L'Opéra-Comique et Les Maisons de Débauche: Prostitution and Power in Mid-Eighteenth Century Paris

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History 400

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December 16, 2022

I. Introduction: Setting the Scene

"Sage ami de la vérité
Qui paraît noble sans fierté.
H… dont la philosophie
occupe toujours le génie
qui distingue l'humble savant
du présomptueux ignorant.
Toi que toute sottise irrite
Qui te moque de l'hypocrite
et qui du vrai seul affecté
n'aime que la sincérité."[1]

The meanings and origins of this poem, found amongst police records at the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, produce many more questions than answers. The poem admiringly celebrates the piety and intellect of the author's mistress, Madame de Chateldon – yet, the identity of this "wise friend" should have rendered her ineligible of such praises according to the social standards of eighteenth century France. As a woman, the society of the Ancien Régime would have considered her unworthy of an education and incapable of possessing such intellect. As a sex worker, she would have been considered a sinner, unworthy of being viewed as a pious Catholic.[2] Taking all of this into account begs the question – why did the author choose to speak of Madame de Chateldon in such a way, especially considering that he never mentions the true nature of their relationship in the poem? Even more baffling is the source of the poem. Sandwiched between Marie-Madeleine D'Ossemont's reports to the police inspector René

[1] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, Rapports de la Dhosmont.
[2] Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France: actresses at the Comedie-Francaise." *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 3 (1994): 479.

Berryer de Ravenville, the inclusion of this poem seems almost random. It appears to be completely unrelated to the accompanying reports and there is no reason given for why it is included. Perhaps D'Ossemont had seen the poem as it circulated through her social network? Perhaps the employee of Berryer who transcribed D'Ossemont's letters chose to add it in as a reflection on D'Ossemont's reports? Regardless of how it got there, this poem provides an excellent example of the mid eighteenth century demimonde's peculiarity as it challenged the rules and morals of polite Parisian society.

The eighteenth century demimonde – which is to say, the world of sex work – existed outside of typical "polite" society. The demimonde had its own set of complex social regulations – and, while not everyone benefited from these rules, they did create opportunities for lower class women to gain personal and financial autonomy.[3] Parisian sex work occurred primarily in two settings: the brothel, which was structured by a madam who was in charge and her rotating cast of employees – and the stage, which included the actresses, singers, and dancers of the Opéra-Comique, the Comédie Française, and the Comédie Italienne. Although sex work had been illegal in France since the reign of Charles IX, the reign of Louis XV from 1715 to 1774 was marked by an unofficial tolerance for the trade.[4] This atmosphere, in conjunction with the demimonde's separation from polite society, allowed sex workers to rebel against societal expectations of women. As a result, by becoming an established sex worker, certain women were able to reclaim the independence and self-governance that was denied to them by the society of the Ancien Régime. In order to achieve this, members of the demimonde had to navigate a complex system of unique social expectations and an economy that valued reputation and status

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[3] Nina Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges : The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 17.

[4] Gaston Capon, *Les maisons closes au XVIIIe siècle : académies de filles et courtières d'amour, maisons clandestines, matrones, mères-abbesses, appareilleuses et proxénètes : rapports de police, documents secrets, notes personnelles des tenancières* (Paris: H. Daragon, 1903), 10.

as much as it valued money. The demimonde was, in many ways, just as brutal and unforgiving as the rest of Parisian society – demimondaines who made poor professional decisions or failed to act according to their status fell into poverty and disgrace. In order to adequately portray the complexity of the demimonde's structure and the distinct roles each member played, this paper will be divided into three categories: The Women of the Brothel, The Women of the Stage, and The Men of the Demimonde. With this organization, this paper will work from the bottom of the demimonde's social ranking up to the top with the goal of leading the reader through this complicated maze of power imbalances, class and gender upheavals, competitions for status, and fights for survival and independence.

Defining Parameters

The terms and categories used to refer to these sex workers are complex and overlapping. Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, a moralist and outspoken critic of prostitution created a ranked list of these women in his 1770 novel *Le Pornographe*. Restif established two categories. The first was titled "Les Courtisanes" and consisted of: "1. Les filles entretenues par un seul 2. Les filles galantes 3. Les actrices 4. Les petites-bourgeoises 5. Les concubines". The second category, "les prostituées communes, ou putains proprement dites", consisted of: "6. Les filles à partie 7. Les chauves-souris de Vénus 8. Les filles-de-modes 9. Les femmes du monde 10. Les débutantes 11. Les boucaneuses 12. Les araignées de cythère 13. Les raccrocheuses 14. Les gourgandines 15. Les gouines 16. Les barboteuses"[5]. These terms, many of which are derogatory and thus will not be used in this paper, demonstrate the complex categorization of sex workers in eighteenth century France. The first category, that of the courtesans, often applied to performers, although

[5] Ann Lewis, "Classifying the Prostitute in Eighteenth Century France" in *Prostitution and Eighteenth Century Culture : Sex, Commerce, and Morality*. Ed. Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 25.

women who got their start in the brothels were also capable of moving up the ranks to these titles. Even narrowing the scope to the women of the brothel, who are represented in the second category, results in a wide variety of terms. Erica-Marie Benabou also provides an array of labels for these women. In reference to women of the brothel she mentions the terms: femmes du monde, femmes de débauche, femmes de mauvaise vie, filles, and femmes or filles publiques. All of these, apart from the term "filles", are terms which could be applied to the madam of the house as well as her employees. In reference to the madams of the house she lists the terms of femme tenant maison de débauche, maitresse de maison (de débauche), maquerelle, procureuse, séductrice, and courtière d'amour, among other terms.[6] While these terms, in some cases, can be used interchangeably, many of them refer to the specific types of sex work that these women participated in. For the sake of clarity, this paper will choose just a few terms to refer to these women. In reference to actresses, this thesis will adopt the term Kathryn Norberg uses of "actress-courtesan" to refer to the intertwined identities of performers and sex workers. The more general term of "femmes galantes" will also be used.[7] Using Nina Kushner's terminology, kept women, who were women who held established agreements with specific men, will be referred to using the original French term of "dames entretenues".[8] Drawing from Norberg and Benabou's work, brothel keepers will be referred to as madams or maquerelles, which is the French term for a procuress.[9] Finally, the employees of brothels will be referred to as "femmes du monde" as

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[6] Erica-Marie Benabou, *La prostiution et la police des mœurs au XVIIIe siècle*. (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1985), 212-213.
[7] Kathryn Norberg,"Salon as Stage: Actress/Courtesans and their Homes in Late Eighteenth-Century Paris" in *Architectural Space in Eighteenth-Century Europe: Constructing Identities and Interiors*. Ed. Denise Amy Baxter and Meredith Martin. (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010), 106.
[8] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges.*
[9] Kathryn Norberg, "In her own words: An eighteenth century madam tells her story" in *Prostitution and Eighteenth Century Culture : Sex, Commerce, and Morality*. Ed. Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

well as “filles publiques” in order to emphasize that many of these employees were minors, both by eighteenth century and modern standards.

The Actress-Prostitute Connection

The overlap between sex work and performing was acknowledged in France long before the eighteenth century as actors had been viewed as immoral figures since the Middle Ages.[10] While this medieval stereotype may have been based more in rumor than in reality, in mid eighteenth century France, it was true that most performers were also sex workers. One police report on the dancers and actresses of the Opera, the Comédie Française, and the Comédie Italienne claims that among seventy-eight performers between the ages of seventeen and forty, “all but 3 had lovers. The police proposed that ‘ugliness’ was the explanation for two of the unattached artists. The other was said to be engaged in the ‘retail trade’”, which meant that she did not have official lovers and instead would take “any man with money for the night”.[11] This association between performers and femmes galantes was so strong that, for many girls, their entrance into the Opera was understood to be their entrance into the demimonde.[12]

The actress-sex worker connection was largely due to two factors: predatory behavior from the men of the demimonde and financial need. When Sophie Arnould, a celebrated singer and courtesan, first became an apprentice at the Opera, her family attempted to protect her purity. However, the Comte de Lauraguais went to great lengths to circumvent this familial protection; he disguised himself as a lodger, seduced Arnould, and took her virginity. He waited until after they had consummated their relationship to reveal that he was a married count and therefore could not marry her as he had previously promised to do. This subsequently cemented her

[10] Berlanstein, “Women and power in eighteenth-century France”, 479.
[11] Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 43.
[12] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 67.

entrance into the demimonde.[13] Arnould's experience was not an isolated event, although it definitely was not universal – for instance, other actress-courtesans actively chose to become femmes galantes. However, what unified these women was their insufficient salaries as performers, which meant that they had to find other sources of income.[14] Elite sex work had the potential to be so profitable, some parents enrolled their daughters in the Opera with the express purpose of finding a kept relationship. This is exemplified by the case of Demoiselle Allart, a dancer at the Opera. Her file claims that "on prétend que dès l'âge de 14 ans ses père et mère tirèrent de sa figure, et qu'ils en eurent 50 Louis".[15] Considering that Allart's parents were "gens peu fortunés", 50 Louis was an immense sum of money. Allart's situation demonstrates why a considerable number of parents viewed their daughter's entrance onto the stage and into the demimonde as a positive event for their family. Overall, the connection between acting and sex work was maintained over time, not because actresses were morally polluting people, as some moralists argued, but because performers needed ways to support themselves and sex work was the most accessible and profitable option.

