Miming Modernity: Representations of Pierrot in Fin-de-Siècle France

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MIMING MODERNITY: REPRESENTATIONS
OF PIERROT IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE
FRANCE

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MIMING MODERNITY: REPRESENTATIONS
OF PIERROT IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE
FRANCE

A Thesis Presented to the Graduate Faculty of
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in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of
Master of Art History
by
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This thesis examines the commedia dell’arte character Pierrot through the lens of gender performance in order to decipher the ways in which he complicates and expands understandings of gender and the normative model of sexuality in fin de siècle France. Beginning with a case study of a chromolithograph by Jules Chéret, the first chapter of this thesis traces the perceived relation between Pierrot and the bohemian artist, and the underlying tensions between the male-dominated artistic sphere and increasingly emancipated women. In contrast, Chapter II complicates the dominant impression of Pierrot’s association with the artists of bohemian Montmartre, and instead explores the way in which Pierrot is visually appropriated by female actors to challenge established models of gendered behavior and dress through male impersonation on stage. For example, female mime artist Félicia Mallet, through the guise of Pierrot, breaks down the conception of the perceived polarization between femininity and creative production, while also increasing the plurality and complexity of the character Pierrot. Lastly, this thesis concludes with an analysis of a series of postcards from 1900 that capture a romantic encounter between two women dressed as Pierrot and his love interest Columbine. As a result, the postcards question the normative model of sexuality, and further destabilize our understanding of Pierrot’s gender identity. In conclusion, Pierrot acts as a protective mask
through which individual artists, actors and writers can explore beyond the boundaries of propriety without severe repercussions.
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INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1888, French literary critic and dramatist Jule Lemaître meditated on the cardinal traits of the theatrical character Pierrot. He mused:

[Pierrot] represents human vice with an air of insouciance and innocence which makes it extremely attractive. Pierrot is outside the law and, thus, outside of sin. He makes us dream of a life which is purely sensual and freed from the yoke of conscience, which is perhaps the definition of perfect felicity. Pierrot is the son of Lilith, the ingenious Adam who has not eaten the apple and continues to wander, amidst our complicated modern societies, with the ignorant soul of the inhabitant of some early paradise.¹

Through biblical allusion, Lemaître characterizes Pierrot as an instinctive, primordial being who operates outside the conventions of everyday life. His nonchalance, innocence and enjoyment of sensual freedom is framed as a point of interest by Lemaître, who seizes upon the Pierrot’s marginality as a trait sympathetic to his own position in Parisian society.² Lemaître, as a founding member of the 1888 Cercle Funambulesque, sought to revive traditional pantomime of the 1840s and promoted Pierrot as the figure-head of the movement.³ Recognizable by his oversized white blouse, deathly pallor and melancholy disposition, Pierrot found resonance with numerous Bohemian artists and literary personnel from the fin de siècle. Pierrot’s genesis,

² Jules Lemaître was a member of the Cercle Funambulesque, founded in 1888, which was a group devoted to the revival of classical pantomime in which Pierrot played a major role. Robert F. Storey, *Pierrot on the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 286.
however, can be traced to seventeenth-century Italian commedia dell’arte, which is a carnivalesque genre of theater reliant on stock characters and improvisation. Initially a minor character, Pierrot accrued components of his identity from both the individual actors who assumed the role, as well as from the carnivalesque tendencies of commedia dell’arte which he retained as a central part of his identity. By the nineteenth century, he broke free from his comedic backdrop and emerged as a self-sustaining image to be deployed and recast in a multitude of venues. A cursory glance at art from this era reveals Pierrot on the canvases of major artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Thomas Couture, Paul Cézanne, Henri Rousseau, and Georges Seurat. Likewise, in the commercial and popular arts, Pierrot can be found on posters advertising confectionaries, in the comic strips of journals, and featured on mass-produced postcards.

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4 The term carnivalesque is used throughout this thesis to identify certain characters, theatrical genres, and performance venues that fall under the domain of the carnivalesque, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky. (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1984), 272. Several of the major hallmarks of the carnivalesque that are most relevant to this thesis are those of social transgression, the inversion of norms, and the suspension of the real in the carnivalesque space. In terms of Pierrot specifically, he comes from the commedia dell’arte tradition which was originally performed during the pre-Lenten period of celebration (Carnaval). Likewise, Marcus Verhagen identifies the 19th century comic performer as carnivalesque since “He assumed different disguises and sexual identities; he parodied the attitudes and appearances of the figures around him; his manner of speech was crude or imbecilic; his reasoning was demonstratively illogical. He practiced multiple inversions, crossed boundaries, turned ordinary values and categories up-side-down.” Marcus Verhagen, “Re-figurations of Carnival: the Comic Performer in Fin-de-Siècle Parisian Art” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 10, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. Moreover, Pierrot is featured as a popular costume at the annual Parisian masked balls, which was another distinctly carnivalesque event. Lastly, La Chat Noir, a popular cabaret established in 1881, was explicitly identified as a carnivalesque space because of it’s permeable boundaries, and embrace of farce, extreme parody, and blague. Jerrold Seigel, Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930. (New York: Viking, 1986), 221.

Pierrot's visual salience places him in dialogue with some of the major ideological concerns of the fin de siècle. In particular, he is positioned to illustrate the anxiety over aberrations to the normative model of gender-specific behavior and dress, and to test the perimeter of the assumptions about gender and sexuality. As an inherently impressionable and malleable character, he is often used to project or reflect the concerns of the individual artist, poet, or actor who assumes the Pierrot mask as a type of alter-ego. As a result, Pierrot takes on a broad range of appearances, and is often employed to visualize taboo or transgressive topics in a socially sanctioned way. Because of his background as a commedia character, Pierrot is cloaked in a protective garment of farce, parody and insincerity that allows him to operate outside the normative boundaries of social propriety without posing a threat. By the late nineteenth century, his imagery is used to navigate the anxiety surrounding gender dynamics, and to problematize ideas of gendered behaviors and appearances, and to question the normative model of sexuality. Through commercial ephemera, including posters and postcards, Pierrot imagery was made visually accessible to the everyday consumer. Whether pasted on the streets of Paris, or sold cheaply in corner stores, representations of Pierrot permeated modern life. This thesis will consider the ways in which the carnivalesque traditions of inversion and transgression are perpetuated in the figure of Pierrot and used to address concerns over gender and sexuality during this era. In particular, Pierrot is employed by bohemian artists to visualize their own self-assigned alterity, but also to examine their concerns over female emancipation. Moreover, Pierrot is used as a neutral screen upon which the boundaries of gender presentation and expression are projected and expanded.

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This thesis will examine a selection of posters by Jules Chéret and a series of postcards from Cornell University that depict Pierrot at the turn of the twentieth century, in order to consider the varied ways in which this character is used to both affirm and transgress assumptions about gender. By selecting posters and postcards as my primary evidence, I am focusing my study on commercial ephemera and the different modes of viewing that each object entails. For example, posters tend to be more overtly public-facing while postcards provide the illusion of intimacy. As commercial items and relatively new forms of media, these works of art are not subject to the same expectations as fine art, but instead must navigate the tension between commercial viability and artistic vision. Posters are also uniquely equipped to dialogue with concerns over gender at the fin-de-siècle because they act as a very public forum for presenting, contesting, or affirming ideas. In addition, these poster advertisements commonly employ female figures as a means of enticing the consumer to take a closer look. This familiar dynamic--the woman as an attractive object who presents promises of material pleasure--exposes an underlying conception of the relation between women and the consumer items they present. Similarly, postcards--as small, portable, and possessable items--also shed a unique light on the desired manner in which to view women. Much like the poster advertisement, the commercial postcard is designed to be implicitly transactional. Differing in their scale, mode of production, and potential audience, the print media covered in this thesis focuses on the pervasive visibility of Pierrot.

This study will begin with a recount of the existing scholarship on Pierrot, and the theoretical models employed to buttress this project. Then I will trace the history of Pierrot and his commedia dell’arte origins, before moving on to examine his relevance in late nineteenth-
century France through particular works of art. Throughout my thesis, the questions I will be considering are: How and to what end does Pierrot contribute to the critical debates of the day, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality? What is it about this character that proves so enticing to artists and the viewing public? Does Pierrot retain the integrity of his identity amongst the divergent forms of his representation?

**Review of Literature**

Robert Storey’s texts *Pierrot: A Critical History of A Mask*, and *Pierrot On the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime* are fundamental to understanding the history and significance of Pierrot in France.\(^7\) The former text acts as a survey of the development of Pierrot’s mask from its inception during the seventeenth century through the twentieth century by examining the literary arts including pantomimes, poems and dramatic literature. When referring to Pierrot’s mask, Storey is not referencing a physical mask, for as we know Pierrot is unique in that he does not wear one but instead powders his face to appear white. Rather, Storey uses the term to synecdochally identify the actor-in-character.\(^8\) Storey argues that Pierrot initially functions as a stumbling buffoon, but by around 1840 he transforms into a complex character who exhibits traces of Hamletic self-awareness, indifference and malice. Storey’s reference to visual arts is secondary to his interest in written documentation, but his thorough discussion of the significance of Pierrot among the literary elite in France

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provides a crucial context from which the Bohemian and Avant Garde artists emerged. My thesis departs from Storey’s encyclopedic cataloguing of the literary and theatrical reference to Pierrot in order to address the visual art that was simultaneously being produced. Similarly, *Pierrot On the Stage of Desire: Nineteenth-Century French Literary Artists and the Comic Pantomime*, a sequel to Storey’s first book, examines the history of French pantomime from Jean-Gaspard Deburau and the Théâtre des Funambules, to the cabaret shows and spectacles popular at the turn of the century. His book constructs a parallel between the contributions of the major Romantic authors of French pantomime, and the prominent mimetic artists of the day. Ultimately, he examines the ways in which Romantic literature buttresses, constructs or omits aspects of Pierrot’s character and the mythology of the mimes who play him. My argument uses Storey’s meticulous biographical approach to examining the authors and mimetic artists dealing with Pierrot as a foundational backdrop against which I tease out the concerns over gender that are mentioned but not discussed in depth.

Additionally, Louisa E. Jones’ *Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Popular Comic Arts in 19th-Century France* (1984) contains a rich reservoir of primary accounts relaying the development of Pierrot in literature and art. Jones recognizes that much of Pierrot’s character is bound up in both history and legend, and she seeks to distinguish what is factual and what is speculative. In doing so, she also recognizes the impact of the spectator and the creative agency of his or her imagination on forming a lasting image of Pierrot. My argument employs Jones’ characterization of clowns as figures of boundaries and crossroads in order to uncover the ways in which Pierrot occupies an alternative, often metaphorical space that allows him to act in ways that would not be permissible outside the performative space.
Furthermore, Rosalind Krauss’s seminal essay “Tracing Nadar” (1978) examines Felix Nadar and Adrien Tournachon’s photographs of Charles Deburau as Pierrot. Her essay presents a parallel between the mimetic tracing of the mime and the light-based tracing of the camera as elucidated in Nadar’s photograph *Pierrot the Photographer* from 1854. Krauss argues that the material properties of the photograph play out through tonality on the whiteness of Pierrot’s costume, thus providing a type of self-portrait of photography. My thesis builds on Krauss’ analysis of Pierrot’s costume as a reflective or neutral patina, and places her theory in dialogue with projections of sexual frustration and gender neutrality. Likewise, Marika Takanishi Knowles continues Krauss’s discussion in her 2015 article “Lost Ground: The Performance of Pierrot in Nadar and Adrien Tournachon’s Photographs of Charles Deburau.” Throughout her article Knowles argues that through Nadar’s photographs, Pierrot assumes an individual identity, excised from the commedia dell’arte milieu and capable of standing on his own apart from the Théâtre des Funambules. Knowles’ article confirms the significance of Nadar’s photographs, and Deburau’s performances in creating an image of Pierrot that is relevant in art and the social imaginary half a century later. Likewise, I believe that these early nineteenth-century photographs are paramount for understanding visual representations of Pierrot, and I employ them as a comparison for representations of the artist-as-performer in the case of Felicia Mallet.

Lastly, Jennifer Forrest’s recent publication *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-siècle France* (2020) examines the *funambule*—a term used to identify the acrobat, clown, pierrot, and so on—as a conceptual and performative tool used by artists and writers to liberate their points of view from aesthetic conventions. Moreover, Forrest identifies the carnivalesque

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properties of the performative space as a void wherein the laws of nature are suspended. This understanding of performance space is important when considering the allowances that are made on stage, in the circus ring, or at events such as the Parisian masked ball that fall outside the governance of normative social propriety. Forrest argues that gender is one factor that becomes more fluid and malleable when performed on stage. The freedom and allowances of this performative space is important to my discussion of cross-dressing and gender-bending in relation to Pierrot.

In conjunction with visual art, literary works --particularly pantomimes and poems-- played a major role in developing, documenting and refining Pierrot’s character. Therefore, I call upon several literary works as my primary sources of evidence, starting with Paul Margueritte’s 1888 novel *Tous Quatre* which contains several pantomime scenarios including “Pierrot assassin de sa femme.” In this pantomime we perceive traces of hysteria inscribed on Pierrot, which subsequently permits female actresses to cross-dress and play his role on stage. By 1880, the medical diagnostic for hysteria was, in essence, “femininity exaggerated,” and it functioned as a tool for undercutting the intellectual equality between the sexes.¹¹ Hysteria was perceived as a predominantly female affliction, and was caused by the exhaustion of the nervous system in response to overstimulation, which manifested in spasmodic or irrational movements, such as fainting.¹² Moreover, as noted by Rae Beth Gordon, “nothing was more modern, more fashionable between 1880 and 1900 than nervous pathology, whose jerky rhythms and

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¹² Jean-Martin Charcot was a particularly prominent figure in the medical field to research and lecture on female hysteria from around 1880-1915. Finn, “Physiological Fictions,” 316.
movements define popular song and performance style in the period.”¹³ By exhibiting traces of this feminine-coded affliction, Pierrot acts as an aberration or foil to the supposed binary of mental and emotional capabilities. Likewise, Paul Verlaine’s poem “Pierrot Gamin” from 1868 collapses the distinction between author and subject by writing in the voice of Pierrot and metaphorically using the character’s mask to explore themes of sexual ambiguity and explicit homosexuality in Verlaine’s own life and that of the character.

