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Will Visconti, *Beyond the Moulin Rouge: The Life and Legacy of La Goulue.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2022. xv + 294 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. $115.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780813946801; $35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780813946818; $27.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780813946825.

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La Goulue (Louise Weber) is best known today as the Moulin Rouge can-can dancer depicted in Toulouse-Lautrec's 1891 poster, *Moulin Rouge.* The poster made Lautrec famous overnight and immortalized her as a can-can dancer. La Goulue knew that to be depicted by an avant-garde artist would outlast her legacy of ephemeral performances; commenting about Renoir, she noted, "I dance, I'll be forgotten. He paints, he'll be remembered" (p. 161)**.** Will Visconti's *Beyond the Moulin Rouge: The Life and Legacy of La Goulue* makes a notable contribution to understanding La Goulue's life, struggles, and professional achievements. It is a telling case study of an ambitious working-class woman's career in a period in which many tended to underestimate women's, and even more so, working-class women's achievements.

In this first scholarly biography of La Goulue, renowned for her can-can dancing at the Moulin Rouge, Visconti's meticulously researched book presents a surprising portrayal of La Goulue as an ambitious self-made, highly versatile performer who rose to stardom and reinvented herself several times throughout her long career.[1] The book tells the compelling story of Weber, who grew up in extreme poverty, sold groceries as a child with her mother, and later worked as a laundress. From early on, her ambition was to become a star. She began her professional dancing career in 1882 and, several years later, became one of the most popular can-can dancers in Paris and the star of the Moulin Rouge. As the biography details, contrary to common belief, leaving the Moulin Rouge did not signal a fading career. Instead, La Goulue decided to leave the Moulin Rouge and give up can-can dancing at a time when this form of entertainment was declining, to launch her own independent performances. In 1894, she opened her fairground booth at the Fête de Neuilly, west of Paris, where she performed belly dancing. To boost the promotion of her new act, about a year later, she asked her friend Toulouse-Lautrec to paint two very large canvases, which she displayed on either side of the entrance to her booth.[2] She also created a troupe and organized its touring in France and England. This marked the beginning of a series of independent ventures in which she was not only a performer but also became an entrepreneur, producer, and businesswoman with complete control over her performances.

In 1898, La Goulue quit dancing to become an animal trainer (*dompteuse*), and a year later, she acquired her own menagerie. These performances earned her much praise for her bravery and composure. Creating a media persona that attracted widespread attention in the press, La Goulue was astute about maintaining her celebrity, using self-promotion to draw in audiences. The biography also details her social life, including friendships with Montmartre entertainers and artists; her private life, including her tumultuous relationships with three husbands, her experiences of domestic violence, as well as her vigorous defenses; participation in several court battles; and care for her family and the birth of her son. Finally, it discusses La Goulue during the last decade of her life, before she died in 1929. She was a living relic of the fin-de-siècle; her son died, and she struggled to survive in extreme poverty while caring for her numerous animals, all the while maintaining her good humor.

Visconti's notable achievement in this biography stems from his consistent effort to distinguish myth from reality, providing a less biased and more comprehensive understanding of La Goulue as a performer, a person, and a media celebrity in fin-de-siècle Paris. Identifying and challenging false representations and inaccuracies, Visconti grounds his critique of "the mythicizing of La Goulue" in Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence" (p. 14).[3] He defines this term as "a representation that denies or diminishes his or her agency (control and self-determination), such as untrue--or what might be seen as libelous--statements" (note 46, p. 210). At the end of the introduction, Visconti clearly states his approach: "the mythicizing of La Goulue that began in the 1880s has been accepted as fact for the past 130 or more years, without consideration of bias, inaccuracy, and hearsay, a compounded act of symbolic violence that previously has not been addressed" (p. 18). Throughout the book, Visconti analyzes numerous media stories, challenging them through diligent use of sources, including pages from Weber's unpublished diary, correspondence, and medical records. He demonstrates how biased media stories and misleading representations devalued La Goulue, providing a thought-provoking and nuanced understanding of the performer.

Visconti reveals much about Weber's life, motivation, character, and evolving career. He also aims to recover Weber's agency, noting that it has often been "watered down into more acceptable forms" (p. 205). To do this, he retrieves La Goulue's voice, which has often been silenced, distorted, or suppressed. Although La Goulue knowingly used her voice to promote herself, she expressed her fierce independence and bold style in statements to the press, such as, "I'll invent whatever steps I feel like!" (p. 66). She disdainfully shares her attitude toward marriage: "Deep down, marriage didn't interest me" (p. 134). When marrying for the third time, she stated, "I'll tell you, frankly I've known enough men, and I'd rather just have one now." "I felt like being called 'Madame', that's all" (p. 133). She staged her third wedding as a publicity stunt, holding her wedding breakfast in her lion's cage and inviting journalists, among others. Her frankness with the media is asserted when she says, she "'doesn't give a damn' about what people think…I say what I think" (p. 100). Despite the media's devaluation of La Goulue, she never doubted her achievement, stating, "You've sure been someone when you've been La Goulue" (p. 206).

