Edgar Degas and French Feminism, ca. 1880: "The Young Spartans," the Brothel Monotypes, and the Bathers Revisited

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In this article, I shall consider the newly resurgent and visible feminist movement in France, ca. 1878-80, as a context for understanding the sometimes ambiguous and much debated meanings of many of Edgar Degas's works of this period, specifically the Spartan Girls Challenging Boys (which, as evidence presented here will show, must have been revised and its figures given a more contemporaneous appearance at this time), the brothel monotypes, and the bather compositions. The writings of the Italian critic, Diego Martelli, a man who was a committed feminist activist and who was closely associated with Degas in Paris during these years, will be adduced to establish the extent to which feminist issues had become an accessible and relevant part of the modern world that Degas set out to interpret.

Edgar Degas's Spartan Girls Challenging Boys (Fig. 1), begun around 1860, later revised for inclusion (but never shown) at the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition in April of 1880, is a painting whose subject has held considerable fascination for modern scholars, but whose meaning, nevertheless, remains something of an enigma. Once interpreted as an expression of a competitive and unhealthy hostility between the sexes, one that reflected a personal fear and dislike of women on Degas's part, the scene was subsequently described as a natural confrontation among equals and offered in an essay of mine as part of a refutation of the notion of Degas's presumed "misogyny." More recently, Carol Salus, also writing in these pages, has rejected the idea that the picture represents a competition between the sexes and has proposed instead that it is a portrayal of Spartan courtship rites, a subject in which Degas, a young man when he first undertook the painting, would presumably have had a natural interest.

In support of her interpretation, Salus maintains that the group of adolescents at the left, formerly thought to consist only of females, contains within it a male and female couple, who set an example of heterosexual bonding which the youths at the right are being encouraged to emulate. The group at the left, moreover, is said to provide a complete display of the stages of courtship, including "hesitancy on the part of the young woman on the left" (whose long hair, according to Spartan custom, would mark her as a virgin), "aggressive enticement in the lunging figure" (whose cropped hair signals that she is either married or ready to be), and, finally, "bonding in the couple." The so-called male in this couple (who is, by the way, noticeably smaller in size than any of the adolescent boys at the right), is shown fondling the breast of his female companion, and "his gesture," we are told, "indicates that he is male." This assumption, which plays a central role in Salus's argument, is unwarranted, however, both in light of Degas's knowledge of classical culture in general and his literary sources for this painting in particular. For Plutarch, who is rec-
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In this article, I shall present a previously overlooked contemporary commentary, which suggests that Degas did regard the action depicted in “The Young Spartans” as a challenge that would lead to an ensuing athletic competition. But this painting and its subject, I will argue, no matter what its original iconographical stimulus may have been, had very different meanings for Degas when he began it in 1860 and when he considered exhibiting it for the first time two decades later in 1880 — at a moment when the feminist movement in France (a movement with which Degas can now be shown to have had an important link) had begun to emerge as a significant force in the political life and in the social consciousness of the French people. What may have begun for Degas in 1860, in other words, as a straightforward depiction of the egalitarian training given atypically to young women in Spartan society, may have taken on for him by the late 1870’s a more complex and problematic significance — one that might serve as a metaphor and as a reflection of the relationship between the sexes in contemporary European society. The attitudes and influences of the contemporary feminist movement, I will also suggest, may have far broader implications for Degas scholarship than the illumination of a single picture and its iconography; and I will therefore conclude with a reconsideration of Degas’s brothel monotypes and bather imagery in the light of this new context.

A new clue to the subject of “The Young Spartans” is provided by the writings of Diego Martelli, the Italian art critic who was a close friend of Degas and of many of the advanced artists in his circle. From April 1878 to April 1879, Martelli spent a year in Paris, and during this period, Degas

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298. Although Nochlin appears to accept Salus’s identification of Degas’s subject as a Spartan courtship rite, she cites elements in the picture that appear to contradict or mask its presumed iconography, and she argues, correctly, I believe, for a more psychologically complex interpretation of the picture’s meaning.
and unfinished because of the same sincerity that had impelled Degas to begin it. A man of the finest education, modern in every aspect of his life, Degas could not fossilize himself in a composite past reconstructed from fragments, which can never be what was or what is, a Chinese puzzle that may yield excellent results for artists like Gerôme, but not for artists who feel the pulse of real life.  

Martelli’s remarks help to clarify several important issues regarding not only the subject but also the history of “The Young Spartans.” They suggest, first of all, that in 1878-79, when Martelli had the opportunity to form his impressions of the picture, Degas apparently considered it to be unfinished. Martelli, perhaps reflecting the current attitude of Degas himself, regards the painting as a relic and document of the artist’s early roots in the classical tradition. He describes it as an artificial and unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct the historical past, a work that Degas had long ago decided to abandon, an exercise unworthy of an artist who feels “the pulse of real life.”

These comments also suggest that at the time Martelli saw the picture, Degas had not yet carried out the major modifications that X-ray examination of the canvas in its present state has revealed — that is to say, the alteration of the figures from their original classicizing models to the more obviously contemporary types that we see here. Sometime between 1879 and 1880, then, Degas’s interest in this picture, begun almost twenty years earlier, was rekindled, enough so that he now planned to show it at the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition in the spring of 1880. It is reasonable to infer that these important expressive changes in the work would have been made just prior to that exhibition, and not in the 1860’s as scholars have previously supposed.  

It is also reasonable to infer that Degas, the artist who wanted to paint the contemporary world through the lens of the classics, may now have come to feel that this particular painting and its subject did indeed have a message, or at the very least a relevance for his own time. What that relevance may have been I would now like to explore.

Diego Martelli’s description of “The Young Spartans” in 1879, based to some extent, we may assume, on conversation with Degas himself, suggests that Degas did regard the action depicted here as a challenge that would result in an athletic competition — a race. Martelli describes it as “the Spartan girls who challenge the boys to the race which decided, in accordance with the law of those people, their submission.” This description is in general terms consonant

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7 In addition to the Edinburgh portrait reproduced here, there is another large-scale painted portrait of Martelli by Degas in the Museo National in Buenos Aires. See P.-A. Lemoine, Degas et son oeuve, Paris, 1946-49, 11, cat. 539 and 520. The standard biography on Martelli is by Piero Dini, with the collaboration of Alba del Soldato, Digo Martelli, Florence, 1978. Martelli’s sojourn in Paris in 1878-79 was the last of four trips that he made to the French capital (the others were in 1862, 1869, and 1870). He left Italy on 30 March 1878 and was back home again in Castiglioncello on 20 April 1879. On Martelli’s trips to Paris, see Dini, chap. iv, 125-156.


10 See D. Burnell, “Degas and His Young Spartans Exercising,” Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies, iv, 1969, 49-65, for a review of scholarly opinion in regard to the dating of both the London and Chicago versions of the painting and related studies.
with Degas's early statement of intention with regard to this painting, the notebook entry, ca. 1859-60, in which he spoke of “jeunes filles et jeunes garçons luttant dans le Plataniste sous les yeux de Lycurgue vieux à côté des mères.”