**Theoretical Approach**

I will use these literary texts to stage my discussion of Pierrot against his historical backdrop, and in the context of the commedia dell’arte in France. My approach to this thesis is through a feminist lens with the hopes of forefronting the ambiguous nature of Pierrot and the way in which he dialogues with notions of gender. In particular, I call upon Judith Butler’s understanding of gender performance in relation to not only the theatrical performativity of the stage, but also the performativity that constitutes gender expression. In her 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Butler asserts that “…Gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movement, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” She continues, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the


In addition to focusing on gender, I employ Mikhail Bakhtin’s deconstruction of the carnivalesque to understand the function and influence of commedia dell’arte and the grotesque body in fin de siècle culture. The carnivalesque is most often associated with certain festivities, masquerade characters, or performances and is characterized by social transgression, the inversion of norms, and the suspension of what is real or “natural.” On the nature of Commedia dell’arte, Bakhtin states:

\begin{quote}
In the commedia dell’arte (which kept a close link with its carnival origin), in Molière’s comedies (related to the commedia dell’arte)… and a few others… in spite of their differences in character and tendency, the carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things.\footnote{Bakhtin, \textit{Rabelais and His World}, 272.}
\end{quote}

For Bakhtin, carnival signals a cathartic reprieve wherein polarities are reconciled, hierarchies are overturned, and boundaries are transgressed. As a result, conventional notions and ways of thinking are momentarily suspended so that new thought patterns are allowed to form without the
external pressure of established truths. Throughout the nineteenth century, commedia dell’arte costumes were popular during carnival season and frequently appeared at the masked balls, which can be seen in Gavarni’s lithographs from the 1840’s that capture individuals dressed as Pierrots, Pulcinellas, and Harlequins. (Figure 1) Likewise, as Bakhtin suggests, commedia dell’arte performances retained a strong association with the carnival-grotesque.

By observing Pierrot through the lenses of gender and carnivalesque performance, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the boundary between the performative space of the stage and the space of the real world. In fact, the separation between fiction and reality is complicated by Pierrot who acts as a liaison between the two spheres. This is due in part because of the individual actors who play Pierrot, as well as the works of art that represent him. In this way, he cannot be confined within the perimeter of performative and fictitious space, but instead his imagery spills over into the streets through lithographic advertisement, and into personal possession through postcards. As a result, the transgressive association of Pierrot --particularly those regarding gender-bending-- are allowed to exist under the auspices of the carnivalesque. However, the ideas that flourish on stage are not contained within that atmosphere but instead merge with, critique, and inform the thought patterns of everyday life. Therefore, Pierrot’s transgressive nature on stage effectively throws into sharp relief the apprehensions harbored by the bohemian avant-garde towards women, while simultaneously questioning the assumptions about the correlation between gender and dress, and the heteronormative model of sexuality during the fin de siècle.

When discussing gender “inversion,” the choice of verbiage is used with the knowledge that such terminology is outdated, and it is therefore employed as a means of repainting the historical circumstances of the era and maintaining the term’s dual significance in discussion of
the carnivalesque. The term “sexual inversion” was introduced by the German lawyer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, in order to describe the principle of same-sex desire in his theoretical pamphlet “Prometheus.” Ulrichs, who himself identified as a homosexual man, wrote that homosexuality between men indicated that each had “a female soul confined in a male body,” and in doing so he conflated notions of sexual and gender inversion. Likewise, Ulrichs proposed the equivalent for women who love women as “a male soul is confined to the female body.”

**Historical Backdrop of Commedia dell’Arte in France**

To begin with, Commedia dell’arte is best translated as “comedy of the comedians” or “comedy of the actor’s guild.” Initially associated with the pre-Lenten festivities of Carnival, the commedia dell’arte acting troupes emerged around 1550 into highly structured bands of traveling entertainers. As the name implies, these itinerant troupes functioned like a guild in which the entertainers were professionally and often personally related. This manner of performance—which developed in Italy in the mid 16th century—is composed of static and dynamic elements that make each performance unique. In commedia performances, the actors will follow a brief narrative outline or “scenario,” but since there is no script the actors are challenged to improvise while maintaining the integrity of the character they perform. The characters themselves are identified and distinguished by their costumes, masks, props and

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18 Forti-Lewis, “Commedia dell’Arte: (Italy: 1550-1750),” 146.
movements. (Characters from the original commedia repertoire include Brighella, Arlecchino, Columbina and so on.) In fact, it was not uncommon for an actor to play the same role his entire life so that the two, actor and character, became indistinguishable in the public eye.\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, roles would often be passed down within a family, which further fused the identity of the character with that of the individual. The performances themselves were often satirical parodies, which required the actors to be highly educated in the current events of the day so that they might invert said events on stage.\textsuperscript{22}

These actor-improvisors traveled in bands throughout Europe and gained resonance particularly in France, where by 1665, the character Pierrot first emerged.\textsuperscript{23} Pierrot is, in essence, a French creation but he borrows traits from the Italian zanni Pedrolino who plays the part of the comic blundering fool. Meanwhile, other sources identify the character Pulcinella as the progenitor of Pierrot.\textsuperscript{24} These zanni serve to complicate the plot with their complementary personalities: one is often astute and foxy, while the other is naive and hapless.\textsuperscript{25} Pierrot falls in the latter category. Unlike the majority of the commedia caste, Pierrot does not wear a mask but instead powders his face to appear white and moon-like.\textsuperscript{26} Likewise, he dresses in oversized

\textsuperscript{21} Scott, “Fictional Deceptions,” 106.
\textsuperscript{22} Moyles explains the extensive preparation process for Commedia performers: “As part of their training and preparation, actors studied and memorized legal and religious texts, political tracts, local news, academic prose, governmental edicts, scientific, and medical treatises, epics, the dialects of the marketplace and the street, the judiciary, the nobility and the bourgeoisie—precisely the “snapshot” of living language rejected by the Academie Francaise for their dictionary.” Moyles, “The Commedia Dell’Arte,” 54.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 14.
\textsuperscript{25} Scott, “Fictional Deceptions,” 148.
\textsuperscript{26} John D. Anderson observes how Pierrot is somewhat isolated from his fellow commedia cast members because, unlike them, Pierrot’s mask is not a physical, removable item but rather the actor’s face painted white or covered in flour; “Pierrot’s pathetic white face could ‘not be unmasked,’ so the performer and the role he played became one quasi-dramatic, quasi-real
white garments that tend to obscure his figure, and render his body inaccessible to the viewer. There are of course variations to Pierrot and his costume, but, as Marika Knowles argues, much attention is given to his white pallor, which, like a blank canvas, attracts artists so that they might inscribe on him their own desires. These attributes are particular to Pierrot and make him amorphous from the beginning. Because his mask is the actor's physical face rather than a removable visage, there is a greater degree of synthesis between the actor and character. This also makes him a highly malleable figure as he is invented and reinvented to a degree by every actor who assumes the character. However, prior to the nineteenth century he is very much a secondary character in the commedia repertoire who serves to complicate the narrative through his incapacities.

As the popularity of commedia dell’arte grew in France, the acting troupes endured a greater degree of censorship. In 1697 the Italian troupe overstepped their satirical boundaries by allegedly making fun of Madame de Maintenon - King Louis 14th’s morganic wife- and were therefore dismissed from the Parisian environs. Soon after, in 1703 they were denied the privilege of staging regular comedies altogether. It is here that the inherent malleability of commedia performance becomes abundantly evident: in order to evade the legal restrictions placed on them, the Italian acting troupes embraced the inconsistencies of their trade. For example, in 1707, when they were denied the use of dialogue, they responded by speaking in

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gibberish, monologue or through silent pantomime. This was just the beginning of a long history of suppression and censorship that characterized commedia dell’arte in France, the memory of which is perpetuated in Pierrot as a symbol of alterity and resistance. Pantomime itself is a tradition that is carried on well into the twentieth century, and experiences a rebirth both on stage and in silent film.

As we move into the nineteenth century, Pierrot not only takes on a primary role in commedia performances, he separates himself altogether and acts as an independent character capable of standing alone. This separation is beautifully illustrated in Felix Nadar and Adrien Tournachon’s photograph capturing Charles Deburau as Pierrot in *Pierrot the Photographer* from 1854 (Figure 2). In this photograph we see Deburau in dramatic, oversized white garments poised next to a tall tripod camera, and framed by a sleek dark curtain behind. His body is overwhelmed and obscured by the large swathes of fabric, making him appear androgynous. Here the emphasis is not on his relation to the other commedia characters that would have been visible on stage at the Théâtre des Funambules where Deburau performed, but instead his white columnal figure occupies sole emphasis. This photograph --which is part of a larger series of têtes d’expression-- solidifies Pierrot’s self-sufficient identity, and his association with the artist. This is seen in *Pierrot the Photographer* as Deburau assumes the role of creator and mimes the action of taking a picture. This trope is returned to over and over again in later works of art that also present Pierrot as analogous to the artist.

While Nadar’s photographs must be appreciated in their own right, one reason for their enduring success was the status of Charles’ father, the mime artist Jean-Gaspard Deburau who

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revolutionized the role of Pierrot on stage.\textsuperscript{31} Under Deburau’s guidance, Pierrot became deeply associated with the art of pantomime and less reliant on the comic routines of his Italian ancestors. The character became more complex, and began to exhibit traits of malice, heroism and lucidity; adding to the paradoxical, often contradictory nature of his existence.\textsuperscript{32} At this time, artists, literary elite and critics were drawn to him as he performed at the Théâtre des Funambules on the infamous Boulevard du Temple. An incredible amount of literature, poetry, art and commentary was generated from his performances, which solidified Pierrot's visual salience in French culture. What initially attracted these artists to represent Pierrot in their creative works was his connection to the streets; he was \textit{Pierrot le peuple}!\textsuperscript{33} Artists sympathized with the idea of the marginalized, itinerant performer which they saw reflected in their own self-assigned otherness.\textsuperscript{34} In addition, there was a new appreciation for pantomime itself as a silent means of expression. Some went as far as to wonder if pantomime -communication through corporeal movement- was in fact a more primordial means of expression than writing or speaking, which they claimed were easily sullied by deceit. For Paul Hugounet “the gesture is directly ordered by the brain, it is the natural and universal language par excellence; mime is,

\textsuperscript{31} Charles greatly resembled his father, which factored into his success on stage since he was perceived as a continuation of the famed Jean-Gaspard. Likewise, the hereditary aspect of passing a role down from father to son was very common among early commedia dell’arte troupes. Storey, \textit{Pierrot: A Critical History of the Mask}, 17.

\textsuperscript{32} Charles Nodier, writing in 1828, suggests that Pierrot “is a character whose infinite nuances are difficult to render. Ingenuous like a child, cowardly, crafty, lazy, mischievous by instinct, obliging, jeering, gluttonous, thieving, blistering, greedy, clumsy, ingenious in the arts that tend to the satisfaction of his tastes: he is a naive and clownish Satan.” Louis Péricaud, \textit{Le Théâtre des Funambules, ses mimes, ses acteurs et ses pantomimes…}(Paris, 1897), 78.


\textsuperscript{34} Verhagen, “Re-figurations of Carnival,” 9-10.
therefore, an art that precedes reciting, it is more sincere and superior.” Much like Lemaître’s understanding of Pierrot as primal and instinctual, so too Hugounet is attracted to pantomime as a pure and uninhibited form of communication.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Pierrot imagery was ubiquitous not only in fine art, but in commercial and advertorial ephemera as well. Moreover, he had become synonymous with the artist or creative savant. For example, Henri-Gabriel Ibels print *Salon de Cents-Salon de Plume* from 1893, and was made to publicize the *Salon de Cents* commercial art exhibition (Figure 5). Here we see three figures, all of whom are performers. Pierrot is situated in front of a canvas with brush and palette in hand. He sketches a brief outline of his subject, an elegantly posed ballet in a teal and white tutu. Pierrot is shown glancing up to verify the accuracy of his brush strokes as he renders the image. Meanwhile, a third character, who by his diamond patterned acrobat’s costume, cocked hat, and black mask we can infer is Harlequin, looks intently at Pierrot’s canvas. There's something sinister about this Harlequin character who conceals a bat behind his back. This image beautifully illustrates the way in which numerous artists assumed the mask of Pierrot as an alter-ego for their creative production. Much like Nadar’s photograph *Pierrot the Photographer*, here once again Ibels directly links Pierrot with artistic agency. Notice the placement of Ibel’s signature on Pierrot’s canvas, which indicates a

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37 Naomi Ritter explains the relation between artists and their alter-egos, and the subsequent notion of art as spectacle and the artist as entertainer; “The identification of artists with transcendent players comes from more than the secularizing process. Indeed, its roots lie deep in the primitivist retreat from rationality that began with the Romantics. This controversial aspect of the latter nineteenth century goes far to explain the affinity our artists felt for all theater of ritual, mask and gesture.” Naomi Ritter, *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer since Romanticism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 5.
permeability between the two identities. Perhaps most significantly, this image renders the performer as creator and work of art, as artist, subject and viewer alike. This ties into the late nineteenth century conception of the performer as embodying the gendered traits of both the maculine creator or artist, as well as the feminine image or representation.\footnote{Verhagen, “Re-figurations of Carnival,” 51. See also Mark Roskill, ed., \textit{The Letters of Van Gogh} (London: Fontana, 1983), 253, 279, 281, 323.} This particular image also illustrates a popular iconographic trio referred to as the grotesque triangle: this includes the poet, the muse and the financier.\footnote{Louisa Jones, \textit{Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots: Literature and the Comic Arts in 19th-Century France} (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum Publishers, 1984), 139.} This configuration is often evoked to visualize the perceived aggression of the financier and the muse/courtesan whose ruthless material appetites leave no place for the sensitive artist/poet. However, despite their apparent opposition, these three types are deeply intertwined and work to visualize a kind of falseness and failure that is celebrated by Bohemian artists who use social rejection as a standard measure for the value of their art.\footnote{Jones, \textit{Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots}, 138.}

