

Diagnosing Syphilis: Tainted Bodies in Zola, Maupassant, Huysmans, Mirbeau, and Fin-de-Siècle Art

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai examine comment les productions culturelles, en particulier la littérature et les arts visuels qui ont vu le jour entre les années 1880 et 1912, abordent la prostitution et définissent le corps syphilitique. Ma lecture se concentrera sur le roman naturaliste Nana (1880) de Zola, la nouvelle patriotique "Le lit 29" (1884) de Maupassant, le roman À rebours de Huysmans (1884), ainsi que sur "L'amour de la femme vénale" (1912), l'essai de Mirbeau écrit au tournant du siècle. Je considérerai de plus la gravure "Mors Siphilitica" (1894) de Félicien Rops et les tableaux que Toulouse Lautrec réalise la même année autour de la Rue des Moulins. Enfin, cette étude prendra également en compte les témoignages de Maupassant et la correspondance de cet écrivain avec ses amis.

J'évaluerai en quelle mesure les œuvres examinées résistent, reproduisent, régulent ou subliment la maladie vénérienne et m'attacherai à répondre en particulier aux questions suivantes: Comment le genre et la classe sociale informent-ils l'iconographie de la syphilis? Qui est perçu comme victime ou reconnu comme coupable? Comment sont pathologisés les responsables de la transmission de la maladie? Quels sont les mécanismes artistiques et les stratégies narratives utilisés pour évoquer la maladie sans la nommer ou la représenter? La maladie peut-elle être contenue et détruite à travers sa représentation ou bien fait-elle l'objet d'une allégorie? Enfin, je me demanderai si les attitudes, perceptions et préventions liées à la syphilis changent et évoluent au cours du dix-neuvième siècle et de quelles façons ces développements se manifestent dans les représentations textuelles et picturales de la fin du siècle.

In her compelling essay "From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802," Kathryn Norberg argues that in the years immediately following the French Revolution, streetwalkers became "increasingly identified with syphilis" while the affliction suggested "hidden moral corruption."¹ The conflation of syphilis and prostitution at the dawn of the nineteenth century made venal sex an issue of public policy where the ownership of the prostitute's body shifted to the domain of medical science.² Archival records from the period indicate that as early as 1800, two doctors were appointed by the Parisian police to inspect female sex workers, and officially document their names.³ By 1812, all prostitutes had to comply with mandatory registration and pelvic examinations while brothels and solicitation were limited to designated red-light areas.⁴ Despite measures to contain the disease and the continued scapegoating of streetwalkers as the agents of

¹ See Kathryn Norberg, "From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8.4 (April 1998): 42.

² Norberg 44.

³ Norberg 44.

⁴ Norberg 45

contamination,⁵ syphilis reached its peak between 1879 and 1880, with as many as 5000 new cases of annual outbreak.⁶ According to some reports, between thirteen to fifteen percent of the male population carried the disease, and the number of contagious syphilitics in French society rose to the staggering figure of one million by the turn of the last century.⁷ Nevertheless, contrary to statistical facts regarding infection and transmission, fin-de-siècle artistic and textual representations of syphilis relied extensively on configurations of the feminine body to incarnate their perceptions of the affliction.

In this paper, I investigate how cultural productions, namely literature and the visual arts between the 1880s and the 1910s address the epidemic of syphilis and depict the illness. My reading focuses on Zola's Naturalist novel *Nana*⁸ (1880), Maupassant's patriotic short story "Le Lit 29"⁹ (1884), the dream sequence in Huysmans's decadent novel *À rebours*¹⁰ (1884), and Mirbeau's 1912 essay "L'amour de la femme vénale."¹¹ I also look at Toulouse Lautrec's 1894 *Au salon de la rue des Moulins*,¹² and *La Visite médicale obligatoire au bordel de la rue des Moulins*,¹³ as well as Félicien Rops's *Mors Siphilitica* drawings¹⁴ from the same year. In addition, my study is informed by Maupassant's testimonials and correspondence with his friends.

In my research, I am interested in learning to what extent the works perused resist, reproduce, regulate or sublimate venereal disease.¹⁵ My examination lends particular attention to the following questions: How do gender and class play into the iconography of syphilis? Who are the perceived victims and perpetrators? How are the transmitters of the infection pathologized? What are the artistic devices and narrative strategies used to allude to the illness without naming or figuring it? Can the disease be contained and expunged through its representation or is the ailment allegorized? And finally, I will consider whether attitudes, perceptions and preventions related to syphilis change and evolve over the course of the nineteenth century and in what ways these developments are acknowledged in the written and visual representations of the fin de siècle.

The theme of contagion and poisoning linked to prostitution appears in Zola's 1880 bestseller, where the eponymous heroine, the beautiful courtesan Nana is perceived as a carrier of infection

⁵ For a historical survey of prostitution in nineteenth-century France, see Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de noce: misère sexuelle et prostitution aux XIXe et XXe siècles* (Paris: Aubier, 1978). For a recent investigation of the theme, see Marjorie Rousseau-Minier, *Des filles sans joie: Le roman de la prostituée dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle* (Genève: Droz, 2018).

