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Belle Époque Bacchanals. Badet, Duncan, and the Problem of "Natural" Beauty

Less than half a year before war foreclosed any possible continuation of a *belle époque*, Nelly Roussel made an impassioned plea for women's suffrage and their place as fully-functional members of the Republic. "We want to be 'citizens' the way you are 'citizens,' Gentlemen," she declared,

> "Nous voulons être 'citoyennes,' comme vous êtes 'citoyens,' Messieurs, dans les mêmes conditions, et exactement pour les mêmes raisons. Nous voulons être, comme vous, *citoyennes*, parce que nous sommes comme vous, *travailleuses*, comme vous *contribuables*, comme vous *justiciables* [...]. Nous voulons être citoyennes, parce que l'expérience nous a suffisamment appris que nous ne pouvons rien attendre de toute organisation sociale, quelle qu'elle soit, à laquelle nous n'apportons pas un concours actif et direct."[1]

A seasoned orator, Roussel made her argument forcefully. Women should be granted full rights because they needed to protect their small but hard-won gains over the last thirty years. Women could only learn to exercise their faculties on governmental issues by voting; the rebuttal that they were not competent in such matters was akin, in Roussel's estimation, to the ludicrous suggestion of "an educational system that waits for a child to learn to write before putting a pen in his hand."[2] The most insidious protest against suffrage – that women would lose their delicious and prized attributes of "grace, beauty, and charm" if allowed to participate in public life and politics – raised Roussel's reddest ire. This argument was "the oldest, most worn-out of all and has served to fight our demands one by one, at all levels and in no matter what connection."[3] Her version of beauty had sharp teeth.

As Roussel's speech demonstrates, beauty was a highly politicized topic in Third Republic France, a symptom of the era's obsession with both theatricality and self-presentation. Due to the complex social negotiations around issues of rights and roles,

1 "We want to be 'citizens' the way you are 'citizens,' Gentlemen, under the same conditions and for exactly the same reasons. We want to be *citizens* like you, because we are *workers* like you, *taxpayers* like you, and *subject to trial* like you. [...] We want to be citizens because experience has taught us sufficiently that we can expect nothing from any social organization whatsoever to which we do not provide active and direct assistance." Nelly Roussel: Créons la citoyenne, Paris 16 March 1914, in: *Trois conférences*, Paris 1930. English translation in *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque: A Historical and Literary Anthology*, ed. Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven C. Hause, Lincoln 1994, pp. 279–291, here p. 279.

2 Ibid., p. 286.

3 Ibid., p. 282.

women were particularly implicated in such discourse. Ballet offers a rich opportunity to examine this shifting aesthetics of women's bodies, not only because of the centrality of the body to dance's materials, but also because of the way beauty was performed during the *belle époque*. Scholars have been attentive to these issues in the more popular contexts of the music-hall and the *caf'con'*; dance and music history, however, have only begun to situate more elite French dance of the period in such a textured environment. Through my discussion of Régina Badet's and Isadora Duncan's respective tangles with Senator René Bérenger over the question of the thinly veiled, theatricalized dancing body, I hope to complicate the tidy categories into which historians of this period have tended to slot the female nude.

In the winter of 1910, Senator Bérenger launched an indecency campaign against the dancer Régina Badet. Known for her luminous, irresistible smile, Badet starred in a stage adaption of Pierre Louÿs's risqué novel *La Femme et le pantin*, a performance that transformed her fame into titillating notoriety. Badet had made her name in the opera *Aphrodite* (1906), with choreography by the influential Madame Mariquita. As Samuel Dorf notes: "in numerous reviews, Badet received more press than Mary Garden [the production's ostensible star] herself."[4] Part of Badet's appeal was her attractiveness, detailed in various profiles and reviews of the dancer. In a fawning article about Badet's career in general and her beauty in particular, columnist Solange Bernot stated:

> "Avant tout, qu'on me laisse dire que Mlle Régina Badet est une perfection de la plastique féminine. Ses photographies mêmes ne rendent pas fidèlement ses attitudes, parce que celles-ci, figées sur le papier, ne sauraient dire ce qu'est le mouvement de ce corps de femme, d'une idéale pureté de lignes.
> Pas assez grande pour que l'on puisse dire d'elle: 'C'est une belle femme!', elle est, sans conteste possible, plus qu'une jolie femme. Le buste est fièrement développé, les hanches arrondies, sans proéminences, les jambes d'une forme impeccable, et l'ensemble si harmonieusement proportionné qu'on pourrait la prendre pour une Galathée ayant dérobé les bras de Vénus."[5]

4 Samuel N. Dorf: Eroticizing Antiquity. Madame Mariquita, Régina Badet and the Dance of the Exotic Greeks from Stage to Popular Press, in: *Opera, Exoticism, and Visual Culture*, ed. by Hyunseon Lee and Naomi Segal, Oxford/Bern 2015, pp. 73–92, here p. 77.

5 "First of all, let me say that Miss Régina Badet is a perfect female specimen. Even these photographs do not accurately depict her manner, as they are fixed on paper and thus cannot present the movement of a woman's body, of an ideal purity of line. / Although she is not tall enough that one could say of her: 'She is a beautiful woman!', she is, without any possible contestation, more than a pretty woman. Her bust is proudly developed, her hips rounded, without protrusions, her legs impeccably shaped, and the combination so pleasantly proportioned that one might mistake her for a Galatea with the stolen arms of a Venus." Solange Bernot: Une comète inattendue, in: *La Culture Physique*, 1 February 1911, pp. 71–74, here p. 72.

Bernot distinguished between the generic appeal of a pretty woman, and Badet's catalogue of particular charms: a beautiful bust line, shapely hips, and perfect legs. Indeed, Venusian femininity could not alone account for so much loveliness, and needed to be combined with the sculptured perfection of a Galatea.

So Badet was an obvious choice for *La Femme et le pantin*. The production's strident protagonist, Conchita Perez, had archetypes in Manon Lescaut and Carmen (she too worked in a cigarette factory), though it was her provocative gestures and dancing rather than her man-eating proclivities that caused Bérenger to mobilize his official forces. He was particularly scandalized by the third act of the production, during which Conchita danced for a group of Englishmen "à peu près nue" – paying customers like Badet's own audience, who were stimulated to "la plus grande joie des lorgnettes".[6] While in the end a failed effort, the campaign made even more of a splash than Badet's original performance.

Debates raged in contemporary periodicals. Was *La Femme et le pantin* an indecent and immoral spectacle? Were Bérenger – saddled with the milquetoast nickname "Père la Pudeur" – and his lackeys in the *Ligue contre la license des rues* thereby obligated to toss Badet off stage? The director of the work, Firmin Gémier, commented in papers such as *Le Matin*. "On fait de l'art au théâtre Antoine", he declared, and "je n'ai jamais fait et ne ferai jamais autre chose de ma vie."[7] His attack turned tauntingly *ad hominem* in *Comoedia*: "J'ai la conviction que Régina Badet toute nue est beaucoup plus chaste que M. Bérenger tout habillé!"[8] In the end, the Senator dispatched the chief of police, M. Valette, to render final judgment, though the outcome hardly lived up to the proportions of the scandal:

> "Le chef de la brigade mobile, comme un bon bourgeois, s'en est donc allé au théâtre et il a vu. Il a vu la scène, il a vu la salle. Et mon Dieu, il est parti sans être, paraît-il, trop scandalisé. 'Des pieds à la ceinture a-t-il écrit au procureur, Mme Régina Badet porte un maillot chair qui la couvre entièrement. Mais à partir de la ceinture, le décolleté est peut-être un peu osé.' Et il a ajouté: 'En tout cas, personne ne proteste dans la salle.'
> La justice est renseignée. Tout simplement, ainsi que sa compagne des temps anciens, Mme Régina Badet danse et plaît."[9]

6 G. D. C.: "La Femme et le Pantin" au Théâtre Antoine, in: *Comoedia*, 8 December 1910, p. 3.

7 "We produce art at the Theater-Antoine; I have never done and will never do anything else in my life." [Anon.]: Le sénateur et la danseuse. Une plainte de M. Bérenger contre M. Gémier et Mlle Régina Badet, in: *Le Matin*, 23 December 1910, p. 2.