\textit{Thesis Organization}

This thesis will be organized around three case studies with a chapter devoted to each: The first will address Jules Chéret’s chromolithograph \textit{Théâtre Optique} (1892), which was designed to advertise Emile Reynaud’s Luminous Pantomime “Pauvre Pierrot,” (1892-93) (Figure 3-4). The second chapter will continue with another lithograph by Jules Chéret titled \textit{L’Enfant Prodigue} (Figure 14). Lastly, the final chapter of this thesis will focus on a collection of postcards titled \textit{Pierrot et Columbine} (1900) from the Cornell University collection “Postcards of female and male impersonators and cross-dressing” (Figure 22-25).
In the first chapter I explore how Pierrot is used as an alter-ego for the bohemian artist in order to express the conflicting sentiments of obsession and apprehension harbored by many of them towards women. Illustrated through the coquettish Columbine, *the woman* is presented as enticing, but also threatening to the male-dominated order. Chéret’s *Théâtre Optique* renders Pierrot uselessly caught up in Columbine’s orbit, which conjures sentiments of the broader anxiety felt towards increasingly autonomous women. It is interesting to note that Pierrot is paradoxically used to both express anxieties felt towards women at the fin de siècle, as well as to challenge notions of gendered dress and presentation. In this way, his alliances are split, and he acts as both defendant and plaintiff. In the second chapter, I turn to examine representations of the mime Félicia Mallet, and the way in which her crossdress performances play an important role in the social negotiation over the meaning of gender, and add a greater layer of complexity to Pierrot’s character by emphasizing his androgyny. Additionally, this chapter considers the public-facing spectacle of the advertising poster as a means of lessening the distinction between performance on stage and that of real life. Lastly, the third chapter opens up the conversation around Pierrot’s sexuality by considering a series of postcards that capture a female couple dressed as Pierrot and Columbine. Presented in a romantic encounter, Pierrot, played by a woman, is used to examine concerns over female sexuality and homosexuality that would have, if not for the protective blanket of comic farce, been considered socially taboo. In addition, the materiality and approach to viewing the postcards themselves is forefronted and juxtaposed to the format of the posters examined in the first two chapters of this thesis.
CHAPTER I

HEROES OF FALSENESS AND FAILURE

In his 1892 poster *Musée Grévin, Pantomimes Lumineuses, Théâtre optique de E. Reynaud, musique de Gaston Paulin* (Figure 3), Jules Chéret personifies the anxiety over gender dynamics at the turn of the twentieth century through the iconography of Pierrot and Columbine. In particular, his representation of Columbine espouses the generic model of the frivolous, perfidious woman, which elucidates an underlying social apprehension over increasingly liberated women. At this time, Chéret’s use of the commedia dell’arte figures in his lithograph would have also been understood as allegorical representations of the tension between the avant garde subculture and bourgeois society. Chéret not only perpetuates the comparison between the outcast Pierrot and the avant-garde artist as a self-assigned “other,” he also heralds Pierrot-the-artist as a hero of falseness and failure. Chéret embraces the material artifice of his lithograph, and captures Pierrot’s symbolic social rejection through the Columbine-Pierrot encounter. The blank-reflectivity of Pierrot’s persona acts as a screen upon which the anxieties over the artist’s position in the Modern world could be played out. In her book *Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots*, Louisa Jones suggests that “Clowns are again figures of boundaries and crossroads: the forms they take stylize tensions that lie deep in culture and result from changing conceptions of human

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identity.” As highly malleable figures of marginality, clowns, performers, and pierrots act as mediators for examining the underlying social tensions of the fin de siècle through comedic, nonserious and absurdist means. The cloak of carnivalesque humor, paired with the bohemian avant garde desire for lucidity, creates an environment in which Pierrot is used to project and discern the relation between the artist and industry, male and female, and la bohème and the bourgeois.

The lithograph itself was made to advertise Charles-Émile Reynaud’s luminous pantomime “Pauvre Pierrot” (Figure 4). Through Reynaud’s Théâtre Optique, the animated pantomime was projected onto a screen at the Musée Grévin where it attracted over 500,000 visitors throughout the months it was on display (Figure 13). In addition to being a novel form of image making, projecting, and viewing, the narrative of “Pauvre Pierrot” reinforced several of the ideas that surfaced in Chéret’s lithograph. In particular, the themes of social rejection and anxiety towards women is illustrated in the animation through Pierrot’s unrequited pursuit of Columbine who leaves him in favor of the foxy Harlequin. Chéret’s lithograph captures Pierrot in the thralls of Columbine, while she appears indifferent to his advances and preoccupied with herself. These sentiments are reflected in the bohemian discourse concerning women which oscillates between obsessive descriptions of their physicality, and the fear of potential betrayal. Writing for Le Mirliton --which was a journal associated with a cabaret of the same name-- Georges Courteline clarifies the quandary:

42 Jones, Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots, 25.
43 After 1850, heroism had become a joke. Lucidity had become fashionable, accompanied by a strong sense of the ludicrous. Jones, Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots, 119.
At Bottom, it’s all a question of whether the harm they will cause us sufficiently balances the hours of happiness they’ll have given us, and whether the cruelty of their ingratitude must erase from our thankful souls the joys spread there by their caress, even the fleeting and deceitful ones.\textsuperscript{45}

A common response by bohemian artists to this concern over deceit and betrayal was to depict women within a narrow selection of types, including the \textit{femme-fatale}, \textit{la parisiene}, and other stereotypical formulas. The results indicate a desire on part of the artist to control the subject by placing them in a clearly defined, reductive category, divested of individuality and autonomy.

From a broader cultural standpoint and looking outside bohemian discourse, the Third Republic (1870-1940) was ripe for the “Woman Question” for several reasons. To begin with, industrialization closed the gap between the ‘natural’ strength disparity between the biological sexes. In addition, the recently inaugurated freedom of the press laws fostered or at least published feminist arguments, and them more widely accessible. Lastly, the reinstatement of a republican form of government caused the people to reconsider the status of the ‘citizen’ and who it applied to.\textsuperscript{46} Yet as Karen Offen reminds us, “It is important, though, that we not confuse discussion of women’s lack of legal or political authority in France with assessments of their power and influence.”\textsuperscript{47} The theatrical stage, in particular, provided an arena for the expressions of female agency, which will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter II of this thesis. But let us return to the concerns over gender, gender roles and gender expression in the context of Chéret’s


\textsuperscript{46} It was not until 1944 that women were able to vote in France. Charles Sowerine, “Revising the Sexual Contract: Women’s Citizenship and Republicanism in France, 1789-1944” in \textit{Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Genders}, ed. Christopher Forth and Elinor Accampo (UK: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2010), 23.

lithograph. Chéret responds to the concerns over female social and professional emancipation in his poster by casting her as a generic type that exists somewhere between the femme-fatale and la parisienne. The lithograph captures both the confidence of the autonomous woman as well as an apprehension over her potential for deceit.

By the late nineteenth century, Pierrot imagery proliferated freely throughout Paris and occupied both high and low forms of art. His corporeal likeness could be found in the form of costumed individuals at the bal masqué, on stage at the Opera or cafe-concert, in vaudeville plays, cabaret performances, and circus rings (Figure 6). When describing the atmosphere of spectacle and performance in Paris, Drake Stutesman suggests that by 1895:

Cities and towns were crammed with opera houses, theaters, burlesque and vaudeville playhouses, music halls, saloons, circus tents, and minstrelsies. Audiences at this time were well used to the stage as a presence, a literal place in which the fourth wall was often breached as performers dazzled, excited, and provoked spectators and fed their Rabelaisian appetites. Performers sang to their audiences—who sang back—or talked to them and made them laugh, cry, or catcall; they threw them acrobatic tricks, dirty double-entendres, and raunchy gestures; they enacted silly, poignant, political, or riveting dramas.48

By the turn of the century, performance was an integral part of the economy, and occupied a primary position in middle-class leisure activity. Moreover, theatrical performance was not contained by the boundaries of the stage, but instead overflowed to mingle with the audience. As a result, the distinction between performer and audience, spectacle and spectator, art and life, collapsed.

Posters played a significant role in bridging the gap between the spectacle of the stage and that of the street. In the wake of Haussmann’s urban renewal project, which displaced

thousands of lower-class individuals in order to facilitate the installation of broad boulevards, the streets of Paris became more accessible and visually legible as an avenue for posters. His urban renewal project also regulated and standardized the appearance of residential facades in the city center. This citywide renovation, coupled with the institution of the 1881 Press Law disbanding the previous censorship laws on public posters, facilitated the transformation of Parisian architecture into a vibrant, living thing. These factors gave rise to a new form of collective spectatorship in the streets of Paris. One journalist, writing under the pen name Maurice Talmeyr, noted:

The real architecture today, the one that grows from the living and pulsating environment, is the poster, the proliferation of colors under which disappears the stone monument, like ruins overtaken by nature. It is the temporary edifice demolished every night and reconstructed every morning, made of tawdry and changing images that annoy and cry out to the passerby, that pander, provoke, laugh, guide, and accost him.

Talmeyr’s description captures the visual onslaught of poster media in everyday life but also the ephemerality of the cityscape which is shaped and changed by the continuous cycle of images. In contrast to Talmeyr’s negative perspective, and speaking directly about the work of Jules Chéret, Joris-Karl Huysman suggests that the optical scandal Chéret’s work created was a welcome disruption to the gray monotony of Haussmannian Paris.


50 In an 1896 article for Revue des Deux Mondes, Talmeyr not only labelled Chéret’s female figure a prostitute, but also maintained that all posters, regardless of content, were tantamount to pornography. Maurice Talmeyr, “l’Age de l’affiche,” Revue des Deux Mondes, 137 (per. 4), no. 9, (September 1, 1896), 214. See also Karen L. Carter, “Unfit for Public Display: Female Sexuality and the Censorship of Fin-De-Siècle Publicity Posters,” Early Popular Visual Culture 8, no. 2 (2010), 116.

Whereas viewing prints had been more of a solitary and private experience in the first half of the nineteenth century, after the passage of the *liberté de l'affichage* and the development of the chromolithographic technique --popularized in part by Chéret-- viewing posters became a very public event. Morris columns and kiosks were erected to house this new form of advertising, and as a result, the theatrics of the Foliese-Bergere, circus, and cabarets spilled over to pave the streets of Paris. Thus, a permeability between performance and life was attained as fabricated characters appeared alongside contemporary celebrities in the form of poster art.

It is from this cultural milieu of performativity and spectacle that Pierrot comes to occupy the pages and canvases of some of Paris’s most notable poets and artists from the turn of the twentieth century. These well-known figures include Georges Seurat, Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau, Edouard Manet, Paul Verlaine, and Jules LaForgue, to name but a few. In an attempt to explain the widespread attraction of representing the figure of the performer in visual art, Nicola Haxell argues that “The idea that the artist, exiled from society by industrialization and capitalism, identified with, and could achieve a symbolic projection into, the marginalized and narcissistic saltimbanque, and that this was his route to a ludic, liberating creativity, certainly holds good for the artist as *pierrot, pitre, clown* or “brother in poverty, the buffoon.”

Haxell affirms the traces of social isolation, lucidity, and anxiety over industrialization that unite the artist and the clown. In addition to more high-status modes of representation, Pierrot appeared in published print media, comic strip cartoons, and commercial advertisements that monopolized off of the popularization of his likeness in the public’s consciousness and claimed him for their varying enterprises. As a result, numerous iterations of the sad clown proliferate in the art and

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material culture of the fin de siècle. While Pierrot conjured nostalgic connections to French cultural history, he also forged new connotations directly related to Haussmann’s urban expansion project in Paris. Specifically, Pierrot was embraced by the bohemian artists occupying Montmartre who heralded the pathetic clown as a “king of falseness and failure” and pasted him as a figure-head on their journal covers, cabaret wall decor, and in their advertorial ephemera.  

It is from this cultural backdrop that Jules Chéret emerges to transpose the clown from the stage to his posters.

**Jules Chéret**

Jules Chéret entered the scene at a time when the traditional hierarchy of the arts was in the process of being dismantled, and the debate over the artistic value of posters and print media was at its height. Initially trained as a typographer and commercial printer, Chéret began his career at a time when lithographic posters were a primary promotional device in the expanding French economy.  

After studying abroad in England and under the tutelage of Eugene Rimmel - the owner of the perfume manufactory and member of the Royal Society of Arts - Chéret returned to France to open his own printing studio. After turning his highly successful business over to Chaix & Company in 1881, he retained artistic control over the lithographs and continued to execute his own prints while expanding his commercial production to include painted stage curtains, interior decorative wall panels, and hand painted furniture. In 1882 Chéret joined an

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anti-academician group of artists and writers known as Les Incohérents led by Jules Levy.⁵⁶ He was very much a part of the bohemian art scene and went on to create works of art for many of Montmartre’s celebrities including Yvette Guilbert.⁵⁷ Chéret’s career exemplifies the increased commercialization of the art market that took place during the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ The commercial dimensions of artistic bohemia were nurtured by the networks of communities that formed among the cabaret circles, and the literary and artistic clubs that formed from these circuits. Chéret’s artwork is recognized for its frivolity, sense of immediacy, and embrace of the material properties of the lithographic medium. His subject matter ranges from allegorical characters such as Pierrot, Arlequin, and Columbine, to depictions of contemporary performers including Sarah Bernhardt and Loïe Fuller.⁵⁹ His posters recall the whimsicality of Rococo paintings coupled with the techniques, color palette and subject matter of the fin de siècle.

Chéret’s success as a commercial and fine artist bridged the anti-establishment sectors of artistic bohemia with sanctioned sites of recognition such as the World Exhibition. After earning several gold and silver medals at the World Exhibitions of 1878 and 1889, Chéret was accepted into the national order of the Legion of Honour and recognized as “creator of a new industry of art...by applying art to commercial and industrial printing.”⁶⁰ A significant portion of Chéret’s artwork depicts scenes at the Folies-Bergere, the Hippodrome, the Nouveau Cirque and numerous other sites of entertainment and spectacle. As a result, Chéret’s lithographs are speckled with the various entertainers found at such sites including clowns and pierrots.