⁶ See Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in 19th-Century France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 234.

⁷ Bernheimer 312.

⁸ Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968). Citations from this text will be taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets.

⁹ Guy de Maupassant, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 12 (Paris: M. Gonon, 1969). This edition will serve as reference for citations from this text, with page numbers in brackets.

¹⁰ J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978). All citations from the text will refer to this edition, with page numbers in brackets.

¹¹ Octave Mirbeau, "L'amour de la femme vénale," trans. Alexandre Lévy (Paris: Indigo-Côté-Femmes, 1994). Citations will refer to this edition with page numbers in brackets.

¹² Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins*, Musée Toulouse Lautrec, Albi. For a discussion or an image of *Au Salon de la rue des Moulins* please visit the public domain site <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Au_Salon_de_la_rue_des_Moulins_-_Henri_de_Toulouse_Lautrec.jpg>.

¹³ Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, *La Visite médicale obligatoire au bordel de la rue des Moulins*, Musée Toulouse Lautrec, Albi. For a public domain image of *La Visite médicale obligatoire au bordel de la rue des Moulins*, please refer to <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lautrec_rue_des_moulins_the_medical_inspection_1894.jpg>.

¹⁴ Félicien Rops, *Mors syphilitica*, Musée Rops, Namur. See <<https://rops.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/items/show/107>>.

¹⁵ Within the context of my study, I sometimes refer to syphilis as "venereal disease" or "sexually transmitted disease" interchangeably for stylistic purposes, even though syphilis is only one of many such ailments.

and an agent of fatality by the men around her. In his newspaper article “La Mouche d’or,” the journalist Fauchery features the working class Nana without disclosing her name, as a golden fly emerging from filth who picks up death from roadside carrions and transmits it to men: “une mouche couleur de soleil, envolée de l’ordure [...] qui prenait la mort sur les charognes tolérées le long des chemins, et qui, bourdonnante, dansante jetant un éclat de pierreries, empoisonnait les hommes” (215).

Nana’s ardent admirer, the devout Count Muffat, readily grasps the allegory of the golden fly and its relationship to his blond mistress when he reads the misogynistic column in Nana’s boudoir, as does Daguene, whose mocking air betrays his complicity with Fauchery’s scornful view of the courtesan. Nana on the other hand remains blissfully ignorant of the true significance of the metaphor, failing to comprehend her demeaning portrayal as a disease-spreading insect.

From its inception, Zola’s narrative presents Nana – “très grande, très forte pour ses dix-huit ans” (42) – as an embodied subject whose full-figured physique already shows marks of excess and hints of corruption through its premature development, well in advance of her adolescent years. The opening chapter of *Nana* takes us to the stalls of the Théâtre des Variétés, where a throng of eager spectators from all walks of life awaits the actress’s début as La Blonde Vénus, and discovers “autre chose” (43), other than talent, in Nana’s performance:

Comme elle [Nana] terminait le couplet, la voix lui manqua complètement, elle comprit qu’elle n’irait jamais au bout. Alors, sans s’inquiéter, elle donna un coup de hanche qui dessina une rondeur sous la mince tunique [...]. Des applaudissements éclatèrent. Tout de suite, elle s’était tournée, remontant, en faisant voir sa nuque où des cheveux roux mettaient comme une toison de bête; et les applaudissements devinrent furieux. (43-44)

The wild applause at the performer’s corporeal humor and bawdy gesticulation leaves little doubt about the vital carnality of Nana’s stage success. Curiously, Nana’s seductive appeal not only emanates from the flaunting of her feminine flesh, but also exudes from her animal characteristics. Zoomorphic terms abound throughout *Nana*, where the red-headed actress resembles a bear: “elle l’amusait en ours, avec sa peau blanche et sa crinière de poils roux” (412). She is compared to “une jument parfaite” (54), assumes “des souplesses de couleuvre” (297) and displays “une distinction nerveuse de chatte de race” (297). Likewise, Nana’s tawny hair, an integral part of her sexual persona, is frequently described as “toison” (44), “poil” (216), “duvet” (217), “queue” (328), and “crinière” (412). It is indeed revealing that in Zola’s novel, Nana’s excessive libido along with her luxuriant hair – this latter a marker of her unbridled licentiousness – cannot be conveyed via feminine parameters alone, and instead must rely on bestial terms and analogies to find articulation. In addition to communicating her sexual proclivity, animal metaphors moreover evoke Nana’s abjection and moral degradation as exemplified by the lethal “mouche d’or” imagery.