8 "I am convinced that a fully nude Régina Badet is far more chaste than a fully clothed M. Bérenger!" Quote by Gémier in the article by Félix Métenier: M. Bérenger menace de ses foudres Mlle Régina Badet. La danseuse et le sénateur pudibond, in: *Comoedia*, 23 December 1910, p. 3.

9 "The chief of the mobile brigade, like a good bourgeois, took himself to the theater to have a look. He surveyed the room and the scene. And my God, he left without being too scandalized, it seems. 'From feet to waist,' he wrote to the *procureur*, 'Mme Régina Badet wore a flesh-colored *maillot* which

Other periodicals also mentioned the humble *maillot* Badet sported, which while successful at concealing her body, did not protect her from Bérenger's censorious gaze. Bernot, in *La Culture physique*, described how the audience waited to see the dancer in "all of her splendid nudity":

> "On s'attend, là, à voir apparaître l'artiste dans toute la splendeur de sa nudité … Mais, même au milieu des mouvements les plus désordonnés, le châle reste docilement fermé. A peine, l'espace de quelques secondes, a-t-on pu entrevoir un maillot noir et rose. Et la scène se poursuit, sans autre intérêt pour nous."[10]

The *Journal amusant* was less disaffected in its pronouncement: "Mme Régina Badet, une de nos gloires nationales, est une exquise petite boulotte, roulée dans ses formes, plus lascive que plastique en son maillot académique."[11] An eclectic column in *Petit Parisien* raised the underlying issue, namely the aesthetic status of the nude body: "La Ligue contre la license des rues n'aurait en tout cas, rien à dire au sujet de cette ampleur d'étoffes, qui serait tout le contraire du déshabillé qu'elle reproche à Mlle Régina Badet, dans la *Femme et le Pantin*, comme pour s'attirer, de nouveau, quelques plaisanteries qui sommeillaient, car, en dépit de ses intentions droites, cette ligue a quelque tendance à confondre l'art et la grâce avec l'inconvenance."[12] During this entire exchange, *La Femme et le pantin* continued to play, without interruption or reinterpretation. After it closed, Badet resumed her regular gig as a dancer at the Opéra-Comique, though now with an expanded resume: sometime *comedienne* and no one's puppet.

Before Badet, however, Bérenger went a warm-up round with Isadora Duncan. The American modern dancer staged the Bacchanale section of Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, an old familiar to Parisian scandals. As Carolyn Abbate crisply notes, "[w]hen Wagner left Paris

covered her entirely. But from the waist up, her neckline was rather racy.' And added: 'In any case, no one in the theater protested.' Justice has been informed. Just as her predecessors in antiquity, Mme Régina Badet simply, and to our pleasure, danced." [Anon.]: Mme Régina Badet danse et plaît, in: *Le Matin*, 28 December 1910, p. 2.

10 "One expects here to see the artist in the full splendor of her nudity … Yet even in her most disorderly movements, the shawl remains modestly closed. Only for a few seconds one could glimpse a black and pink leotard, before the scene continues, without further interest for us." Bernot: Une comète inattendue, p. 72.

11 "One of our national treasures, Mme Régina Badet is an exquisite little morsel, deliciously rounded, more seductress than dancer in her academic *maillot*." [Anon.]: Théâtre Antoine. La Femme et le pantin, in: *Le Journal amusant*, 24 December 1910.

12 "The *Ligue contre la license des rues* in any case, has nothing to say on the plenitude of fabric that is the opposite of the *déshabillé* of which they accused Miss Régina Badet in *La Femme et le Pantin*. These tendencies, though undertaken with good intentions, demonstrate that this *Ligue* has the tendency to confuse art for impropriety." Paul Ginisty: La Semaine parisienne, in: *Le Petit Parisien*, 26 December 1910, p. 1.