The book is organized chronologically. The first chapter explores Weber's working-class background and various occupations and highlights her rise to fame through dancing. The second chapter focuses on her five years at the Moulin Rouge, debunking the myth of La Goulue's

"overnight" success. By the time she was hired by the Moulin Rouge in 1889, she already had years of experience as a successful professional dancer in Parisian venues. Visconti clarifies that although the Moulin Rouge made La Goulue a celebrity, she, in turn, elevated the fame of the Moulin Rouge. Visconti situates La Goulue within the wider Montmartre entertainment scene and its celebrity culture. Chapter three discusses the period from 1894 to 1898, after La Goulue left the Moulin Rouge, when she took charge of her independent career. She developed and performed her own act as a belly dancer in her fairground booth, which she named the Theatre de la Goulue. Her performance attracted the largest audiences in the fairground and generated the most revenue. Visconti recounts her two years of touring in France with her Orientalist act, which also featured other dancers, her pregnancy and the birth of her son, her swift return to performing, and her subsequent touring in England. Chapter four discusses La Goulue's reinvention of herself as an animal trainer, a career she practiced from 1898 to 1914. Chapter five is devoted to La Goulue's final years as an aging woman, when she approached fifty and had lost the fortune she had made in her twenties. Chapter six focuses on the afterlife of La Goulue, examining her posthumous representations, and is followed by a brief conclusion.

Throughout, Visconti dispels numerous myths about La Goulue as a performer and as a person. Among these is the claim that La Goulue's career declined around 1894, after she left the Moulin Rouge, even though she developed her independent ventures and succeeded in them for many years. Contrary to the belief that alcoholism caused her poverty, Visconti concludes that the actual cause was her generosity towards others. Despite the belief that she was illiterate, the letters she wrote prove otherwise. In contrast to her reputation as a glutton, the source for her name, "La Goulue," it appears that she adopted this image in public while at home she kept to a strict diet. Known for her extravagant nightlife, she also enjoyed domestic activities, such as cooking and spending time with her family, to which she was deeply dedicated.

Although Visconti claims that these examples all dispel erroneous myths, some of his analyses instead exposes the gap between media stereotypes and the more complex reality of La Goulue. She performed her persona in the media but lived a life not confined by it. Since Visconti's effort to differentiate myth from reality is crucial to his reimagining of La Goulue, the book would have benefited from a critical discussion on how difficult it is to distinguish truth from falsehood in media portrayals. This is especially problematic since La Goulue actively promoted certain myths about herself, using the media to serve her interests rather than to reveal an unmediated, authentic self.

This publication includes only ten illustrations, all of which are black-and-white and, regrettably, of poor quality. The abundance of images depicting La Goulue--including paintings, original prints, posters, postcards, photographs, and press illustrations--is poorly represented. This is especially problematic in the numerous instances where the author discusses specific images that do not appear in the book. Nonetheless, this carefully documented, well-argued, and insightful biography of La Goulue also makes a unique contribution to understanding fin-de-siècle Paris, Montmartre entertainment, and its representations. It is highly recommended for scholars and students and would make a valuable addition to course reading lists. A general insight I gleaned from Visconti's analysis of the symbolic violence of fin-de-siècle media toward La Goulue is that women's cultural contributions have not simply been "overlooked," "neglected," or "forgotten," as often suggested, but actively diminished.[4] This explains why women artists

who achieved substantial recognition during their lives have later been marginalized or written out of history.

NOTES

[1] The journalist and novelist Maryline Martin authored La Goulue's biography, written in the style of fiction, *La Goulue: Reine du Moulin Rouge* (Monaco: Rocher, 2019).

[2] Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Panels for the Booth of la Goulue at the Foire du Trône in Paris,* 1895. Oil on canvas. The left panel: *Dance at the Mouline Rouge, La Goulue and Valentin le Désossé,* 298 x 316 cm. The right panel: *The Moorish Dance*, 285 x 307,5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

[3] Bourdieu, *Langage et pouvoir symbolique* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2001).

[4] Although this devaluation is most pronounced for a working-class performer like La Goulue, it also impacts women artists more broadly, including those who, like Mary Cassatt, belonged to the upper class. This is one reason I dedicated a chapter to analyzing Cassatt's legacy in my book, *Mary Cassatt between Paris and New York: The Making of a Transatlantic Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2025).

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