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In particular, Chéret’s lithograph *Musée Grévin, Pantomimes Lumineuses, Théâtre optique de E. Reynaud, musique de Gaston Paulin*, was commissioned in 1892 to advertise the exhibition of Emile Reynaud’s *Luminous Pantomime* “Pauvre Pierrot” at the Musée Grevin (Figure 3). Through figuration and synecdochal intonation, Chéret’s lithograph displays the same trio outlined previously in Henri Ibels work; that of Pierrot, Columbine and Harlequin (Figure 5). Explain the dynamic of the trio, Green and Swan state:

To sum up their entanglement: The naive, defenseless, moonstruck Pierrot adores the lovely Columbine, who has wit and feeling enough to appreciate his worth but is too light-minded to resist the coarse and brutal Harlequin, who is himself bound to Pierrot in a mocking, rueful, treacherous comradeship.\(^\text{61}\)

Likewise, Chéret’s poster evokes a similar predicament. Given prominence front and center is Columbine, dressed in vibrant yellow, lifting her skirts as she frolics on a theatrical, painterly background of heavily saturated blue and red swathes of color. Shadows dance and loom behind the trio, giving the composition a sense of dynamism and groundlessness. Columbine is not an individualized person, but instead assumes the characteristic appearance common to most of Chéret’s female figures.\(^\text{62}\) She is flanked by a very pale Pierrot in the back, and a discarded mandolin, tamourbine and mask in the front. These foregrounded items are visual premonitions of the character Harlequin, who is synecdochally represented through them. In the background, Pierrot appears beguiled by Columbine’s presence, as though helplessly caught in her orbit. He is utterly pale, with no discernable difference between the pallor of his skin and that of his white clothes. Only through the slight splattering of color -impressed on the print through a technique known as *crachis*- is Pierrot gives the slightest degree of tonal modeling. In fact, like a pale shade, he seems but a mere echo of a man. Despite its apparent frivolity, there is a sinister tone to

\(^{62}\) Chéret’s generic women are referred to as “Cherettes.”
this poster as the remnants of a previous paramour are hinted at through the presence of the mandolin, mask and tambourine. Likewise, a trickle of white daisies fall from Columbine’s skirts as if to caress the grave of a departed loved one.

This lithograph summons the discussion of a broader anxiety towards women that was voiced by many artists and authors of bohemian Montmartre through the depiction of the teasing, dominating or simply liberated woman. As previously mentioned, the literary and visual arts collaborated to craft stereotypical prototypes of women as frivolous, flirtatious, and often dangerous. Female types such as the femme-fatale, la parisienne, and other stereotypes provide insight into the French attitude towards women during the latter years of the nineteenth century when gender roles were changing. To begin with, the femme-fatale is often represented through historical, biblical or mythological women who in some manner or another lead men to their demise. In contrast, La Parisienne was seen as “flirtatious and always feminine, a symbol of glamor, leisure, and fun.” However, in her article “Femme Fatale: Fashion and Visual Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” Valerie Steele suggests that the two types, the femme-fatale and la Parisienne, are interconnected, and that “Behind the image of the femme fatale, the irresistibly attractive woman who leads men to destruction, lurked the specter of the fashionable Parisienne.” Likewise, Felicity Chaplin suggests that “la Parisienne became one manifestation

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of the *fille d’Eve* or daughter of Eve.” The circulation of these stereotypes in the visual and literary arts perpetuated the association between women’s social liberty and moral unruliness.

When viewed alongside Reynaud’s luminous pantomime, and in light of the cultural understanding of Columbine as a coquette, Cheret’s lithograph reveals an amalgam of the two female types. Though not overtly a *femme-fatale* in Chéret’s depiction, Columbine was nearly synonymous with the dangerous woman in fin-de-siècle France, and we can assume that her depiction conjured certain negative connotations to the contemporary viewer. The *femme-fatale* signified base appetites, both material and physical, and is often presented as the metaphorical counterpart to the artist in conflict with industry. Much like the way in which industrialization was seen as an isolating and destructive force by bohemian artists, so too the *femme-fatale* was perceived as provoking these same consequences. In Chéret’s lithograph, the figuration of the commedia dell’arte trio, Columbine, Pierrot and Harlequin (implied), likewise references a typical scenario of unrequited love in which Pierrot shamelessly pursues Columbine, who, after playing with his feelings, will leave him devastated. Despite their common origin in commedia dell’arte, Pierrot and Columbine are not commonly paired together in art until the tail-end of the nineteenth century. With Pierrot signifying the artist-poet, and Columbine as the flirtatious and noncommittal woman, this print relays an underlying apprehension voiced by

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68 For example, the pantomime *Pierrot Pendu* exemplifies the lethal dynamic between Pierrot and Columbine during which the performance ends with Pierrot’s death.
69 Towards the latter years of the 19th century, Pierrot is most commonly paired against Columbine who represents “base appetite, both physical and financial; she is a bad muse, bad mother, evil temptation, baser self and chief rival. She often kills him to satisfy her own vanity.” Jones, *Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots*, 172.
many male artists towards women. Jones suggests that “grotesque imagery in this period deals with failed idealism, especially that of alienated writers confronted with the power of financiers and courtesans who easily symbolize the excess of ruthless material appetite.” Just as Pierrot is shown in Chéret’s print as naively pursuing Columbine despite his impending rejection or destruction, so too the artist is both enticed and repelled by the confrontation of the modern capitalist economy.

The new mode of visibility fostered by fin de siècle poster advertisements is mirrored in the orientation of the Musée Grévin where Emile Reynaud’s Théâtre Optique - the subject of Chéret’s aforementioned lithograph - was exhibited. (Figure 13) Jean-Louis Comolli noted how “The second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible.” Just as the streets of Paris entertained a continual cycle of posters that were pasted up and torn down daily, so too the Musée Grévin adopted a rotating collection for display. This concept of a rotating collection was relatively new for an institution that claimed to be a museum, and it provided a constantly renewed spectacle for public consumption. In particular, the Musée Grévin specialized in wax recreations of historic and contemporary events such as the death of Marat, which were displayed alongside foreign curiosities and fictitious scenes from French literature and theater. It was among this “instant and living history” that Reynaud debuted his Théâtre Optique. Patented in 1888, his device allowed for the projection of a moving image - luminous pantomime - onto a large screen. As a result, the viewing experience was not dissimilar to that of

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70 The promotional material for the Musée Grévin touted that it would “represent the principal current events with scrupulous fidelity and striking precision…. In short, to bring together before the eyes of the Parisian public all the elements of curiosity, instruction, and information…. To create what we call a ‘living newspaper.’” Vanessa R. Schwartz, “Museums and Mass Spectacle: The Musée Grévin as a Monument to Modern Life,” French Historical Studies 19, no. 1 (1995): 15.
the Le Chat Noir’s ombre chinoises that will be discussed presently. An engraving by Louis Poyet deconstructs the mechanics behind the device's operation which stemmed from Reynaud’s previous invention, the praxinoscope. (Figure 4) Made up of 500 hand painted crystalloid squares which were adhered to a strip of material that ran through a series of spools, the Théâtre Optique allowed figures to move across a static background.

The particular pantomime advertised in Chéret’s lithograph is “Pauvre Pierrot,” which narrates a typical comic scenario in which Pierrot pursues Columbine, who rejects him in favor of Harlequin. This film embraces the idea of Pierrot as the unrequited lover and innocent, melancholy fool. It is interesting to note how Chéret’s lithograph gives no indication of the technology used to project the pantomime, but instead lends sole focus to the characters. This is extremely atypical for the late nineteenth century when moving images which were often advertised for the novelty of their medium rather than the contents of the film or pantomime. However, since Chéret preceded the popularization of motion pictures and their accompanying promotional ephemera by a few years, his advertorial methods reflect back on a long history of circus advertisement wherein the illusion of the performance is maintained, and the structure enabling the spectacle is kept hidden. It is similarly interesting to consider the reception of Reynaud’s Théâtre Optique in relation to the historical modes of viewing. The luminous pantomime was projected onto a large screen that was framed in a way that echoed the traditional framing of an academic painting. As a result, his projection is placed in dialogue with “high art,”

71 Today we have a 4 minute fragment of the original 15 minute animation, that was restored in 1982 by Julien Pappe to celebrate the opening of the Les Halles branch of the Musée Grévin, which was the original site for Reynaud’s projection.
72 One relevant characteristic of Pierrot is that his integrity or criminal innocence prevents him from succeeding through illegal or immoral means. Unlike the fox and astute Harlequin, who plays to win and as a result, occupies a hierarchical status in relation to Pierrot.
while simultaneously embracing the overt artifice of the animated projection. Likewise, Jules Lemaître comments that the world reproduced inside the Musée Grévin was authentic, because in this museum, as in his own world, “all is wax and all will melt, sooner or later. A clear expression of the futility of objects.”

In a less light-hearted comparison, Adolphe Willette’s lithograph *Pierrot Pendu* depicts the clown’s ultimate demise at the hands of Columbine (Figure 7). Here he is shown lifelessly hanging with a noose around his neck as columbine laughs. This pairing, Columbine as the femme-fatale and Pierrot as the artist-poet, expresses a greater anxiety felt towards women who rejected the typical gendered roles they were expected to inhabit. In these prints, Pierrot works to affirm the apprehension felt towards women who violated normative boundaries, and to present the artists as both endangered and enthralled by such transgression.

In addition to the familiar iconography of Pierrot and Columbine, the overt flatness of Chéret’s poster evokes certain modes of viewing that would have been recognizable in his social sphere. In particular, the shadow plays or *ombres chinoises* popularized in the cabaret Le Chat Noir by Henri Riviere, presented a form of entertainment that was visually reliant on light, shadow and silhouette. These shadow plays would project the silhouette of paper or zinc cut outs onto a makeshift screen covering the small *guignol*, or puppetry booth (Figure 8-11). Interestingly, “Riviere and his friends experimented not only with ombres noires, or black shadows, but also ombres blanches, white shadows in which the figures appeared white set off

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by the black of the card from which they were cut out.”

It is not difficult to imagine that this form of entertainment may have influenced Chéret’s experimentation with figuration, and prompted him to challenge the pictorial use of shadows and silhouettes. In fact, Pierrot, with his somewhat angular perimeter and largely monochrome coloring, resembles a white version of the zinc cut outs (Figure 10).

Much like the spectacle of the cabaret and the luminous pantomime, artists working in more conventional mediums, such as oil paint, were likewise experimenting with silhouette, shadows and flatness. For example, Manet’s The Piper (1866) denies the viewer a grasp on the relationship between the figure and ground, and instead condemns the piper to a liminal existence floating within the confines of the canvas (Figure 12). T.J. Clark pinpoints this tendency to destabilize realistic representations in art through the embrace of flatness as emblematic of fin de siècle Modernity. Chéret’s posters exemplify this flatness and are placed in dialogue with the visual rhetoric of high-art as in the case of Manet. Moreover, by embracing the inherent two-dimensionality of the lithographic medium through form and color, “Chéret had been the first to frankly state the physical properties of his materials and methods of production.” In doing so, his prints maintained an integrity of material, design and function by embracing the overt artifice of the medium.

Although Chéret’s work was received with enthusiasm, particularly during the poster-collecting frenzy of the 1880’s, there were several critics who perceived his work as threatening to public morality. For example, several critics condemned his utilization of sexuality and

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75 Segel, “Fin De Siècle Cabaret,” 49.
77 Kalba, “Chromolithography,” 162.
fantasy as a means of publicity. In one comment, Georges d’Avenel states that Chéret “expertly wedded sexuality to the commodity in his images of attractive women who were actually a dyad of female types – ‘half fairy-princess and half street-walker.” For d’Avenel, Chéret’s posters masked obvious sexual solicitations beneath an elegant and dazzling veneer.” Similarly, Emile Straus recognized the commercial potential of the sexualized female form and embraced the opportunity capitalized off of it. When offering advice to his colleagues, Straus said “Above all, don’t forget to include a Woman [in your advert]; that will really sell.”

In conclusion, a strain of pessimism is visible in the art and writing of the fin de siècle that indicates a broader apprehension towards the mechanical age, industrialization and women which is personified in Chéret’s lithograph through the figure of Columbine. However, the bohemian artists adapt and perpetuate a bourgeois systems of morality and gendered propriety by promulgating this female “type.” In doing so, the bohemian artists espouse the very societal structure they claim to oppose. Similarly, the pairing of Pierrot and Columbine work in harmony to challenge and uphold the status quo.

81 “The enemy muse, like the bourgeois rival, is both same and opposite.” Jones, Sad Clowns and Pale Pierrots, 134.
CHAPTER II
UNMASKING GENDER

As Chapter I demonstrated, Pierrot’s identity remained bound up with that of the self-ostracized artist, and was used to voice the apprehension felt by many bohemian artists about the increasingly liberated female sex. In contrast, this chapter complicates the dominant impression of Pierrot’s association with the artists of bohemian Montmartre, and instead explores the way in which Pierrot is visually appropriated by female actors to challenge established models of gendered behavior and dress through male impersonation on stage. In particular, this chapter discusses depictions of the pantomimist Felicia Mallet, and the connotations of her crossdress performances as Pierrot during the fin de siècle. Moreover, Pierrot is used by Mallet to disrupt the assumption about the correlation between gender and clothing through her crossdress performance in *L’Enfant Prodigue* depicted by Chéret (Figure 14). This lithograph, which was made to advertise Michel Carré’s pantomime based on the biblical story of the Prodigal Son, captures Mallet in an eighteenth-century Pierrot garb. She appears to be very young and her gender is not readily apparent in the print. Moreover, her name is excluded from the advertisement, which allows her identity to merge with that of the character she plays. This form of dress transgression is able to permeate the boundary of the stage and merge with the audience’s conception of real life.
The Parisien stage itself, much like the circus ring or the carnival perimeter, operates outside the normative rules and regulations that govern everyday life. Drawing from Jean Starobinski’s notion of the carnivalesque space in *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Jennifer Forrest describes the potential cohabitation of paradox and reversal of prevalent norms within the circus perimeter. She explains that “the space of the circus is a threshold separating the possible from the impossible, the real from the unreal, sense from non-sense. On the other side of the threshold lies the world of the paradoxical acrobat, one without constraints on meaning and being...where gender and race are perceived as their opposites.”

Forrest likens the suspension of the acrobat in the circus ring to the suspension of accepted norms or natural laws, such as gravity or human physical ability, both of which are challenged by the acrobat’s seemingly impossible performance. Much like Bakhtin’s interpretation of the carnivalesque space wherein opposites are forced to confront their similarities, Forrest likewise suggests that the circus perimeter holds the potential to reconcile antipodal forces.

I suggest that the theatrical stage holds a similar potential to that of the circus ring in that it is a space where standard thought patterns are suspended, questioned and capsized through performance. Much like circus acrobatics, there is a primacy of the body and corporeal expression in pantomime. The stage, as a place of overt-artifice, circumvents the assumption that what is being performed is in fact real. Instead, as a place of costuming, illusion and role-play, the contrivance of it all is not questioned. As Forrest points out, gender is among the tenets brought into question, transgressed, and overturned in the performative space. When discussing gender, I invoke Judith Butler’s understanding of gender constitution as “instituted through the

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stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” In Butler’s paradigm, gender is the product of repeated actions of self-stylization, and is comparable to an actor's adoption of certain postures and mannerisms when assuming a role. I will now turn to the particular case of Félicia Mallet performing as a male Pierrot, and explore the connotations of theatrical crossdressing during the mid nineteenth century. I will then use this case study to demonstrate how, by the late nineteenth century, crossdress performances were perceived as subversive because of several changes in the cultural understanding of gender constitution.