for good in 1862, he took with him the memory of his most spectacular failure."[13] Scandal aside, the facts are easily tabulated and well-worn from repeated tellings. Concurrent with his receipt of the news of the opera's production in Paris, Wagner learned from Alphonse Royer (then director of the venue) that he would need to insert a ballet interlude; rather than the suggested placement in Act II, the composer opted to augment the Venusberg Bacchanale music in Act I.[14] Adhering to custom, members of the Jockey Club – a rare emulsion of opera goers and equine enthusiasts – would arrive at performances fashionably late, just in time to ogle and applaud their favorite *danseuses*. Théophile Gautier memorably describes this familiar scene: "And how attentive everyone is! Look at them leveling and focusing their binoculars, not those light country binoculars that fit into a jacket pocket, but large military binoculars, twin monsters, optical howitzers that will make future generations think we were a race of giants!"[15]

Wagner's decision to place the ballet earlier for dramatic reasons had other, more dramatic results. The audience allowed the overture to unfold uninterrupted, but as soon as the curtain rose chaos ensued. As Edward House recollected in 1891:

> "Before the introductory scene was half through, the uproar had reached such a height that the actors upon the stage and the orchestra in front were alike inaudible except to those who sat nearest the proscenium. There was not even a pretence of waiting to form an opinion."[16]

But though these histrionics were the ostensible result of balletic haggling – exacerbated by the political situation that would explode a decade later – the actual choreography has left little historical residue. Created by Lucien Petipa (brother of the as yet unlaunched

13 Carolyn Abbate: The Parisian "Vénus" and the "Paris" *Tannhäuser*, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 36/1 (1983), pp. 73–123, here p. 74.

14 Abbate explains that Wagner would have been amenable to a later, Act II ballet, but only after the first several performances.

15 Quoted in Marian Smith: Dance and dancers, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera*, ed. by David Charlton, New York 2003, pp. 93–107, here p. 105. In Baudelaire's impassioned defense of the composer, he too notes this lecherous penchant, though with a much less indulgent veneer: "Que les hommes qui peuvent se donner le luxe d'une maîtresse parmi les danseuses de l'Opéra, désirent qu'on mette le plus souvent possible en lumière les talents et les beautés de leur emplette, c'est là certes un sentiment presque paternel que tout le monde comprend et excuse facilement; mais que ces mêmes hommes, sans se soucier de la curiosité publique et des plaisirs d'autrui, rendent impossible l'exécution d'un ouvrage qui leur déplaît parce qu'il ne satisfait pas aux exigences de leur protectorat, voilà ce qui est intolérable. Gardez votre harem et conservez-en religieusement les traditions; mais faites-nous donner un théâtre où ceux qui ne pensent pas comme vous pourront trouver d'autres plaisirs mieux accommodés à leur goût. Ainsi nous serons débarrassés de vous, et vous de nous, et chacun sera content." Charles Baudelaire: *Richard Wagner et Tannhauser à Paris*, Paris 1861, pp. 62 f.

16 Edward H. House: Wagner and Tannhäuser in Paris, 1861, in: *The New England Magazine* 4 (June 1891), pp. 411–427, here p. 425.

Marius), the ballet found favor with the Jockey Club only after the premiere; William Gibbons has recently noted that it was successfully transplanted that same year into a production of Gluck's *Alceste*.[17] Others present, such as the critic Pier Angelo Fiorentino, were more snide. He described the choreography as follows:

> "Twenty-four bacchants walk from right to left and raise their arms above their heads in a slow, gentle movement. Then twenty-four fauns walk from left to right, raising their arms like the bacchants. Sixteen nymphs follow the fauns, raising their arms in the same manner. Then sixteen youths, who were asleep on the rocks, wake up suddenly and raise their arms as though stretching. Finally, twelve cupids, not to be different, raise their little arms in the air, without knowing why. All these raised arms undoubtedly make a charming scene, but it lasts too long. There remain the three Graces – Mlles. Rousseau, Stoïkoff and Troisvallets. One hopes for a moment that they will be excepted from the routine and do what they like with their arms; but one soon sees that they, no less than the fauns, the bacchants, the youths and the nymphs, will not be allowed to lower them, and that they will end by catching cramp. Apparently the dance of the future only permits arms in the air."[18]