And, in turn, it would also support, I believe, the traditional reading of the composition as divided into two, gender-defined groups of figures in the foreground, the Spartan girls at the left and the boys at the right. If the “race” newly specified by Martelli was associated with a particular mating practice that went beyond the general opportunity for mate selection afforded by these exercises — as might indeed be inferred from Martelli’s description, as well as from the presence of the women and children who accompany Lycurgus the law-giver in the background of the picture — no source from which Degas might have gathered this particular notion about Spartan custom has yet been identified.

But even if Degas did not set out here to illustrate a documentable Spartan mating ritual as Salus has claimed, nevertheless, by the time he showed this picture to Martelli in 1878-79, he appears to have seen the activity it depicts in terms of the larger context of the lives of these Spartan girls — whose unusual training in youth might have suggested a more egalitarian status than the future actually held in store for them as members of a patriarchal society. In the group of Spartan girls at the left Degas has presented the early and natural forms of bonding that occurred among those girls (including sexual bonding), their competitive spirit, and their aggressive group challenge directed toward the wary group of boys at the right. And this, I will now suggest, by the late 1870’s, may well have reflected Degas’ perception of the situation of contemporary European women and men, as that perception would have been stimulated and evoked by the growing feminist movement of his period.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the “woman question” had become a central issue in French intellectual and political discourse, so much so that during the Second Empire (according to a report issued in 1911), more books on women were published than at any other time in French history. The continuing debate, which focused on the role and status of women within the family as a key to the moral and material regeneration of the French nation, was fed in the late 1850’s and early sixties by the overtly misogynist writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and by the more chivalric ones of Jules Michelet, both of whom argued for restricting the options and rights of women as a means of preserving and strengthening the patriarchal family, and both of whom based their arguments to differing degrees on the notion of the physical, intellectual, and moral inferiority of women. In heated refutation, a spate of newspaper articles, brochures, and books soon appeared by feminist writers, the most influential of whom were Juliette Lamber (Mme. Adam) and Jenny d’Héricourt, who set forth their own views on the nature of woman, calling for equality and programs of social and legal reform.

This lively literary debate was the most visible evidence of the survival of feminist activism during the Second Empire, a period during which government controls on the press and on free assembly effectively prevented feminist organization and propaganda in France, and virtually decimated a feminist movement that, before 1850, had been one of the most active in Europe. But with the relaxation of repressive laws and censorship in the last years of the Second Empire, feminist activism reemerged in the late 1860’s. In 1869, the liberal journalist Léon Richer founded the newspaper Le Droit des femmes, whose pages, over the next twenty-three years, provide us with an important historical record of the French feminist movement during this period. In the next year, 1870, Richer and Maria Deraismes (a political activist, a woman of independent means, and a brilliant and popular public speaker who could draw large crowds) founded the “Société pour l’Amélioration du

12 Bidelman, 63 and 230, n. 114. See also K.M. Offen, ‘The Woman Question’ as a Social Issue in Nineteenth-Century France,” Third Republic, Nos. 3-4, 1977, 238-299. An impressive literature exists to document and analyze the French feminist movement of the 19th century. Among the most helpful of the recent works in English, in addition to Bidelman’s book cited above, is Moses (see Sources). See also L. Abensour, Histoire générale du féminisme: Des origines à nos jours (Paris, 1921) repr., Geneva, 1979; S. Grinberg, Histoire du mouvement suffragiste depuis 1848, Paris, 1926; and Li Dzeh-Djen, La presse féministe en France de 1869 à 1914, Paris, 1934. Essential for research in this field are the holdings of the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris. A research library now housed in the mairie of the fifth arrondissement, it was created in 1897 by Marguerite Durand (1864-1936), who was director of the feminist journal La Fronde, and who donated her library to the city of Paris in 1931. In addition to published books and journals of the period, its holdings include thousands of newspaper clippings, pamphlets, and letters, which have been organized into dossiers under the names of feminist leaders, organizations, and congresses.
13 The books in question were: P.-J. Proudhon, De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église, 3 vols., Paris, 1858 (which included two chapters on women and the family), and his last work, La pornocratie ou les femmes dans les temps modernes, Paris, n.d., incomplete and published posthumously, in which he devoted himself to combating the feminist position; and J. Michelet, L'Amour, Paris, 1858, and La femme, Paris, 1860. (Enormously popular, both of Michelet’s books were published in dozens of editions well into the early part of the 20th century.)
15 Le Droit des femmes was a weekly newspaper until 1876. Then it became a monthly review; and after 1885, it was published biweekly. In September of 1871, Richer changed its name to L’Avenir des femmes (in response to the government’s contention, during the early days of the Third Republic, that the definition of “rights” was solely its prerogative). But in 1879, after the victories of the republicans at the polls and the subsequent lifting of an earlier government ban on meetings of the Amélioration Society, he restored the journal’s original title (see Moses, 186; and Bidelman, 94 and 96).
Sort de la Femme et la Revendication de ses Droits," and together, over the next decade, these two were the major leaders in organizing and defining the political tactics of the feminist movement in France. Middle-class and republican in their orientation, as distinct from the working class and socialist leaders who had shaped the movement during the first half of the century, Deraismes and Richer worked during the 1870’s to make feminism into a respectable political position in France, allying it with, and in some ways subordinating it to, the survival of the fledgling and at first unstable Third Republic. Linking the emancipation of women to the stability and welfare of the family and the Republic, they held the issue of women’s political rights (i.e., the vote) in abeyance, and concentrated their efforts on seeking legislative reforms, particularly in the areas of equal education for women, the reestablishment of a divorce law, women’s right to file paternity suits, the abolition of state-supervised prostitution, and the rights of married women to control their own property.

Implementing a strategy of making the movement more visible as well as more respectable by enlisting influential public figures, especially male legislators and writers, in their cause, the Amelioration Society organized a banquet for 150 people at the Palais-Royal in June of 1872. With Edouard Laboulaye of the Institut de France presiding, the assembled group heard an impassioned statement of support sent to them by Victor Hugo. And in his report on the banquet in the 8 July 1878 issue of L’Avenir des femmes, Richer cited a long list of prominent writers and politicians who supported the feminist cause. He proudly declared: “Who now can be afraid of being ridiculed when in the company of Victor Hugo, Louis Blanc, H. de LaCretelle, Naquet, Lemonnier, the director of Opinion nationale, Adolphe Guérout, and the director of Siècle, Louis Jouard.”

Throughout the seventies, the fortunes of feminism were very closely tied to the republican cause. In the wake of the anti-republican movement that toppled Adolphe Thiers and brought the monarchists’ candidate, Marshal MacMahon, to the presidency of the Republic in May of 1873, a ban was placed on public meetings of the Amelioration Society. The Republican victory in the Chamber of Deputies election of 1877 led at last to the lifting of that ban, and enabled the group to proceed, in 1878, with a major international congress, for which plans had been begun earlier in the decade.