In *Idols of Perversity*,¹⁶ Bram Dijkstra views the underlying misogyny embedded in the negative and demeaning portrayals of courtesans by the upper echelons of society as an expression of thwarted affluent-male fantasy about working-class women:

The indolent sons of the bourgeoisie watched the hard-working women of the factories and seemed to see a promise of sexual freedom and spontaneity which they sought again in the arms of the prostitutes. Inevitably they were disappointed, and just as inevitably,

¹⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

they blamed the women, coming to see them, as Zola did in *Nana*, golden flies, predatory sirens, atavistic evils.¹⁷

Dijkstra claims that “a confused mixture of sexual desire and guilt, a vague sense of class difference and exploitation, and a desire to hold on to privilege gained”¹⁸ caused bourgeois men to view prostitutes as the proletariat’s tool for revenge against the wealthy. References to noxious bugs occur again toward the end of Zola’s novel, when many of *Nana*’s lovers and admirers suffer financial ruin and destitution due to the courtesan’s mindless extravagance and excessive love of luxury: “Son œuvre de ruine et de mort était faite, la mouche envolée de l’ordure des faubourgs, apportant le ferment des pourritures sociales, avait empoisonné ces hommes, rien qu’à se poser sur eux” (422). Syphilis is never mentioned by name in Zola’s naturalist novel. One can nevertheless safely assume that Satin, the courtesan with whom the jealous Muffat suspects *Nana* of having a lesbian relationship, expires from syphilis, judging from *Nana*’s reaction after finding out about the nature of her friend’s disease and where she has gone off to die: “elle s’était fâchée en apprenant la maladie de Satin, disparue depuis quinze jours, et en train de crever à Lariboisière” (419). As for *Nana*, her sex becomes a metonymy for the fin-de-siècle social disease which claimed so many victims as it flaunts itself over the bodies of its prey like the rising sun – “dans une gloire, son sexe montait et rayonnait sur ses victimes étendues, pareil à un soleil levant qui éclaire un champ de carnage” (422). It is indeed revealing that even when she is on the verge of creating new life, *Nana* experiences morbid anxiety and depression, “ses peurs nerveuses, ses humeurs noires” (363), at the discovery of “cette maternité grave” (363). Not only does her unexpected pregnancy leave *Nana* feeling “dérangée dans son sexe” (363), but her power of procreation is further diminished through the juxtaposition of her fertile womb and allusions to its ability to sow death and destruction – “cette vie donnée au milieu de toutes les morts qu’elle semait autour d’elle” (363).

At the conclusion of Zola’s narrative, *Nana* dies disfigured – “les pustules avaient envahi la figure entière” (438) – symbolically branding her as a whore. Curiously however, despite “ce masque horrible et grotesque du néant” (439), which closely resembles the outward appearance of a syphilitic eruption, *Nana* does not perish from “la grande vérole” as one might expect but from “la petite vérole” (432), or small pox contracted from her dying child: “un bébé plein de mal, et qui avait l’air si vieux et si triste” (432), the tainted fruit of her promiscuous lifestyle. In his insightful article, Leonard Koos analyses *Nana*’s bodily dissolution and disfigurement in Zola’s “post-mortem image of his courtesan.”¹⁹ Koos argues that while “the official cause of death is small pox (la petite vérole), ‘Vénus se décomposait’ in terms that unambiguously refer to the nosological representation of syphilis (particularly in the image of the decomposing face).”²⁰ Furthermore, Koos adds that *Nana*’s putrid flesh “informs upon Zola’s projection of the courtesan’s alleged infection onto the body politic.”²¹ Nevertheless, Koos credits Zola with “historiographical veracity,”²² since, diagnostically, *Nana*’s death refers to the smallpox outbreak in 1870. While, during her lifetime, the gilded courtesan materialized figuratively as a noxious bug in Fauchery’s scathing article, in death, *Nana*’s tainted remains are transformed into a literal

¹⁷ Dijkstra 357.

¹⁸ Dijkstra 358.

¹⁹ Leonard R. Koos, “Damaged Literary Goods: Telling the Tale of Syphilis in Nineteenth-Century France,” *Dalhousie French Studies* 80 (Fall 2007): 50.

²⁰ Koos 50.

²¹ Koos 50.

²² Koos 50.

threat of contagion, and become a conceivable health risk for her caregivers, causing Mignon to express justifiable anxieties about Rose's welfare: "Voilà deux jours que je ne peux pas arracher Rose de là haut... C'est stupide à la fin de risquer sa peau ainsi! Elle sera gentille si elle y passe avec des trous dans la figure! Ça nous arrangera bien" (427). In a cruel echo of Fauchery's metaphorical portrayal of the courtesan's toxic effect on her entourage, the threat of a pock-marked face turns out to be Nana's final legacy to her friends, allies, and various sources of support.