Such derision of *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* illuminates the tenuous position dance practice held in Wagner's totalizing theory. Certainly the composer devoted many heated pages to this component of his synthetic ideal, rhapsodizing that "Tone" and "Poetry" satisfy only the ear, and must be supplemented with occasion for the eye – here dance. Dance, so the story goes, tumbled from prelapsarian holism when she detached herself from her sister arts. Tellingly, Wagner characterizes her debased and solitary wanderings as a kind of "harlotry," a doubly resonant description when coupled with the titillations offered by the *corps de ballet* at the Opéra.[19] His nasty farce *Eine Kapitulation* (a reference to the outcome of the Franco-Prussian war) satirized among other topics the music of Offenbach, whom Wagner dismissed as a hack composer of trite dance music – most notably the cancan and all of its attendant, and particularly Parisian, ribaldry. *Tannhäuser*'s ballet, then, perhaps offers more to contemplate than delectable historical scandal wrapped in a bacchanale. Duncan certainly thought so.

17 William Gibbons: Music of the Future, Music of the Past. *Tannhäuser* and *Alceste* at the Paris Opéra, in: 19th-Century Music 33/3 (2010), pp. 232–246, here p. 238.

18 Quoted in Mary Cargill: Wagner and Dance. *Tannhäuser* and Beyond, in: *Wagner Outside the Ring. Essays on the Operas, Their Performance and Their Connections with Other Arts*, ed. by John Louis DiGaetani, Jefferson 2009, pp. 175–183, here p. 177.

19 Smith writes: "In any case, the managers of the Opéra capitalised on the sex appeal of the *danseuses* by admitting members of the Jockey Club and selected male patrons [...] to the *foyer de la danse*, the warm-up studio where the female dancers stretched their bodies before curtain-up. In this cosy space, wealthy and powerful men could make the acquaintance of their favorite *danseuses*, flirtations sometimes playing themselves out in more private venues under a system of 'prostitution légère'. [...] Yet, no matter how repugnant the Opéra's overt salesmanship of the *danseuse*'s sexuality, it need neither obscure the practical reasons for their sometime prostitution, nor suggest (as it did to Wagner) that ballet at the Opéra was meritless as art." Smith: Dance and dancers, p. 106 f.

By the time of her unfortunate encounter with Bérenger, Duncan had a far-reaching reputation as an idiosyncratic yet inspired dancer. She had a well-documented fascination with all things Hellenic – spending an entire year in Greece to study its ancient culture – though her repertoire also included choreography to such composers as Beethoven, Chopin, and, most notably, Wagner. In a recent article, Mary Simonson has remarked on the conspicuous lack of critical attention paid to these artistic connections: "scholarship on Duncan has largely been devoted to her unique, improvisatory movement aesthetic and unorthodox career trajectory – in short, her individuality. As a result, her relationships with other artists and her position within the larger cultural milieu tend to be ignored."[20] No doubt some of this oversight is a result of Duncan's own publicized attitude toward her art. She penned a lengthy commentary, "Les Idées d'Isadora Duncan sur la danse," for an issue of *Revue Musicale* SIM. Alongside her castigation of ballet and related choreographic conventions was an attempt to philosophize her own dance practice. "Et puisque toute ma conception de la danse est basée sur des formes naturelles," she declared, "puisque je ne m'inspire que d'éléments naturels ravis au jeu des vagues ou aux caprices harmonieux des branches dans les forêts, il est de toute évidence que le ballet doit être mon ennemi [...]."[21] The emphasis on her dance's naturalness and purity threw into sharp relief its distinction not only from conventional balletic practice, but also from aesthetic artifice in any medium.

In this way, Duncan considered Wagner an artistic ancestor, but was always careful to distinguish how her work differed from his. "If we seek the real source of the dance," she wrote, "if we go to nature, we find that the dance of the future is the dance of the past, the dance of eternity, and has been and will always be the same."[22] As Simonson notes, however, despite the rhetorical allusion to Wagner's *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, Duncan's own *The Dance of the Future* suggests that "all art is based in dance".[23] It is not surprising, then, that Wagner's derisive statements about dance in general and ballet in particular in the wake of the *Tannhäuser* debacle did not deter Duncan from tackling the opera's (in)famous Bacchanale section. The way in which she approached it, nevertheless, was

20 Mary Simonson: Dancing the Future, Performing the Past. Isadora Duncan and Wagnerism in the American Imagination, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65/2 (2012), pp. 511–555, here p. 512.