The First International Feminist Congress (Congrès International du Droit des Femmes) opened in Paris on 25 July 1878. Eleven foreign countries and sixteen organizations were represented, and two hundred and nineteen people were on the roster as official delegates. Among the latter were nine members of the Chamber of Deputies, two senators, and such familiar names as Julia Ward Howe and Theodore Stanton from the United States. By the time the Congress closed on 9 August, an additional four hundred people had come to hear the speeches and reports that had been presented during sessions held at the Grand Orient Hall (the major Freemason lodge) in Paris. These sessions, organized broadly around issues of pedagogy, economics, morality, and legislation, produced a series of resolutions calling for reform that had by now become a familiar part of the liberal feminist program: these included equal education for both sexes; “equal pay for equal work” (“à production égale, salaire égal”), and open access to all professions; the abolition of state-regulated prostitution; and the establishment of a divorce law, based not on a double moral standard in regard to adultery, but on the principle of equality between the spouses. Press coverage of the Congress, which was predictably negative in Bonapartist papers and positive in republican ones, was lively, and generated considerable debate over the issues, as the organizers of the Congress had hoped. In response to an article in Le Gaulois, for example, that began with the statement, “Enfin, nous allons rire un peu!”, XIXe Siècle published an article in defense of the Congress by Francisque Sarcey, entitled “Il n’y a pas de quoi rire.”

The next year, 1879, was a major turning point for the feminist movement in France. In that year, liberal Republicans gained control of the Senate and the presidency, with the result that, for the first time in that decade, considerable legislative progress was made on feminist issues. In 1880, for example, the Camille Sée Law was passed, authorizing the establishment of secondary schools for girls (with a curriculum, however, that would not prepare girls for the baccalauréat examinations). And the campaign to reestablish a divorce law in France, which had been begun by Alfred Naquet, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, in 1876, was also now much advanced. After many unsuccessful efforts on Naquet’s part to win consideration of the issue in the legislature, the Chamber of Deputies voted with a strong majority to debate the proposed measure after Naquet delivered an eloquent speech before it on 27 June 1879. Even though a divorce law would not be passed until 1884, the vote of 1879 was nevertheless a significant victory, for it marked the beginning of vigorous discussion of the issues, both in the legislature and in the press.

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16 For the announcement of the program and list of delegates, see Le Droit des femmes, x, 164, 1878, 97ff. See also the report on the Congress after its opening, ibid., x, 165, 1878.
17 The acts and resolutions of the Congress appear in L’Avenir des femmes, x, 166, 1878, 131-133.
18 For a discussion of the press coverage and a reprint of the article by Sarcey, see L’Avenir des femmes, x, 165, 1878, 117.
19 See Moses, 32, 209, 210, 233. For a contemporary report on the developing debate, see also J. Mercour, "Questions d’enseignement," Le Droit des femmes, xi, 174, 1879, 70.
20 A liberal divorce law of 1792, which had granted divorce on demand, was amended in favor of the male partner in 1804, and then repealed in 1816 (see Moses, 18-19).
21 Naquet’s proposal for the reestablishment of divorce appears in Le Droit des femmes, xi, 174, 1879, 68-70. The June issue (xi, 175) reports Naquet’s preliminary victory in the Chamber of Deputies and reprints a recent article from the Télégraphe in which arguments in favor of the proposed law had been set forth (pp. 84-85).
The year 1879 also saw the emergence of a radical wing of Republican feminism led by Hubertine Auclert, who took up the issue that had been shelved by Deraismes and Richer, the issue of suffrage. Taking the position that civil reforms for women would follow only in the wake of their political enfranchisement, Auclert, who had been silenced at the Congress of 1878, split from the moderate majority, announcing a new “politics of assault” rather than one of compromise. And in a press release of January 1879 reflecting this new aggressive spirit, she threw down her challenge: “Man makes the laws to his advantage and we [women] are obliged to bow our heads in silence. Enough of resignation. Pariahs of society, stand up!”

Later in the same year, Auclert presented her demand for suffrage at the Congress of the Socialist Workers of France (Congrès Ouvrier Socialiste de France), which convened in Marseilles in 20-31 October 1879. She met with resounding success, for not only was the assembly persuaded to adopt a resolution in favor of women’s suffrage, but Auclert herself was elected president of the Congress. In accepting the presidential chair, according to a report published in Le Figaro, Auclert thanked the Congress for the honor it had conferred upon her, “for,’ she said, ‘in naming me your president, you are acknowledging the equality of man and woman.”

Even in the conservative Le Figaro, almost daily reports on the Congress and its sessions were published. These reports, though often mocking and hostile in tone, were relatively lengthy and detailed, and are indicative of the amount of attention that was given to the Congress and to Auclert’s part in it by the Parisian press.

In 1879 and 1880, Auclert continued to implement her strategy of assault both upon the government and upon public opinion with a steadily escalating barrage of press releases and petitions demanding the vote, as well as with increasingly visible and well publicized public demonstrations and acts of protest and resistance. After attempting unsuccessfully to register to vote in February of 1880, for example, Auclert and twenty of her followers staged over a tax strike that drew coverage from the press and elicited new expressions of support, some of it surprising quarters (it was at this time, for example, that Alexandre Dumas fils, whose earlier writings had been vehemently antifeminist, began to reverse his position and endorsed women’s suffrage). As usual, Auclert expressed herself forcefully. Having been told “that the law confers rights only on men and not on women,” she informed the prefect of the Seine, “in consequence, I leave to men, who arrogate to themselves the privileges of governing, arranging, and allotting the budgets, I leave to men the privilege of paying the taxes that they vote and divide to their liking. Since I have no right to control the use of my money, I no longer wish to give it. . . . I have no rights, therefore I have no obligations: I do not vote, I do not pay.”

These events, and in particular the active and escalating challenge to male supremacy that was being laid down by the newly radicalized wing of the French feminist movement around 1879-80, are relevant, I believe, to defining the climate in which Degas was inspired to revise and insert contemporary figure types into “The Young Spartans,” with the intention of showing the picture to the public at the Fifth Impressionist Exhibition in April of 1880. The original character of the picture before revisions were carried out is best suggested by the thinly brushed and largely tonal version of the subject, today in The Art Institute of Chicago (Fig. 3), which Degas probably painted in 1860, in the traditional manner, as a large-scale study for the London picture. Here the challenging gesture of the leading Spartan girl at the left can be read (as it can still be read on one level in the London picture), as a straightforward illustration of Degas’s original literary sources: these are the Spartan girls of Plutarch or of the Abbé Barthélemy, who exercise publicly with the Spartan boys, taunting them and inviting them to acts of greater glory. But in the revised version of 1880, with its explicitly contemporary Parisian types and the newly wary and confrontational stance of the boys on the right, all of whom, in contrast to the Chicago version, now look directly at the group of girls at the left (cf. Figs. 1 and 3), these same gestures — as well as the presence of Lycurgus, the male law-giver, surrounded by women and children in the background — take on new meaning. They demand now to be read as well within the context of the contemporary relationship between the sexes — in terms, I believe, of the challenge that was being presented to contemporary men to yield their positions of total legal and political power and to participate in the creation of a more equitable social order. That Degas would have chosen to respond in this instance to topical concerns within the context of a history painting is not altogether surprising nor wholly unprecedented in his practice. For as Hélène Adhémar pointed out some years ago, the subject of Degas’s Scène de guerre au Moyen Age, a history painting that he exhibited at the Salon of 1865, is likely to have been “la citoyenne Hubertine Auclert (sic) de Paris, rentière déléguée des Sociétés des Droits de Femme et des Travailleuses de Belleville.”