In some ways, all women involved in sex work were actresses, regardless of whether or not they ever set foot on stage. Both actresses and prostitutes "deploy a body that is paid to fake emotions for the paying audience's benefit (which makes an actress of the prostitute)".[16] In the same way that the actress feigns love and attraction for her co-star, the prostitute feigns attraction for her customer. This dynamic becomes even more complicated for the actress-courtesan who acts both as a performer and as a sex worker. The actress rarely ended her performance. Even off

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[13] Colin Jones, "French Crossings IV: Vagaries of Passion and Power in Enlightenment Paris. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 23 (2013): 20-21.
[14] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 31.
[15] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10235, Dossier de la Demoiselle Allart, 5 Novembre 1756.
[16] Thomas Wynn, "Prostitutes and Erotic Performances in Eighteenth Century Paris" Prostitution and Eighteenth Century Culture : Sex, Commerce, and Morality. Ed. Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 92.

stage, they performed for their lovers and for the public. The fine dresses and jewels they wore in their daily lives could be compared to the costumes they wore on stage; they both played a role in creating a character. Similarly, girls working in brothels were often expected to buy certain clothes, and thus create their own costumes, in order to impress their customers. For instance, the girls at Madame Paris' brothel all wore matching white chemises.[17] Certain actresses even created stages of sorts in their private lives. When the most successful actress-courtesans began constructing extravagant houses in the 1760s and 1770s, many of their homes featured a "predominance of rooms devoted to entertaining".[18] Even in their own homes, the actress-courtesan was obligated to continue her act. They could not separate their identity as a performer from their personal and professional love lives. As a result, these women were constantly on the stage, constantly putting on a show.

Actress-courtesans and the average prostitute shared many similarities, but the differences between the two were well established. Most importantly, while prostitution was illegal, galanterie, or the act of being a kept woman, was not.[19] For this reason, actress-courtesans were able to carry out their work without fear of arrest, which was a luxury not afforded to the average prostitute. The difference between galanterie and prostitution was also highlighted by the fact that femmes galantes chose their own lovers, while filles publiques were expected to accept any customer their madam gave them.[20] In short, actress-courtesans possessed a considerable amount of personal autonomy and femmes du mondes did not. Due to this distinction, the actress-courtesan enjoyed much more respect than the femmes du monde – so much so that it was common to insult a femme galante by accusing her of prostitution. For instance, when the

[17] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police*, 223.
[18] Norberg, "Salon as Stage", 110.
[19] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 19.
[20] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police,* 338.

Duchesse de Montmorency cried to her father, the Duc de Luxembourg about her husband's affair with Rosalie Astraudi, Luxembourg went to Astraudi accusing her of being a prostitute and threatening to have her arrested. Astraudi was so upset by this attack, she complained to the Duc de Montmorency himself. He then repaid the favor by replicating the same threat to Luxembourg's mistress, Mademoiselle Vestris.[21] To call a femme galante a prostitute communicated the utmost disrespect – this clearly indicates how brothel women were viewed by those at the top of the social pyramid. Although femmes galantes and femmes du monde were both sex workers, they were by no means treated the same way. Instead, the demimonde had a strict social hierarchy with actresses at the top and brothel women at the bottom.

The Special Circumstances of the Demimonde

Before we can delve into this paper's exploration of the demimonde's inner workings and the people who participated in it, a final bit of context is needed. In eighteenth century France, the age of majority was twenty five. Any person under this age, regardless of gender or class, fell under the complete control of their family. At the time, the patriarchal rule of a father was considered to be ideal, and the government encouraged and enabled fathers to control every aspect of their underage child's life.[22] Children who disobeyed their parents could be imprisoned if their family received permission from the royal government to do so, regardless of if they had committed a crime or not. One example of this is that of Le Feron, who was imprisoned in a monastery after attempting to run away to Belgium to marry his mistress, Rosalie Astraudi, whom his family disapproved of.[23] Even when a woman married, she continued to be under the control of a man, since the authority transferred from the father to the husband. However,

[21] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10235, dossier of Rosalie Astraudi.
[22] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 83.
[23] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10235, dossier of Rosalie Astraudi.

performers of the Opera, the Comédie Française, and the Comédie Italienne were considered to be the king's performers. As such, actresses were considered to be under the protection of the king, which absolved any authority that any husband or male family member previously held over them.[24] Therefore, when a girl became a performer, she was legally emancipated and she gained the ability to control her own life.

Although women of the brothel did not have the same legal independence that the actress-courtesans did, since they lived on the fringes of society, they were not expected to follow social rules as closely as "respectable women" were. It was not unheard of for a married couple in polite society to be separated, but in the demimonde, it was commonplace for a woman to leave her husband to begin sex work.[25] The brothel madam Marie-Madeleine D'Ossemont didn't just live separately from her husband, she swore of men entirely claiming that "[elle] regarde cela comme un mauvais chemin".[26] When she did take a lover a few years later, she did so only because this specific man respected her independence and boundaries.[27] Some women in the demimonde also had same-sex relationships. One example is Madame Lemoine who was well known in the community for having relationships with other women.[28] While this kind of love was not universally accepted in the demimonde, its public existence in the eighteenth century is still remarkable and it reflects how this community allowed women to live outside of typical societal expectations. In these ways and more, women of the brothel wielded the power to decide how they wanted to structure their personal lives – a privilege that may not have been as accessible had they not been sex workers.

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[24] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France", 486.
[25] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 195.
[26] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253.
[27] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253.
[28] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police*, 339.

II. The Women of the Brothel

Key Brothel Madams

This paper focuses primarily on three brothel madams: Marie-Madeleine D'Ossemont, Madame Lafosse, and Justine Paris.[29] In her collaboration with the police between 1749 and 1757, D'Ossemont created a detailed record of her personal and professional life as a brothel madam – she even included an autobiography written in 1750. In her autobiography, D'Ossemont makes sure to highlight her family's connections to nobility as she mentions one relative who is "actuellement plumassier du Roi" and another who was "chirurgien de la Reine Mère".[30] These added details, while seemingly unimportant, are actually indicative of D'Ossemont's idealization of the aristocracy. She developed this preference at the age of thirteen during a trip to Versailles with her mother. There, she was exposed to upper class society for the first time in her life.[31] D'Ossemont's autobiography also illustrates her personality. She explains how she grew "grande et farouche" during her convent education and how, as a young woman, she had "l'humeur obstinée et de l'ambition". After her father died, D'Ossemont moved to Paris with her mother where they fell into poverty. Around this time, she became a femme du monde. D'Ossemont's mother tried to put a stop to her career, but D'Ossemont, though unhappy with her line of work, did not want to quit and thus be relegated "souffrir la compagnie des bourgeois". In 1743 she got married and quit la vie galante to be a wife. However, this marriage was short lived

[29] It is important to note that "D'Ossemont" is spelled in a variety of different ways, even by D'Ossemont herself. As a result, different sources refer to her differently. Alternative spellings of her name include: Dhosmont, Dosmont, D'Osmont, Dossement, and D'Osment.
[30] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253. Rapports de la Dhosmont, 10 Octobre 1750.
[31] Norberg, "In Her Own Words", 35. After this trip, D'Ossemont recalls: "Je devenais fière a Chateau Thierry, je n'écoutais plus ce que les Messieurs me disaient. Je les trouvais grossiers et mal vêtus en comparaison de ceux de Paris".

and she eventually returned to Paris where she resumed her work. By 1747, at the age of thirty-six, she succeeded in establishing her own brothel.[32]

Madame Lafosse differed greatly from D'Ossemont. Her records are one of the few that were not transcribed by the police inspectors' assistants. As a result, it is possible to see that Lafosse wrote phonetically and did not write in cursive like the rest of her counterparts. Gaston Capon, a nineteenth century historian, harshly describes her writing as being "faites des caractères hiéroglyphiques" and consisting of "les mots hachés, séparés, [et] les phrases sans ponctuation".[33] Although Lafosse was literate, this difference in writing skill reflects a great difference in class background. Lafosse collaborated with the police from 1750 until 1760. For some unknown reason, she was the police inspecteur Jean Mesunier's favorite brothel madam, and she enjoyed special privileges and protection because of this.[34] For example, when Madame Paris moved her brothel out of Paris in 1750, Meusnier offered the newly vacated and highly coveted space to Lafosse before he offered it to anyone else.[35] Lafosse, unlike D'Ossemont, held nothing back when describing the specifics of brothel practices. Thus, her reports leave us with a detailed and uncensored record of prostitute-client interactions.

