Body of Labor: Fetishizations of French Laundresses between 1840 and 1880 and their Lived Reality

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After a long day's work, a young woman trudges late at night from the workhouse on the outskirts of Paris to her home in one of the city's many working-class *arrondissements*. She's exhausted from over fourteen straight hours of scrubbing and pounding and washing, she hasn't had a day off since last Sunday, and she already has a headache from the alcohol her boss encouraged her to drink throughout the day. She is a laundress.[1]

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France saw a drastic rise in popular consumerism and the idealization of individualism emerging from the Industrial Revolution and Enlightenment thinking. The invention of superior technology such as the flying shuttle in looms and the sewing machine allowed for garments to be made and purchased at an increasing rate. As the dominating sector in France, technological growth in the garment industry created the essential pattern of fashion consumption and production that greatly contributed to the rise and acceleration of capitalism in the nation and the West.[2] However, the laundry industry did not benefit from this same boom in technological innovation; washing and bleaching clothing remained an arduous, manual, multi-day process that required professional help from laundresses, known as *blanchisseuses*.[3] Garments would then need to be starched and pressed by specifically designated ironers. Because of widespread demand from consumers, mostly middle and upper classes, for their services, laundresses became a staple of the French metropolitan region, accounting for one-fifth to one-third of the population of Paris and its suburbs, and an icon of popular culture.[4] Though studies such as Gen Doy's Women & Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century France 1800-1852, Patricia Tilburg's Working Girls: Sex, Taste, and Reform in the Parisian Garment Trades 1880-1919, and Eunice Lipton's Looking into Degas and Modern Art and Modernism explore the significance of laundresses in art and paintings of the mid-nineteenth century, few have analyzed these women outside of art, in broader media, and in relation to historical gender theory. This research will also analyze the ways in which bourgeois and upper-class women contributed to the popular sexualization of laundresses in nineteenth-century French society. By examining paintings, plays, songs, and instruction manuals, this research bridges material culture with histories of gender and class in mid-nineteenth-century France, offering a novel way of tracking social change through the gendered construction of laundresses and the reality of their lives.[5]

The brutal reality of the laundresses' exploitation by the industrial complex does not correspond with their fictionalized image as beautiful, sexually active flirts, a cultural sex symbol excluded from the constraining, virginal construction of gender and femininity in nineteenth-century France. The fictionalization of the *blanchisseuses* occurred from three distinct perspectives. Laboring men idealized laundresses as model working women because of the necessity of their occupation and their accessibility to the common man as members of an industry deemed *domestic*; to these men, they were an *achievable* wife or conquest, worthy of their attention. On the other hand, bourgeois and elite men sexualized laundresses as easily accessible (laundresses literally picked up and delivered garments inside their homes) bodies to use and possess for their own pleasure. Laundresses were made to embody a disparate reality and sexuality by upper- and lower-class men, all functioning within a

1 This is a speculative imagining of the daily routine of the average French laundress based on my research and not based on a real person.

2 Sewell, "The Empire of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France," 84.

3 Translated as "whiteners," this term is the French designation for laundresses.

4 Lipton, "The Laundress in Late Nineteenth-Century French Culture," 276.

5 All translations from the original French, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

sexual, gendered economy. Elite women also participated in society's obsession over laundresses because of class disdain, the perceived threat they presented to their matrimonial stability, and, contradictorily, gender solidarity.[6] This research does not extend its analysis to other working-class women despite their similarities, focusing on the *blanchisseuse* as a special case within the working class: gender conventions of the day created a specific moral panic around laundresses because of the intimate, domestic nature of their labor.

The conception of a new, desired femininity in the nineteenth century elevated the allure of upper-class women while creating an environment in which working-class women could not hold virtuous reputations, diminishing their "worth." The nineteenth century carried with it a long history of the patriarchal family and societal structure.[7] The political system that emerged with the Restoration of the Monarchy and then the transition into Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's Second Republic in 1848 firmly established women's position in society as a domestic one, dependent on the patriarchy.[8] Nineteenth-century society was more unified than ever on women's inferiority to men. Furthermore, gender was formative in every aspect of industrialization and economic decisions of the time. Not only was it on everyone's mind, either consciously or subconsciously, but the necessity of maintaining the gender hierarchy and paradoxical sexuality (taboo and imposed simultaneously) sometimes overruled rational economic decisions. [9]

The rising importance of innocence and ignorance of sexuality for women, marking the shift in the fabrication of gender in the nineteenth century, is crucial to analyzing the depictions of laundresses as it explains how their lack of awareness about their sexuality adds to their desirability to the male audience.[10] In analyzing paintings depicting laundresses that span the nineteenth century, it is important to keep in mind that this new perception of women coincides with the rise of the new Romantic tradition.[11] The construction of gender, specifically female, shifted in the nineteenth century away from an early modern association of all women as agents of temptation and the devil to an idealized innocence and mandatory virginity. There was a place for young men and women to explore romantic and intimate relationships publicly so long as they remained within socially acceptable hetero-normative standards.[12] Thus, sexuality and desirability were dependent on age as well as gender. Youth for women was crucial and yet most working-class women did not get married until their mid-twenties for economic reasons. Thus, working-class women wed later in their twenties were placed in a (moral) dilemma: If they followed their hearts and bodies' desires to pursue romantic and sexual connections, they risked sacrificing their reputations, and eligibility for marriage. In the nineteenth-century definition of the female gender, woman was the body; she did not just have one, the body *was* her primary signifier.[13] And yet, the body was unspeakable in explicit terms and could only be alluded to, even the mention of getting dressed was repressed by contemporaries.[14] In a society where women are nothing except their bodies (their femininity) and yet, the body is too taboo to discuss, there is no place for women to exist without shame.