21 "And because all of my dancing is based on the natural world, because I am only inspired by the stunning elements such as the play of waves or the pleasing caprices of the branches in the forest, it must be clear that ballet must be my opponent [...]." Isadora Duncan: Les idées d'Isadora Duncan sur la danse, in: *Revue Musicale* SIM, 15 March 1912, pp. 8–11, here p. 10.

22 Isadora Duncan: The Dance of the Future, in: *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, New York 1983, pp. 262–264, here p. 262.

23 Simonson: Dancing the Future, Performing the Past, p. 525.

unexpected. Rather than portraying a single personage – one of the Graces, perhaps – she embodied a protean combination, what Simonson calls "an abstract amalgamation of characters and ideas: a chorus."[24] Duncan's gestures expressed, without question, the ripe sensuality of the scene. One critic for the *Revue Critique* reminisced:

> "Aussi, bien que nous soyons, nous autres Français, devenus des êtres fort soumis, n'est-il pas étonnant que lorsque miss Duncan dansa l'autre jour la Bacchanale de *Tannhäuser*, un spectateur ait joyeusement proféré le cri populaire: 'Mais ne te promène donc pas toute nue!' Cela déplut à d'aucuns; cela nous a ravi: c'est la revanche du bon sens contre la barbarie. Certes, chaque soir, certains cafés-concerts exhibent de jolies célibataires infiniment moins vêtues que miss Duncan: puisqu'elles ne le sont pas du tout. Seulement ces pimprenettes n'ont jamais prétendu nous moraliser. Tout au plus, une fois traînées devant les Héliastes, jurent-elles qu'elles faisaient œuvre d'art, ce qui, en somme, renferme du vrai."[25]

As with the Badet affair, sympathizers accused those moralizing spectators of ignorance and philistinism. What Duncan presented on stage was art – or, rather, Art – not mere titillation.

Through the grapevine, the newspaper man about town Georges-Michel learned that Bérenger was contemplating censure of Duncan. The journalist recounted a conversation with the Senator in the pages of *Gil Blas*:

> "– [...] Cette danseuse s'exhibe tous les soirs dans une tenue inadmissible ...
> – Elle n'est pas nue ... Avez-vous vu? ...
> – Moi, voir? ... Vous voulez que je me fâche? On m'a *rapporté* cela! ... Ta, ta, ta ... Je sais bien ce que vous allez me rétorquer. Il y a une question d'Art, avec un grand A! Non, monsieur, l'Art peut se passer de ces choses! Et que ce soit au music-hall ou au théâtre, ces *exhibitions* ne sont pas tolérables ... De l'art? ... Non, monsieur, c'est de la cochonnerie, tout simplement. De la cochonnerie!! ..."[26]

24 Ibid., p. 541.

25 "Also, although we French have become very submissive creatures, is it not surprising that when Miss Duncan danced the other day in the Bacchanale of *Tannhäuser*, one spectator joyously gave voice to the popular cry: 'But do not walk around stark naked!' This displeased many; it delighted us: it is the revenge of common sense against barbarism. True, every evening certain cafés-concerts display pretty, unmarried women infinitely less dressed than miss Duncan, since they are not dressed at all. Only these 'pimprenettes' never claim to moralize. At the most, if dragged before the tribunals, they swear to have portrayed a work of art, which in fact contains some truth." Fagus [Georges-Eugène Faillet]: "Mais ne te promène donc pas ...", in: *Revue Critique des idées et des livres*, 10 March 1912, p. 584–588, here p. 586 f.