The final key brothel madam is Justine Paris or Madame Paris. Unfortunately, Paris' police reports have been lost to time, however she was well known in Paris and there are countless other contemporary sources that discuss her and her brothel. During the height of her brothel's fame in the 1740's, Paris was in her fifties and was nearing the end of a long career as a femme du monde turned maquerelle. Paris was extraordinarily successful in establishing, not just a brothel, but an extravagant brothel, and she provided luxury accommodations for her customers

[32] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[33] Capon, *Les Maisons Closes au XVIIIe siècle,* 83.
[34] Capon, *Les Maisons Closes au XVIIIe siècle,* 83.
[35] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 103.

and her girls. Paris and her brothel were so well known that poems and songs were written about them. She was especially popular amongst foreigners who came to visit her brothel almost as if it were a tourist destination.[36] Furthermore, Paris was rather well respected by her clients. One of her clients, the Comte de Charolais, even accompanied Paris and two of her girls to the Palais Royal on March 2, 1750, which "ce prince exécutait avec une dignité non pareille".[37] Her success came to an end on February 12, 1752 when she was arrested and jailed for "having seduced a young person, age twelve, from a good family".[38] In this situation, Paris' fame worked against her since she may have evaded punishment if she were able to fly under the radar. Nevertheless, Paris remains in the historical record as a remarkable brothel madam who ran an impressive brothel – even through written documents the opulence of her brothel is clear.

Brothel Madams as Business Women

Within the demimonde, brothel madams were usually viewed as protectors and members of the community would often come to them seeking help. One such instance occurred on January 27, 1751, when a former femme du monde, Madame Lambert, brought Mademoiselle Causon to D'Ossemont's brothel. Causon was seeking work since the man who had promised to take care of her and make her a kept woman had suddenly broken off their agreement.[39] In the demimonde, where girls were constantly at the mercy of their employers or their lovers, it was important for women like Lambert to look out for girls like Causon. In these situations, filles publiques usually had only two options – find someone to provide support or perish. For brothel madams, it was quite common to encounter girls in vulnerable situations and providing support

[36] René-Louis de Voyer D'Argenson. *Journal et mémoires du marquis d'Argenson*. (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1864), 28 mars 1750.
[37] Capon, *Les Maisons Closes au XVIIIe siècle,* 31.
[38] D'Argenson. *Journal et mémoires*, as cited in Kusher, *Erotic Exchanges*, 105.
[39] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10253, Rapports de la Dhosmont, du 5 fevrier 1751.

to these girls was beneficial to their business; as word spread about their benevolence, more and more people grew to view them as potential protectors. D'Ossemont did not exclusively offer jobs in prostitution to the girls who came to see her. On September 17, 1751, another woman came to D'Ossemont asking for work. She had previously been working a respectable job in a hat shop but a relationship with her coworker resulted in her becoming pregnant. Following this event, she fell sick and went to the Hotel de Dieu. There, a doctor informed her that she would have to live with the femmes du monde as girls that were known to be sexually active were rarely offered respectable jobs.[40] After a failed attempt at becoming a fille publique at a different brothel, this woman swore off sex work and instead came to D'Ossemont asking for work and claiming to be a cook. D'Ossemont wrote of the situation:

> Je l'ai habillé en cusinière croyant qu'elle l'était, mais voyant qu'elle ne savait rien et lui trouvant l'humeur douce et une apparence de sagesse, je lui ai dit que je la garderais pour peu qu'elle voulut apprendre ce qui est utile de faire puisqu'elle renonçait d'être demoiselle, et qu'en effet elle n'était point du tout ce qu'il fallait pour le devenir.[41]

This woman never wanted to enter the demimonde, instead she was forced into it by a society that rejected her. Even though D'Ossemont ultimately decided not to keep this woman as an employee, her willingness to accept her on her own terms and to give her a chance even after she lied demonstrates a level of tolerance that was not seen in polite society. Undoubtedly, D'Ossemont, as the skilled business woman that she was, did not provide these opportunities out of the kindness of her heart. By offering aid to the women of the community and establishing herself as a protector, she won more respect and influence in her neighborhood as well as in her industry.

Brothel madams also went out of their way to protect girls that already worked for them. In the brothel, filles publiques often referred to madams as "maman", which thus created a kind

[40] Kushner., *Erotic Exchanges*, 62.
[41] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, Rapports de la Dhosmont, du 23 Septembre 1751.

of mother-daughter, protector-protectee relationship.[42] In these situations, madams would usually intervene to "empêcher les brutalités", or avoid brutal treatment.[43] Lafosse reported that during one interaction, she stepped in to stop a customer from engaging in a sexual act that her employee, Julie, had refused to do.[44] In assuming the role of a protector against a noble client, and consequently losing the money from a potential sale, Lafosse openly prioritized the safety of a fille publique over the patronage of an influential nobleman. D'Ossemont assumed a similar role. When Nanette Poisson, a long time employee at her brothel, was kicked out of her father's house for being a prostitute, D'Ossemont provided her with a place to stay.[45] Considering that Nanette had just been kicked out of her parent's house, D'Ossemont's decision to step in as a kind of second parent reinforced the portrayal of madams as mamans. D'Ossemont also acted as a motherly caretaker when she paid for syphilis treatment for her girls. In the case of Marguerite Joli in February 1752, D'Ossemont personally took care of her "pour être sûre de sa guérison" and even "garderait [Marguerite] depuis 8 jours chez [elle]".[46] This specific situation is particularly notable because Marguerite was not in need of a mother figure since her own mother, Madame Ardancourt, was an active part of Marguerite's personal and professional life. When D'Ossemont decided to personally take care of Marguerite, she usurped Ardancourt's motherly status. Furthermore, syphilis treatment during this time was costly and painful; it consisted of applying mercury to the open sores multiple times a day for weeks on end.[47] For D'Ossemont to take on the cost of this treatment was a major decision – but with this choice came a boost in D'Ossemont's reputation. As someone with the means to pay for syphilis treatment, as well as someone who was willing to provide it for others, taking care of girls in this way increased

[42] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police*, 229.
[43] Benabou, *La prostitution et la police*, 228.
[44] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253
[45] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253
[46] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, Rapport de la Dhosmont, du 23 Fevrier 1752.
[47] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 120

public perception of her generosity and her wealth. This attention to employees also created bonds between madams and filles publiques. As a result, girls were encouraged to become both emotionally and materially dependent on their brothel madam. By doing this, brothel madams worked to protect their role and influence in the demimonde.

The roles of brothel madams were not exclusively tied to their professions as sex workers. For instance, madams also functioned as mediators for their community. On October 20, 1750, Monsieur Tremblain, a painter at the Opera, came to speak with D'Ossemont. He was there to stop his younger brother, who was staying at D'Ossemont's brothel, from marrying their family maid, who was pregnant with the young Tremblain's child. Tremblain recounted that their uncle was threatening to disinherit the boy and was prepared to get the police involved if he did not cooperate. After hearing this, D'Ossemont asked Tremblain "que fera cette fille si vous ne lui donnez rien en attendant qu'elle prenne un autre parti?" to which he responded "Ce qu'elle voudra". Upon hearing this, D'Ossemont took it upon herself to negotiate "pour que cette fille se contente de quelque argent et de quelques meubles et renonce au mariage du jeune Tremblain".[48] D'Ossemont's role in this situation was influential as her intervention prevented the escalation of the conflict as well as the suffering of the maid. This example is just one of many, but it is representative of the way that brothel madams, despite their profession, assumed the jobs of mediators during conflict – a role that could only be accomplished if the mediator is respected. Apart from mediating, brothel madams also carried out the more official job of money lending. These madams "extended credit, exchanged bills of exchange, liquidated annuities and when really large sums were needed, suggested other individuals (usually women) who could handle the transaction".[49] It was so commonplace for madams to extend credit, most of D'Ossemont's

[48] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, Rapport de la Dhosmont.
[49] Norberg. "In Her Own Words," 39.

customers were known to be in debt to her. As an extension of this practice, madams would also work with femmes galantes who needed assistance with selling presents from their lovers. Performing this kind of job demanded respect from the patrons who visited the madams – afterall, successfully carrying out these tasks required skill, wealth, and reliability. Overall, when brothel madams dealt with matters unrelated to sex work, they interacted with a wider portion of their community. As a result, they were able to establish themselves as reputable business women in their neighborhood's community as well as in their demimonde community.