As previously mentioned, in 1890 the actress Félicia Mallet starred in Michel Carré’s three act play *L’Enfant Prodigue* (Figure 14). The play itself, which was produced in accordance with the revivalist spirit of the Cercle Funambulesque, was extraordinarily successful and -after its initial debut- traveled to commercial theaters, and onto the stages of London and New York. In 1906, the pantomime was the first stage-play to be translated into film, while also experiencing revivals on stage well into the 1920s. The play itself, which was a modernised version of the Prodigal Son, was performed in silent pantomime with an accompanying

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84 The Cercle Funambulesque was a group started in 1888 by Fernand Beissier, Paul Margueritte, Emile de Najac, and Pierre Henri Larcher that was devoted to reviving the classical pantomime of Jean-Gaspard Deburau, “the parades of the Boulevard, and the farces of the Foire; to present pieces from the commedia dell’arte and from the Comedie-Italienne; to offer the composers and scenarists of the modern pantomime a theater, orchestra, and audience for their work, and to produce new playlets in prose or in verse inspired by the old Italian comedy of masks.” Storey, *Pierrot: On the Stage of Desire*, 286.
85 It premiered in London at the Prince of Wale’s Theatre (1891), and in New York at the Booth Theatre (1916). In 1906 *L’Enfant Prodigue* was made into a film but this time with a male actor, George Wague, as Pierrot. Storey, *Pierrot: On the Stage of Desire*, 292.
composition by André Wormser (Figure 16). The following plot description comes from a review of the London production of the play published in The Brisbane Courier, 1 June 1891:

The plot of the piece is simplicity itself, being merely a modernised version of the Prodigal Son, who leaves his father’s comfortable middle-class home to waste his substance in riotous living in Paris, in the equivocal company of a siren appropriately named Phrynette. In due time the nymph abandons him for a wicked but wealthy Baron, and the disgusted and ruined Pierrot returns to his parents’ house, “lean, rent, and beggar’d.” His mother revives him with a tender pardon; not so his father, who heaps indignant curses on his devoted head. The drums of a passing regiment are heard, and Pierrot . . . declares his intention of enlisting, and thereby saving his honour on the field of battle. On this his father relents, and he departs, blessed by both parents, as the curtain falls. All this is done without a word being spoken, but to the accompaniment of delightful descriptive music.87

Likewise, another review of the play noted the “feminine grace” Mallet’s performance brought to the role of Pierrot, while others concurred that her interpretation was “delicate” and “charming.”88

As it so happens, Jules Cherét was among the ranks of men composing the Cercle Funambulesque, and he was hired to create the poster advertisement for Félicia Mallet’s performance as Pierrot (Figure 14). The color lithograph stands at a massive seven feet, eight inches tall, with a width of just under three feet. The size alone is enveloping and one can imagine the impact such a vibrant, monumental image would have on its surroundings. A horizontal band of rich, hyper-pigmented ink reveals the place in which two sheets of paper overlap to facilitate the grand scale of the print. Occupying the foreground of the frame is Mallet dressed as Pierrot. She holds a taper candle in her right hand while shielding the flicker of its

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87 Anonymous contributor, “‘The Prodigal Son’ in Pantomime,” The Brisbane Courier, (1 June 1891), page 7. (digitized by the State Library of Queensland). It is interesting to note that after Pierrot has fallen from the graces of his parents, he appears in a black suit. (Figure 3)
flame with her left. Her posture is that of someone who is delicately treadding so as not to draw attention to oneself, and her pursed lips and backwards glance expose her clandestine intentions. Composed of whites, pale blues hues and a dark blue outline, her figure hovers ever so slightly above the implied ground while the recess behind her diminishes into painterly abstraction. Framing her right side, two figures - an older man and his wife, presumably M. and Mme. Pierrot - emerge from a fog of inky flecks. Barely discernible, Mme Pierrot’s face is delicately illustrated with dark blue lines while her husband is more fully rendered. The posture of M. Pierrot, with his hands raised and his mouth agape in surprise, mimics that of Pierrot fils and visually reiterates their familial ties. There is, however, a disjunction between the activity of the foreground and that of the background as indicated by Pierrot fils glance to the right of the frame while Pierrot père reacts to an unseen stimulant to the left. They seem to be responding to different incitations, and their lines of sight imply activity beyond the perimeter of the lithograph. Additionally, both figures are wearing the skullcap associated with Pierrot’s traditional costume from the time of Jean-Gaspard Deburau (1818-1854). However, Pierrot père dons long trousers, a suit jacket, waistcoat and necktie in accordance with the sartorial fashion of the 1890’s, while Pierrot fils is garbed in breeches, stockings, a foaming collarette, and heeled evening shoes that evoke nostalgia for the eighteenth century (Figure 17). Similarly, his unbuttoned, fitted jacket resembles a previous iteration of the standard Pierrot costume of the century prior, such as the one depicted by Antoine Watteau in 1718-1719 (Figure 18).

Framing the top of the poster and embracing the curvature of Pierrot’s silhouette, the reddish-orange type font boldly declares the title of the biblically inspired stage-play: L’Enfant Prodigue. Likewise, in white lettering the playwright and musical composer are indicated in the spatial recesses of the composition. A concern for clarity, legibility, and visual excitement seem
to guide Chéret’s organization of space and choice of color. Having worked in London for several years during his youth, Chéret was greatly influenced by the color advertisement issued by touring American circuses he encountered there.⁸⁹ He also accredits Antonie Watteau and Giambattisa Tiepolo as sources of inspiration; both of whom furnished the image of a sensitive, dreamy Pierrot over a century prior. Similarly, Chéret’s composition evokes a wistful playfulness, youth and innocence reminiscent of Rococo art that he merges with modern means of production. By implicating eighteenth century Pierrot, Chéret recalls the character’s long history and integration into French culture. In fact, by the latter years of the nineteenth century, Pierrot imagery was “an automatic shoe-in the market, and guaranteed popularity and success.”⁹⁰ From a commercial standpoint, Pierrot was an excellent ambassador and could be found on confectionery advertisements, printed on wallpaper, and proliferating in the pages of journals.⁹¹

**Crossdressing on Stage during the Nineteenth Century**

When discussing Félicia Mallet’s performance as Pierrot, it is necessary to understand the gendered codes of dress and the cultural history of theatrical cross-dressing in fin-de-siècle France. As far back as 1800, the decree of 16 Brumaire An IX and the sénatus-consulte were established to serve as a “formal notice that women were henceforth forbidden to wear trousers, except during the long-traditional bedlam of Carnival.”⁹² Exceptions to this decree regulating women’s clothes were given only if one received a medical permit, but restrictions still applied,

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⁸⁹ Forrest, *Decadent Aesthetics*, 141.
⁹¹ Both Chéret’s and Thomas Couture’s depictions of Pierrot were made into wallpaper. Likewise, Jean-Léon Gérôme famously capitalized off of Pierrot imagery. Forrest, *Decadent Aesthetics*, 42. See also Jones, *Sad Clown and Pale Pierrots*, 122.
and women could not appear in trousers “aux Spectacles, Bals et autres lieux de réunion ouverts au public.” Moreover, as Gretchen Van Slyke argues in her 1998 article “The Sexual and Textual Politics of Dress: Rosa Bonheur and Her Cross-Dressing Permits,” this decree was applied throughout the nineteenth-century but “enforced with particular rigor during the Third Republic.” The despotic concern with policing women’s dress around the late nineteenth century correlates with the compensatory emphasis on masculinity following France’s emasculating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. Similarly, Kaja Silverman attributes the war with annihilating “the positives of the masculine ‘self,’” which resulted in an increased anxiety over gender distinction. As a result, by the turn of the century cross-dressing was perceived as an affront against national propriety.

Additionally, discourse on gendered medical diagnostics, and depictions of predatory women in visual art illuminate a preoccupation with sexual ‘aberrance,’ and an anxiety over female emancipation. In *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender* (2010), Elinor Accampo and Christopher Forth clarify how after the precipitous decline in national birth rates during the last few decades of the nineteenth century, French “politicians, health professionals, and social critics became obsessed with sexual and reproductive disorders, venereal disease, mental illness, alcoholism, emerging feminist movements, and other violations

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94 Women were often imprisoned if caught wearing “male” attire more than once. Ibid, 321.
of the social and gender order that seemed symptomatic of the Republic itself and its broader engagement with modernity.\textsuperscript{97} Likewise, bohemian artists echoed this sentiment and expressed both an obsession with and a severe distrust of the female sex. Female tropes including the biblical Lilith, Salomè, and Judith, as well as the mythological Medusa, Pandora and Circe populate artist’s canvases from this era and expose their fear of female dominance and betrayal. Bohemian discourse about women oscillates between objectifying descriptions of their physicality, and expressions of “the knowledge that men are tied to women emotionally and sexually, and are thus vulnerable to them...[which] exacerbates the bohemians’ anxiety that their ideal woman will use and then betray them.”\textsuperscript{98} The penal codes, medical discourse, and visual art from the fin-de-siècle collectively demonstrate an increased uneasiness about gender ‘transgression’ in appearance and behavior.

How does this discussion of gender nonconformity relate to Pierrot? In addition to the performances by Mallet, the role of Pierrot was popularized among other female actresses including Sarah Bernhardt, Ada Rehan and Jane May. Known for his melancholic demeanor, hysteria and impulsive behavior, Pierrot was understood as entertaining feminized sensibilities.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} Elinor Accampo, Christopher Forth, ed., \textit{Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender} (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 2. Also, Charles Sowerwine suggests that women were denied the vote for so long in France because republicanism itself was gendered male. Charles Sowerwine, “Revisiting the Sexual Contract: Women’s Citizenship and republicanism in France, 1789-1944” from \textit{Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France: Bodies, Minds and Gender}, ed. Accampo and Forth (UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 9.


\textsuperscript{99} Premonitions of Pierrot’s associations with impulsive, erratic behavior are present over half a century prior, and can be found in the writings of Jules Janin in 1832. Janin, who was the primary biographer of Jean-Gaspard Deburau, first painted the image of Pierrot as an emanation
For instance, Paul Margueritte’s poignant pantomime “Pierrot assassin de sa femme,” published in 1882, narrates Pierrot’s gradual lapse into hysteria as he reenacts the murder of his wife Columbine by his own hand. As previously noted, hysteria had distinct connotations in relation to performance in fin de siècle France. Gordon elaborates that “In its restructuring of the body, hysteria became a cultural phenomenon and created a new form of expression in the arts. More precisely, the theme of hysteria in popular entertainment produced a novel form of spectacle.”

The pantomime, which begin after the murder has taken place, features Pierrot assuming both his own role as perpetrator, and the role of Columbine, his victim. As the pantomime progresses, Pierrot, who is played by Bernhardt, becomes increasingly paranoid and the boundaries between his identity and that of his deceased wife are blurred. His inability to discern between his own identity and that of Columbine results in him taking his own life at the moment when he reenacts Columbine’s murder. This pantomime indicates not only Pierrot’s unstable mental state, but also illustrates the permeable boundaries between himself and Columbine, and between their genders. Speaking more specifically about concerns over his indistinct gender, Green and Swan elaborate on what were viewed as effeminate facets of Pierrot’s character. They describe him as “socially elusive, psychologically eccentric, intellectually oblique, with abysses of metaphysical melancholy within, and lifelines of frail of the people. The people, as Janin portrayed them, “were governed by instinct, feverish, alcoholic, hysterically happy and hysterically sad, brutal, and yet profoundly sensitive. Janin identified this same erratic, mercurial temperament in Pierrot, who always acted according to ‘the instinct of the people, the spirit of the people’.” Jules Janin, *Débureau: Histoire du théâtre à quatre sous* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1881), 75-77. Translation in Knowles, “Lost Ground,” 370-371.

102 Green and Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot*, 16.
humor, hypersensitive and hyper subtle.” He was seen as lacking the “broad, warm, genial gestures and opinions by which a man asserts his membership of the club of men.”

Margueritte’s pantomime is perhaps one of the more extreme examples of Pierrot’s malaise and ennui, but it is demonstrative of the character’s association with instability which presented him as a prime role for a female actor to assume.

Much like Maugueritte’s pantomime *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*, Huysmans recognizes the presence of similar traits in Chéret’s depictions of Pierrot. As Karen Carter acknowledges, the figures in Chéret’s posters were not singularly delightful, but received critique from Huysmans for being “presque satanique,” (almost satanic) “inquiet,”(restless) “névrosé,”(neurotic) “joie démentielle,”(insane joy) and “hystérique.” (hysterical). This vivid language portrayed the poster, as a “symbol” of the modern age that equally contained a sense of pathology and madness.”

Take for example Chéret’s illustrations for Huysmans’s *Pierrot Sceptique*, in which Pierrot’s body appears spasmodic (Figure 19). Likewise, Henri Lanos takes a similar approach in his illustration for *Pierrot assassin de sa femme*, by referencing both clinical illustration of the late nineteenth century, and Nadar’s photographs of Deburau as Pierrot from 1854 (Figure 20). These illustrations indicate the restless, unpredictable and hysterical attributes that become associated with Pierrot towards the late nineteenth century. This pathologizing visual language is symptomatic of a broader trend in medical discourse that sought to identify and set apart ‘normal’ from ‘abnormal.’ Elizabeth Williams attributes many of these diagnostics, including hysteria, melancholy, and mania as the response by those in the male

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105 For clinical illustrations see Paul Richer, *Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie* (1885), and *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* 2 (1878).
dominated medical field to the transgression of gender roles. She states “In recent years historians have come to recognize the extent to which French cultural anxieties of the fin de siècle were fixed on disruptions of gender roles, producing an era of veritable gender panic...In response, the male dominated medical field produced modern scientific teachings that reinstated women’s fragility, instability and unsuitability for public activity.”

Though not exclusively reserved for diagnosing female patience, hysteria was coded feminine. Likewise, by the turn of the twentieth century melancholic behavior was linked to homosexuality. The transference of clinical visual language into artistic depiction of Pierrot indicates an apprehension over the unruly or nonconforming body.

