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Lela F. Kerley, *Uncovering Paris: Scandals and Nude Spectacles in the Belle Époque*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2017. xiii + 278 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$48.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8071-6633-8.

Review by Stephen Harp, University of Akron.

This book is unique, as Lela Kerley effectively cuts across subfields of modern French history. There is a well-established literature on nude models in art, from the buff male ones of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the beautiful female ones of the late nineteenth and twentieth.[1] There is a well-developed historiography on avant-garde entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] There are now also books on the history of nudity and *naturisme* in modern France.[3] Kerley brings these three historiographical strands together in her careful consideration of the transition from the static female nude models of the artist's studio to the dynamic *femmes nues* seemingly omnipresent on Parisian stages in the Belle Époque.

Kerley begins the first chapter in 1893 with the controversial Bal des Quat'z'Arts, staged by students of the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Opposed to the "bourgeois" norms of society and the formal Académie, male art students staged (nearly) nude women as part of the entertainment. In a fundamental sense, students were questioning the established, if sometimes unstable, barrier between the formal nudes in art and the naked working-class women who posed in artists' studios. The Bal and its aftermath generated some press coverage; as is the case throughout the book, Kerley makes clear the link between mass spectacle and the mass press, a link that those of us, not specialists in either, could easily forget.

Kerley proceeds to introduce the ways that the Bal des Quat'z'Arts was policed after the event, as one male art student and four female models stood trial. As would become typical, public authorities reacted under pressure, in this case from Senator René Bérenger in the form of his Ligue contre la licence des rues. Here and in a later chapter dedicated to moral leagues, including both the Ligue contre la licence and Emile Pouréy's Ligue pour le relèvement de la moralité publique, Kerley reveals the ways that the leagues pressured government officials to prosecute nude performances. Alongside the defenders of nude performances, she considers the critics, a strategy that highlights the choices that French officialdom faced. Many of us who have worked on the period are somewhat familiar with the leagues. However, Kerley's presentation enriches our knowledge, building on the now oft-cited article by Jean-Yves Le Naour.[4] To give but one example, Kerley describes how and why Pouréy advocated women's suffrage; it is a fact

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relevant to our usual discussion about the resistance of Radical republicans in the French Senate to approving women's suffrage in the interwar years.

Other chapters focus more squarely on music hall performances, which increasingly featured ever more nude performances. Like studio models, in the early years performers moved little, as if they were the statues that sculptors fashioned. Over time, the performances became more daring, not only showing more flesh but also doing so in ways considered erotic by both patrons and critics.

Among Kerley's interesting findings is the fact that the elimination of formal censorship of the theater in 1905 did not effectively end censorship. While the National Assembly did indeed cut funding in 1905 for the office that signed off on scripts, and directors attempted to test the limits regarding nudity onstage, the leagues pressured authorities to charge both directors and their performers with *outrages publics à la pudeur*, according to Article 330 of the criminal code. In fact, prosecutions for such acts against public decency peaked in 1908, causing directors to become more cautious. Although the government restored formal theatrical censorship during World War I, one gets the sense that the legal apparatus for controlling the stage mattered less than the desire to control. Here there is an interesting parallel with the lack of laws against homosexual sex in modern France, in contrast with other countries, most notably Britain and Germany. While homosexual sex was not officially illegal in France, other parts of the code, such as Article 330, could be used to prosecute it.<sup>[5]</sup> The "public" that was offended by behavior in either case was often just a police officer posted precisely to monitor behavior, be offended, and then charge the perpetrators.

I particularly enjoyed the last two chapters, in which we hear the voices of a few of the female performers themselves. There are of course the famous ones, like Isadora Duncan and Colette, whose views appeared in print. Much to her credit, Kerley also uses court documents from a handful of the prosecutions in order to try to understand the perspective of the other, today entirely unknown, performers.

*Uncovering Paris* relies heavily on printed primary sources, which Kerley has mined to good effect. Given the richness of the few court cases that Kerley did use, I wished for greater use of archival sources. Admittedly, the categories of classification of the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris can make navigating them difficult given the analytical frameworks of scholars today.<sup>[6]</sup> I wondered whether Kerley might have considered a few departmental archives since she covers some provincial scandals reported in printed primary sources. There are always limitations of funding and of research time, but Kerley found such richness in a few court cases that I kept hoping for more.

Kerley rightly points to the complexity of the French adjective "*nu*". Since French does not have both the Germanic "naked" and the Latin "nude" as English does, "*nu*" can suggest both the artistic nude and the naked body. Students considered themselves avant-garde in claiming that artistic nudes were not pornographic or erotic even while staging women in scenes considered risqué by critics; for them and their defenders, the term *femme nue* evoked both the nude model and the naked woman without always making a clear distinction between them. Not surprisingly, Kerley uses "*femme nue*" in the text rather than attempting to render it as either "nude woman" or "naked woman" in order to maintain the ambivalence over which contemporaries fought.

