation of the inhabitants: "Ce sont gens de la rue Bourg-l'Abbé; ils ne demandent qu'amour et simplesse."
11. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 48–50.
12. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 70–72. GEREMEK, *Margins*, pp. 87–91,
13. JACOB, *Curiosités*, pp. 134–140. The *Val d'amour* applies to the narrow entry of Glatigny, descending to the river and leading to the Port Saint-Landry.
14. JACOB, *Curiosités*, p. 112. LAZARE, *Dictionnaire*, p. 261, notes that the name of Glatigny is given to the street and the environs of St. Denis de la Chartre just to the Hotel des Ursins. Considering Jean Fouquet's portrait of Jouvenel des Ursins (c. 1455–60), dignified, reverent, splendidly accoutered, kneeling at a prie-dieu, it is difficult to imagine him as an inhabitant of this neighborhood. GEREMEK, *Margins*, p. 85, notes that the alleys were sometimes called courts.
15. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 71.
16. VICTOR HUGO, *Notre Dame de Paris*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975. Mention of the rue Glatigny occurs as follows in this work set in 1482: I, 1, p.20: "Est-ce que vous cherchez Marie la Giffarde ?/ Elle est rue de Glatigny./ Elle fait le lit du roi des ribauds." IV, 5, p.158: "Enfin on disait, horreur dans un enfant de seize ans, que ses débordements allaient souventes fois jusqu'à la rue de Glatigny." VI, 1, p. 194: "Regarde-le, le porc!...encore une femme amoureuse!...Pour etre sortie de la rue Glatigny!"
17. BERNARD, *Emerging City*, p. 180.
18. GEREMEK, *Margins*, pp. 82–83.
19. SAUVAL, *Antiquités*, I, 128, pp. 510–511, is also cited by BERNARD, *Emerging*, pp. 160–161. See, too, the description by Jacques HILLARIET, *Connaissance du Vieux Paris*, new ed. Le Club français du livre, 1969, p. 96, who cites the odiferous, muddy court surrounded by hovels of dirt, accessible only by tortuous streets, silent by day, animated at night with beggars and thieves. Also, JACOB, *Curiosités*, pp. 181–182.
20. HILLARIET, *Connaissance*, p. 96. BERNARD, *Emerging City*, p. 160–161. GEREMEK, *Margins*, pp. 82–83.
21. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 79. See, too, LAZARE, *Dictionnaire*, p. 321, who states that the rue du Grand-Hurlleur begins at the rue St. Martin and extends to the rue Bourg-l'Abbé in the quarter of the Porte Saint-Denis. He also discusses the etymology of the name.
22. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 15–16. See, too, pp. 20–21, where the author briefly discusses church scandals and the debaucheries of monks belonging to different orders.

23. SAUVAL, *Antiquités*, II, vi, p. 617. Writing “of customs and usages and their origin—festivities,” Sauval notes that the women of *mauvais vie* claimed the day of the Madeleine to form a guild. LAZARE, *Dictionnaire*, 404: In the entry under “Madelonnettes,” once the convent of the Filles de la Madeleine, the author records that in 1618 a wealthy wine merchant received in his house two public women who declared their desire to lead a regular life; this was the beginning of a convent for penitent women established in 1629. See, too, SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 17.
24. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 21–22.
25. JACOB, *Curiosités*, pp. 145–150.
26. See RABELAIS, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955. *Pantagruel*, ch. vi, pp. 190–193: “Comment Pantagruel rencontra un limosin qui contrefaisoit de langaige françoys.” In the Franco-Latin jargon of university students, we read of the dissolute life of a Parisian scholar, his sexual escapades and his haunts, which include le Huleu and dives on the Cité.
27. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 26.
28. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 25–26.
29. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 27–29.
30. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 30.
31. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, p. 44.
32. Cf. *Journal d’un Bourgeois de Paris (1405–1449)*, ed. A. Tuetey, Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1975 (ed. 1881), p. 382: 1446: “la sepmaine devant l’Ascencion, fut crié parmy Paris que les ribauldes ne porteroient plus de saintures d’argent, ne coletz renversez, ne penes de gris en leurs robbes ne de menu ver, et qu’ilz allassent demourer es bordeaux ordonnez, comme ilz estoient ou temps passé.”[sic] Note 2 cites SAUVAL, *Antiquités*. III, 270, mentions “la vente d’une houppe de drap pers, fourée par le collet de penne de gris...”[sic] confiscated from a woman of loose morals.
33. See A. J. B. PARENT-DUCHATELET, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, 2 vols., Paris, 1857, esp. I, pp. 323–324. As expected in a work of this date, issues of health are here treated in detail. See, too, François VILLON, *Œuvres*, Paris: G. Jeune, 1950, pp. 92–96, “Ballade de la grosse Margot,” wherein the poet tells of a bequest to a prostitute.
34. SAUVAL, *Chronique*, pp. 87–88.

RÉSUMÉS

La chronique scandaleuse de Paris ou Histoire des mauvais lieux explores the sites of prostitution where social control is exercised and marginal characters are the principal players. Based on documentary accounts, archives, and literary sources, Sauval’s treatise (published posthumously in 1883) examines particular places subject to legal regulations imposed by governing bodies. A series of case studies also demonstrates the impact of theological forces tolerating prostitution. In the time from Philip Augustus to Louis XIV there are shifts in patriarchal attitudes towards prostitutes marked by ambivalence between repressive measures and permissive allowance. Attempts to set aside specially designated areas for brothels were doomed as their location depended on patterns of settlement and expansion.

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