In addition to his erratic tendencies, Pierrot was often scripted as being in his adolescence, which was understood as a transitional age and therefore a permissible role for female actors. In his chapter “Boys and Girls Together: Subcultural Origins of Glamour Drag and Male Impersonation on the Nineteenth Century Stage,” Laurence Senelick explains the

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106 Elizabeth Williams, “Gastronomy and Diagnosis of Anorexia in Fin-de-Siècle France,” in Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France, ed. Forth and Accampo (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 91.

107 The diagnostic history of hysteria and the word itself are associated with female biology, namely the womb. Likewise, melancholy is associated with homosexuality and can be found in medical records and observations of patience from 1895. In a nonmedical context and persistent over two decades later, melancholy can be traced in homosexual characters such as Stephen Gordon in John Radclyffe Hall’s novel The Well of Loneliness, 1928. Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 229.

108 It is worth noting that in 1895 homosexuality in females was associated with immaturity, arrested development and a melancholy demeanor. Havelock Ellis’s “Sexual Inversion in Women” (1895) linked female homosexuality to immaturity and premature womenhood. Likewise, Freud suggested that female homosexuality was a result of arrested female development. Similarly, Ellis writes of an American business woman, “Miss M,” who he writes about; “Her sense of beauty was developed early, but there was always a sense of melancholy associated with it.” She was marked by “boyish tricks of manner and speech which seem to be instinctive” Jack Halberstam, Female Masculinity (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 227-229.
conditions for female cross-dressing on stage; “Such transpositions were acceptable only when the age represented was transitional and, according to social conventions, the least sexually active: young women might play prepubescent lads -the Peter Pan motif- and men might play post-menopausal matrons.” Similarly, Paul Bouissac corroborates this claim by suggesting that “Gender enters into the mix in the case of adolescents, too, who, like children and artists, have a more fluid relationship with the social codes into which they are being integrated.” Pierrot’s feminine temperament, adolescent maturity, and association with carnivalesque spaces of role-reversal, including the theatrical stage, circus ring and *bal masqué*, license him to thwart sanctioned notions of gender. It is significant to note that at this time there existed a *Pierrette* - a female counterpart to Pierrot- and yet women actors frequently assumed the male role of Pierrot. Other than the nominal distinction, Pierrot and Pierrette are distinguished by their respective costumes in that the former’s costume is considered masculine, the latter’s is associated with female sartorial customs. Additionally, Pierrette did not hold the same history and connotations as Pierrot, and functioned more as a supporting character or paramour. What is the effect of a female performing a male Pierrot? In her book *Acting Women*, Lesley Ferris elucidates the social function of cross-dressing on stage: “A woman assumes male clothes (in performance) in order to play with - at whatever level of consciousness - ideas about gender in

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112 Pierrette appears around 1885 and often rivals Columbine in romantic pursuit of Pierrot.
relationship with an ‘audience’: This is radically different from the concept of disguise, since it is a primary necessity of all ‘impersonation’ that the audience should be aware that this is an impersonation.”¹¹³ The affective quality of cross-dressing is, therefore, to mitigate and expose what is socially acceptable and socially taboo.

As previously mentioned, Mallet’s performance of Pierrot was lauded and her female attributes were perceived as enhancing the character’s “delicate” and “charming” qualities.¹¹⁴ To the nineteenth century reader, these descriptors -“delicate” and “charming”- would not have been exclusively associated with femininity, but in fact coincide with the ideals of the dandy.¹¹⁵ Much like the image of the bohemian artist, the dandy was a consciously cultivated persona, and someone who entertained a very particular, often eccentric lifestyle. Writing several decades prior, Baudelaire embraced this moniker and described the dandy as someone who had “no profession other than elegance...no other status but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons.”¹¹⁶ Others have made this association between Pierrot and the dandy including literary scholar John Anderson, who states that “The “unmanliness” of Pierrot in the age of decadence identifies the mask with the figures of the dandy and the aesthete, but it also asserts

¹¹³ Playing male roles was also a way for an actress to demonstrate her varied repertoire and acting abilities. Ferris, Acting Women, 148, 161.
¹¹⁵ Elisa Glick examines the origins of dandyism: “We may trace this conception of dandyism back to Barbe d’Aurevilly, who declared that the dandy “does not work; he exists,” and Baudelaire, for whom dandyism was a “cult of the self” characterized by “first and foremost the burning need to create for oneself a personal originality.” Elisa Glick, Materializing Queer Desire: Oscar Wilde to Andy Warhol (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 27.
the androgyny and the absence of sexual involvement that are regularly characteristic of the clown.”

On the one hand, Pierrot’s perceived effeminacy, which is enhanced by Mallet’s performance, is seen as reflective of the constructed personas of the dandy and aesthete. Simultaneously, Anderson highlights Pierrot’s lack of sexual involvement as an attestation to the androgyny of the character, and a reference to the common practice of celibacy among acrobats to enhance their performance. In most of his romantic endeavors, Pierrot appears to be frustrated and unable to contribute to a healthy relationship. Likewise, when he does successfully secure a partner, he is often cuckolded by her and her lover as is the case in L’Enfant Prodigue. Most frequently, however, he is unable to obtain the interest of the person he pursues, and is destined to pine for her to no avail. Anderson’s conclusion is grounded in Martin Green and John Swan’s assertion that “the denial of manliness and womanliness, thus became an essential part of commedia modernism.” This embrace of gender ambiguity or denial in commedia was developed in response to the contemporary societal insistence on gender distinction. In true

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118 It’s interesting to note that according to Alan Sinfeild, it was Oscar Wilde’s trial in 1895 that made “effeminacy, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism” the hallmarks of “sexual inversion.” Alan Sinfield, The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Movement (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 172.

119 “According to popular tradition, most acrobats were celibate: sexual activity was liable to weaken them and so expose them to unnecessary risks.” Verhagen, “Re-figurations of Carnival,” 48. See also an excerpt by Hugues Le Roux: “Those eminent gymnasts, the Hanlons and Voltas, testified in the 1880s that an admiration for the muscular masculine form and professional reliance on one another’s strength and skill made most acrobats and trapezists scornful of women: they sought their sentimental attachments in their own company.” Hugues Le Roux, Les Jeux du cirque et la vie foraine (Paris: Plon, 1889), 197-202. Quoted in Senelick, “Boys and Girls Together,” 84.

120 Green, and Swan, The Triumph of Pierrot, 26-27.
commedia fashion of parody, inversion and farce, gender became a site of contestation to enter the stage through the crossdress performances of Pierrot.

Through impersonating a traditionally male character, Mallet enhances the plurality of Pierrot and challenges the boundaries of sanctioned gender roles. In her discussion of the funambule, a term that encapsulates “acrobatic clown and pantomimist, tightrope walker, trapezist, equestrienne, and more,” Forrest outlines the changing affect of these performers throughout the nineteenth century. She states that “In the first half of the nineteenth century, clowns, depicted graphically or in literature, mirrored the social and cultural climate; in the second half, clowns and their acrobatic colleagues - funambules- became in many instances agents of social and cultural change.” Clowns, acrobats and other performers were highly visible during the fin-de-siècle because of the circulation of advertorial media, the proliferation of reviews, and the sheer popularity of the subject matter that attracted all manner of duplication in fine and popular art. As a result, Mallet’s performance in travesti likely had an impact beyond the strictures of the singular role and the intentions of the producers. Rather, the mere visibility of a successful woman transgressing demarcated lines of gendered dress and behavior correspondingly subjects these strictures to reexamination.

However, as Jack Halberstam recognizes in his book Female Masculinity, “Male impersonation as a theatrical tradition extends back to the restoration stage, but more often than not, the trouser role was used to emphasize femininity rather than to mimic maleness.” Here Halberstam is referring to the prepubescent roles that women were allowed to play so that their

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121 Forrest, Decadent Aesthetics, 2.
122 Forrest, Decadent Aesthetics, 11.
123 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 233.
generally small, softer features would emphasize the adolescence of the character. Likewise, the famous actor and sculptor Sarah Bernhardt, a contemporary of Mallet’s, explicitly rejected the possibility of females portraying mature men, and limited cross-dressing to pathological youths. She affirmed that “a woman can only interpret a male part when it represents a mind in a feeble body,” and argued that most male actors were “in too splendid health, with muscles too solid to lend credence to . . . so much inward strife.” To be “divested of all virility” and caught in the “decay that leads to death,” these characters must be represented by a woman. Bernhardt’s narrative demonstrates an acute awareness of the “gender panic” of the day, and yet, as Marjorie Garber emphasizes, “transvestism is not only a marker of cultural change but also its agent.”

By depicting Mallet in a vintage Pierrot costume, Chéret locates her outside the present moment and cloaks her in a protective layer of nostalgia. Functioning much like mythological, exotic or historical scenes in art, Mallet’s depiction in an outdated mode of dress casts her into the safe ambiguity of a bygone era, making her transgression of gendered dress less offensive and more overtly a costume. However, it would be short-sighted to assume that her performance had no effect on the audience's understanding of gendered appearance. In fact, one could argue

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124 “So long as adolescents had been politically inconsequential, their sexual identity could remain culturally indecipherable. However, the discovery of adolescent sexuality accompanied the politicization of their bodies. It was not that youths became a political force in their own right, but certain fin-de-siècle intellectuals seized on them as symbols of a decaying France.” Lenard R. Berlanstein, “Breeches and Breaches: Cross-Dress Theater and the Culture of Gender Ambiguity in Modern France,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 38, no. 2 (1996): 360.
126 Berlanstein, “Breeches and Breaches,” 362.
that under the auspices of performance, women in Pierrot mask were able to consciously or unconsciously combat the normative gendered expectations of dress and bodily movement.\textsuperscript{128} Therefore, the crossdress performance itself, despite the many strictures that limit it, challenges the partitions of gender identity, and mounts a revolt from within the discursive space of theatrical traditions in fin-de-siècle France. In this way, female actors playing Pierrot engage with both the limit and its transgression by toying with the permissible crossdress roles and expanding the boundaries of the character Pierrot himself. In her book \textit{Gender Outlaw}, Kate Bornstein recognizes gender as “a method of partitioning our identities, our families, our economics, or our society,” and asserts that “Virtual Reality [theater] is a method of making partitions obsolete.”\textsuperscript{129} While theater is removed from reality through its embrace of contrivance, the space of play-acting operates outside the normative structure of everyday life and provides a reflective surface upon which tensions, boundaries and statutes can be reconsidered in a socially acceptable manner. This otherworldly space of the theater is implicated in Chéret’s depiction of Mallet through her hovering feet that do not meet the ground. Rather, she is suspended physically from the stage and metaphorically from the governance of ordinary life.

Mallet herself, as a successful actor, gained financial stability from her career that allowed her the freedom, mobility and public visibility of a flâneuse.\textsuperscript{130} However, despite her success the theater, like the literary clubs and inner circles of Bohemian artists, perpetuated a gender disparity that insisted on the antithesis of femininity and artistry. This is made visible in the terminology used to identify female creatives, as stressed by Michael Wilson in his chapter

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\textsuperscript{128} The body moves more freely in pants. See Paul Gavarni’s \textit{Carnaval} prints of women in male debardeur attire.


“‘Capped with Hope, Clad in Youth, Shod in Courage’: Masculinity and Marginality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” (2010) in which he states that “women who assume the masculine prerogative of creation... are identified by the hyphenated, hermaphroditic appellations of femme-artiste, femme-peintre, or femme-auteur,” because creativity in a women was seen as an unnatural accommodaion, and “one identity must dominate at the expense of the other.” These opinions were upheld through strange practices of groups such as the Hydropathes, a prominent literary circle that Chéret was associated with, who addressed the rare female visitor with the masculine prefix Monsieur. In the Bohemian mentality, femininity was sacrificed through a woman’s pursuit of creativity and vice versa.

Edouard Vuillard, an artist associated with the Nabi, renders an lithograph of Mallet’s performance in L’Enfant Prodigue, and depicts her as a predatory female type (Figure 21). She is identified synecdochally by her mask, which hovers in the upper left corner of the composition. Her identity is melded with that of the mask in that while her exaggerated features appear to be her own, small holes with black cords fastened through them indicate that it is actually a mask. Her expression appears unhinged, and the tangle of cords double as strands of hair evocative of the mythological gorgon Medusa. Below her disembodied head and in capital letters her name is inscribed. The flat areas of color mirror the implied artifice of the mask, and present Mallet as a menacious female type greatly popularized in the late nineteenth century. In sharp contrast to Chéret’s dainty depiction of Mallet as Pierrot, Vuillard’s rendition borders on the grotesque and emphasizes the division between actress and character, severing femininity and artistic metier.

131 Wilson, “Capped with Hope,” 204.
132 In this particular instance, I am referring to when Sarah Bernhardt was admitted to a meeting of the Hydropathes. Wilson, “Capped with Hope,” 204.
In contrast to Vuillard’s depiction of Mallet, a series of six photographs taken by Arthur da Cunhain in 1896 not only affirm her creative autonomy as a professional actor, but also visually link her Nadar’s photographs of Deburau by employing the same visual language. Take for instance Figure 15, in which Mallet is captured standing next to a large studio camera. Her body is turned to the right as she motions for her subject to remain still, while her other hand holds the bulb shutter as she prepares to take the photograph. Compositonally, the dark, plain studio backdrop and the presence of the large camera allude to Nadar’s photograph of Deburau in *Pierrot the Photographer* which was introduced at the beginning of this thesis (Figure 15). However, unlike Nadar’s photograph, Mallet is absorbed in her off-camera subject and does not acknowledge the audience. In fact, she asserts an arguably greater degree of creative authority than Deburau through her motioning for the subject to remain still. By invoking the visual iconography of Pierrot the photographer, Mallet is bound up in a heritage of pantomime and artistry.