For certain brothel keepers, their jobs were incredibly profitable. Madame Paris was arguably one of the most successful Parisian brothel keepers of her time. While most brothels employed around two to three girls, Paris employed twelve. One of Paris' contemporaries recorded that "cet établissement est d'autant plus singulier qu'il y a un portier, un cuisinier, quatre femmes de chambres pour les filles, des maîtres à écrire, de danse et de musique pour leur donner un éducation, et un chirurgien attitré pour les visiter tous les deux jours".[50] Additionally, Paris owned a carriage which she used to take her girls on outings around the city.[51] The opulence of Paris' brothel proves that it was possible to amass significant wealth in this profession, even if one was not an actress-courtesan. The average brothel was much more humble, although most were also financially successful. For example, D'Ossemont's brothel employed a cook, a maid, and a servant that worked for her as an informant. As for D'Ossemont herself, rumors abounded in her community that she was rich. In her correspondence with Berryer, D'Ossemont insisted that these rumors were false, but this denial may have been motivated by the need to downplay her power in order to avoid police harassment.[52] This theory is supported by the fact that D'Ossemont had the means to rent a house worthy of a wealthy

[50] Capon, *Les maisons closes au XVIIIe siècle, 26.*
[51] D'Argenson, *Journal et mémoires* as cited in Capon, *Les maisons closes au XVIIIe siècle*, 26.
[52] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 10253.

merchant.[53] Brothel madams may not have been as wealthy as the actress-courtesans were, but, unlike the femmes galantes, their type of sex work allowed them to manage their wealth in a way that preserved it. In general, even if brothel madams were not ridiculously wealthy, they were certainly more successful than they would have been if they were not maquerelles.

Brothel madams's statuses as business women provided them with the opportunity to work closely with the aristocracy. Many of their customers were nobles and since most clients developed a loyalty to one brothel, many brothel madams had close professional relationships with these men. For instance, Lafosse worked closely with the Marquis Paulmy d'Argenson and he patronized her brothel exclusively.[54] Madams established business deals with nobles as they organized balls and dinner parties and provided femmes du monde for aristocratic men's social gatherings. Through this kind of work, women like D'Ossemont socialized with men like the Duc de Richlieu as they spent time in upper class society.[55] Using these connections, madams also worked as a middle man for relationships between femmes galantes and their potential lovers. In some cases, this role included finding extra work for these women. One such example of that is Madame de Daubigny. Lafosse recounts that "elle est venue chez moi hier me prié de lui faire des parties".[56] Lafosse was able to help Daubigny find work and set her up with the Marquis d'Asselle.[57] For brothel women to have any kind of professional relationship with a member of the aristocracy disrupted the class standards of the time. As women who came from the lower classes and who worked illegal, "shameful" jobs, class standards of the Ancien Régime should have prevented any kind of fraternizing between brothel madams and nobles. And yet, the

[53] Norberg. "In Her Own Words," 35.
[54] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253.
[55] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253.
[56] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253, rapports de la Lafosse, 9 mai 1753.
[57] This name is spelt according to Lafosse's phonetic spelling and thus may be incorrect.

demimonde was not governed by those same rules and it instead allowed such women to upend society's expectations of them as working class women.

Brothel Madams as Illegal Business Owners

While brothel madams were usually treated as respected business owners, they were still participants in an illegal industry. Certain people in the community, unaware of the collaboration between madams and the police, aimed to take advantage of the assumed vulnerability of brothel madams. D'Ossemont writes regularly about groups of men that came to her brothel to harass her and her girls. At the end of June 1751, D'Ossemont's brothel suffered a series of attacks from groups of Musketeers, who were known amongst the demimonde to be some of the most unruly brothel clients.[58] D'Ossemont's retelling of the second attack is as follows:

> Ils ont jeté des pierres et se sont fait ouvrir la porte de la maison. Quand ils ont été entrés, ils ont demandé à déjeuner et des filles, ont fouillé partout et n'ayant trouvé dans une armoire que du Ratafia, ils l'ont bu entre eux et après m'ont obligé de leur donner à manger sans quoi ils casseraient tout. Il y eu deux ou trois de la même bande qui avaient coupé le lit dont un me disait vous devez savoir ce que nous savons faire ainsi arrangés vous là dessus. En disant cela, ils ont cassé la bouteille qu'ils avaient vidée et les gobelets m'ont demandé beaucoup d'artichauts, une salade et 3 bouteilles de vin ce que j'ai été contrainte de faire, ensuite ont voulu absolument des filles.[59]

Twice during these attacks, D'Ossemont sent for a girl named D'Angerville, who seems to have had no choice over whether or not she wanted to work with such a violent and intimidating group. In both instances, the musketeers left without paying D'Ossemont. However, Musketeers were not the only men who harassed brothels in this way. A year later on February 11, 1752 a different group of young men broke into the brothel and started destroying valuable items. When asked by D'Ossemont "ce qui leur donne l'occasion d'être si méchants" the men replied that they

[58] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police*, 235.
[59] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms, 10253, rapports de la Dhosmont, du 28 juin 1751.

had visited the brothel the night before and that no one had let them in.[60] These examples reflect two important societal perceptions of the brothel. Firstly, these men's attitudes reflect the medieval idea of "common women" or prostitutes who were collectively "owned" by the men of the community in the same way a husband would "own" a wife.[61] Based on their behavior, it is clear that they felt entitled to the bodies of the working girls. In the 1752 incident, simply being denied entry, which may have been an accident, drove these men to such anger that they took it upon themselves to violently attack the brothel. Secondly, it is clear from these attacks that these men believed that the illegality of brothels, or perhaps the immoral nature of the business, rendered the brothels unprotected. If they had not believed this to be the case, the attacks would not have been as frequent and as violent as they were. Finally, it is clear that these men did not afford any respect to the women of the brothel as they worked to exercise their authority over them as men and as musketeers.

Brothel Work and Oppression

Through their writing and their business practices, brothel madams worked to establish power over their girls. In D'Ossemont's reports, the way she talks about the process of matching a customer to a girl supports the idea that filles publiques had no say over their customers. One small example is seen when D'Ossemont, referring to a specific customer, says that "je leur ai donné pour compagnie la nommé Dupré".[62] This sentence structure appears repeatedly throughout her reports and seems to imply that D'Ossemont alone held the authority to decide which girls got which clients. Furthermore, when girls entered the brothel, they often took on new names. D'Ossemont also takes control of this as she refers to one girl as "Nanette qui je

[60] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253 rapports, du 12 février 1752.
[61] For more information on medieval prostitution see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England*. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[62] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.

nomme Javotte".[63] Taking on a new name when entering a brothel was almost like taking on a new identity – Benabou describes this as a "déguisement de l'identité, perte de l'identité".[64] Therefore, in using this kind of language, D'Ossemont actively paints herself as someone that has complete control over the girls' sexual labor and personal identities. This narrative only continues as D'Ossemont recounts the story of one mother who came to her seeking help finding work for her fourteen year old daughter. D'Ossemont agrees to find clients for her, but tells her that she will only agree to the business proposition if the girl accepts all of the customers that she gives her.[65] Again, the notion that these girls had no choice in their situation is supported and D'Ossemont's authority as a powerful woman in her industry is upheld.

As employees, the filles publiques were in vulnerable positions. This vulnerability was only aggravated by the fact that brothel practices were designed to trap girls into sex work. When madams provided necessities like shelter, food, clothing, and medical treatment, they often did so with the expectation that the girls who received this help would then work off their debt.[66] In these situations, girls became unofficially indentured. Additionally, once girls became sex workers, they became stuck in the industry since their reputations prevented them from finding legal, respectable work. Filles publiques were at the mercy of maquerelles and the threat of being fired was ever present. Usually, when girls developed visible signs of venereal disease, they were promptly dismissed from their jobs in order to avoid the brothel gaining a negative reputation. This is seen, for example, in Lafosse's dismissal of Catherine Mahüe due to Catherine's development of visible ulcers, which clients complained about.[67] Furthermore, girls were sometimes sent to work at different madam's brothels without having any say in the matter. On

[63] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[64] Benabou, *La prostitution et la police*, 228-229.
[65] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 10253.
[66] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 110.
[67] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. 10252.

September 11, 1752 when D'Ossemont sent Victoire, who had come from Madame Hecquet, to work for Madame Chedeville, Victoire was not aware that she was being sent to another brothel.[68] In this sense, the filles publiques not only had no say over their customers and wages, they also sometimes had no say over their workplace and employer either.