The construction of the female gender in the nineteenth century cannot be done without discussing masculinity as well. Masculinity was the norm against which femininity was constructed as an *Other*. In *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary studies of gender in the nineteenth century*, political philosopher Susan Mendus and history professor Jane Rendall affirm that "women's very identity was to be conceived in terms of their difference, as reproductive beings."[15]

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6 I want to acknowledge that this analysis of elite women's perceptions of working-class laundresses assumes a general heteronormativity, not because there weren't many LGBTQ+ women and homosexual interactions between women of all classes in nineteenth-century France, but because LGBTQ+ people were not able to express their sexuality openly and were thus not depicted by the popular media exhibited in this research.

7 Moses, *French Feminism in the nineteenth Century*, 1.

8 Ibid, 6.

9 Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades* 1750-1915, 6.

10 Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, 7.

11 Romanticism is an individualistic and emotional artistic movement that emerged in the late eighteenth and early-nineteenth century that expresses a longing to return to simpler days where men and women were more connected with nature and each other. Artists and intellectuals such as Robert Burns, Lord Byron, Eugène Delacroix, and Francisco Goya are famous participants of this movement.

12 Hardwick, "Sourcing Intimate Histories," 36.

13 Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 8.

14 Thompson, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France*, 6.

15 Mendus and Rendall, *Sexuality and Subordination*, 12.

The bourgeois men that emerged from the French Revolution experienced the nineteenth century through a constant "crisis of masculinity" as a result of emerging industrialism, capitalism, and the increase in organized feminist political movements. The political upheaval of revolutions and the shift in men's fashion from gaudy extravagance to somber elegance (amongst other shifts) changed the fabric of society, causing the crisis and instability felt by nineteenth-century men. While men were in this state of flux and "crisis" throughout the century, women remained consistently excluded from the public and political sphere.[16] The patriarchy justified women's continued exclusion from social equality by pointing to the shifted concept of womanhood, relatively positive and idealized, "sharply differentiated from men."[17] In the nineteenth century, the way that women were *Othered* by society shifted from one of denigration to one of idealization. Discussing women didn't just imply their body, but it also implied the *difference* of their body to that of men.[18]

Nineteenth-century French society came to associate working women, specifically women engaged in physical labor such as laundresses, with prostitution.[19] Just as gender was dependent on age and sexuality, it was also intertwined with class for nineteenth-century French society. [20]Working-class women could not escape their position on the bottom of economic and gender hierarchies. The definition of "work" is an exchange of labor or goods for financial compensation. Thus, female labor of any kind was seen as a market exchange, with the female body on the giving end. Because women were explicitly perceived as "bodies", all female labor had an uncomfortable overlap with prostitution, labor *of* the body. The public nature of formal female work, in contrast with domestic labor, linked working-class women with sex work. Overlap between sex workers and laundresses was not just a societally-constructed assumption: many sex workers held multiple jobs to make ends meet, and so, some laundresses *were* sex workers. The laundresses' distinct habits, work conditions, and circulation throughout society made them particular purveyors of the image of sex work, regardless of whether or not they were engaged in it.

Male power over women is not individual but rather systematic and historically constructed.[21] A language of class and gender is crucial to understanding the plight of the laundress because, as a working-class woman, she was oppressed by the gendered, patriarchal system *and* by the capitalist order.[22] In a society where explicit awareness of the body was taboo and shameful, one can imagine how being perceived only for one's body would place a tremendous amount of pressure on the laundress. Because of society's construction of femininity and working-class sexuality, the laundress held great anxieties in her body, her reputation, her future, and even her potential for romance or marriage. Laundresses were excluded from prevailing ideas about proper femininity and judged harshly for their working-class expression of sexuality because of gender's intersection with class *and* age in the nineteenth-century's patriarchal society; Working women were barred from embodying ideals of respectable womanhood.

From white linen shifts to cloth *mouchoirs* that had to be washed after each use to easily-stained silk gowns, the changes in consumer culture, fashion, and the emergence of an economically autonomous middle class in nineteenth-century France created increased demand for laundresses.[23] Challamel, a French historian born in 1818, details these changes from a self-aware perspective in his book, *Histoire de la mode en France*. He offers a unique first hand perspective of women's fashion of his own time period, and, being a historian, is cognizant of how his present will one day become history for others. While Challamel, like many nineteenth-century historians, was prone to writing pop-history, appealing to the masses but not definitively substantiated, his conclusions about the rise of consumer fashion and its intrinsic economic impact on society are corroborated by modern scholars. The rise of industry in the mid-nineteenth century coincides with the large increase of

16 Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation*, 11-13.

17 Moses, *French Feminism*, 17.

18 Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work*, 64

19 It is important to note that prostitution did not have the same connotation in nineteenth-century France as it does today: it was a legal industry regulated by the French police. Nonetheless, sex workers themselves were degraded and ostracized by society.

20 Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen*, 223.