In conclusion, Chéret’s depiction of Mallet in *L’Enfant Prodigue* increased the visibility of women in pantomime, particularly those playing traditionally male roles, and challenged the boundaries of Pierrot’s character. Pierrot’s costume, as a gender-neutral patina, molds to the wearer and harmonizes the distinctions between actor and character. By emphasizing the femininity of an already androgynous character, Mallet added a layer of complexity to the character, and -through her performance- confronted the assumption of the correlation between clothing and gender. Moreover, the pervasive circulation of imagery advertising, reviewing and critiquing her performance bridged the gap between the artificial space of the stage, and that of real life. As a result, depictions of Mallet as Pierrot purposefully or inadvertently work to
complicate the gendered associations of dress, and actively develop the plurality of Pierrot’s character.
CHAPTER III
POSTCARDS AND FICTIONS OF POSSESSION

Dove-tailing with the era of “poster-mania,” which peaked around 1895-1900, was the “golden age” of postcard collecting.\(^{133}\) Much like previous forms of print media, postcards offered a cheap, accessible, and durable means of bringing the outside world into one’s private possession. However, unlike posters, postcards were designed with the potential for private communication as well as for continued public circulation through the post. This chapter continues the discussion of depictions of Pierrot in print media, but transitions from the public-facing poster to the postcard which elicits both public and private modes of visibility. In particular, I examine a series of four collotype postcards titled *Pierrot et Columbine* from 1900 that capture a gallant courting scene between two female actresses costumed as commedia dell’arte characters (Figure 22-25). This series of collotypes does not easily fit into a definable genre, but exists at the juncture between celebrity publicity, theater souvenirs, and illicit collectible imagery. Following a narrative structure, the four postcards show the progression of a romantic courting that concludes with Pierrot successfully seducing Columbine. In contrast to similar illicit imagery from this era, these postcards do not posture themselves for visual

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consumption, but rather expose discrepancies in narrative continuity that hold the view at arms length and disallow consummation of the illusion. In other words, the discontinuity of the narrative sequence does not lend the series to easy reading. Rather, the viewer is prompted to pause and reconsider the undisclosed events taking place in between the frames, and to wonder what is not being shown. As a result, the viewing experience lacks closure, and the viewer is denied the satisfaction of complete comprehension of the narrative. Similarly, when viewed against the backdrop of comparable scenes of gender-impersonating actors, this series deviates from the standard practice of explicitly identifying the actor as disguised in the clothing associated with another gender through the inclusion of text stating travesti, Le Célèbre Imitateur Français, or ...dans son imitation de... In stark contrast, the Pierrot et Columbine series features no such identifying marks, but instead allows Pierrot to exist in gender ambiguity. Since very little is known about this sequence, I consider them against the context of similar “gallant scenes” of gender-impersonating actors, postcard manufacturing techniques, and collecting habits from 1900. Privileging the materiality of the postcards, I argue that these collotypes navigate a series of dichotomic tensions between the public and private, spectacle and spectator, and legibility and discretion that result in the negation of the observer’s visual possession of the image through scale, format, and mass production.

To begin with, when considering viewing tendencies in relation to the postcards, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s observation is insightful. She states that “New media fosters means of ‘touching’ others in ways that challenge and buttress traditional separations of ‘them’ and

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134 “Galant scenes” is the categorical term given to a selection of postcards from Cornell University’s collection. Gerard Koskovich, Postcards of female and male impersonators and cross-dressing, #7778. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.
The *Pierrot et Columbine* series features a sexuality that was somewhat foreign to the everyday viewer, and the postcard format provides a false sense of familiarity between the viewer and subject.

Additionally, this chapter recognizes the gendered labor behind hand-colored postcards, and the agency of the objects themselves. Color, which served as a fundamental “material of desire,” was often hand applied to photographs, postcards, and film slides by female laborers to enhance their value and visual appeal. Similarly, among the tenets of art, color was associated with the feminine. As the nineteenth-century French critic Charles Blanc recalls: “the role [of color] is to tell us what agitates the heart, while drawing shows us what passes in the mind…Color is a mobile, vague, intangible element, while form, on the contrary, is precise, limited, palpable, and constant.” He continues, “drawing is [thus] the masculine side of art, color the feminine.” As it so happens, hand-coloring employment opportunities advertised for women functioned as a gateway for their involvement in male dominated spaces including film production, and photography. Moreover, women played a significant role in the tinting and

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136 Natalie Kelsey from the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell University confirmed that the *Pierrot et Columbine* series is hand-colored. Natalie Kelsey, private email correspondence, March 22, 2021.


coloring of erotic images from the mid to late nineteenth century in France. \(^{140}\) This historical circumstance overturns the assumption about the gender of the intended viewer of the imagery, and places a greater degree of agency in the hands of women coloring these postcards.

Lastly, the affective qualities of the *Pierrot et Columbine* postcards are intimately intertwined with the physical properties of the medium, and their function in the matrix of social circulation and private collection. As a mass produced commercial item, these collotypes existed in editions ranging from 500 to 2000 prints. \(^{141}\) Therefore, the issue of possessing an item or image that is inherently multiple is called into question. Are the postcards fragments of a larger corpus? Or are they complete in their individual state? I suggest that the multiplicity of the postcards is one of several ways in which these images evade possession by means of their inherent material properties. In addition, the lapses in the narrative sequence of this postcard series leaves the viewer dissatisfied with the partial story they are made privy to. What happens in the time between the third and fourth image in the series that causes Columbine to cry? Undoubtedly an intimate encounter about which we can only speculate. Moreover, as an exposed form of communication, the postcard walks the line between public and private spheres, and even when the postcard is not sent, it contains the latent potential to function as a medium of reciprocal communication. Therefore, the physical properties of the postcard, such as the space

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\(^{141}\) In 1900, the collotype had a limited edition size because of the fragility of the greyed glass plate and the shallow gelatin surface. As a result, most editions were no larger than 500 impressions, but some have claimed to have pulled 2000 images from a single collotype plate. Alan Petrulis, “Techniques: Photography and The Black Arts,” MetroPostcard Guide to Postcard Printing Techniques 2. Accessed January 3, 2021, http://www.metropostcard.com/tech2-collotype.html
allocated for the receiver’s address and the sender’s signature, subliminally works to evade singular possession by implicating more than one party on the surface of the postcard.

The sheer popularity of postcards as collectibles, a cheap means of communication, souvenirs, and a rostrum for pornography at the turn of the century warrants examination.¹⁴² By 1900, the postcard industry soared to unprecedented heights and employed over 30,000 people in France alone.¹⁴³ The collecting craze that fueled the “poster-mania” of the late nineteenth century turned its gaze to the new medium of postcards, which proved to be an economically viable alternative. Likewise, in her book *Picturing the Postcard: A New Media Crisis at the Turn of the Century*, Monica Cure suggests that the “Interest in postcards in the 1880s undoubtedly stemmed from the already established popular pastime of stamp collecting, which was intrinsically linked to national governments...The 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris merged the souvenir with the new mode of communication, heightening the postcard’s use as well as its collectability.”¹⁴⁴

Measuring at a standardized 14 x 9 cm, and costing significantly less than a telegram or photograph, the postcard could theoretically be bought or sold by anyone regardless of their age, gender or class. More significantly, postcards of an explicit nature could easily be found in “corner stores, in markets, in tobacconists, in newsagents’ shops, and on the street,” which led to a heightened concern over the policing of public morality.¹⁴⁵ The laxity of the postcard market itself was counterbalanced by the ethical regulation of the type of material that could be sent in

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¹⁴² The years 1895-1915 are considered the “golden age of picture postcards.” Likosky, “Gender Bending in Early Postcards,” 1.


¹⁴⁴ Monica Cure, *Picturing the Postcard: A New Media Crisis at the Turn of the Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 163.

the public postal system. For example, in 1908, the British postmaster-general issued an official warning stating that “The Postmaster-general finds that during the past year there has been a large increase in the number of post-cards, principally of foreign manufacture, sent by the post bearing pictorial designs of an objectionable and in some cases indecent character.”146 Similarly in France, where many of these notoriously indecent postcards were produced, the government sought to regulate the postcards sent through the mail by enforcing laws against indecency.147 As an inherently open form of communication, the imagery and contents of a postcard was readily available for inspection.

However, an astonishing number of postcards were never sent in the mail, but instead remained in private possession. At the same time, international collecting clubs - composed primarily of women - “grew into a perfect mania.”148 Here we begin to see the contrasting ways in which postcards occupied the polemics of public and private visibility. The *Pierrot et Columbine* series was never stamped, addressed, or sent in the mail, which suggests that the series was obtained for private viewing (Figures 26). Likewise, as a series of four distinct images that tie together and form a set, we can assume that perhaps they were never intended to be sent in the mail but instead were meant to cater to the collector. While the scenes themselves are by no means exemplary of the most explicit imagery produced at this time, and are tame by contrast, they do have overtly sexual connotations. In the first frame we observe two costumed figures with their arms linked, standing to the left of a delicately set table. The intimate setting is

146 *The Vigilance Record* (London), n.s. 1 (January, 1905), 8.
148 An article in the *New York Daily Tribune*, 1901, reports that “the sending of these cards from Europe is particularly in vogue, and it is there that the practice of collecting and preserving them has grown into a perfect mania.” Quoted in “Post Card Fad Increasing,” *New York Daily Tribune*, July 28, 1901, 9.
furnished with floral wallpaper, patterned curtains, a table and four chairs. The actor Clara Faurens is dressed as Pierrot, while her companion - a comparatively tall, unnamed actor- is dressed in the garb of a clownness, who in this context we can infer to be Columbine (Figure 22). The scene is dusted with muted pinks, purples, and blues that give the figures a sense of warmth and potency. Pierrot -whose costume is a starched white, baggy ensemble with a frilled collar and dark toned skullcap- gestures with a hat in hand towards the set table while casting an adoring glance up at Columbine, who looks down with a mixture of aloof amusement.

In the second frame, the intimate scene has progressed, and the pair are shown seated at the table partaking in the bottled beverage. Columbine has visibly relaxed; her cheeks are flushed, and her hat and frilled collar have been discarded. She leans into Pierrot with a greater sense of openness while balancing an empty wine glass in one hand. Pierrot, who appears to be making the most of the situation, tenderly leans in to her advances. By the third frame, the two figures are visibly disheveled, and Columbine, who is missing the top half of her dress, exposes the undergarments beneath. Likewise, the mise-en-scène setting sympathizes in joint disarray, and it appears as though the table has been urgently shoved to the right side of the room. Pierrot is positioned on her knees before Columbine in what can only be described as an intimate advance. By the fourth and final frame, it becomes abundantly evident that Columbine is beginning to regret her rendezvous with Pierrot. She sits wrapped in a swath of gauze, wears a maillot (a pink body stocking), and weeps while Pierrot -who is looking a bit smug- lounges against the table and motions to pour a glass of wine.

In his analysis of this postcards series, Gerard Koskovich, historian, curator and founding member of the GLBT Historical Society, notes that “This gallant series is exceptional as the only one I have scouted where the narrative is taken to a blatantly sexual conclusion. The close, stage-
like setting and the poses bring to mind the conventions of French pornographic photography of the era, itself inspired in part by the erotic tableaux vivants performed in licensed houses of prostitution. Koskovich places this series in the realm of illicit imagery, and notes the novelty of the events transpired. As illustrated in Chapter I of this thesis, Pierrot is frequently characterized as a hapless clown who unsuccessfully pursues Columbine. However, in this instance where the role of Pierrot is assumed by a female actor, it appears as though the forces that initially kept the two apart are now inconsequential. Writing several decades prior to these postcards in 1868, the poet Paul Verlaine aligned his interpretation of Pierrot with the emerging gay subculture in Paris in his poem *Pierrot gamin:*

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Corps fluet et non pas maigre
Voix de fille et non pas aigre
Corps d’éphèbe en tout petit
Voix de tête, corps en fête
Créature toujours prête
À soûler chaque appétit.
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Verlaine paints Pierrot as a youthful androgyne whose appetites and tendencies are untempered. He is delicate, effeminate and acts beyond conventional morality. Verlaine himself was homosexual and identified greatly with the fictional clown.

An overtly gay Pierrot is not altogether unexpected since gender bending and mutable sexuality play a fundamental role in traditional *Commedia* performances dating as far back as the eighteenth century. Pierrot retains these qualities as part of his identity long after *commedia*

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149 Gerard Koskovich, private correspondence, August 2020.
dell’arte dwindles. Take for instance the series of engravings *The Marvelous Malady of Arlequin*, printed in 1740 by the Dutch artist Gerard Joseph Xavery (Figure 28-31). These prints demonstrate that sexuality, along with traditional gender roles, were among the social tenets to be made fun of, questioned, and subverted through performance on stage. Several of the prints depict a domestic scene between Arlequin and Pierrot, both of whom are presented as male, and are shown cohabitating and nurturing a family (Figure 29). One scene captures Pierrot doing the laundry while Arlequin tends to the baby, while another depicts Arlequin dressing the child while Pierrot looks on with a sense of parental pride. These engravings challenge the steadfastness of the corporeal body -Arlequin is shown laying eggs that then hatch into little Arlequins- and propose “a human body that can mutate, alter its sex, grow parts or take parts from others and rearrange them.”¹⁵² The *Commedia* body is presented as a transformative site, where fundamental narratives such as the nativity, or the nuclear family are “dismantled, shuffled and rearranged in —almost—unimaginable ways.”¹⁵³ Likewise, the *Pierrot et Columbine* postcards parody a heteronormative romantic encounter, and disrupt the expectation of a male and female couple.

However, in the late nineteenth century and in the context of the *Pierrot et Columbine* series, the depiction of a romantic encounter between a same sex couple appears to be less about destabilizing assumptions about the body and human relationships, and more so a means of visualizing autonomous female sexuality. Note the way in which neither Pierrot or Columbine ever acknowledge the audience, but rather are completely absorbed in one another's presence. While this aspect of the series is not altogether an anomaly, it does work to cut off the viewer

¹⁵² Moyles, “The Commedia Dell’Arte,” 144.
¹⁵³ Moyles, “The Commedia Dell’Arte,” 146.
from the intimacy of the encounter. To a similar effect, the scenes are highly choreographed with little sense of naturalness. No wine ever fills the glasses, the bread remains untouched, and the positioning of the table and chairs frame the scene in a staged manner. This embrace of artifice in the postcards works to evade the illusion of realism, and instead heightens the viewers awareness of the performativity of the scene, and in turn of their own act of viewing. As a result, the choreographed nature of the scene forces the viewer to reconcile with the act of viewing, which then sets him or her apart from the scene taking place.

Similarly, the small scale of the postcards initially appears to invite the viewer to engage in an intimate encounter, but upon further inspection the feeling of intimacy is misleading. Writing more broadly about miniaturization, Stephanie Langin-Hooper suggests that “miniatures often seem intimate, enticing their users with the promise of personal interaction, but – once lured in – the user is sometimes constrained in his or her ability to touch, to see, and to engage.” As a result, the small scale item or image offers but the shallow “semblance of intimacy.”