Arguably the most horrific part of a brothel madam's job – both by modern morals and by eighteenth century morals and laws – was the organization of virgin sales. Many parents came to maquerelles hoping to sell their daughters into sex work. While this was sometimes done as a last resort to escape poverty, some parents were interested in having their daughters work up the ranks to become femmes galantes.[69] However, many of these girls were young, some only being eleven or twelve. Consequently, these children had absolutely zero say in the matter; the discussion took place exclusively between the brothel madam, the parent(s), and the client.[70] Since parental authority was valued during the Ancien Régime, parents had complete control over every aspect of their child's lives. In cases where parents approved of the sale, this ideal sometimes deterred the police from getting involved and preventing these virgin sales.[71] In one of her letters to Meusnier, Lafosse describes one of the parents who came to her looking to strike up a business deal. The girl's mother was interested in selling her daughter with the goal of making her a dame entretenue. Lafosse mentions that this woman "se croit elle-même capable de trouver quelque jour un honnête homme épris de ses charmes" (a declaration that Lafosse found to be misguided and naive, which likely reflects how difficult it was for poor girls to work up the social ladder in the demimonde).[72] The mother also explains how her daughter had fought her decision and did not want to enter this kind of work, an opinion that the mother disregards

[68] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[69] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 104.
[70] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 76.
[71] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 83.
[72] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, rapports de la Lafosse, 22 novembre 1752.

entirely. Lafosse ultimately decides not to do business with this woman, but considering that Lafosse was known for organizing virgin sales, this was likely due to the fact that the mother was defying her husband's wishes that the girl not be sold.[73] As a result of this, aiding the sale could have resulted in legal issues or arrest for Lafosse, which she undoubtedly wanted to avoid. As morally reprehensible as this practice was, virgin sales were a key part of the demimonde and catering to their clients' wishes necessitated that brothel madams organized these sales.

Despite brothel madams' best efforts to present themselves as unchallengeable authority figures within their brothels, parts of D'Ossemont's reports suggest that the narrative she tells may not reflect the truth in its entirety. In fact, many girls seem to participate in little acts of rebellion. On February 15, 1753, one of D'Ossemont's girls, Mademoiselle Pelissier, refused to sleep with a client that had paid ten Louis for her. She claimed that when she was not in need of money, she did not like accepting clients that did not interest her, and this specific client "était trop épais et qu'elle trouvait trop court".[74] In retaliation, D'Ossemont did nothing. She simply brushed off the matter, clearly annoyed but not looking to punish Pelissier. While Pelissier may have been able to refuse clients since she was potentially a high earning femme du monde, this situation nevertheless shows that D'Ossemont did not have the total control she claimed to have.[75] In another entry, D'Ossemont writes about Nanette Poisson's return to the brothel after her forced hiatus. Since she was leaving her father's house, she needed a place to stay and D'Ossemont arranged for her to live with another girl that worked in the brothel. Nanette, however, was so unhappy with the situation she threatened to go work at a different brothel if D'Ossemont did not fire the other girl. D'Ossemont did not fire the other girl, but she did find

[73] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[74] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, rapports de la Dhosmont, du 28 février 1753.
[75] Meusnier's list of notable femmes galantes in Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10238 does mention a Mlle Pelissier, although it is unclear if these two women are the same.

Nanette other living arrangements, which proves that girls could find ways to control their situation.[76] Once again, this situation shows cracks in D'Ossemont's presentation of events and suggests that filles publiques, or at the very least certain girls, had more power in the brothel than brothel madams portray them as having.

III. The Women of the Stage

Key Actress-Courtesans

This paper focuses primarily on the lives of three renowned actress-courtesans, Rosalie Astraudi, Sophie Arnould, and Madame Deschamps, although less successful femmes galantes will also be discussed. Rosalie Astraudi, while successful, is perhaps one of the lesser known courtesans of the three that are introduced in this section. In 1750, Astraudi was about twenty one or twenty two years old and was engaged in a long term relationship with the Comte d'Egmont. Astraudi grew up in a theater family and participated in the family trade as the star actress at the Comédie Italienne.[77] Astraudi provides an uncommon example of what the vie galante could entail. Her relationship with Egmont was unusually loving and long term; according to one police report, the couple "sont fous l'un de l'autre et vivent ensemble de la meilleure intelligence".[78]Even after the couple's dramatic split in 1753, Astruadi moved on to have relationships with some of the richest and noblest men in the demimonde. She even received, not one, but two marriage proposals from her lovers, one of which she (allegedly) accepted and used as an opportunity to retire from galanterie.[79] Though these kinds of

[76] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10253.
[77] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 93.
[78] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10235, dossier de Rosalie Astraudi, 15 Décembre 1750.
[79] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10235.

relationships were atypical in the demimonde, Astraudi's experiences were not unique and examining her story provides a different view of the vie galante.

Sophie Arnould's career seems to be a better representation of the typical actress-courtesan experience. Arnould was born in 1740 to a middle class family. She became an apprentice singer at the Opéra-Comique in 1757 after Madame de Pompadour, the king's mistress, allegedly complimented her voice.[80] Despite her family's best efforts to protect her, Arnould was tricked into joining the demimonde by the Comte de Lauragais. The pair then proceeded to have a tumultuous, on again off again relationship that produced three children. Arnould quickly became a popular public figure during the 1760's as she developed a reputation for her talent and intelligence. She capitalized on her influence by establishing her own salon and using Enlightenment ideas to justify her rejection of gender roles. One example of this occurred in 1762 during an argument with Lauragais, when Arnould sent a carriage to his house with all the jewels he had given her, their children, and a note that read:

> I do not understand what you are doing. You have left me alone and abandoned. I am using my liberty - that liberty so precious to the philosophes - to do without you. Don't take it ill that I am tired of living with a madman who has dissected his own coachman and wanted to be my accoucheur with the aim of dissecting me too. Forgive me if I protect myself from your encyclopaedic lancet.

This note rapidly circulated through Paris and the public reacted with shock and horror that a mother would give up custody of her children in such a way. Lauragais was similarly upset as he spent three days sobbing on his sofa, much to his wife's annoyance. However, Arnould triumphed in the end as the couple eventually reconciled and Lauragais set up an allowance for their children.[81] Arnould enjoyed fame and wealth during the height of her career and, unlike other femmes galantes, knew when to retire in order to preserve her wealth and reputation. She

[80] Jones, "French Crossings IV" 14.
[81] Jones, "French Crossings IV" 21.

continued to preserve her wealth well into her older years and even managed to make it through the Revolution without major financial issues.[82] All in all, Arnould represents the actress-courtesans who successfully navigated the demimonde and avoided falling into poverty and disgrace.

The same can not be said of Madame Deschamps and many others like her. Born as Marie-Anne Pagès in 1730 to a Parisian shoe maker, Deschamps ran away from home at the age of fourteen to enter the demimonde.[83] She started out working in a brothel, although she soon became the mistress of the Marquis de Ximenes. Ximenes "faisait alors beaucoup de fracas" which resulted in her "en prit le ton et les airs".[84] When Ximenes left Paris to join the military, Deschamps secured herself a spot at the Opera as a dancer and officially became an actress-courtesan. In 1747, she left the Opera to join a traveling troupe where she married an actor named Deschamps. However, her marriage was short-lived and she soon returned to her life in Paris.[85] Deschamps was famous for some of the most shocking scandals of her time and this reputation made her a sought after dame entretenue. Despite this, her career was filled with ups and downs and her failures were just as shocking as her successes. On September 10th, 1751, Deschamps attended a dinner where she expected to be paid 25 Louis. Instead, her lover only offered her 2 Louis, a rate that she accepted. Meusnier, who recorded the event, wrote in the margins of the report "quelle reduction!" – a remarkable comment considering it was rare for him to openly voice his opinions in the dossiers.[86] While Deschamps enjoyed wealth and luxury

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[82] Jones. "French Crossings IV" 30.
[83] This depiction of a young Madame Deschamps, eager to become a sex worker is the common depiction presented in stories of her life and contemporary documents about her. However, I would like to note that this explanation of events may be unreliable. For a young girl to willingly enter sex work in this way would have been unusual. Entering the brothel was no small decision and was often motivated by poverty or by hopes of escaping abusive homes. While Deschamps was an unusual woman, I still question how much this depiction is influenced by negative public opinion of her as well as moralist critiques.
[84] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police,* 370.
[85] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10237.
[86] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10236, du Septembre 1751.

during the height of her career, courtesans couldn't maintain their careers forever, and her life ended in misery, which will be discussed in more detail below.