Those not already steeped in the history of nudity and nudism in modern France may be surprised to learn that both before and after the elimination of censorship of the French stage in 1905, very few women were ever completely nude on stage. In this the theater was not unique; accounts of European “discovery” of hitherto unknown places and peoples often referred to people as “*nu*” or “naked” while extended descriptions also referred to loincloths and other coverings of the genitals. There was a whole lot less complete nudity in the past than many commentators have implied, and exaggeration has often served a purpose. In a sense, *femme nue* was a descriptor, to be sure, but it was also provocative in implying that the limit was being pushed farther than it actually was, both among those trying to drum up audiences for their shows and among those offended by bare breasts and legs: or, to be exact, what bare breasts and legs seemed to signify about social change, morality, and women’s rights to their own bodies.

*Uncovering Paris* is also an important reminder of the importance of the stage in the Belle Epoque, from the Comédie Française to the most popular of the music halls. While some establishments survived well into the twentieth century, cinema replaced many as a popular entertainment.

I sometimes had some difficulty following the book’s argument. In general, Kerley seems to argue that staging the *femme nue* was a way of navigating “modernity,” particularly in the sense that the nude dancers were in fact New Women of the Belle Epoque. At one point, however, Kerley’s evidence suggests the opposite when she takes up the case of Madeleine Carlier (pp. 156-61). As Kerley describes it, Carlier seemed to assert her professionalism in refusing to strip to the extent demanded by her director. She seems every bit the New Woman. Although Kerley does not say so per se, I think she would argue that the existence of *femmes nues* on the stage precipitated a situation in which some women claimed that performing nearly nude was their will—while others claimed that as professionals they could choose not to do so. New Women were thus not all the same. In short, I believe the seeming ambiguities of Kerley’s argument are intentional, as Kerley hews closely to her sources and avoids simplifying for the sake of accessibility. That is no problem for scholars, particularly anyone interested in French art, theater, music halls, or nudism; we learn much from the detail here. But despite the inherently interesting subject matter, I fear that I could not assign this book in class without students revolting in much less creative ways than did the young men of the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

At several points in the text, I thought Kerley repeated the binary between bohemian and bourgeois dear to the avant-garde and obviously running rampant through her sources. I wonder if it might be useful to probe the deployments of the term “bourgeois,” à la Maza in order to distance ourselves from contemporaries’ constant efforts to portray “bourgeois” as a fixed objective social category.[7] For example, while the young men styling themselves as bohemians condemned the bourgeoisie, those same young men seem in retrospect like young bourgeois themselves. After all, they were young men who had gained admittance to the Ecole des Beaux Arts, and who oversaw lavish expenditure on a grand ball that included women in live performance. For a social group assumed to be so stodgy, the term “bourgeois” has been amazingly fluid.

The book needed better proofreading. There are many errors of French. Leaving aside the endnotes where such errors do not distract readers as much, in the text itself lines should read “*garde des sceaux*” not “*garde de sceaux*” (p. 44); “*dépôt légal*” not “*dépôt légale*” (p. 45); “*fléau*” not “*fleau*” (p. 101); “*La traite des blanches*” not “*la traité des blanches*” (p. 109); “*femmes nues*” not “*femme nues*” (p. 193). I’d translate “*puce*” as “flea” rather than “bedbug” (p. 86). On the one hand, I will

be the first admit that I am being picky. On the other hand, small errors can detract from otherwise excellent published work.

My quibbles aside, *Uncovering Paris* is a fascinating book. Have a look--and not just at the abundant, well-chosen illustrations.

## NOTES

[1] Susan S. Waller, *The Invention of the Model: Artists and Models in Paris, 1830-1870* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Heather Dawkins, *The Nude in French Art and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Guy Cogeval et al, *Masculin, masculin: L'homme nu dans l'art de 1800 à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013); Marcia Pointon, *Naked Authority: The Body in Western Painting, 1830-1908* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

[2] Sally Charnow, *Theater, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-Siècle Paris: Staging Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Époque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War One* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968); Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009). On the performers themselves, see Lenard Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass.; Harvard University Press, 2001).

[3] Arnaud Baubérot, *Histoire du naturisme: Le mythe du retour à la nature* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004); Sylvain Villaret, *Histoire du naturisme en France depuis le siècle des lumières* (Paris: Vuibert, 2005); Stephen L. Harp, *Au Naturel: Naturism, Nudism, and Tourism in Twentieth-Century France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

[4] Jean-Yves Le Naour, "Un mouvement anti-pornographique: La Ligue pour le relèvement de la moralité publique, 1883-1946," *Histoire, Économie, et Société* (2003): 285-94.

[5] Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to Aids* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Jeffrey Merrick and Bryant T. Ragan, eds. *Homosexuality in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Florence Tamagne, *A History of Homosexuality in Europe: Berlin, London, Paris 1919-1939* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004).

[6] Andrew Israel Ross, "Sex in the Archives: Homosexuality, Prostitution, and the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris," *French Historical Studies* 40, No. 2 (April 2017): 267-90.

[7] Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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