For details, see Bidelman, 125ff.

For a review of the literary sources to which Degas had access, see Salus (as in n. 3), 501-502.


23 “Le Congrès, partant de ce principe, l’égalité absolue des deux sexes, reconnaît aux femmes les mêmes droits sociaux et politiques des hommes.” For the resolutions of the Congress, see Séances du Congrès Ouvrier Socialiste de France (Troisième session tenue à Marseilles du 20 au 31 Octobre 1879 à la salle des Folies Bergères), Marseilles, 1879, 801-805; this quotation is on p. 804. For the report on the session “De la femme,” see pp. 145-223.


25 For details, see Bidelman, 125ff.

26 See Alexandre Dumas fils, Les Femmes qui tuent et les femmes qui votent, Paris, 1880. For his earlier, antifeminist position, see L’homme-femme: Réponse à M. Henri Ideville, Paris, 1872.

27 Bidelman, 126. The women who participated in Auclert’s tax strike would have been for the most part single or widowed, since the law gave men complete control over their wives’ finances.

28 For a review of the literary sources to which Degas had access, see Salus (as in n. 3), 501-502.
a response or a reference to specific events from the American Civil War, events that had had a direct impact upon the lives of the artist’s female relatives in New Orleans.29

The relationship of Degas’s “Young Spartans” to another classic French painting, David’s Oath of the Horatii (Fig. 4), in which the artist also addressed the issue of appropriate gender roles for his own period through the model of antique history, provides another revealing reference point for this discussion. It has been pointed out that the active versus passive roles of the women versus the men in Degas’s picture, as well as their left versus right compositional placement, present obvious reversals of what is to be found in such traditional history paintings as David’s Oath.30 And this, I think we may conclude, was neither


30 Richard Brettell has written: “Comparison of Degas’s composition with that of The Oath of the Horatii reveals an element of satire on the part of Degas. Indeed, the gesturing girl at the left is almost a caricature of the young oath-takers in David’s famous painting” (R.R. Brettell and S.F. McCullagh, Degas in The Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago and New York, 1984, 34-35).
accidental nor unselfconscious, for the relationship between the two pictures clearly resonates on more than just the formal level. Originally, Degas had undertaken "The Young Spartans," in part, and not entirely without the spirit of rebellion, as a youthful artist's effort to come to terms with the Neoclassical tradition of history painting, a tradition for which David's painting already stood as the obvious archetype. But by 1880, in the revised London version, Degas's "Young Spartans" had emerged as a mature artist's fully formed critique and answer to that tradition, painted now not only from a vastly altered aesthetic perspective, but from a vastly altered social one as well—based on the vision and at least the possibility of a more nearly egalitarian relationship between the sexes.

We do not know what Degas thought about feminism, and we have no evidence, beyond what may be inferred from his works, that might permit us to speculate on where he stood in relation to the feminist movement of his period. It can be said, however, that during the 1870's, the increasingly middle-class and republican orientation of that movement would not have been antithetical to Degas's own political position, which had clearly emerged as liberal and republican during the period of the Franco-Prussian War and the siege of Paris (when he and Manet, unlike many of the other artists in their circle, had chosen to remain in Paris). It can also be said with some assurance that Degas would have been exposed to contemporary feminism, and that he must have become aware, at least by the late 1870's, of the debate that it was generating. A link between Degas and contemporary feminist thought is in fact provided, once again, by Diego Martelli, whose friendship with Degas during this period was apparently a close one, and whose activities may further help us to establish the context in which Degas's interest in "The Young Spartans" was renewed during the years between 1878 and 1880.

In addition to his activity as an art critic, Diego Martelli was a respected politician and social observer who wrote on a variety of issues for Italian journals. During the year he spent in Paris, from 1878 to 1879, he supported himself in part by acting as correspondent to the Universal Exposition for several of these Italian newspapers, covering not only the Exposition itself, but also related cultural events in the French capital, and, in two articles for La Sentinella bresciana, the sessions of the First International Feminist Congress. That the Congress would have been of interest to Martelli's Italian readers is not surprising, given the emphasis that Risorgimento leaders had long placed on the issue of women's emancipation, and the continuing political and legislative struggle among Italian liberals of Martelli's generation to secure equal rights for women. Giuseppe Garibaldi had been an early supporter and adherent of Derrideans and Richer's Amelioration Society in France, and Italian feminists were active in the planning and organization of the Society's First International Congress. On the roster of official delegates to the Congress were several prominent Italians, including Anna-Maria Mozzi, Aurelia Cimino-Folliero, and, from Rome, the legislators Mauro Macchi and Salvatore Morelli. Morelli, the author of a law that allowed Italian women to act as legal witnesses for civil and public acts, had only recently introduced a divorce bill into debate before the Italian parliament, an action for which he had been publicly congratulated by Garibaldi. In the 1870's, the international feminist movement had even penetrated to Livorno, in Martelli's native Tuscany, where, in May of 1878, after Martelli's departure for Paris, Julia Ward Howe addressed a meeting of the Circolo Filologico on the subject of women's rights and education in America.

While Martelli's articles on the International Congress reflect to some extent the liberal attitudes of many Italian political leaders on the issue of women's rights, his remarks also reveal considerable ambivalence and anxiety about the feminist movement, reactions that would probably have been quite normal for even some of the most liberal-minded men of his period. Beginning, for example, with the kind of jocular ridicule that was a familiar part of the journalistic response to feminism in the nineteenth century, he observes that out of the approximately four hundred women who attended the congress, no more than two could accurately be described as belonging to "the fair sex." He seems, however, to be genuinely interested in and surprised by Theodore Stanton's description of the indirect political power wielded by female abolitionists in the northern United States during the period of the Civil War, by the educa-