Peculiarities of Performing or Why the Stage was Special

Women gained power in the theater by using their popularity with the public to defend their diva behavior. During the eighteenth century, the aristocracy and bourgeoisie attended performances at the Opera, the Comédie Italienne, and the Comédie Française as a popular pastime.[87] Thus, it was crucial that these shows went on without any problems. This is where actresses were able to find opportunities for power. Many of the most celebrated actress-courtesans were famous for their difficult behavior. Sophie Arnould regularly threatened to quit and was often late to practices; she was even known to go off script during key parts of a performance in order to gain a few laughs from the audience. Despite this, Arnould maintained popularity with the public; even as her voice declined one admirer described her singing as "the most beautiful asthma [he] ever heard".[88] If the directors of the Opera had allowed Arnould to quit, they would've certainly suffered criticism from their patrons. Arnould was not the only performer to use this strategy. Some women even banded together to ensure that their voices were heard. In one instance, a group of actresses collectively refused to perform a play due to concerns that the scandalous content would harm their reputations. Through this group strike, they succeeded in having the play thrown out.[89] As a result of this influence, actresses possessed the tools to make demands in a way that wouldn't have been tolerated in other fields. The diva attitude was so widespread and tolerated that, when Mademoiselle Dangeville refused to perform at Versailles since she found the journey there to be tiring, Louis XV accepted her rejection

[87] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France," 478.
[88] Jones. "French Crossings IV" 29.
[89] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France," 488.

without consequence.[90] This influence was even used to fight for political change. Mademoiselle Clairon, a star actress at the Comédie Française during the 1760's, famously organized a performer strike to demand that the Catholic church change its policies and allow actresses to participate in Catholic rites.[91] Her protest was so influential that the government feared widespread strike amongst the theater. While these specific demands were ultimately not met, the capacity for actresses to engage in political protests in such a way is nevertheless notable. Clairon came from a humble background as the illegitimate daughter of a seamstress, and yet, through her status and reputation as an actress-courtesan, she was able to fight for societal change – a feat that would have been unthinkable for any other working class woman at the time.

At the Opera and the Comédie Française, there were no gendered restrictions on who could make decisions for the troupe. In the general assembly, the committee that governed the theater, men and women worked collaboratively as they "selected new plays for the repertoire, established the offerings for the current season, cast roles, chose new players, and budgeted productions".[92] In short, the men and women of the general assembly worked together as equal business partners. This structure was unusual for the time period and contemporary moralists, forever fixated on the morally polluting influence of actresses, narrowed in on this structure as a key source of actress immorality. Many moralists called for the dissolution of these committees. The most vocal of these men was Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne, the author of the 1770 treatise *La Mimographe*. He called for the complete restructuring of the theater, with the strictest rules aimed at reducing the power and influence of actresses. However, Restif's beliefs, while partially representative of polite society's views on actresses, were extreme examples of moralist criticism

[90] Lenard R. Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve : a Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin de Siècle*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 69.
[91] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France," 484.
[92] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France," 482.

(he later argued that performers should be enslaved and subjected to public humiliation once a year in order to ensure their morality).[93] Men of Letters were also amongst those who critiqued these committees. Since the general assembly chose which plays would be performed by the troupe, these committees held the keys to a playwright's success. Writers who had been rejected by the committee occasionally turned bitter and aimed patriarchal attacks towards the actresses. In 1775, after his play was rejected by the Comédie Française, Charles Palissot de Montenoy began to claim that the actresses "had scuttled a play that would have been morally uplifting simply because it cut too close to their lascivious mores".[94] Although this attack was motivated by a personal grudge, Montenoy's critique of actresses and their power reflect polite society's resentment towards the actress-courtesan's influence. Despite this criticism, actresses continued to wield this power and enjoyed a form of gender equality in the theater.

Actress-Courtesan Disruption of Social Regulations

Dames entretenues completely disregarded what was expected of them as women and their careers gave them the opportunity to do so without major consequences. The eighteenth century woman was typically expected to participate in "passive politeness, public invisibility, sexual submissiveness, social domesticity, [and] linguistic refinement".[95] Additionally, the goal of any typical eighteenth century woman was to marry and have a family.[96] Dames entretenues did not adhere to any of these expectations. Upon entering sex work, they ruined their reputations and marriage prospects and thus rejected what was expected of them as women. Many femme galantes engaged in relationships with multiple men at once. Often, an

[93] Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 65.
[94] Berlanstein, "Women and power in eighteenth-century France," 490.
[95] Ann Lewis and MarkmanEllis "Introduction: Venal Bodies - Prostitutes and Eighteenth Century Culture" in *Prostitution and Eighteenth Century Culture : Sex, Commerce, and Morality*. Ed. Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 3.
[96] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 49.

actress-courtesan would have one primary lover that was given priority; this man was usually the richest or most noble of her lovers. In addition to this, she may have had secondary lovers, with whom she maintained less official agreements, as well as greluchons, who enjoyed her time without regularly providing payments or gifts. Some women also had amants de coeur, or lovers of the heart, who paid them nothing for their company.[97] While this kind of infidelity was widespread, the success of these arrangements varied greatly. In some instances, these affairs were accepted reluctantly, but with grace. For example, the three lovers of Mademoiselle Favier would all attend her performances and then civilly decide which man would take her home after the show.[98] Other men were much more jealous. Rosalie Astraudi and the Comte d'Egmont had been in a relationship for three long years between 1750 and 1753, an impressive feat considering that most of these relationships lasted mere months. However, when he caught her in bed with another man on March 7, 1753, he physically assaulted her and took back all of his gifts in retaliation. Astraudi was seemingly unfazed by this rejection "d'autant qu'il lui fait peu de bien, et qu'il la néglige beaucoup".[99] Even when he offered 2,000 livres as a reconciliation present, she continued to see other people, at which point Egmont ended the relationship.[100] By choosing their lovers without regard for their current arrangements, dames entretenues reclaimed their sexual labor and gained the freedom of pursuing the relationships they wanted to pursue.

Actress-courtesans were also able to defy gender expectations in ways that did not connect back to their love lives. Dames entretenues earned the highest wages out of any working woman in eighteenth century France. For reference, "wet nurses were paid 6 livres a month… girls working for mistress seamstresses in skilled and semiskilled positions were paid between 30

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[97] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*; Benabou *La Prostitution et la police,* 343.
[98] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10239.
[99] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10235, Dossier de Rosalie Astraudi, du 9 Mars 1753.
[100] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.

and 100 livres a year. The annual salary of a shopgirl (fille de boutique) at a marchande des modes (fashion merchant) was between 150 and 200 livres, journeyman building 472 livres a year, master silk maker 1800 livres".[101] The median monthly earnings for a femme galante was around 600 livres a month – but that figure doesn't account for the presents included in the relationship.[102] For example, while the Demoiselle Allart was only given about 500 livres a month by one of her lovers, another one gifted her 10,000 livres worth of furniture.[103] Similarly, although Astraudi was unhappy with her finances following her split with Egmont, her new lover paid six months of her rent in an apartment that cost her 2,000 livres a month.[104] With the wealth that some of these women gained, they often overthrew gender roles in becoming the breadwinner for their families. The financial independence gained by these dames entretenues was unrivaled by any other working woman in any other field and their salaries even outranked those of men in specialized fields.

Femmes galantes also disrupted the Ancien Régime's strict class dynamics. Actress-courtesans were able to outperform the noble women that ranked above them since aristocratic women could not compete with them. Noblemen viewed actresses almost as an exotic person since the difficult upbringings that performers often endured was radically different from the lives that aristocrats were familiar with.[105] Additionally, femmes galantes had nothing to lose. For noblewomen, their entire reputation and marriage prospects would be ruined if they were caught to be in an extramarital or premarital affair. For them, participating in galanterie could put their entire livelihood at stake. Furthermore, femmes galantes, who had to be sexually experienced due to their trade, performed acts that a respectable noblewoman would

[101] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 132-133.
[102] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 132.
[103] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.
[104] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.
[105] Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 39.

have considered to be demeaning. Part of the reason that the Duchesse de Montmorency was so distraught by her husband's relationship with Astraudi was because he had begun requesting that she carry out sexual acts that she found to be shocking and unacceptable.[106] In this sense, aristocratic women could not compete with the experiences that courtesans could provide. All of this being said, this success against noblewomen was like a double edged sword. Even though noblewomen lost in this game of love, they still maintained the respect and privileges attached to their rank, as well as the financial security that came from marrying other nobles. Femmes galantes, on the other hand, were relegated to performing acts that noblewomen deemed unacceptable – a judgment that seems even more demeaning when considering that these women were just doing what it took to earn money and survive. Nevertheless, regardless of if this win was positive for actress-courtesans or not, the fact still stands that the femmes galantes, who came from the lower class, competed, and won, against members of the aristocracy. This situation, while not ideal, again proves how the demimonde disrupted the Ancien Régime's strict class expectations, even if it did not completely overthrow them.