The choreographed nature of the postcards, compounded with the false invitation for intimacy denies the view access to the familiarity expected. Rather, the viewer is ostracized from the encounter both because of the postcard's small scale and because of the subject's refusal to reciprocate the viewer’s gaze.

154 Langin-Hooper proposes that “while all miniatures appear intimate, this is largely an illusion: most, if not all, miniatures fail to follow through on their offers of intimate engagements.” (14) Speaking more broadly on miniaturization, she suggests that “Such objects would seem to fool us, the users, offering us the tantalizing prospect of full intimacy (and the entire spectrum of feelings that intimacy entails: familiarity, tenderness, affection, seclusion, sensuality), only to ultimately deny us access. Indeed, the wound goes deeper: this rebuffing of intimacy on the part of the object comes in spite of the fuller intimacy offered by the user, who has brought the object into his or her personal space, and opened access to his or her living eyes, hands, and skin. It is the user who offers true intimacy, not the object.” (19) Stephanie Langin-Hooper, *Figurines in Hellenistic Babylonia: Miniaturization and Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 19.
It is important to note that scenes of sapphic love were pervasive in fine and popular art from the turn of the century, and can be found in works of art by Gustave Courbet, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Simeon Solomon.\textsuperscript{155} Michael Wilson recognizes that “This vast corpus, it bears stressing, is entirely the work of men, phallocentric and factitious. Female sexuality for the bohemians is conceptually dependent on male desire, on accepting or, inversely, rejecting it; lesbian desire cannot be conceived in its own terms, for it has none.”\textsuperscript{156} Likewise in poetry, “the trope of the lesbian appears in the writing of male decadent poets, and they’re primarily presented as depraved and aestheticized objects of fascination.” Less frequently do we encounter the lesbian subjective point of view, or representation from a female perspective. In Paris, “pleasure guides” from the turn of the century “used lesbian sex to advertise the exoticism of Paris’ bordellos, presenting the lesbian couple as ‘the crowning jewel of a Parisian brothel.’”\textsuperscript{157} In this schema, the idea of the lesbian is fictitiously formed around a system of commodification and objectification that caters towards a predominantly European male audience. However, it is interesting to note that the \textit{Pierrot et Columbine} series departs from typical depictions of lesbian love and instead enacts a heterosexual encounter through the historical genders of the two characters.

When considering the potential audience for these postcards, it is interesting to note that women composed the majority of postcard collectors in 1900. Rogan points out how “In the first

\textsuperscript{155} “The lesbian image was not the exclusive domain of high art, but in the nineteenth century, as now, was a preferred theme of popular erotica.” Dorothy M. Kosinski, “Gustave Courbet’s “The Sleepers.” The Lesbian Image in Nineteenth-Century French Art and Literature,” \textit{Artibus Et Historiae} 9, no. 18 (1988): 187.
\textsuperscript{156} Wilson, “Le Commerce de La Bohème,” 402.
year, collecting postcards was primarily if not exclusively the hobby of young girls and women. There were even collector clubs for ladies only. It was not until 1905 that men entered the scene and took over the clubs and journals. At the same time, the underground lesbian scene in Paris flourished as women built a subculture of social networks and commercial institutions outside male-dominated spaces. These locusts of interaction were by no means high profile, and were “centered in cafés that served lesbian clients, and to some extent in café-concerts, music halls, and brothels.” Against the backdrop of this lesbian subculture in Paris and the dominantly female collecting clubs of 1900, it is not far-fetched to consider that perhaps the postcards were accessible to or even catered to a female clientele.

In a similar pictorial vein, images of “exotic” women -like the exoticized lesbian sexuality- are found on postcards from this era, and illuminate the problematic implicit power structures that upheld the market. Sigel points out how the accessibility of explicit postcards to a broader range of genders, classes and ethnic groups revealed an inequity between the policing of women and ethnic minority purchasers, versus male European customers. By purchasing postcards not intended for their consumption, “Women, children, blacks, and the poor could act in ways that mocked fantasies of control, and that undercut fantasies as fantasies,” and “On one occasion, a young woman who was stopped from buying “indecent” postcards argued that the imagery was no different from that found in public galleries.” The clearly defined double standard for who could consume this type of material exposed the gender, class and race

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159 Paris became known during this period, 1890-1914, as “Paris-Lesbos,” a double-edged reputation which offered the possibility of both “free sexual expression and oppressive sexual stereotyping.” Wilson, “Le Commerce de La Bohème,” 405.
161 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People's Hands,” 877.
162 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People's Hands,” 874.
“divisions to greater scrutiny and offered the possibility of a more egalitarian system of objectification.” The material associations of the postcard itself held colonialist assumptions about seeing and “knowing” foreign peoples, places and sexualities. Yet when these same postcards were in the hand of minorities, they were perceived as problematic.

The Pierrot et Columbine series occupies a similar vein by presenting a fantastical image of two women engaging in what would have been an atypical form of intimacy. As previously noted, lesbianism was a point of fascination and spectacle, and occupied an adjacent realm to representations of exotic “others.” However, when considering this particular series of collotypes in the context of other postcards capturing cross-dressing actors, and scenes of alternative gender-impersonation, the distinction between performance and real life are blurred. Take for example the letterpress halftone postcard from 1915, titled Novelty’s Imitateur à Transformations (Figure 32). To the left of the postcard and occupying a vertical frame, a male actor is shown garbed in a showgirl’s dress. Just above the actor hovers a circular vignette headshot of himself in traditional male attire and coiffure. The inclusion of the text and secondary vignette image function to make explicit the gender identity of the male subject. Similarly, a postcard of the French actor Louis Vernassier titled Louis Vernassier l’homme-portée-musical-excentrique dans ses Travesti-Dame from 1910, is constructed so as to sensationalize the actors sartorial transformation from a man into a woman (Figure 33). The postcard recto furnishes a montage of Vernassier captured in three progressive stages of his transformation. The first portrait captures him in men’s attire and has the word “nature” typed under his collar. Likewise, the second iteration of Vernassier depicts him still in male attire, but with makeup applied to his eyes and face, and the word “maquillé” placed under his collar. By

163 Sigel, “Filth in the Wrong People's Hands,” 862.
the third image, the transformation is complete and he is displayed in full female attire, with the necessary jewels, makeup and hair. The word “transformé” indicates that the actor has successfully donned the required accoutrement to impersonate a female.

By contrast, the *Pierrot et Columbine* series contains no typographical identification about either the actors, or -in the case of Faurens- her impersonation of a traditionally male role. Rather, they are allowed to exist in ambiguity without the diagnostics of definition and identification. As previously noted in Chapter II, *Pierrettes* -female Pierrots- existed as a nominal type, and were often synonymous with female clowns (Figure 34). However, in these postcards, Faurens is presenting a masculine Pierrot and assuming the stereotypically male role of courting and seducing Columbine. It appears as though a deliberate choice was made to perpetuate the androgyny of the character, and the elusivity of the overall encounter.

Another category of postcards that relates to the *Pierrot et Columbine* series are “comic cards.” This genre of humorous imagery often took the form of caricatures or illustrated comics rather than photographs, and their intended function was to surprise, entertain and amuse. Take for instance *Illusion’s Perdues* from 1920, (Figure 35). This caricature depicts a tall lanky man caught in the midst of undressing from his female burlesque. Standing before a dressing room mirror, he fusses with his wig while a second man, realizing that the performer is indeed male, reacts in surprise. Within the context of this type of antic postcard, perhaps the *Pierrot et Columbine* series were meant as a lighthearted, somewhat salacious joke.

The forces of agency at play in these collotypes are complex and multilayered, and emerge from a range of sources. Several of the influential parties are the unnamed photographer, the publisher, the actor alongside Clara Faurens, the individuals involved in the technical process of developing the collotypes and applying the tint, and the viewer. When considering the
gendered labor of hand-coloring, the dominance of female postcard collectors in 1900, as well as the autonomy of Faurens and her companion, we see the dominance of female involvement in the production of something that would, in theory, cater to a male audience. As a result, I suggest that these postcards are more than a series of titillating images, and instead act in subtle ways to deflect and complicate the viewing process.

In conclusion, the physical properties of the postcard both toy with fictions of familiarity and possession, but also subvert and deny such claims. The deterrence of voyeuristic possession is accomplished through the narrative discrepancies of the series, which give the viewer pause and disrupt passive viewing. Likewise, the artifice of the mise-en-scène keeps the illusion at bay, and disallows the viewers complete submersion in the fantasy. Furthermore, the inherent multiplicity of the postcard edition, and the area allocated for the address, stamp, and signature on the verso, remove the postcard from singular possession. Instead, it exists as an illusive fragment of a whole that cannot be fully possessed. Moreover, the actors refusal to engage with the spectator further removes them from the events of the scene, and allows the two women to exist in their own autonomous sexuality.
CONCLUSION

Pierrot’s identity, though revolutionized throughout the nineteenth century, retains certain essential characteristics of his commedia dell’arte origins. Among these are the primacy of improvisation, and the practice initiated by the itinerant acting troupes to modify their performance to cater to the individual audience. Likewise, Pierrot contains a similar plasticity, and tendency to mold and fashion himself to the individual wearer. As a result, he provided actors, artists and writers with a mask or alter-ego to assume in their creative work.

Characterized as the perpetual underdog, I believe that Pierrot’s popularity had something to do with the sympathetic response he elicited from his audience. There is a degree of vulnerability to his character, and a blind hopefulness that perhaps acts as familiar ground between him and the audience. Discussing Pierrot in relation to Columbine and Harlequin, Green and Swan suggest that these figures “do not belong in the same part of our mind as our plans for our own future. It is realistic or serious art which mixes with our purposeful dreams. These figures preside over that part of our experience and our selves which does not make any sense --the part we laugh at or fear.”

The unseriousness and unreality of these comedic characters allows them to act almost like a thought-experiment. Looking on vicariously with no intention of joining, the viewer is able

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to safely and without repercussion test and transgress boundaries, whether they are externally and internally imposed.

In Chapter I, I argued that in Chéret’s poster Musée Grévin, the dynamic of Pierrot and Columbine was used to personify the anxiety felt by many Bohemian artists towards increasingly emancipated women or simply those who operated outside the prescribed model of femininity. Likewise, he was also hailed as an emblem of social rejection, and therefore the rejection of bourgeois taste and values. Lastly, the material artifice of the poster itself reiterated this theme of lucidity that was promulgated among artistic bohemia.

In Chapter II, I examined Mallet’s performance as Pierrot to consider the plurality she brought to the role, and the way in which her performance worked to confront the assumption about the correlation between clothing and gender. Similarly, the immersive size of Chéret’s poster advertising L’Enfant Prodigue would have brought her performance from the stage onto the streets of Paris, thus bridging the gap between performance and life. As a result, depictions of Mallet as Pierrot purposefully or inadvertently contributed to normalizing women in what was traditionally male attire. Moreover, Mallet’s performance of Pierrot, as captured by Arthur da Cunha in Félicia Mallet as Pierrot, a photographer, continues the association between Pierrot and the artist, but deviates from the bohemian gender ideology which equates artistic merit with masculinity. Rather, by successfully performing as Pierrot, and having those performances recorded in art by Chéret, Vuillard, de Cunha, Willette and others, Mallet throws into sharp relief the problems with this gender hierarchy and the idea that society and culture was created and sustained by men.

Finally, in Chapter III, I continued my inquiry into female cross-dressing, but in this case examined situations in which Pierrot was used to visualize lesbian romantic encounters. In
contrast to the previous chapters' focus on posters, I instead focused on postcards so as to consider the various ways in which Pierrot proliferated in printed and commercial media. As the Cornell postcards illustrate through the depiction of two female lovers, the likeness of Pierrot is used to test the boundaries of what intimate relationships look like.

Looking beyond the borders of France, and into the early years of the twentieth century, Pierrot continues to occupy the creative works of musicians, poets and artists. Significantly, he is adopted by several notable creators who recognize Pierrot’s queer coding and embrace this aspect of his character in their work. For example, Arnold Schoenberg’s 1912 “Pierrot Lunaire,” Opt. 21 perpetuates the association between Pierrot and the moon, and as theorist, philosopher and musicologist, Theodor Adorno claims in his 1922 review of a performance of Pierrot Lunaire, Schoenberg’s piece characterizes “the homelessness of our souls.”\(^{165}\) There is a sense of eternal disbelonging which is admittedly part of the human condition. Yet this sense of ostracization is something that resonates particularly with the queer community because of the extensive history of repression and stigmatization throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{166}\) Turning our gaze from visual art and music to poetry, Spanish writer Frederico Garcia Lorca explicitly embraced the gender ambiguity and melancholic spirit of Pierrot in his 1918 poem “Pierrot: Poema Intima.” Here Garcia Lorca, himself a homosexual man, sympathizes with the Pierrot’s sensitive disposition and employs him, much in the way Laforgue


\(^{166}\) For more on gender ambiguity in relation to Schoenberg’s Pierrot Lunaire see Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, "Pierrot L." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no.3 (2011): 601-645.
did, as a persona through which to write. Lastly, English illustrator Aubrey Beardsley
enhances Pierrot’s effeminate qualities and homoerotic implications in his illustrations for John
Lane’s 1896 publication “Pierrot’s Library.” Take for instance, Beardsley’s front end-paper
design for “Pierrot’s Library” (Figure 36). Through delicate linework, saturated contrasts, and
whimsical detail, Beardsley renders a pastoral scene in which two Pierrot are positioned under a
tree. One Pierrot stands and strums an instrument while the other relaxes under the tree. The
billowing clothes of the two figures, and their delicate, cherubic faces make it difficult to discern
their genders. The scene appears to be one of tender romance between the companions. These
three examples of music, poetry and art outside of France are intended to illustrate the
pervasiveness of Pierrot imagery as well as the common interest in his androgyny.

In conclusion, Pierrot’s gender is as elusive as the rest of his being, which can be fixed
only in representations that are necessarily as varied and unique as the artists who create them.
Because of his malleable nature, and carnivalesque propensity for inversion and transgression,
Pierrot is able to operate outside of convention and under the protective blanket of artifice.
Artists of the late nineteenth century use Pierrot as a detached means of visually engaging in the
dialogue about changing norms regarding gender and sexuality. Pierrot is a tool used by artists to
invert and transgress social propriety, while simultaneously reflecting cultural change and acting
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*Pierrot et Columbine*, 1900, 9 x 14 cm, collotype, French. Postcards of female and male impersonators and cross-dressing, #7778. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.
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