26 "– [...] Every evening, this dancer exposes herself shamelessly ... / – She is not nude ... Have you seen her? ... / – Me, go see? Do you want to make me crazy? People have *reported* it to me! ... Ta, ta, ta ... I know very well what your response will be. It's a question of Art, Art with a capital 'A.' No, sir, Art can do without such things! Whether at the music-hall or the theater, such *exhibitions* are intolerable ... Art? ... No, sir, it is simply disgusting. Disgusting!! ..." Georges-Michel: Quand M. le sénateur Béranger a le sourire, in: *Gil Blas*, 5 December 1911, p. 1.

Duncan did not let such smears against her lofty Art pass unnoticed. She penned columns for two consecutive days in response to Bérenger's prudish pronouncements. One reprinted Wagner's indications regarding the Bacchanale, which repeatedly detail the "voluptuousness" of the scene; she presented the idea that she herself was merely a cipher for the dramatic apex of the bacchanale, thereby implying the transcendence of her nudity in the scene.[27] In the other, she quibbled with Georges-Michel briefly before presenting what amounted to a petite artistic credo: "Si l'on m'ennuie, j'irai danser dans une forêt, nue, nue, nue … avec pour orchestre le chant des oiseaux et le bruit des sources …"[28] Her performance in *Tannhäuser* embodied her larger aesthetic which, as Sally Banes describes, "characterizes female sexuality as fresh and vital, and also graphically joins it to nature."[29] In that way, Duncan provides a counterpoint to Badet in this historical moment: her nude performance in *Tannhäuser* demonstrates the prominence and fluency of this cultural trope.

As historical parables go, those concerning *La Femme et le pantin* and *Tannhäuser* offer a neat example of the complexities of staging the nude female body during the *belle époque* – a perhaps unexpected reticence in a reliably permissive era obsessed with salubrity and naturalness. After defeat at the hands of Bismarck, republican officials peddled the notion that the decadence of the nineteenth century – at its apices during the feckless July Monarchy and the opulent Second Empire – was responsible for France's fall. The obvious prescription, then, was to get healthy. As Mary Lynn Stewart has detailed, the nation had long attempted to enact better public health regulations; being trounced by the Germans made such projects all the more urgent.[30] Large-scale urban renovations, such as improvements in sewer systems, obviously fell under the purview of the government. But more than any other population, campaigns targeted women as overseers of hygiene in the home, officials having surmised that public hygiene required the cultivation of private hygiene.[31] Initially targeting such pressing issues as infant mortality, these

27 "Faut-il avoir devant les yeux la représentation grossière de ces visions ? Ne préféreriez-vous pas, fixant vos yeux dans les espaces flous, voir Europa aux bras souples enlaçant le cou du grand taureau, et faisant à ses compagnes, qui l'appellent du rivage, un ultime geste d'adieu ? Ne préféreriez-vous pas, fixant vos yeux dans l'ombre, apercevoir Léda à demi couverte par les ailes du Cygne, pantelante sous le baiser proche ? Peut-être répondriez-vous: 'Oui'. Pourquoi êtes-vous là ?' [sic] Moi, je vous dis simplement: 'Je suis peut-être une indication.'" Isadora Duncan: La Bacchanale de Tannhauser, in: *Gil Blas*, 8 December 1911, p. 1.

28 "If you bother me, I will go dance in the forest, nude, nude, nude … with birdsong for my orchestra and the sounds of the stream …" Georges-Michel: La danseuse nue, in: *Gil Blas*, 7 December 1911, p. 1.

29 Sally Banes: *Dancing Women. Female Bodies on Stage*, New York 2003, p. 76.

30 Mary Lynn Stewart: *For Health and Beauty*, Baltimore 2001, see Chapter Three, "Hygiene and Housewifery," pp. 56–74, in particular.

31 Ibid., p. 59.

initiatives soon gave way to more commercial concerns, resulting in a tide of advertisements by companies that manufactured home cleaning supplies and personal care products. Health was now for sale in the form of sparklingly clean furniture and glowing skin.