The unique position of the femmes galantes allowed them to simultaneously upend both gender and class expectations. This is demonstrated perfectly by the greluchons. Actress-courtesans fought over these men the same way that nobles fought over the femmes galantes. For example, in August of 1761, Deschamps and another dancer at the Opera argued over who was the true lover of Vesian, a greluchon who had been visiting both of them. Eventually, Deschamps won the argument and the other woman left him alone.[107] In this situation, we see two women competing for "ownership" of a specific man. This is a complete flip of the gendered organization of galanterie. Some femmes galantes even had lovers that acted

[106] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.
[107] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 209.

as kept men in the sense that they were provided with money, housing, and other gifts.[108] However, these situations were not as formally structured as lover-dame entretenue agreements and they sometimes worked to harm the femme galante. For example, with the Mademoiselle Favier and her lover, "après toutes les folies qu'il lui a fait faire pour lui, le sieur Legrand, gendarmes de la garde, n'a laissé à la demoiselle Favier, qui 'l'aimait éperdument', 'que la chemise'".[109] Evidently, these relationships were complex. In some situations, they reinforced the ideal of a man having control over a woman and her finances. Even though these greluchons did not have any official authority over the femmes galantes, they still managed to manipulate the emotions of their lover in order to benefit from their money. In other situations, ones that weren't so exploitative, femmes galantes were able to enjoy taking on the roles that were usually reserved for the men of the demimonde. In both situations, however, gender roles were twisted in a way that would not have happened in polite society.

The vie galante provided women with the opportunity to humiliate aristocratic men in a way that would have been met with severe punishment in any other context. Since femmes galantes often had multiple lovers at once, their secondary lovers and their greluchons could be used to humiliate their primary lover. Through this kind of infidelity, the femme galante and her secondary lover worked together to hoodwink a man of much higher status.[110] Admittedly, some of these social transgressions did produce consequences as the primary lovers did not always react with nonchalance upon discovering these affairs. Afterall, having a dame entretenue that openly cheated with other men damaged the primary lover's reputation. Still, in polite society, it would have been unheard of for a lower class woman and a low ranking man to humiliate an aristocrat without consequence. Infidelity was not the only way for an actress-courtesan to

[108] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police,* 344.
[109] Benabou, *La prostiution et la police*, 344.
[110] Kusher. *Erotic Exchanges*, 152.

humiliate her lover. During one dinner party in 1756, Deschamps and one of her friends infamously destroyed all the porcelain of one fermier-general. They left only two teacups intact and "into these the ladies were saucy enough to deposit the digestion of their dinner".[111] The motivation for these two women to do such a thing is unknown, although some have speculated that they did so to terrorize the upper class men. Alternatively, these women may have simply drunk a bit too much wine at dinner. Regardless, they faced no consequences for such an outrageous and disrespectful act – other than the loss of one expensive dress which the fermier-general tossed into a bonfire. In fact, Deschamps only benefited from this event as the story, naturally, spread like wildfire throughout Paris and bolstered her legendary reputation.

Failure in the Demimonde

Not every femme galante was successful. Of the four hundred women that were tracked by the Paris police, countless women have files that only span a few months. While this short lived career may not be due to failure, it is likely that the women who disappear from the record were not able to maintain a career notable enough to be documented. Mademoiselle Allart is one of these girls. At the age of twenty she already had an extensive career as an actress-courtesan, and yet, her files only consist of three entries between November 1756 and March 1757.[112] Perhaps her file ended so abruptly because she was unable to sustain a notable list of lovers after her initial success from moving to Paris in November 1756. Or perhaps her situation simply continued with the last man she was documented having a relationship with, the Duc de Montmorency – an unlikely occurrence knowing the duke's promiscuity.[113] Another possibility,

[111] Excerpt from the police reports, taken from Jones, "French Crossings IV" 5.
[112] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.
[113] For reference, Montmorency also had relationships with Deschamps and Astraudi as well as many other actress-courtesans not discussed in this paper.

considering that the average lifespan in Paris was as low as forty to fifty years, is that she died.[114] Regardless of what happened to Allart, her situation can be used to represent the situation of many hopeful actress-courtesans. Unable to maintain their career, especially since women over the age of twenty eight were rarely recorded in the dossiers, failed femmes galantes had to figure out new ways to survive.[115] Although the police records do not report what happened to these women, it is likely that they were reduced to poverty and shunned from the demimonde.

Even the most successful courtesans faced the threat of a miserable end. Due to expectations to spend as much money as possible, both to maintain their own reputation and to compete with others, many courtesans lived beyond their means. Despite regularly receiving gifts of money, most of the actress-courtesan's wealth consisted of material possessions such as furniture, jewelry, silver, and clothing.[116] Their monetary wealth was often spent as quickly as they received it, meaning that they lived paycheck to paycheck and when their cash flow dried up, they were left with nothing. Deschamps suffered as a result of this practice. Like many actresses, Deschamps accumulated an enormous amount of debt and in order to avoid prison, she had to find another source of money. During a ten day auction in 1760, Deschamps sold her porcelain collection in an effort to pay back 300,000 livres worth of debt – yet she chose to keep her diamonds and her carriage, which was "gilded with silver and drawn by eight horses, whose reins were decorated with sequins".[117] This auction did prolong her career, however, Deschamps was unable to completely recover. A woman who was never concerned with avoiding scandal, Deschamps was known to be involved with the most shocking drama of her time. Between openly having relationships with other women to having one lover, the Prince de Conti,

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[114] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges,* 92.
[115] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges,* 203.
[116] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges,* 137.
[117] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10236; Jones, "French Crossings IV" 8; Norberg,"Salon as Stage," 109.

embroider a twelve on his trouser button to represent the twelve times the couple had sex during one night, Deschamps was a far cry from a respectable eighteenth century woman.[118] Deschamps was not the only demimondaine to engage in lesbian relationships or to be known for scandal, but Deschamps, unlike these other women, failed to handle this drama in a way that boosted her reputation. In her case, being known, without care for what she was known for, only temporarily benefited her career. When Deschamps fled Paris to avoid her debts in 1762, she left in shame. After a year in exile, she returned, but she returned unrecognizable. She had become severely sick with gonorrhea and was completely penniless. She died in 1764 at the age of thirty-four. Deschamps' fall from power tells a dramatic story, and it is certainly not representative of all kept women.[119] Still, the vie galante was dangerous and those who failed to navigate the demimonde's rules often ended their lives in poverty, sickness, and shame.

IV. The Men of the Demimonde

The Police

While the demimonde existed on the fringes of society, it was still governed by established rules, which were enforced by the police. The 2e Bureau, discipline des moeurs was a branch of the Paris police force dedicated to monitoring sex work. Over the eight years he spent working for this branch from 1749 til his murder in 1757, Inspecteur Jean Meusnier kept detailed files on over four hundred femmes galantes, brothel madams, and femmes du monde.[120] In addition to this, certain brothel madams actively collaborated with police men like Meusnier and the police commissioner René Berryer de Ravenville. These brothel madams would provide

[118] Jones, "French Crossings IV" 7.
[119] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10238.
[120] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 42, 62.

regular reports on notable events in their brothels, the latest gossip circulating the demimonde, their business deals, and the identities of their customers.[121] Through these informants, the police were able to keep a close watch on the inner workings of the demimonde. Yet, they chose to tolerate the prostitution that occurred in these spaces. When they did enforce rules, they enforced the rules of the demimonde itself, which ultimately benefited sex workers as this informed them on how to operate their businesses without running into trouble.[122]

For the most part, the police did not interfere with brothels and sex workers that did not cause public disruption. Even in cases where certain brothels became rowdy, police inspectors would issue warnings before issuing any punishments.[123] Harsher punishment occurred when social rules had been greatly disrupted. In the demimonde, there was room for women to take on certain roles stereotypical of men. For instance, certain femmes galantes like Sophie Arnould were avid collectors, an activity that was usually reserved for men.[124] Yet, this leniency for the bending of gender roles did not apply to every situation. Catherine Mahüe, also known by her working name Virginie, had once been a successful dame entretenue, but by 1754 she fell into poverty and was reduced to sending her maid into the streets to procure clients. This kind of sex work was both illegal and looked down upon by the police, but this, even in conjunction with the scenes Virginie made at local bars, did not bring about her arrest. The line was crossed when Virginie went out into the streets dressed as a man.[125] While the police tolerated a bit of public disturbance and procuring, crossdressing was considered morally reprehensible and merited police interference. In D'Ossemont's reports, she informs Berryer of any cross-dressing women she witnesses in her brothel, emphasizing that she was following Berryer's request to identify

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[121] Most of these documents can be located in Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[122] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 19.
[123] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 105.
[124] Norberg, "Salon as Stage", 110.
[125] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10236, Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 38.

and repress this behavior. D'Ossemont herself looked down on crossdressing women, being sure to remark that "les filles travesties font autant de bruit et tiennent de mauvais propos comme si elles étaient hommes".[126] Despite the demimonde's tolerance for the disregard of certain social standards and gender roles, this kind of transgression was considered excessive and was punished by swift and intense intervention from the police.