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33 See R. McMullen, Degas, His Life, Times, and Work, Boston, 1984, 188ff. Suggesting Degas's openness as well to even more radical positions during this period, McMullen writes: "There can be no doubt... about Degas's being a republican at this time. Indeed, Madame Morisot, who was herself a very moderate anti-Bonapartist, one day completely lost her always short temper and put him in the same category as the ruffian, wild-eyed radicals of Belleville (one of the most socialist quarters of Paris), which was a gross exaggeration but an enlightening one" (ibid., 189).
34 A selection of Martelli's writings on art have been published as Scritti d'arte di Diego Martelli, ed. A. Boschetti, Florence, 1952. Drafts of these and other articles by him, as well as his personal correspondence (most of it unpublished), are preserved in the Biblioteca Marucelliana in Florence.
35 D. Martelli, "La Sentinella all'esposizione di Parigi," La Sentinella bresciana, xx, 214 and 224, Aug. 4 and 14, 1878.
36 See Bidelman, 96-97, and 100. The Italian members of the Congress's Committee of Initiative are mentioned in L'Avenir des femmes, x, 163, and x, 164, 1878, 98.
37 A list of registered delegates to the Congress was published in L'Avenir des femmes, x, 165, 1878.
38 For a report from Italy on Morelli's legislative initiatives, see ibid., x, 164, 1878, 111.
39 Martelli's mother, Ernesta Martelli, wrote to him about the lecture in a letter of 10 May 1878 (Carteggio Martelli, A XXVI, Biblioteca Marucelliana); cited by Calingaert, i, 116. On Martelli's attitudes toward women in general, and his relationships with his mother, his wife, and other women in particular, see Calingaert, i, chap. 5, 107-152, for a discussion that is based extensively on Martelli's unpublished correspondence as well as other sources.
40 Martelli, "La Sentinella all'esposizione di Parigi," La Sentinella bresciana, xx, 214, 4 Aug. 1878, 2.
tional and professional opportunities open to American women, and by the fact that in some of the states, women were permitted to sit on juries. But while he expresses the belief that “this tendency of women to change customs is one of the most serious phenomena of our times,” he also expresses fear and concern for the future of marriage and the family as social institutions, predicting that feminist activists, “this legion of grenadiers who have opened the path to attack the edifice of the past, will, in our opinion, be followed by large numbers of an irregular infantry who will sow affections upon the thorny field of the home and the marriage bed.”

Within a year, however, Martelli had become a committed supporter of the feminist program of social and legal reform, allying himself, as he put it, with “the many men of feeling and intelligence who nowadays raise their voices against the usages of an antiquated constitutional law” and “the many women, cultivated and courageous, who are demanding a broader and less ignoble share in the banquet of life.” Among the causes he now championed were women’s right to vote, to serve on juries, and to receive equal pay for equal work. Indeed, in many ways, he was now willing to go further than the feminist Congress with which he had been so uncomfortable only a year earlier, and which he now faults for lacking “the courage it should have had to proclaim the absolute vindication of the sacred and natural principle of mother right (la potestà materna).” For this principle, he says, stands “in direct opposition to the principle of father right, just as truth is the opposite of the absurd, and as certainty is the opposite of the conjectural.” Although he still remained committed to the privacy of the family, he now saw equality and justice within marriage as the key to the strength and stability of the family unit and of society itself, ideas that were now identical to those of French feminists like Maria Deraismes.

This development in Martelli’s thinking is clearly related to his experience in Paris, where he met Maria Deraismes and other feminists, both male and female, and where he seems to have been particularly impressed by Deputy Naaque’s campaign for the reestablishment of the divorce law. Inspired by that campaign, either shortly before or after his return to Italy, Martelli wrote and published an article entitled “Il Divorzio,” in which he exposed the illusions and hypocrisies of patriarchal authority in general and decried in particular the subjugation of women under the laws regulating marriage—laws, he said, which have accustomed us to regarding a woman as merely an “instrument of pleasure or as a child-making machine.” He argued against several of the more discriminatory provisions of the civil code in this regard. (One of these was a provision that permitted legal separation on the grounds of a husband’s adultery only in cases where the husband had maintained his mistress within the family home, a provision that had also been attacked by Naaque and others in France.) And in conclusion, he exhorted his readers “to praise and encourage this first step toward the rationalization of the marriage bond, which is called Divorce, until woman regains her primacy and her liberty completely . . . so that the family at last can become a truth of conscience, and not continue for eternity as a lie of the law and as an illusion of masculine vanity.”

Although Degas’s decision to revise and exhibit “The Young Spartans” appears to have followed Martelli’s return to Italy in April of 1879, it was, significantly, during the year that Martelli spent in Paris, between 1878 and 1879, that Degas is thought to have undertaken his series of more than fifty brothel monotypes, works for which scholars...

39 Ibid., 2.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., xx, 224, Aug. 14, 1878, 2. See also Calingaert, 117-118.
42 See D. Martelli, “Il divorzio,” an article written and published in an as yet unidentified Italian newspaper, ca. 1879 (on the date, see below, n. 45). Martelli’s original manuscript for this article is preserved with the rest of his papers in the Biblioteca Marucelliana in Florence (ms Martelli, “Scritti,” iv, No. 47, 410-426). An unidentified newspaper clipping of the published version is in Martelli’s “Libretto d’appunti,” a small pocket notebook also in the Marucelliana. Using the library’s pagination for double pages in that notebook, the passages here quoted can be found on p. 15. For a discussion of this article, see also Calingaert, 108.
43 For Deraismes’s views on the family, see Moses, 181-184.
44 In a letter to his mother of 12 August 1878, Martelli mentions that he has been invited to meet Deraismes and indicates her eagerness to meet her. He describes her as “a forty year old woman, with a look more fierce and resolute than a gendarme, who possesses a very rare and very original fertility of mind and education” (Carteggio Martelli, A XXI, Biblioteca Marucelliana; as cited by Calingaert, 119 and 147, n. 42).
45 See above, n. 42. “Il divorzio” was probably written and published during the months immediately following Martelli’s return to Italy, in May or June of 1879, for at that time a divorce law was in fact before the Italian Senate, and the article would have been a timely and relevant one (on the proposed Italian divorce law, see E. Cérioli, “Letter from Italy,” Droit des femmes, June 1879, 109-110). Also, Martelli states in the preface to the article that he had been inspired to write it by the campaign being mounted by Deputy Naaque in France to gather popular support for divorce, so that a law might be presented to the Parliament. This too suggests a date around May or June of 1879 (see above, p. 644 and n. 21), but does not entirely preclude the possibility that Martelli drafted the article during the weeks or months just prior to his departure from Paris. Martelli’s own association of the growth of his views on issues like divorce and women’s rights with his experiences in Paris is further reflected by the fact that his clippings of this article (and another on prostitution, which can be dated to 1880 — see below, n. 59) are pasted onto the pages of his “libretto d’appunti,” a small pocket notebook which he had had with him in France and which contains some of his own drawings of Parisian scenes.
have long cast about in vain for a context. An important part of that context, I believe, can be found in the attitudes and influences of the contemporary feminist movement. And once again, the link between Degas and the feminist position is provided by Diego Martelli, who had had a long-standing interest in prostitution as a social issue. In Martelli's library, in fact, were no fewer than six books published in France and in Italy on the subject of prostitution, a subject to which he had been sensitized on a personal level by his own common-law marriage to a former prostitute.