21 Maynard, "Privilege and Patriarchy: Feminist Thought in the Nineteenth Century," 242.

22 Moses, *French Feminism*, 31.

23 *"Mouchoirs"* are tissues, made of cloth in the nineteenth century.

gowns being produced and purchased.[24] Around 1850, at the start of Napoleon III's Second Empire, thanks to the patronage of Empress Eugènie, the designer Frederick Worth rose to prominence, creating French *haute couture* culture and popularizing ready-to-wear clothing for women[25]. Suddenly, middle-class women were able to purchase larger wardrobes at more efficient costs. Today, scholars see and identify the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a "consumption revolution."[26] Though he doesn't use the explicit language of commercialization and consumption culture, Challamel is clearly aware of this new and defining characteristic of his time. Thanks to this increased consumption, the demand for laundry services, and thus labor within the industry, rose. The nineteenth century was the last era where women wore many layers of petticoats — many white layers that would have needed washing and bleaching services quite frequently — before transitioning to metal cage-like crinolines. [27]The rise of the less cumbersome crinoline later in the century explains why there was a downturn in the importance of laundresses in the media at the turn of the twentieth century. Another fashion trend that Challamel discusses is women's continued use of cloth *mouchoirs* in an increasingly luxurious fashion.[28] These *mouchoirs* needed to be washed incredibly frequently, after every use even, and were thus a large part of the laundry industry. Challamel shows an understanding of how the mid-nineteenth century was characterized by a rise in consumer culture and individualism within fashion. Laundresses became more popular references in media and general culture at this time because of the rise in demand for laundry services as the supply of clothes rose.

The fetishization of laundresses stands in direct contrast to the harsh reality of their labor and the institutional exploitation of women in this industry. Laundering was a tremendously time-consuming process on top of requiring grueling physical labor. According to the standard process of the time, laundry had to be left to soak and process for many hours, if not days.[29] Additionally, the process of removing stains was, even by their own standards, arduous and had to be done on top of the normal multi-day washing and bleaching process.[30] Laundresses would pick up clothes from the homes of their clients of all classes to bring to their washhouses. They were a visible demographic in cities: they were seen. An 1883 newspaper publication, "Le Journal des petits chéris", commented that "with the amount of laundresses in Paris, it should be the cleanest city in the world."[31] Obviously, the role of laundress was not to clean the physical city, but the overarching feeling of laundresses being pervasive throughout Parisian society rings true. Laundresses were not only incredibly conspicuous in their places of work and commute, they often worked fifteen to eighteen hours a day.[32] Laundresses were forced to work these long hours not just because the demand was high, but also because of the "old-fashioned" nature of the profession. Technological advancement for washing and drying clothes lagged behind the process of making them. French historian Anatole Leroy-Beaulieu, writing from the 1870s, recognized that the "backwards" nature of female labor industries such as the laundry and garment industries originated from the lack of technology and investment into the industries' progress, not any deficiency on the part of the *blanchisseuses*.[33]

Though slightly different professions, laundresses and ironers fall under the same umbrella, and, for the sake of this analysis, I correlate the two. However, ironers were paid more than washerwomen and given more "innocent" reputations because of the gentler nature of their work.[34] The lines between *blanchisseuses* and ironers are blurred as they were both sexualized by the media, often as one homogenous group. I do not particularly distinguish the two groups in this research because of their overwhelming similarities and shared experience of fetishization. The garment and other "women's" industries were primarily staffed by unmarried women.[35] In many historical documents detailing women's work, the term "servant"

24 Challamel, *Histoire de la mode en France*, 176-177.

25 Ibid, 181.

26 Fontana and Miranda, "The business of fashion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries," 70.

27 Challamel, *Histoire de la mode en France*, 186.

28 Ibid, 193.

29 de Lisle, *Le livre du blanchissage / par Mme Rouget de Lisle*, 7.

30 Ibid, 24-25.

31 Le Guillois, "Le Journal des petits chéris."

32 Lipton, "The Laundress," 276.

33 Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work*, 70.

34 Lipton, "The Laundress," 277.

35 Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work*, 148.

is used despite not designating literal household servants but rather most of women's work in general, including production and consumption industries.[36] This signals the common acceptance of laundering, and most women's work in general, as domestic. Women themselves, in men's eyes, were domestic beings and the laundry industry was simply a necessary expansion upon this patriarchal structure. Hence, the reality of being a laundress was a sobering one, not enviable for most working women, let alone bourgeois women.

Despite their incredibly difficult lives, the inherently tarnished reputations of laundresses and their high visibility in metropolitan regions of France made them popular objects of sexualization and desire. *Blanchisseuses* would often stomp on laundry to get the stain-removing chemicals to soak into the fabric, holding their skirts aloft: this was particularly sexualized because underpants that cover everything did not yet exist.[37] Men walking past laundry workshops "'would glance in, surprised by the sounds of ironing, and carry away a momentary vision of bare-breasted women in a reddish mist.'"[38] Moreover, women going out by themselves in the evening were often assumed to be sex workers in nineteenth-century France.[39] For the working laundress, this presents an issue. The association of young female garment workers with prostitution emerged as a result of societal anxieties about industrial capitalism and was justified by their construction of womanhood.[40]

> *"The Parisian working woman has had spun around her a kind of legend, charming and false like all legends. The working woman is the joy of Paris and one of its prettiest jewels dressed up as she is with bits of nothing, and, despite her simple clothing, always seductive with her light step, her little, amused face, her lively gestures, her merry laugh... We also say that she is a little fairy who weaves marvels, while being nourished only by fashion."*[41]

Parisian laundresses, as most French people, were renowned for their good taste.[42] Having paintings, postcards, and plays centered around their idealized image is both the manifestation of their popularity and a major contributor to the lore of the laundress. The very nature of their work was eroticized by these artistic renditions. Laundresses were also famous for their talkativeness and propensity for gossip. The "Journal des Petits Chéris" comically claimed that "women use their tongues an immoderate amount. It is, without a doubt, in a laundress workshop that the wisdom of nations formulated this sentence."[43] Because of the nature of laundresses' profession, they were in close contact with other women for long hours of day and thus able to pass the time chatting and singing. The stereotype that laundresses were talkative and loud then spread to be applied to all lower-class, working women: Laundresses became a projection of womankind. Making up such a large portion of the population, laundresses, and the perception of laundresses by the media, had tremendous social impact in shaping how women in the nineteenth century were perceived and the construction of their gender (not just the other way around).