Although the police and brothel madams worked in collaboration and were codependent in the sense that the police needed the madams to provide information and the madams needed the police to provide protection, the police ultimately held the power in this dynamic. The police could choose at any moment to imprison the brothel madams for their illegal businesses. As a result, for many of these women, it was of the utmost importance to stay in the good graces of the police inspectors. Madame D'Ossemont was especially concerned about maintaining her connection to the police. On October 10, 1750, D'Ossemont sent a letter to Berryer apologizing profusely for a disrespectful remark she had made during their previous meeting after having drunk a few too many glasses of champagne. She continues to apologize in a report she sent on the same day, excusing herself for any grammatical errors she may make during their correspondence.[127] D'Ossemont appears to be abundantly aware of where she stands on the social ladder and she follows this role accordingly. She continues to appeal to Berryer's authority in her later letters to him. On June 14, 1751, she wrote to him about Madame Paris' newly vacated brothel house. She claims that Paris "m'a fait l'offre" to establish a payment plan for her to buy the house and continues that "si votre grandeur juge à propos de laisser subsister cette maison, j'oserai lui demander la permission de la prendre".[128] D'Ossemont was an influential business woman in her community and her choice to ask Berryer for permission to make important

[126] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[127] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[128] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.

business decisions reflects the perceived necessity for her to appeal to police approval. This approval, however, may not have been truly necessary. Madame Hecquet, a different brothel madam, took a drastically different approach towards interacting with the police. On one occasion, when Meusnier demanded to meet with her to discuss one of her reports, she replied that she was unavailable since she was taking her girls for a picnic.[129] While the police did hold the majority of the power, as is demonstrated by D'Ossemont's fear of upsetting Berryer, it appears that the power was not as unbalanced as she makes it appear. The example with Hecquet shows a different side of these interactions, one that seems a bit more equal.

The Nobles

Actress-courtesans were able to wield as much influence as they did because their lives and their work were so public. Ultimately, many of the relationships between actresses and the men of the demimonde had much more to do with reputation and status than it did with love and sex. When noblemen began relationships with actresses, they did so to build their reputation. During the Ancien Régime, the power of aristocrats was dictated, not just by their wealth or title, but by their ability to associate themselves with people of much higher titles. By publicly connecting themselves to the king's performers, they were able to gain some of that prestige for themselves. Similarly, as these men began new relationships and competed with other men for the affections of other women, they did so in the public eye. During performances, actresses were known to direct their declarations of love, not to their co stars, but to their lovers who were watching them perform in the audience.[130] In doing so, the stage became a space to announce relationships to the public. In these public liaisons, aristocrats used their mistresses almost as

[129] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253.
[130] Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges*, 187.

trophies to display their status and wealth. It was common for women to perform wearing the elegant, bejeweled costumes their lovers had gifted them, even when such choices were inappropriate for their roles. One humorous example is that Madame Vestris who played the role of a poor shepherdess while wearing a shepherdess's hat bejeweled with diamonds – a gift from one of her lovers.[131] Another example of gifts being used to display wealth is the example of the Comte d'Egmont's gifts to Rosalie Astraudi. During their relationship, Meusnier reported that "elle ne va jamais à la Comédie à pied, le carrosse du comte vient la prendre chez elle, et la ramène après".[132] By providing this gift, Egmont ensured that all of Paris would see that he had the wealth and the resources to ensure that his mistress could travel around comfortably. Of course, actress-courtesans benefited from this style of gift giving, but it is evident that the motivation behind this practice was for nobles to communicate to other nobles, not for mistresses to enjoy the wealth of their partners. Furthermore, femmes galantes were at the mercy of these men. At any moment, their allowances and gifts could be taken away from them as their lovers moved on to the next girl who might boost their reputation. All in all, practices of the demimonde were far from ideal and although some women benefited from these affairs, the fact that many girls did not is unsurprising.

Brothel madams and prostitutes found themselves in the same vulnerable position. Since prostitution was illegal, payments to the brothel madams were done on an honor code basis and it was not unheard of for nobles to refuse to pay. Oftentimes, brothel madams were forced to ignore these instances for the sake of maintaining relationships with their influential clients. For instance, Lafosse regularly complained about the Marquis d'Argenson who constantly refused to pay. However, Lafosse was forced to put up with this behavior since Argenson was a powerful

[131] Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve*, 46.
[132] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal ms. 10253, rapports de la Dhosmont, du 28 juin 1750.

protector of the brothel.[133] Furthermore, nobles had the power to disrespect brothel madams and their girls, and some of them did so regularly. During March of 1752, D'Ossemont complained that a certain noble had not returned one of her girls, Javotte Freibourg, after a dinner party. It was not until two weeks after the party that Javotte returned without the money that was due to D'Ossemont.[134] In this situation, this noble disregarded D'Ossemont's authority as a business owner and refused to follow the rules of her brothel. As for Javotte, it is unclear whether she stayed voluntarily or not, which means that it is possible that she was held against her will. The aristocracy also disrespected the filles in the most horrific ways. Lafosse recounts one story of a party she had organized – but not attended – where the men present physically assaulted the girls and forced them into participating in non consensual acts. The girls were only saved after a priest passing by the house witnessed what was happening and put a stop to it.[135] Again, the nobles proved that, while they may have treated certain sex workers with respect, this respect was by no means universal. This all being said, it is important to mention that most nobles did follow the rules of the demimonde and treated the brothel madams and their girls civilly. These examples simply serve to demonstrate that, just because the demimonde allowed space for gender and class rules to be twisted, does not mean that an imbalance of power did not exist.

[133] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10252.
[134] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10253.
[135] Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal mss. 10252.

V. Conclusion

As this paper's examination of the mid eighteenth century Parisian demimonde concludes, it is clear that any attempt to summarize this society's systems of power would only result in oversimplification. The demimonde allowed for lower class women to challenge traditional organizations of class and status. At the same time, it also created new hierarchies of power that were enforced with the same severity as the old system. Furthermore, having explored the inner workings of the demimonde, it is clear that the opportunities it provided were not as radical as they appeared to be on the surface. In the demimonde, women did have the potential to achieve a level of personal, financial, and bodily autonomy that would have been impossible in polite society. However, countless women never managed to obtain these privileges and the women who did prosper actively participated in other women's failures; for instance, brothel madams ratted eachother out to the police, femmes galantes stole eachothers' lovers, and the spread of rumors destroyed reputations. Yet, to paint these women either as oppressors or as victims would ignore the complexity of their situations. As Kathryn Norberg puts it in her analysis of Madame D'Ossemont, D'Ossemont "never thought of herself as either empowered or victimized as a result of her profession".[136] While she participated in portraying filles publiques as powerless, trading girls with other madams without regard for their opinions, and purposefully indebting her employees to her, she did so because she had no other choice. Mid-eighteenth century France in general was a brutal, oppressive society to live in – afterall, France's peasants didn't revolt for no reason. In this oppress or be oppressed kind of society, brothel madams and femmes galantes had only those two choices – unless they wanted to suffer the same fate as the girls that failed, they had to be compliant with the demimonde's rules.

[136] Norberg, "In her own words," 42.

The only neat conclusion that can be drawn from this subject concerns the status of the demimonde's men. The policemen and noblemen were the only people who truly prospered in this society since they were the ones that ran it. Femmes galantes may have set the terms of their relationships, but they only did so because their lovers allowed them to. Noble men did not need galanterie in the way that actress-courtesans needed it – while sex workers became demimondaines in order to survive and to have a livelihood, noble men participated in it as a pastime. As a result of this, noblemen truly held all of the power in these interactions. Similarly, the police could have chosen at any minute to arrest the brothel madams they collaborated with. In fact, many prostitutes were punished for their work as they were imprisoned, had their heads shaved, and were paraded around the city as crowds booed – this humiliation was the true consequence for those who failed to adhere to the demimonde's expectations.[137] All of these factors made the demimonde a dangerous and confusing community to live in; the interactions between actresses and lovers, police and madams, madams and filles, courtesans and madams, filles and nobles, made the community a mess of complicated power dynamics and struggles. It is because of this intricacy that sex workers needed to be skilled to be successful. This success, although not consisting of the same genuine independence that the nobles enjoyed, still entailed achieving a comfortable life in a society marked by poverty. With an understanding of the complexities of this community, its unique form of economics, and its social hierarchy, as well as a good amount of luck, maquerelles and femmes galantes alike could escape the lower classes they were born into and strive towards a better future for themselves. While the demimonde wasn't perfect, polite society wasn't perfect either, and at least as a demimondaine, women could achieve some semblance of power and autonomy.

[137] Capon, *Les maisons closes au XVIIIe siècle*, 10.

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