Written a few years after *Nana*, Maupassant's touching short story "Le lit 29" also features a prostitute, and recounts a tragic tale of vengeance where a lady of the night uses syphilis as an instrument of her revenge against the men who have wronged her. Maupassant's 1884 narrative opens with the picture of someone passing on the street, where the ambulatory figure turns out to be that of a man:

Quand le capitaine Épivent passait dans la rue, toutes les femmes se retournaient. Il présentait vraiment le type du bel officier de hussards. Aussi paradait-il toujours et se pavanait-il sans cesse, fier et préoccupé de sa cuisse, de sa taille, et de sa moustache. Il les avait superbes, d'ailleurs. (43)

Flaunting his manly body primarily for the pleasure of female spectation, the attractive Captain struts around the neighborhood in his regimental finery. Despite the pleasing horseman's flagrant exhibitionism, his undisputed success with the opposite sex, and his many amorous conquests, interestingly the handsome Épivent remains free from the virus, while his mistress Irma succumbs to syphilis after being violated by enemy soldiers during the Franco-Prussian war. "C'est ces salauds de Prussiens. Ils m'ont prise presque de force et ils m'ont empoisonnée" (51), the dying Irma admits to her lover when she summons him to the civil hospital after the war. In stark contrast to the majority of fin-de-siècle representations which held the female prostitute responsible for the spread of venereal infection, Maupassant's short story imputes the contamination to masculine agency, namely to the opposing army. When asked why she neglected to seek treatment for her condition, Irma informs Épivent that she wanted to avenge her illness – "j'ai voulu me venger" (52), she claims, by infecting as many members of the Prussian military as she could. She proudly adds that she has succeeded in her plan: "et je les ai empoisonnés aussi tous, tous le plus que j'ai pu" (52). Épivent's direct question to Irma – "tu ne t'es donc pas soignée?" (52) – acknowledges the availability of treatment for the disease during that time. In fact, anti-syphilis drugs and antidotes like Gilbert's syrup, Ricord's pills and Van Swieten's liqueur were the rage of the fin de siècle.²³

An ambiance of decay and putrefaction pervades the syphilis ward where the robust Captain goes to find his ailing mistress: "Les autres malades le dévisageaient et il croyait sentir une odeur de pourriture, une odeur de chair gâtée et d'infamie dans ce dortoir plein de filles atteintes du mal ignoble et terrible" (52). It is ironic that even in this rank dormitory of disease and fetidness, the handsome captain invites the feminine gaze and is ogled – "dévisageaient" (52) – by the syphilitic women patients. Leonard Koos points out that in Maupassant's short story, Irma's revenge and syphilis "are inextricably linked as fundamental factors"²⁴ in advancing the plot. Koos remarks that recounting the tale of syphilis consists of a "narrative event" that defies "control or containment" and eventually replaces other "social narratives such as those of

²³ Bruno Halioua, "Comment la syphilis emporta Maupassant," *La Revue du Praticien* 53 (2003): 1387.

²⁴ Koos 49.

genealogy, gender, [...] tradition, and so forth.”²⁵ As the syphilis story emerges, “narrative authority” is disrupted by “a pathologizing effect on textuality.”²⁶ Indeed the handsome Épivent’s combat history and reputation for sexual exploits are usurped by Irma’s claim that she has wiped out more Prussians with her disease than the captain ever killed in the battlefield. Koos claims that ultimately, Épivent’s conquests are obliterated and “forever tainted by Irma’s syphilis.”²⁷ Nonetheless, Maupassant’s gentle portrayal of the syphilitic prostitute with her noble patriotic goals remains one of the more tender and compassionate renditions of the theme in fin-de-siècle cultural production.

Much like his character Épivent, Maupassant was also popular with the ladies, but whereas the fictional captain narrowly escapes contamination, the real-life author contracted syphilis from a boating companion at the age of twenty-seven.²⁸ In a letter to his friend Pinchon, written in 1877, Maupassant admits that he has the dreaded venereal disease and expresses the irony of therefore ceasing to be afraid of catching it:

Tu ne devineras jamais la merveilleuse découverte que mon médecin vient de faire en moi [...] La vérole [...] J’ai la vérole, enfin la vraie, pas la misérable chaude-pisse, pas l’ecclésiastique cristalline [...] non, la grande vérole, celle dont est mort François 1er. Et j’en suis fier, malheur [...], j’ai la vérole, par conséquent je n’ai plus peur de l’attraper.²⁹

In his article “Comment la syphilis emporta Maupassant,” Bruno Halioua reports that Maupassant underwent an arsenic and potassium iodine treatment for his condition which he had to stop due to digestive trouble, leading his doctor to recommend hydrotherapy – “une cure d’eaux sulfatées”³⁰ instead. During this period Maupassant is also prone to spa-hopping, moving from one “station thermale”³¹ to another. In his correspondence with his friends, Maupassant not only complains of losing tufts of hair and recurring migraines, but is also concerned about his failing eyesight. In 1880, he writes to Flaubert: “je n’y vois presque plus de l’œil droit”³² and in his 1881 letter to Pinchon he humorously warns his friend: “t’épate pas si ce n’est pas mon écriture, j’ai un œil qui dit Zola à l’autre.”³³ Despite his humorous self-portrait, Maupassant’s condition deteriorates leaving him in severe pain and deep anxiety. Halioua describes the writer’s physical and mental state in the following words: “Maupassant se plaint à longueur de journée de terribles névralgies crâniennes et oculaires, d’une diminution de sa vision et de multiples hallucinations autoscopiques et auditives. Il vit dans la hantise de sombrer dans la folie.”³⁴