Media created for the male working-class audience portrayed laundresses as joyful (despite their taxing profession) and flirtatious, which fed their fixation of laundresses as desirable, but achievable, romantic partners. Laundering was originally a small-scale domestic task done by women in their homes; The laborer could easily mentally project the laundress into his home, providing domestic labor such as washing clothes or raising his children.[44] The nature of the laundress' work itself created the ideal of the romantic, marriageable laundress in the mind of working-class men. In the nineteenth century, no form of media or entertainment was more directed towards the working-class man than the vaudeville play, a raunchy, comedic, short play that could be read in the newspaper, viewed in theater, or purchased fairly cheaply thanks to its short length. Nineteenth-century vaudeville plays frequently featured a common man, besotted with a laundress and threatened by a bourgeois character's predatory, carnal intentions towards her. Vaudeville acts depicted these laundresses in a positive light — flirtatious, cheerful, and beautiful — and with potential futures with the working-class men in their social spheres. One-acts such as "Les belles femmes de la rue Mouffetard" and "Bateau

36 Hardwick, "Sourcing Intimate Histories," 35.

37 Lipton, "Images of Laundresses.", 128.

38 Ibid, 122.

39 Moses, *French Feminism in the nineteenth Century*, 35.

40 Tilburg, *Working Girls: Sex, Taste, and Reform in the Parisian Garment Trades*, 1880-1919, 19.

41 Paul Acker qtd in Tilburg, *Working Girls*, 1.
Not my translation.

42 Tilburg, *Working Girls*, 1.

43 Le Guillois, "Le Journal des petits chéris."
"On prétend que les femmes font un usage immodéré de leur langue. C'est sans doute dans un atelier de blanchisseuses que la sagesse des nations a formulé cette sentence."

44 Grüring, "Dirty Laundry," 33.

de blanchisseuses," written by Auguste Jouhaud — a prolific Belgian playwright and writer based in Paris — and Charles de Livry's respectively, are two such examples of the codification of the French laundress' flirtatious and attractive nature to working-class men.

Working-class men specifically interacted with laundresses for the purpose of longer-term relationships and romanticized them within that context. In "Les belles femmes de la rue Mouffetard," Mr Poulet, a simple laborer, is obsessed with Jeannette, a beautiful laundress, and wants to court her. However, when another admirer tries to get Jeannette illustrated in a "most beautiful women of Paris" series, he fears she will become too popular with other men to pay him attention anymore.[45] While normally an achievable lover or partner for Mr Poulet as a peer of the lower class, he is worried that a rich man would make her into his courtesan if Jeannette's image were to be distributed. The men in the "Bateau de blanchisseuses" organize the regular festival for laundresses in which the nominated queen of the *blanchisseuses* can choose her king amongst all men, though only male launderers are invited to the event (other than the women).[46] The exclusion of non-*blanchisseux* men from the festival has a clear matchmaking intention that demonstrates that working-class men sought to interact with laundresses over other working-class women. Popular media depicted laundresses hand-in-hand with laborers (literally), focusing on the love lives of these women. Thus, working-class men saw themselves in competition with upper-class men for the laundress' attention and interactions.

Through their focus on the courting potential of laundresses, working-class men sexualized these women by repeatedly portraying only their superficial interests and beautiful bodies. In "Bateau de blanchisseuses," the laundresses sing to "quick, soap up these bloody rags and petticoats! Afterwards, we will dance and laugh," illustrating how working-class men wanted to perceive laundresses having a "girls just want to have fun" mentality (to use a modern reference).[47] Though this song acknowledges the menial work that laundresses did, it nonetheless emphasizes their more entertaining and sexualizing activities such as dancing and flirting with men. The *blanchisseuses* in de Livry's *spectacle* spend most of their time discussing romantic liaisons with men, specifically the potential marriage partners and lovers of Françoise, the laundress with the highest status.[48] Additionally, when Cadichon, the *maître* of their laundry *atelier*, addresses the laundresses as "*mes petits amours*," it becomes clear that, to him, they are not just female workers, but inherently romantic, sexual bodies.[49] The beauty of the laundress in the eyes of the working-class man is reaffirmed when Grinchet, an *épicier*, falls to his knees in front of Françoise, blown away by her beauty, when he sees her for the first time.[50] He literally looks up to her in this scene. Despite being on a similar low level on the class hierarchy, working-class men retained the privileges of being men in a patriarchal world. Nonetheless, Grinchet immediately dotes upon Francoise and begs for her attention, giving her some power to dictate the potential future of their relationship. Grinchet and Françoise's power imbalance, despite the societal norms, exemplifies the way that working-class men placed laundresses on a pedestal as achievable romantic and sexual pursuits based on this fictional, idealized image.