As images of life within the State-regulated maison close, the works that constitute Degas's extensive series of brothel monotypes were unusual and virtually unprecedented both in their subject and in their form. Most earlier nineteenth-century images of prostitution had dealt with its "unregulated" and more glamorous variety—that is to say, the independent courtesans pictured by artists like Constantin Guys, Manet, and others. The literature of the Second Empire and the early years of the Third Republic is filled with diatribes against the spreading evils of unregulated or "clandestine" prostitution (which, it was feared, would overrun and pollute the moral arrangements and strictures of patriarchal society), as well as with calls for stricter government regulation of prostitutes and their activities. But while much has been made of these documents as interpretative tools in the recent art-historical literature, the "different voice" that was being raised by feminist writers in the nineteenth century on these issues has yet to be admitted into our presently very narrow critical discussion regarding the impact of this social debate on the visual imagery of the period.

T.J. Clark, for example, in attempting to turn the issue of prostitution in nineteenth-century art and society into one of class struggle, has argued for the centrality of class distinctions in the contemporary debates over Manet's Olympia, asserting that critics were distressed by this picture of a courtesan, who stares out at the beholder with aggressive insolence, because in it nakedness alone was left to communicate class. "Nakedness," he writes, "is a strong sign of class, a dangerous instance of it. And thus the critics' reaction in 1865 becomes more comprehensible." What this approach ignores is the feminist position on prostitution that emerged during the nineteenth century, a position that was based on what is for orthodox Marxism the inadmissible assumption that all women—whether single or married, exploited laborer, prostitute, or protected middle-class mother—may be seen to constitute, in fact, a single "class." Increasingly, the liberal feminist movement in the nineteenth century used as part of its rhetoric the metaphor of the prostitute as a symbol for the oppression of all women, for all were forced to sell their bodies for money, whether within the framework of the repressive marriage laws or outside of them. As early as 1840, the utopian socialist feminist, Flora Tristan, had written in this vein: "Look at the prostitutes on the street, that lamentable flock marked by shame; if only they had known enough to sell themselves at an earlier age, they would not have fallen to such a low mark, and they would be honorable women." A somewhat different version of the same equation was presented later in the century by Diego Martelli, who condemned marriage as a form of prostitution, describing it as "nothing but a state of subjection and slavery, or, better still, a private form of prostitution for a woman, compared with public prostitution; a condition, in short, equivalent to that of a horse, who whether he pulls

48 The brothel monotypes have been catalogued by E.P. Janis, Degas Monotypes, Essay, Catalogue and Checklist, Cambridge, MA, 1968, checklist Nos. 61-118ff.; and by J. Adhémar and F. Cachin, Degas, The Complete Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes, New York, 1975, Nos. 83-123ff. (Both classify images that belong to the brothel category as simple studies of the nude at her toilette: e.g., Janis, Nos. 184 and 185, and Adhémar, Nos. 129 and 130.) Janis speculates that at the time of his death there may have been in Degas's studio perhaps twice as many brothel monotypes than the fifty-odd now extant (p. xix).

The date of ca. 1878-79, traditionally assigned to the brothel monotypes since Lemoisne's catalogue, has been accepted by most subsequent writers on the subject, with the exception of Adhémar, who cited a lack of concrete evidence and asserted that "it is impossible to date them more precisely than between 1876 and 1885" (p. 276). Janis, whose catalogue placed the brothel monotypes within a range of dates between 1878 and 1880, remained closer to the traditional dating. Nevertheless, she examined and dismissed what had heretofore been the major support for this dating: the assumption that the monotypes were part of a project to illustrate recent novels on prostitution, like J.-K. Huysman's Marthe, histoire d'une fille, published in 1876, or Edmond de Goncourt's La fille Éliana, published in 1877 (Zola's Nana, which Janis does not mention in this context, appeared in 1880, and Guy de Maupassant's La Maison Tellier, which she does consider, was not published until 1881). 'Degas' brothels seem related to the contemporary interest in documenting prostitution," Janis wrote, "but no specific literary work has been found to which they might correspond" (p. xci).

49 The books, which span the literature from the 1830's to the 1890's, are A.J.B. Parent-Duchâtelet, De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris, Brussels, 1837; D.J. Jeanne!, Mémoire sur la prostitution, Paris, 1862; idem, La prostitution dans les grandes villes au XIXe siècle, Paris, 1868; A. Vincente, Della prostituzione, Florence, 1875; Commissione per la prostituzione, Florence, 1889; and Regolamento della prostituzione, Florence, 1891 (see Calingaert, 1, 148, n. 49).

50 Martelli met Teresa Fabbrini in a Florence brothel in 1862 or early 1863, and by January of 1865 had moved her to his home in Castiglioncello. Although she was never fully accepted by his family and some of his friends, she lived with him for some thirty years as his common-law wife. On their relationship, see Dini (as in n. 7), 267-272; also, Calingaert, 1, 121-123.


52 Clark, 146.

53 In recent years, the applicability of strict Marxist methodology to women's history has been widely challenged. For an overview of some of the literature that has been generated by this interdisciplinary debate, see J.W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," American Historical Review, xci, 1986, 1059-61.

54 F. Tristan, Promenades dans Londres, Paris, 1840, 110; as cited and translated by Moses, 111.
a king's coach or is tied to an omnibus, will always remain a beast of burden." 55

For feminists in the nineteenth century, then, the central issues to be addressed were indeed economic ones — but not the economic exploitation that separated one social class from another, but rather the kind, based on sexual discrimination, that denied to women — all women — control of their own property if married, or, if unmarried, access to the kind of education, range of jobs, and fair pay that would ultimately free them from the necessity of prostitution and subservience, at whatever economic level, to the dominant male "class." Here it would be well to reiterate that the increasingly visible feminist movement of the 1870's was not socialist: it was primarily bourgeois and liberal-republican in its constituency and in its political orientation. While republican and socialist feminists had been allied earlier in the century in opposition to the governments of Louis-Philippe, and later, of Louis Napoleon, with the consolidation of the Third Republic in the 1870's and early eighties, and with the exile after the Commune in 1871 of such socialist feminists as Louise Michel, Andre Léon and Paule Mink, the leadership and politics of the French feminist movement were altered and its ties with socialism were gradually cut. Even Hubertine Auclert's alliance with the socialists in 1879 was a pragmatic and a temporary one. 56

The liberal feminist position on prostitution was clearly enunciated in 1878 at the First International Congress, whose "Section de morale" passed resolutions calling for the end of State-regulated prostitution and the closing of all government-licensed brothels and separate health facilities for prostitutes, on the grounds that the State was sanctioning and supporting behavior — on the part of men — that was at odds with the ideals of an egalitarian society, behavior that was ultimately injurious to the institution of the family and hence to the moral health and stability of the republic itself. "By converting disorder into the exercising of a regular profession," they asserted, "the state sanctions the immoral prejudice that debauchery is a necessity for man." In an egalitarian society, they believed, there would be no need for regulation, since economic justice and equity for women would automatically eliminate most forms of prostitution. Thus, the report of the "Section économique" of the Congress called vigorously for the principle of "equal pay for equal work," citing insufficient pay for women as "one of the principal causes of prostitution." 57