Yoking together health, beauty, and morality, the physician Ernest Monin published several tomes for women, including the watershed *L'Hygiène de la beauté*.[32] His later encyclopedic monograph, *Secrets de santé et de beauté. Hygiène et médicine féminines*, reiterated those messages, demonstrating the tenacity of such notions in the *belle époque* popular imagination. "La beauté," he intoned, "est un présent naturel qu'il faut savoir garder. Mais il ne suffit pas d'une plastique irréprochable: il faut que la flamme intérieure anime Galatée. Aussi, le culte du beau est-il essentiellement moralisateur."[33] Efforts to instill such values commenced early, embedded in the republican directives of a now-secularized school system. "Fin-de-siècle health and physical education curricula presented French girls in particular with a persistent linking of physical beauty and moral goodness," notes Patricia Tilburg, creating the ideological infrastructure for appropriate self-care as mature women.[34]

Investment in the health and resultant beauty of the female form did not, however, allay anxieties about it in its fully "natural" state. The issue of nudity animated peculiar tensions within republican ideologies of the body. As Tilburg has argued in her study of Colette's numerous near and fully nude performances, such displays may be read not as a flouting of durable conventions to shock the prim, but instead as a "novel but equally exacting moral code regulating the relationship between body and soul."[35] Other performers – such as Badet, and even more notably Duncan – reveal a yet more complex negotiation of nudity on stage.

Maurice Lefèvre considered "La Question du Nu" at length in *Le Monde artiste*. He defended Duncan's decision to dance barefoot and transparently garbed because, in his estimation, such costuming was a logical choice given her passionate Hellenism and antiquarianism. But Lefèvre cautioned that "cette œuvre de miss Duncan est emprisonnée dans un cadre forcément étroit, et ne peut ni ne doit sortir d'un genre tout spécial

32 Ernest Monin: *L'Hygiène de la beauté. Formulaire cosmétique*, Paris 1886; Stewart discusses this source and Monin – Stewart: *For Health and Beauty*, pp. 62–65.

33 "Beauty is a natural gift that one must safeguard. But it isn't enough to have a perfect physical form: an inner fire must burn in Galatea. Therefore, the cult of beauty is essentially one of morality." Ernest Monin: *Secrets de santé et de beauté. Hygiène et médicine féminines*, Paris 1904, p. 62.

34 Patricia Tilburg: *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870–1914*, New York 2009, p. 137.

35 Ibid., p. 156.

qui est le genre classique."[36] His imagination seems to have then gone wild, causing him to lament preemptively the idea of a naked *Giselle* or *Le Cid*, foretelling a theatrical world in which nudity would be *de rigueur* for dancers.[37] After the author regained his composure, the article took a curious turn. Sounding much like the government officials who proselytized vigorous somatic (and therefore national) upkeep, Lefèvre declared: "La Vertu n'était qu'une des formes secondaires de la Beauté."[38] Thus beauty was not merely in or for the eye of the beholder (or, in this case, of the audience member), but instead representative of a greater, Gallic civic imperative. Said another way, what was needed was a reeducation, "non pas seulement celle des corps de ballet, mais surtout celle de la race."[39] In this way, the public, rhetorical scuffles Badet and Duncan had with Senator Bérenger are more than tantalizing historical tidbits; rather, these moments present the discursive complexities and contradictions surrounding women's bodies in *belle époque* France. As Roussel herself caustically, though correctly, once exclaimed "Vous avez raison, Messieurs, la beauté d'abord! la beauté surtout!"[40]

36 "Miss Duncan's work is in a necessarily specialized category, and should not, must not leave the genre of classicism." Maurice Lefèvre: La Question du nu, in: *Le Monde artiste*, 20 January 1912, pp. 35–37, here p. 35.

37 "Je sais bien que nul ne songe à faire danser *Giselle* ou le ballet du *Cid* par un corps de ballet sans maillot – car c'est de cette question du Nu que je m'occupe exclusivement – mais n'y aurait-il pas danger certain à vouloir dénuder nos ballerines ordinaires, même pour les produire dans un ouvrage où le Nu serait de rigueur? Je le crains." Ibid.

38 "Virtue is just another form of Beauty." Ibid., p. 36.

39 "[...] not only for the *corps de ballet*, but for the entire population." Ibid.

40 "You are right, Gentlemen, beauty first! Beauty above all!" Roussel, "Créeons la citoyenne", p. 101, English translation in *Feminisms of the Belle Epoque*, p. 283.

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