Short plays, geared towards a working-class male audience, were another popular medium in the mid-nineteenth century to discuss the lives, bodies, and sexuality of laundresses. "Les blanchisseuses de fin" is a 1965 play written by French dramatist Hippolyte Lefebvre and well-known journalist, playwright, and songwriter Dunan Mousseux. The theaters that produced their plays were comedy theaters in Paris that catered towards the working class (some even performed Cancan numbers, particularly geared towards a lower-class audience). In this play, the laundresses are depicted as joyous, women who love to work hard but also go dancing and mingle with men.[51] The laundresses are not portrayed as individuals in the same employment but a generally homogenous, but no less enthusiastic, group. Though, in reality, most laundresses were single women, many of the laundresses in this play are married,

45 Jouhaud, *Les belles femmes de la rue Mouffetard.*

46 Livry, *Le Bateau de blanchisseuses.*

47 Ibid, 1.
"vite, savonnons / fichus et jupons; / après nous rirons / et nous danserons"

48 Livry, *Le Bateau de blanchisseuses*, 4.

49 Ibid, 7.

50 Ibid, 9.
"Épicier," is the French equivalent of a convenient or corner store worker.

51 Lefebvre and Mousseux, *Les Blanchisseuses de fin, pièce en 5 actes mêlée de couplets*.

enhancing their respectable image and the marriageability of their single colleagues. The *blanchisseuses* start singing "all the laundry is pressed [...] let's go dancing" as they work.[52] Working-class men look to plays such as this, and also the laundresses, as escapes from the hard realities of their own lives. Thus, they want to interact with *blanchisseuses* that will sing and dance, entertaining them with enthusiasm and joy. Despite regularly having respectable intentions in courting laundresses, working-class men put laundresses in a highly constrictive box of romantic behavior, seeking the media's fictional ideal for these women instead of their reality.

Despite visual art being primarily an upper-class form of media, I want to examine two painted depictions of *blanchisseuses* that play into the male, working-class standard of the desirable, but achievable, laundress. Honoré Daumier's *The Laundress* (186[3]?) depicts a strong, curvy woman with a bundle of clothes on one hip, holding (presumably) her son's hand in the other. She looks caringly towards the little boy, ensuring his safety.[53] Daumier's laundress is a respectable, matronly figure, one that presents as a realistic piece which would appeal to a working-class audience. In the nineteenth century, femininity was inherently linked with fertility and the woman's ability to carry children. Hence, depictions of laundresses with wider hips and children in tow is a clear idealization and sexualization of these women within that framework of working-class desirability. The second painting is Renoir's *La Blanchisseuse et son enfant* (1886), an usually colorful painting for its time in the style of Italian fresco. Renoir paints his wife as a young laundress lovingly holding her small child, in reality the eldest of his three sons. She is slightly blushing and her lips are a rosy pink that could not be natural (but pretends to be).[54] Similar to Daumier's laundress, this painting idealizes laundresses for their motherly nature, depicting their eligibility as working-class wives, mothers, and homemakers. It is important to note that because the changing definition of gender relied heavily on virginity and "intact" reputations, working- and lower-class women didn't have access to this new construction of gender in the nineteenth century. They could only play into feminine ideals in the form of motherhood through the eyes of the working-class men because of their shared economic and social background.

Because of the rigid class hierarchy dominating nineteenth-century France, laundresses, with their tarnished reputations, could be nothing more than sexual lovers to upper-class and bourgeois men, who fetishized laundresses for their bodies and the pleasures they could take from them. In fact, at this time, the most common occurrence of sexual intercourse outside of marriage was between a lower-class woman and her bourgeois employer, and "almost one-half of the illegitimate children born in Paris in the 1885 were born to servant mothers."[55] There is a clear power imbalance between these two parties that play on gender, class, and even employment hierarchies of the time. It is important to note that many of these women were pressured into sex or even raped by their employers which makes the sexualization of laundresses by upper-class men all the more poignant and disturbing. As is explained by Lipton in her chapter on the imagery of the laundress in *Modern Art and Modernism*, upper-class men do not acknowledge the reality of the laundress' life and her difficult labor. Rather, they make her "both a sex object and the butt of class prejudice."[56] Upper-class men weaponize the laundress' gender *and* class in their subjugative sexualization and control over her body. The back-breaking, difficult experience of *blanchisseuses* superimposed with their objectification makes a sick reality for these women, filling their lives and bodies with a patriarchally-imposed anxiety.

While upper-class men enjoyed theater and performances in the form of the opera, orchestras, or serious plays, the refined art they flocked to consume was paintings, a visual art that could be gazed upon in museums, purchased for one's home, or judged during exclusive Salons. Hence, the bourgeois obsession with the *blanchisseuse* is best demonstrated through paintings. In fact, the male, upper-class obsession with laundresses has been present since the profession's inception and pre-dates the industrial revolution. Greuze's iconic painting *The Laundress* makes up an essential part of popular lore around *blanchisseuses* and only fed the nineteenth-century obsession with them. In Greuze's work, the laundress

52 Lefebvre and Mousseux, *Les Blanchisseuses de fin*.

53 Daumier, *The Laundress.*

54 Renoir, *Washerwoman and Child (La Blanchisseuse et Son Enfant).*

55 Moses, *French Feminism*, 30.

56 Lipton, "The Laundress," 278.

stares straight at the painter.[57] A woman making direct eye contact was unusual at the time because it makes her provocative and knowing rather than innocent and virginal. Despite clearly fetishizing the laundress' reputation, I argue that this eye contact gives some power back to the laundress. She is not clueless about sex: she knows and is unashamed of her experience. Regardless, Greuze's laundress is extremely sensual as her strong fingers caress the folds of the wet, soapy fabric. She goes so far as to expose her ankle (how scandalous!).[58] In this painting, Greuze exploits the laundress' reputation for being promiscuous by playing into contemporary social cues and taboos (eyecontact, labor, revealing body parts) showing that sex literally sells as he successfully exhibited this painting at the prestigious Salon in 1761.