A powerful statement of the antiregulatory and feminist point of view during this period is to be found in Diego Martelli's "La Prostitutione," an article published in La Lega della democrazia on 1 August 1880, and written in conjunction with a congress on prostitution that was then being held in Genoa. In Italy, prostitution was regulated by a law that had been promulgated by Cavour in 1860 (and that remained in force until 1958). 58 It was apparently to the dehumanizing aspects of this system and its enforcement, as he could have seen it applied in France as well as in Italy, that Martelli was here responding. Denouncing the system of State regulation and police surveillance of registered prostitutes as a system of persecution that deprived women of their basic human and civil rights, he dismissed as the standard justification for such regulation the right and the duty of government to protect public health and morality. "It seems to me, rather," he wrote, "that this final step in the subjugation of the female, which almost all men take with pleasure, is the last link in a chain of infamies to which woman has been subjected by the bestiality of man." Equating prostitution, in the broadest terms, with the condition of women in contemporary society, he called it "a state not peculiar to those unfortunate women who sell their mistreated and exhausted flesh for a few pennies in the brothel; but, rather, it is the normal condition of the entire sex which we call gentle, and of which the brothel part is only one variety, perhaps the least significant and the least dangerous." 59

Among the most extensive recent discussions of Degas's brothel monotypes are those by Hollis Clayson and Charles Bernheimer. Clayson dismisses as methodologically retdataire and as socially irresponsible the analyses of the monotypes that depend on the biographical reconstruction of the artist's viewpoint. Nevertheless, she engages in one of the least productive forms of such analysis when she asserts that "fantasizing and in turn representing prostitution in this way may have had its personal satisfactions" for the artist. Degas, she says, "disparages the working class prostitute," but at the same time was attracted by "the positive aspects" of her obscenity and vulgarity, and he "cloaked [his own] voyeurism in detachment and gentle parody" by depicting the male clients of the brothel as look-

55 Unidentified and undated quotation from Martelli's writings, in Dini (as in n. 7), 287, n. 13.


57 From the report on the Acts and Resolutions of the Congress, published in Droit des femmes, x. 166, 1878. The resolutions of the "Section de morale" appear on pp. 132-133; and those of the "Section économique" on p. 132. See also Moses, 208.


59 Martelli then proceeds to give examples of the prostitution of women at all levels of society — examples that range from the contemporary queen of Spain, who was reportedly subjected to a humiliating "ceremony" in order to prove the legitimacy of her offspring, and was thus prostituted, Martelli says, "neither more nor less than a poor woman of the streets"; to the virginal, middle-class girl, who was neither physically nor emotionally prepared for the marriage into which she was sold by her parents for social or economic gain (D. Martelli, "La Prostitutione," La Lega della democrazia, 1 August 1880. A clipping of the published article is pasted onto the pages of Martelli's Parisian "libretto d'appendi" in the Biblioteca Marucelliana. These quotations are from the clippings on pp. 17-18 of that notebook).
Bernheimer, on the other hand, refuses to see Degas's brothels as "a space of self-representation" for the artist. His interpretation of the images still depends, nevertheless, upon the projected reactions of a voyeur — "the would-be voyeur at the brothel threshold," who may further be identified with the viewer of the work. "What," Bernheimer asks, "if the male viewer I have supposed to be made uncomfortably self-conscious about his complicity in the exploitation of women actually felt quite at ease with the marks he sees of her subjugation? Could not the flattening of the prostitute's body into a common-place of male sexual privilege serve to reinforce, rather than subvert, the viewer's satisfaction with patriarchal gender arrangements?" The viewer's response, Bernheimer concludes, oscillates between two perspectives. "In the first, the viewer is made to feel guilt about the ideological impact of his gaze; in the second, the viewer finds his patriarchal prejudice reinforced." 61

What these writers share, I believe, is a masculinist point of view from which they attempt to interpret Degas's images and his intentions. (I use the terms "masculinist" and "feminist" in this context to describe modes of thought that, in the first case derive from, and in the second case respond to, a patriarchal social structure. The terms are not necessarily predictive of the sex of the observer, for men can hold feminist attitudes and women masculinist ones.) What is essentially at stake in both of the masculinist interpretations presented above is how Degas's images of prostitutes reflect upon or define the psychological position or the economic and social power of the male. Both writers ignore or omit the possibility of a feminist observer. For both, the point of view to be defined and established is assumed to be that of the patriarchal male viewer, and the question to be answered is whether that viewer is easy or uneasy with his point of view.

Proceeding from this masculinist perspective, Clayson has tried to build a social context for the brothel monotypes by establishing partial parallels between what we see in the images and the position held by those who advocated stricter government regulation and police surveillance of prostitution during this period. Like the "neo-regulators," who argued that prostitutes were unlike other women and should be kept separated from the rest of society in order to protect public health and morality, Degas, she says, in the monotypes, also presented a view of the debased prostitute as "bestial" and "other" by nature. "The world of the monotypes," she writes, "is shown to be populated by a species which is singularly well adapted for life within its confines: subjective 'selves' transformed into objective commercialized matter; a view with which the neo-regulators could have heartily agreed." 62

The overlooked feminist position, however, which countered calls for increased state regulation of prostitutes and their separation from the rest of society, provides a broader context for art-historical analysis, one in which the brothel monotypes can take on new and more plausible meanings. Degas's remarkable series of prints is too extensive and consistent to be dismissed — as there is still an inclination to do — as an expression of personal "voyeurism" or as gratuitous pornography. It must have been conceived, at least in part, I believe, as an indictment of the system of State-regulated and sanctioned prostitution, a system that, from the feminist point of view, numbered among its victims not only the women themselves, but also their "foolish" clients, and even French society as a whole. In these images of grotesque and dehumanized women and their equally grotesque and dehumanized customers, some of whom leer hungrily (Fig. 5) or stand stiffly in their bourgeois attire (Fig. 6), Degas brought his talent as a caricaturist to bear as he worked to strip away the myths behind which nineteenth-century society tried to hide and to justify its patterns of exploitation. These women, officially classified as "other," have indeed been debased and commodified by the lives in which they have been economically trapped — they have become what patriarchal society intended them to be used for. Nevertheless it is striking that Degas provides us with images that attest not only to their exploitation but also (in the occasional rendering that is more particularized than caricatured) to their humanity, their affection for one another, and their solidarity as well (Figs. 7 and 8).

Diego Martelli's clearly enunciated statement in 1880 of a passionately held feminist and antiregulationist position on prostitution establishes at last a broader range of social attitudes on this issue to which Degas could have been exposed. In 1877, Degas did a few drawings in one of his notebooks to illustrate Edmond de Goncourt's La fille Elisa, a recently published novel about prostitution (Fig. 9). 63 The differences in scope, character, and expression between the slightly later series of brothel monotypes and these comparatively mild and decorous drawings of 1877, which show the women talking or playing cards with their soldiers, are indeed startling. And they are enough to suggest that the period from 1878 to 1879, when Martelli was in Paris and when many of the brothel monotypes may have been executed, was an important turning point for Degas's perception of the theme and of the issue of prostitution in modern art and life. It was through Martelli, I would suggest, that Degas may have become sensitized to issues and exposed to a point of view about prostitution that had not previously been fully accessible to him through French literary treatments of the subject. 64 And it is through Martelli that we today may be afforded a glimpse of what the brothel

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60 Clayson (as in n. 51), 127 and 128.