While Maupassant’s letters communicate the progression of his debilitating disease in terms of actual symptoms and his short story evokes the venereal disease through the representation of an infected courtesan, Huysmans’s 1884 novel *À rebours* confronts the fin-de-siècle anxiety about the syphilis epidemic metaphorically. In this decadent narrative, after collecting rare and exotic plants emulating rotting flesh – “chairs en pourriture” (137) – for his hot house, the duke Floressas des Esseintes associates the putrid flowers with the age-old virus that has been gnawing

²⁵ Koos 49.

²⁶ Koos 49.

²⁷ Koos 50.

²⁸ See Halioua 1386.

²⁹ See Halioua 1386.

³⁰ Halioua 1386.

³¹ Halioua 1387.

³² Halioua 1387.

³³ Halioua 1387.

³⁴ Halioua 1388.

away at humanity since time immemorial. “Tout n’est que syphilis” (137), the duke muses to himself as he reflects on the questions of heredity and transmission – “de père en fils, toutes les créatures se transmettaient l’inusable héritage” (137). He lets his mind dwell on the topic of this “éternelle maladie qui a ravagé l’ancêtre de l’homme” (137). Des Esseintes’s cultivation of horticultural monstrosities combined with his speculations about syphilis provoke a haunting nightmare featuring the venereal disease. In *Les Filles de noce*, Alain Corbin explains that towards the end of the nineteenth century, before taking shape as an object of propaganda within public opinion, the fear of syphilis, in tandem with prostitution, becomes steeped in the prevalent anxieties of the period: “le péril vénérien porte déjà en lui, comme la prostitution avec laquelle il tend à se confondre dans les esprits, les angoisses majeures du temps concernant la santé, le sexe, la population et la menace prolétarienne.”³⁵ In the disturbing dream sequence of *À rebours*, a strange and sexless rider on horseback appears in the horizon. “Cette figure ambiguë, sans sexe” (139) with bony arms and cold, blue eyes fixes its stare on the duke and paralyzes him with fear – “l’affreux regard s’attachait sur des Esseintes, le pénétrait, le glaçait jusqu’aux moelles” (139). The dreamer eventually unravels the identity of the deathlike apparition and correctly deduces it to be the incarnation of Syphilis: “Il avait devant les yeux l’image de la Grande Vérole” (139).

In his seminal text *Figures of Ill Repute*, Charles Bernheimer argues that “Huysmans’s vision of rampant organic degeneration” has its fantasmatic “origin in the horror of castration” which identifies “female sexuality with the organic basis of nature itself” and views “that basis as morbidly diseased.”³⁶ And indeed the dream in *À rebours* closes with a misogynistic vision of symbolic castration as des Esseintes senses dark floral clusters resembling misshapen male genitalia – “de noirs amorphophallus” (141) – sprouting at his touch, and sees blooming “sous les cuisses à l’air” (141), the gaping wound of the wild *Nidularium*, “qui baillait en saignant dans des lames de sabre” (141).

Whereas *À rebours*’s oneiric insertion offers an allegorization of syphilis, Félicien Rops’s 1894 etchings and drawings entitled *Mors Syphilitica* attempt to mythologize the disease. In Rops’s macabre lithographs, syphilis appears as a grinning, bony effigy of a woman standing at a doorway with a looming blade behind her. Through the emaciated, quasi-skeletal female figure carrying a scythe resembling the pale rider of des Esseintes’s dream, the decadent engravings articulate a gendered conceptualization of the sexually transmitted illness. As Bram Dijkstra points out, “in the visual vocabulary of the artists of the turn of the century the time-honored representation of death as an old man carrying a scythe was [...] replaced by the image of death as a woman or as in the case of Rops, by a macabre feminized carcass.”³⁷

Félicien Rops who was reputedly the highest paid illustrator in Paris in the 1870s, featured skeletons in a series of works spanning three decades. Beginning with the artist’s execution of the frontispiece of Baudelaire’s *Les Épaves* in 1866 where the tree of good and evil emerges as an ossified human body, calcified figures and crystallographic forms recurred frequently in Rops’s macabre illustrations. In addition to *Mors Syphilitica* which depicts death masquerading as a prostitute, skeletal bodies can also be found in the artist’s *La Mort qui danse*, *La Mort au bal*, and *La Parodie humaine*. Similarly to *Mors Syphilitica* which portrays the grim reaper posing as a lady of the night in an open doorway, *La Parodie humaine* from 1878 also warns of syphilitic threat via the personification of death disguised as an attractive, fashionably attired woman. In commenting on Rops’s predilection for representing human carcasses in his artwork,

³⁵ Corbin 368.