Nineteenth-century paintings of the laundress for upper-class men play on and contribute to her promiscuous reputation and the fixation on her body and fictionalized sexuality. I will focus on a few of Degas and Renoir's many paintings depicting laundresses. Degas did not just express his obsession with laundresses through his work, but explicitly stated it: "One Paris laundry girl, with bare arms, is worth it all for such a pronounced Parisian as I am."[59] Degas depicts his laundresses through a peaceful, sunny lens: in his paintings, the laundress is always happy to be ironing or laundering in her sun-filled backdrop.[60] This simplistic and diminutive, but eternally positive, depiction of laundresses emerges from his background as a bourgeois man that interacted with laundresses not just as a man towards a woman, but as an elite member of society, with financial and social power, towards a poor(er) worker. Though *The Ironer* (1869) at first glance doesn't seem sexual, "her face is sensual and distinctly drawn with its slightly open, full-lipped mouth, languid eyes, and faintly swelling lids."[61] She looks like she could have just been pressing clothes or, more crucially, engaging in a sexual type of physical activity. Renoir focused on the body and sexuality of laundresses in a whole series of paintings, heightening their mainstream popularity for the upper-class man to fixate on. *The Laundress* (1877/79) illustrates a woman, not currently occupied in any of her duties or labor, standing in the center of the frame with rosy cheeks. Her shift is sliding down her shoulder, leaving it bare.[62] In Degas' *Woman Ironing* (1873), the young woman is hard at work, pressing a clean white garment: her cheeks are flushed bright red and she is partially undressed, wearing only an undershirt with the front falling open to reveal her bare chest underneath.[63] Apart from the obvious sexuality of being partially undressed, the laundresses' flushed skin sexualizes them to the anonymous viewer. The fact that these *blanchisseuses* do not know that *he* is there heightens their sexual allure and innocence. The hard-working, yet seductive nature of the laundress appeals to upper-class men because of her seeming virtuousness. If she doesn't know that she is seductive, while being seductive, the laundress' reputation can remain relatively intact. Purity of the women surrounding them was especially important to the upper-class man of the nineteenth century as women were a visible representation of the man's honor. Hence, purity was an attractive trait in any woman, even if both parties were aware that the innocence or virginity of the laundress in the paintings was only an act. Renoir's laundress does not work within the frame of the canvas; instead, she flirts with her audience while being separate from their physical presence.[64] Renoir depicts laundresses in the way he wants to interact with them, sexually, and in doing so, the laundress' reality is denied.

The laundress' sexuality is not just limited to her rosy cheeks or flirtation with the invisible audience, in some paintings, her surroundings reinforce her promiscuous reputation and active sexuality. In *Lady's maid Ironing*, Joseph Caraud paints the woman, a servant, in her home surrounded by prominently displayed undergarments.[65] The exposition of this intimately taboo garment is an explicit depiction of the fictional laundress' sexuality in the fantasies of upper-class men. In an anonymous photograph of an ironer, the woman appears unaware of the camera, dedicated to her work. Everything seems normal and everyday apart from one detail, her shirt has strategically fallen down to expose

57 Greuze, *The Laundress (La Blanchisseuse).*

58 Bailey, *Jean-Baptiste Greuze: The Laundress*, 17.

59 Lipton, "The Laundress," 279. Not my translation.

60 Lipton, "Images of Laundresses," 116.

61 Ibid, 139.

62 Renoir, *The Laundress.*

63 Degas, *Woman Ironing.*

64 Lipton, "The Laundress," 275.

65 Lipton, "Images of Laundresses," 123

one bare breast.[66] We can draw a direct line from the laundress' slightly open *chemise* in Degas' *Woman Ironing* through Renoir's laundress' uncovered shoulder to this scandalous photograph of an ironer's bare breast. The exposing of the breast, and her seeming oblivion to this, sexualizes her and allows the viewer to gaze upon her body while maintaining the illusion of her virtue.

The popular obsession with laundresses permeated even the highest classes of society, with songs about their beauty being sung to ambassadors at large concert events in Paris. Though not a symphony or opera, these songs were not simply circulated orally amongst the working class. Émile Duhem, a French singer-songwriter, wrote a joyful, rather direct ode to laundresses for a distinguished event in 1879. The lyrics voice his fictionalization of the thoughts of the Parisian laundresses, stating that there is no job more divine amongst the working class than that of the laundress, passed down from mother to daughter.[67] Laundering was inherently gendered and was often passed down maternally. Though not overtly sexual, this song clearly glorifies the laundress' labor and the women who fill the job. The cover of the songsheet, illustrated by another man, Gustave Donjean, depicts a pretty, young, well-dressed laundress collecting (or returning) a man's white garments to clean. The man is most likely a member of the bourgeoisie because of his checkered pants and ability to pay for a laundress to wash his clothes. We can also assume that this man is unmarried because he is sending away the laundry himself instead of the woman of the house. From his body posture reaching out towards the laundress, we can deduce that he is flirting with or propositioning her, however, with her hand in the air holding him away, I argue that she isn't interested in his advances/offer.[68] Both of their poses are suggestive and their mere presence in the same room, alone, is enough to call scandal. She could be turning down his proposition, but she could also be playing coy, as the male illustrator and viewers would likely fantasize about.

In her work on garment workers in the late nineteenth century, Tilburg points out the common portrayal of the *grisette* through the Romantic lens as a girl that doesn't work hard and as a companion — love, not partner — to bourgeois men. The *grisette*, a term referencing their simple gray dresses, is a young French garment worker, a seamstress, and represents innate French taste.[69] In many ways, the *grisette* worked and existed in a similar sphere to that of the laundress, emerging as one of the republican icons of the French people. Going all the way back to the seventeenth century, authors such as Jean de la Fontaine wrote about the *grisette* as an "easily won treasure."[70] The framework and sexualization of the *grisette* applies directly to the *blanchisseuses*. The working woman in France is a lover to the middle class/bourgeois man first, and a laborer second.[71] Bourgeois men thought about laundresses from a fictionalized sexual perspective rather than one based in reality.

Though men were usually in control of the media and popular perceptions of laundresses, elite women also played a role in pigeonholing these working women into a gendered and classist position of inferiority; however, their sexualization of laundresses stemmed from a place of condescension and their own vulnerability to the patriarchy rather than sexual desire.[72] Despite the common assumption that men were the only ones to sexualize the opposite gender in art, there is evidence that women did, in fact, view art of the male body for their own pleasure — just as men did of paintings of women.[73] Women were not just subjects but also participants. They were observers of other women, laundresses, being sexualized, though they most likely would not have realized the implicit messaging of class superiority or gender roles implanted into modernist art of laundresses. It's important to recognize that while it's easy to pick apart the internalized patriarchy or misogyny in art and culture of nineteenth-century France, women at the time did not have the benefit of hindsight. In many instances, they not only failed to see elements of their own oppression but contributed to upholding the male bourgeois hegemony.[74] The article about laundresses

66 Ibid, 127.

67 Duhem and Donjean, "Les blanchisseuses de Paris." *"De toute la ruche ouvrière / N'est-il pas métier plus divin, / Qu'l'etat que m'fit apprendr'ma mère / Celui de blanchisseus' de fin."*

68 Ibid.

69 Tilburg, *Working Girls*, 2.

70 Ibid, 20-21.

71 Ibid, 28.

72 See footnote 5.

73 Doy, *Women & Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century France 1800-1852*, 135.

74 Doy, *Women & Visual Culture*, 131.

from a 1884 issue of "La Femme", written by one Mademoiselle Delpech, has a condescending tone about working women and portrayed these laundresses in a negative light, as "*grossières*" (crass). Delpech nonetheless depicts them as welcoming and kind, despite their lack of breeding and education.[75] We can determine that "La Femme" is written by and for bourgeois women thanks to surviving postcard images of the all-female staff of the newspaper.[76] Working-class women would not have had the time, money, *and* education to read or write such a newspaper. Bourgeois women denigrated the laundress because they were threatened by her overt sexuality, whether fictionalized or true, and visible movement throughout society, interacting with *their* husbands in the streets, their homes, and, so they feared, their beds.

Though bourgeois women looked down on laundresses as inferior and of ill-repute, the historically domestic nature of their profession empowered bourgeois women with the belief in their authority over laundering and knowledge of the work. In 1852, Mme Rouget de L'isle wrote a precise instruction manual on the act of *blanchissage* though she most likely had no background in it herself as a bourgeois woman. Only bourgeois women would have the time or ability to write several books about subjects such as sewing, sculpture, and more importantly, *blanchissage*. De L'isle expected her audience to be mainly female and working class; either laundresses themselves or poor women that couldn't afford to pay for the laundresses' services. She states that *blanchissage* is not just a job, but an art.[77] This rather pretentious statement from someone who might never have picked up bleach, let alone spent days in a grueling steamy workhouse, appears amusing and ironic at first glance. Upon further inspection, it becomes clear that this statement stems from de L'isle's desire to glorify the act of doing laundry because of its societally constructed "domestic" nature as a part of her motherly, wifely, or simply womanly duties. Through her manual, de L'isle provides key details about the tough reality of being a laundress that exposes the conflicting dynamics between these working-class women and their upper-class counterparts or employers. Though bourgeois and upper-class women had objectively easier daily lives than *blanchisseuses*, not having to work fourteen-hour days in harsh environments for little pay, they were nonetheless oppressed by the patriarchy and gender norms of the nineteenth century. The laundress and the bourgeois woman still hold one thing in common: their womanhood. Though their lives were not as physically hard as working-class women, bourgeois women were highly controlled by their male family members in order to "protect their virtue."[78] They could never be unescorted outside of the home for fear of tarnishing their reputations. Upper-class women and girls experienced intense levels of direct physical and social control from the people surrounding them that the laundress and working-class woman didn't. Through their shared gender, laundresses and bourgeois women alike are expected to function in the domestic sphere, not the public, or, god-forbid, political one. Upper-class women could not escape their gender, despite their class advantage. Such was the restrictive construction of gender in nineteenth-century France.