³⁶ Bernheimer 248.

³⁷ Dijkstra 360.

Victoria James argues that “some disturbing pieces take those moral X-rays to the extreme, showing the literal bare bones of their rotten-through subject.”³⁸ James substantiates her claim by citing the etcher’s *La Mort qui danse* and *Naturalia* as examples: “Dancing Death” (c.1865), is a skull-faced but full-breasted figure in elbow gloves lifting her skirt. Even nastier is “Naturalia” (1875), a skeleton below and, from her corset up an attractive, mascara’d blonde.³⁹

In the same vein, while crediting Rops with “marvelously accurate draughtsmanship and brilliant technique,” in “Syphilis in art,” R.S. Morton nevertheless describes the artist’s social commentary as “frankly brutal” and adds that his work “leaves one in no doubt that he considered women wicked, and a source of evil and deadly disease.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Rops’s morbidly ghoulish and feminized images of syphilis reveal undeniable hints of misogyny, and they conflate the ailment with a gynophobic representation of human mortality and degeneration.

In *L’Histoire de la sexualité*,⁴¹ Michel Foucault claims that the study of heredity in the late nineteenth century put sex, which included sexual interaction, marital relations, venereal disease, and sexual deviations, in a position of “biological responsibility” with regard to the species:

L’analyse de l’hérédité plaçait le sexe (les relations sexuelles, les maladies vénériennes, les alliances matrimoniales, les perversions) en position de “responsabilité biologique” par rapport à l’espèce: non seulement le sexe pouvait être affecté par sa propre maladie, mais il pouvait si on ne le contrôlait pas, soit transmettre des maladies, soit en créer pour les générations futures.⁴²

According to Foucault, sex could not only be affected by its own disease, but could also, if left unchecked, transmit infections or create other ailments that would impact future generations. For this reason, a move towards state control of the human body – “une gestion étatique” regulating “le sexe et sa fécondité” – occurs in fin-de-siècle Europe.⁴³ In light of Foucault’s argument, we can read Huysmans’s angst about heredity and Rops’s concern for the survival of the species as a reflection of anxiety over the syphilis epidemic and the notion of biological responsibility. Foucault further explains that the increased interest in health matters – this “intensification du corps [...] de la santé et de ses conditions de fonctionnement”⁴⁴ – coupled with the growing awareness of both private and public hygiene, “une santé individuelle et collective,” eventually paved the way for social control of sex, genetics, and women’s bodies.⁴⁵ Foucault adds that the pathologization of feminine anatomy, which called for “une médicalisation minutieuse de leur corps et de leur sexe” was conducted “au nom de la responsabilité qu’elles auraient à l’égard de la santé de leurs enfants, de la solidité de l’institution familiale et du salut de la société.”⁴⁶ In other words, public oversight of the feminine body in the nineteenth century was promoted as a means not only to ensure protection of their offspring, but also to secure the preservation of the entire human race.

³⁸ Victoria James, “Félicien Rops: Days of Madness,” *Japan Times* 14 Aug. 2002. Web. 17 December 2018

< <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2002/08/14/arts/felicien-rops-days-of-madness/#.XBguuhNKjPA> >.

³⁹ James < <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2002/08/14/arts/felicien-rops-days-of-madness/#.XBguuhNKjPA> >.

⁴⁰ R.S. Morton, “Syphilis in art: an entertainment in four parts. Part 4,” *Genitourin Med.* 66.4 (Aug. 1990): 284-85.

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

⁴² Foucault 156.

⁴³ Foucault 162.

⁴⁴ Foucault 162.

⁴⁵ Foucault 188-89.

⁴⁶ Foucault 193.