French laundresses worked in a highly unified manner as a defense of how men of all classes and upper-class women felt entitled to their bodies, to their beings. With all these stereotypes and fictional depictions of laundresses, it's crucial to bring the laundress back into her own body and examine the ways in which the laundress actually engaged with her surroundings. In the following few paragraphs, I hope to craft the laundress' response to the attack on her body and reputation from working-class men, upper-class men, and bourgeois women, reclaiming the laundress' narrative for her own. It's important to keep in mind that there is no singular "woman's voice", the same goes for laundresses. However, I argue that men didn't recognize the individuality of working-class women in the media, rather grouping them into one homogenous body. Feminists in nineteenth-century Europe could see and live the double standard around gender and sexuality.[79] However, despite this awareness, nineteenth-century feminists built on the romanticization of women, idealizing them further in some instances than their patriarchal counterparts.[80] There wasn't a question of sexual liberation in this era, but rather a desire to hold

75 Union nationale des amies de la jeune fille (France) and Delpech, "La Femme," 105.

76 "Frankrig - Ubrugt: Frankrig. Paris. Union Nationale des Amies de la Jeune Fille 328."

77 de Lisle, *Le livre du blanchissage*, 5.

78 Moses, *French Feminism*, 33.

79 Maynard, "Privilege and Patriarchy," 233.

80 Moses, *French Feminism*, 18.

men to the same standards of chastity and morality as women. Women had to continuously prove their morality to society, men, and even each other. However, because of conflicting, and damning, media fixation on the laundress, she lived in a world of sexual exploitation, whether it be through the physical use of her body and labor or her juxtaposing psychological cages of "innocent" and "whore". Because of the definition of labor as an exchange of goods and the perception that all exchange of labor for financial compensation on the part of a woman is a form of prostitution, all work is sexual when performed by a woman. There are no known documents detailing this awareness from any nineteenth-century laundresses — in fact, I found no documents at all written by French laundresses; however, we know that they felt the impact of their exploitation, finding ways to avoid the anxieties placed on their bodies. The laundress was never paid enough to avoid going into debt and was often prone to drinking as an escape from the tough reality of her life. In fact, it was encouraged and expected by many employers.[81] While escaping her debt through drink is one part of her reaction to the reality of her life, she sometimes resorted to prostitution, selling her sexual services to men, to make ends meet. Sex and possible pregnancies were incredibly disruptive to the young working woman's life.[82] Regardless of the loss of her reputation if unwed, a single mother also risked losing her job and salary rendering her unable to support herself or her child. Thus, whether to make ends meet or for their own pleasure, sex was always a risk for laundresses.

Though the media constantly portrayed and sexualized laundresses in relation to men, laundresses remained loyal to each other. Though disagreements and friendships shifted (as is inevitable), "no one could deny the mood of camaraderie that filled washhouses and ironing shops alike."[83] Returning to Lefebvre's "Blanchisseuses de fin", the laundresses are depicted as unusually unified with each other.[84] From centuries ago to today, in books and media, women are often written to turn against one another and tear each other down in order to advance themselves, individually. However, the laundresses don't play by these rules, even when written by men. The reality of their unity and camaraderie was such that it pervaded the media objectifying them. Most depictions of laundresses in mid-nineteenth-century French media have a lack of internal dissent and backstabbing between women. However, this unity also serves to erase the individuality of the *blanchisseuses*. If laundresses are depicted as always unified, always happy, dancing, and singing, they can be uniformly idealized, gazed upon: Regardless of the frivolous, sexualized image that laundresses held in French society, Lefebvre's play also doubled down on their hard-working nature.[85] No one can deny the harsh reality of the laundress' labor after knowing the long hours these women worked. The truth is that these *blanchisseuses* that society, from the poorest of men to the richest of women, was hyper-fixated on and sexualized, were often young girls, overworked and underpaid.[86] They performed backbreaking work in an industrial job that had not yet caught up to the technological revolution of the rest of the garment industry.

Laundresses in mid-nineteenth-century France lived in a strange dichotomy shaped by class and gender domination: they were immortalized in paintings as innocent, seductive, and beautiful in their virtue while they actually moved through society drinking, dancing, and sleeping around (for their own pleasure and sometimes to make ends meet). Society became fixated on laundresses because of their visibility in cities; Their labor required them to walk through neighborhoods of all economic backgrounds, visiting homes across the city to pick up (and drop off) laundry and using public water stations. Upper-class women saw the seemingly ubiquitous *blanchisseuses* as a threat to their marriages and worried that these working women would steal away their husbands. In response, they denigrated laundresses as women selling their bodies, not distinguishing between labor and sex. Nonetheless, the nineteenth-century fabrication of gender, shifting away from a demonization of women to a glorified feminine ideal of womanhood, ensured the imprisonment of upper-class women within this feminine archetype and the exclusion of laundresses from it. Laundresses labored in steamy workhouses that were often open to the passerby for better ventilation

81 Lipton, "The Laundress," 277.

82 Moses, *French Feminism*, 29.

83 Ibid, 276-277.

84 Lefebvre and Mousseux, *Les Blanchisseuses de fin*, 13.

85 Lefebvre and Mousseux, *Les Blanchisseuses de fin*, 9-10.

86 *Département de La Seine. Préfecture de Police. Rapport Sur l'application Des Lois Relatives Au Travail Dans l'industrie En 1891 et 1892. (15 Mars 1893)*, 12, 17.

which, to men of all classes, meant seeing these women in various states of undress as they worked. For working-class men who interacted daily with laundresses in the streets and at communal establishments, these women provided companionship and amusement outside of just sexual encounters and were idealized as potential partners. In contrast, long-standing class hierarchies made it impossible for upper-class men to interact with laundresses in any context other than an illicit, sexual one. Paintings of barely working, happy *blanchisseuses* by artists such as Degas and Renoir illustrate this elite male fetishization of the women washing their clothes and the fictionalization of their sexuality. Accompanying her endless mountain of back-breaking work, a laundress, more than the average woman in nineteenth-century France, held the burden of being a body.

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