State appropriation of control over women's sexuality and the monitoring of female anatomy emerge as recurrent themes in Toulouse Lautrec's 1894 Rue des Moulins paintings. Lautrec executed the tableaux in a Parisian brothel called La Fleur Blanche, which was one of the most sought-after houses of ill repute during the period. Referring to the prevalence of whorehouse scenes in the younger artist's repertoire, Edgar Degas once remarked that Lautrec's work reeked of the pox – "puait la syphilis."⁴⁷ From the forty paintings and sketches of prostitutes Lautrec completed in La Fleur Blanche, this study investigates two, *Au Salon de la Rue des Moulins* and *Visite médicale obligatoire au bordel de la rue des Moulins*, that most poignantly evoke the reality of routine health inspections imposed in brothels in the name of hygiene and public safety. In *Au Salon de la Rue des Moulins*, the figure of the sex worker lifting up her skirt for her medical check-up with her back turned to the viewer is literally pushed to the edge, away from the focal point of the tableau, and partially cut off. The spatial positioning and fragmentation of the protagonist on the extreme right subtly hint at the marginalization of prostitutes, the threat of syphilis and the social alienation and physical mutilation resulting from the disease. The second representation, entitled *Visite médicale obligatoire au bordel de la rue des Moulins*, on the other hand, places the two female figures lining up for their tests at the center of the canvas. Nevertheless, as in the first picture, the subjects awaiting examination remain modestly anonymous, denying full frontal view to the objectifying gaze. The word "obligatoire" in the title however, suggests that they are not quite as successful in avoiding the scrutiny of medical science or the probing inquiry of public health officials. In *Visite médicale*, the protagonists reveal their partial profiles to the viewer as they queue up for their periodic inspection. The two women, one blonde and the other a redhead, appear rather sad and forlorn with downcast countenances as they hold up their skirts. Lautrec's painting neither dehumanizes nor condemns the prostitutes but simply depicts them as workers undergoing their routine occupational health procedure. Moreover, *La Visite médicale* does not attempt to erotically exploit the undressed female bodies or emphasize the sexual subtext, even though the artist was a regular client at the brothel and possessed his very own private room at la Fleur Blanche. Underscoring Lautrec's empathy for his subjects in *la Visite médicale*, R.S. Morton remarks that the painter is "privy to the tragic, even grotesque, life story behind each painted face."⁴⁸ Morton adds that "of all brothel scenes, it must be the most fearsome," and concludes that Toulouse-Lautrec "could be audacious, not only technically, but in his social comment."⁴⁹ Addressing the rationale behind the health inspection of sex workers in connection with this Toulouse-Lautrec work, Mike McKiernan writes:

The validity of routine medical examinations in occupational health practice has often been questioned. In the brothels of 19th Century France, they were used as a tool to protect the *bourgeoisie* from the social, mental and physical ravages of syphilis. The prostitutes themselves gained little, their clients were not examined and the role of the unseen doctor remains ambiguous.⁵⁰

Despite the routine health check-ups at brothels, Toulouse-Lautrec reputedly contracted venereal disease from a red-haired prostitute by the name of Rosa la Rouge and confessed his illness to

⁴⁷ Quoted in Semaan, Des Jarlais, and Bice 1782-88.

⁴⁸ Morton 283.

⁴⁹ Morton 283.

⁵⁰ Mike McKiernan, "Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec *Medical Examination, Rue des Moulins (1894)*," *Occupational Medicine* 59.6 (Sept. 2009): 368.

his friends. Like Maupassant, the artist suffered a decline in mental health induced by syphilis during the latter part of his life and was institutionalized in 1899.

While fin-de-siècle culture scapegoats the prostitute for the spread of syphilis and sees her as a threat to the perpetuation of the species, Octave Mirbeau's 1912 essay "L'amour de la femme vénale," on the other hand, attempts to rehabilitate the sex worker and rescue her from social stigma. Mirbeau argues, in his treatise written in Bulgarian and first published in Bulgaria in 1922, that the prostitute lives in a society where a woman has no value, and is fully aware of her abject status: "la prostituée sait fort bien qu'elle est une maladie dont la société n'entend nullement guérir" (60). In "Octave Mirbeau et la femme vénale," Pierre Michel claims that the advocacy for the prostitute's rehabilitation in Mirbeau's essay not only stems from a sense of justice, "un devoir de justice," but more importantly, also assumes a radical political stance: "un acte éminemment politique et subversif," carrying the seeds of "la révolution culturelle."⁵¹ Michel adds that for Mirbeau, this cultural revolution provided the necessary condition that would pave the way for future political and social change – "toute révolution politique et sociale ultérieure."⁵²

Jean-Luc Planchais compares Mirbeau's courtesan to Zola's Nana in his "Octave Mirbeau et la femme vénale," and rules in favor of Mirbeau's depiction of the sex worker:

Dans cet essai, qui surprend par la richesse de sa brièveté, Mirbeau échappe aux lourdeurs du manichéisme d'Émile Zola, à l'apologie de la mère nourricière et à sa puissance vitale naturellement bonne face à la stérilité de la courtisane. Cette "ouvrière qui travaille de tout son corps" n'incarne plus un monstre à la bêtise extrême (Nana). Elle ne reproduit plus ce parasite zolien, cette mouche d'or achevant de gangrener le monde déjà corrompu qui lui donna naissance.⁵³

Planchais not only credits Mirbeau's choice of a concise form for expressing his views on prostitution, but also finds his essay less ridden with binary clichés regarding feminine sexuality in comparison to the Zola's depiction of Nana. In her intriguing study,⁵⁴ Isabelle Saulquin on the other hand, weaves in Mirbeau's family history, specifically his marriage to Alice Regnault, a reformed courtesan, and detects a personal note in the author's social treatise:

Octave Mirbeau décide d'envisager le problème social que représente la prostitution à partir de sa propre appréhension de la femme vénale et de sa vie érotique. La ré-intégration de la fille dans le corps social, but avoué de cet essai-confession, est également avancé par un argument esthétique.

Les pages consacrées à la solution de la prostitution ne sont pas lues sans émotion. Le poids des conventions qui a pesé sur le couple Octave-Alice y apparaît en filigrane.⁵⁵

Mirbeau does indeed describe with feeling and conviction the poor working conditions and grave health risks of sex workers in his progressive essay. According to the author, the prostitute visits unsanitary areas: "elle fréquente des quartiers dépourvus d'hygiène" (64). The horrors of her profession,

⁵¹ Pierre Michel, "Octave Mirbeau et la femme vénale: Le complexe d'Asmodée," *Recherches sur l'Imaginaire, Cahier 29* (2002): 50.

⁵² Michel 50.

⁵³ Jean-Luc Planchais, "Octave Mirbeau et la prostituée: Notes sur 'L'Amour de la Femme vénale,'" in *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau 2* (1995): 156.

⁵⁴ Isabelle Saulquin, "À propos de la femme vénale" in *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau 1* (1994): 126-37.

⁵⁵ Saulquin 134.

such as “l’insalubrité des endroits” (64) she frequents and her toxic environment make her ill – “la rend malade” (64). Only the hospital remains to take her in, according to Mirbeau, yet she knows that as soon as she gets out, the same life awaits her. Mirbeau goes on to explain that the hospital however is not “sa seule ‘protection’” – her sole refuge – , and that she is also dependent on other, more human agents: “sous la dépendance du maniaque, du maquereau, du truand et de l’alcoolique” (64). Furthermore, he enumerates life-threatening scenarios where “elle est entourée d’inconnus qui peuvent à tout moment, l’étrangler, la tuer, la chloroformer” (64) while she sleeps. It is interesting that in the long list of the prostitute’s occupational hazards and vulnerabilities, Mirbeau’s essay does not include the danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases from her clients. In fact, like the other fin-de-siècle texts perused in this study, Mirbeau’s work also describes the prostitute’s body as a carrier of mental illness and sexually transmitted disease. In the chapter entitled “Le corps de la prostituée,” Mirbeau contrasts “le corps d’une femme ordinaire” (52) which he qualifies as “une vraie machine” (52) which gives her even in her nakedness the appearance of natural healthiness and decency, “un air sain, naturel et décent” (53), with the sex worker’s deviant and incomplete corporeality which lacks plenitude, and only represents “une ébauche de la vraie machine” (53). The venal woman’s body according to Mirbeau emulates a hellish engine, “cette machine infernale” (53) inflicting paralysis, tuberculosis, stroke, sexually transmitted diseases – “des maladies vénériennes” – and madness on the man who pays for her services (53). While combatting the prostitute’s marginalized social status, Mirbeau’s text simultaneously replicates and perpetuates some fin-de-siècle prejudices and misconceptions about sexual contamination and disease transmission.

However, in the concluding chapter of “L’amour de la femme vénale” entitled “Son avenir,” Mirbeau envisions the dawning of a new era for the prostitute, free of state decreed control of her body and the indignities of compulsory medical check-ups:

Avec le soutien d’hommes de lettres et de moralistes, elles réussiront à faire abroger les lois inhumaines, le statut féroce, les chinoiseries cruelles des visites médicales obligatoires. Elles se feront reconnaître “d’utilité publique” [...] De nouvelles lois proclameront [...] que la prostitution satisfait un besoin naturel; qu’elle doit être délivrée du mépris de la société et bénéficier des mesures de profession sociale, comme n’importe quelle autre profession. (80-81)

In spite of his progressive advocacy for the rehabilitation of sex workers, Mirbeau’s argument seeks to normalize prostitution and the trade of women’s flesh by presenting them as meeting the demands of “un besoin naturel.” To a certain extent, Mirbeau’s aspirations for the prostitute’s future legitimizes the exploitative turn-of-the-century sex industry promoting the abjection and consumption of feminine bodies as providers of public service.

As underscored by the rich and elaborate iconography of syphilis in fin-de-siècle verbal and visual texts, the feminine body, especially the prostitute’s “corrupt” flesh inscribed and emblemized the disease both in public consciousness and in the collective imaginary of the period. It was not until the 1940s when penicillin became readily available that Europe saw a decline in outbreaks of syphilis, and the disease eventually fizzled out thanks to treatment with antibiotics. The gynophobic cultural representations along with anxieties over the affliction and its detrimental impact on heredity also dissipated with the emergence of an effective cure. Nevertheless, the scapegoating of prostitutes and other marginalized substrata of society still persists to this day with the dawning of other sexually transmitted diseases on the horizon, and the appearance of fresh pandemics on a global scene.