62 Ibid., 123-124.

63 Ref (as in n. 11), 1, 130, and 11, Notebook 28, pp. 26-27, 29, 31, 33, 35.

64 See above, n. 48. For further discussion of Degas's work in relation to contemporary naturalist novels that dealt with the theme of prostitution, see Clayson (as in n. 51), 139-167.
monotypes might have meant to a late nineteenth-century feminist observer of either sex. For from this feminist perspective, the monotypes, as unprecedentedly direct images of female degradation, present an often harrowing vision of the State-regulated system of prostitution, one that accords well with Martelli’s view of that system as the “final step in the subjugation of the female . . . the last link in a chain of infamies to which woman has been subjected by the bestiality of man.”

Although the brothel monotypes were apparently never
exhibited by Degas, the female "bather" compositions (most of them pastels) were; and as manifestations of Degas's earlier and more general interest in the subject of the female nude in modern life, it is significant that many of these works predate the brothel series by several years. At the First Impressionist Exhibition in 1874, Degas showed a drawing entitled *Après le bain*. The catalogue of the Second Exhibition in 1876 lists a work entitled *Femme se lavant le soir*, as well as the tentative and enigmatic *Petites pay-sannes se baignant à la mer vers le soir* (Lemoisne 377), an oil painting that includes a fragment of a woman arranging her hair at the upper right (Fig. 10). The latter work appears again in 1877 in the catalogue of the Third Exhibition, along with two bather subjects, *Femme sortant du bain* (Lemoisne 422), and *Femme prenant son tub le soir*. Also from the show of 1877 is *La toilette* (*Femme nue, accroupie de dos*), a pastel over monotype (Lemoisne 547), which was shown either *hors catalogue* or as one of three untitled monotypes listed in the catalogue. A pastel described as *Toilette* appears in the catalogue of the Fifth Exhibition in 1880; and the catalogue of the Eighth Exhibition in 1886 lists ten pastels, the *Suite de nus [sic] de femmes se baignant, se lavant, se séchant, s'essuyant, se peignant ou se faisant peigner*, which was the largest and most coherent group of bather and toilette subjects by Degas that had been shown publicly to date.64

The subjects of Degas's bather and toilette scenes, though more traditional in their art-historical origins and evocation than the brothel scenes, nevertheless caused confusion and controversy among the artist's contemporaries, and they continue to do so today. In recent years, Eunice Lipton has made "the case for realism" in the interpretation of Degas's bathers, asserting that they are really depictions of prostitutes.65 In support of this, she cites State regulations for cleanliness on the part of registered prostitutes, which would have compelled them to bathe frequently (while the bathing habits of respectable, middle-class women, we are given to understand, were not as regular).66 Also in support of her contention, she speculates on the question of whether Degas, a bachelor and a "realist," would ever have had the opportunity to see the inside of a respectable, middle- or upper-middle-class woman's bedchamber.67 Leaving aside the dubious assumption that, as a realist, Degas could work only from the most immediate and personal kinds of real-life experience, it might be recalled, in response to this argument, that throughout his life Degas had occasion to visit and share the homes not only of female relatives but also the homes of many of his married male relatives and friends. While he may or may not have been admitted on an intimate basis into these or other middle-class boudoirs, the general character and physical arrangements of such dwelling spaces would surely not have remained a life-long mystery to him.

That a few of Degas's contemporaries responded to his female bathers as prostitutes, as Lipton and others have observed, is of course undeniable, and is the principal aspect of this argument that needs to be addressed.68 As the reviewer Henry Fèvre put it, in response to the *Suite de nus*...
at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition (including the works reproduced here below as Figures 15, 17, and 18): "Degas lays bare for us the streetwalker's modern, swollen, pasty flesh." Degas's images of "real" women, whose bodies conformed to no ideal standard of feminine beauty, but which were nevertheless not without sensual appeal, were images that proved distasteful and even frightening to many critics and observers of the period, some of whom, like Févre, assumed automatically that a nude woman who was not a goddess must be a prostitute. Their reactions were not only understandable but even necessary ones in a society that seems to have been virtually obsessed with the need to regulate "vice" in order to draw clear and recognizable distinctions between "good" and "bad" women.

Nineteenth-century male commentators, fixating upon themselves as observers of these images and hence as observers of the women who are depicted in them in private situations, often took the position that these women did not know that they were being observed, thus introducing the factor of male voyeurism — their own and the artist's — into their interpretative readings of these works, and thereby turning the female subjects of Degas's bather compositions into the passive objects of "the male gaze." But once we succeed in dissociating ourselves from that gaze and that point of view, Degas's bathers, as distinct from his brothel prostitutes, can be seen, unequivocally, as women who are naked for no one but themselves. And therein lay their potential to disturb and repel male audiences. They are among the very few representations of the female nude by male artists in the Western tradition that challenge (albeit mildly and obliquely from our point of view today) the societal assumption that nude women can

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72 As A.-J.-B. Parent-Duchâtelet, author of the authoritative work on the subject of prostitution in France in the 19th century, put it: "We will have arrived at the limit of perfection, and of the possible, in this regard, if we arrange it so that men, and in particular those who are looking for [prostitutes], can distinguish them from honest women; but that those

exist only for the pleasure and the purposes of dominant males. 74

Thus, even though some of Degas’s contemporaries may have responded to his bathers as prostitutes, their responses must be understood in large part as reflections of personal and societal biases, and cannot be used necessarily to “prove” the artist’s intentions. It should be remembered, too, that equally skewed charges of “misogyny” also grew out of contemporary responses to the nonidealized aspects of Degas’s bather pictures, 75 as did contemporary efforts to defend the artist from such charges, efforts that were couched in very different terms. The critic Maurice Hermel, for example, wrote of Degas, in response to the Suite de nus at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886: “He is a feminist . . . and more feminist than the manufacturers of Venuses and Ledas, if one understands by that the gift of seeing and defining woman (a certain type of woman, if you wish) in that which most characterizes her.” 76

Lipton has cogently analyzed and identified some of the broader differences between Degas’s brothel and bather images. “The context in the paintings,” she writes, “is imprecisely described; gesture and narrative are minimized; the male spectator is removed; and the expressiveness of texture, form, color, space, etc. has increased.” 77 Nevertheless, she dismisses all of this to insist that the bathers are in reality prostitutes, reasoning (in a circular manner) that if only the male observers were to be removed from some of the brothel monotypes (e.g., Figs. 11 and 12), then “a prevalent Degas bather image” would emerge. 78

But between Degas’s images of prostitutes and his images of bathers, there are clear and often glaring differences that cannot be denied. And these differences are all the more telling and meaningful when works that would appear, superficially, to have much in common are juxtaposed from each category. The woman, for example, in Degas’s pastel, Retiring (Fig. 13), ca. 1883, who reaches to turn off her bedside lamp as she prepares to retire for the night into the curtained privacy of her bed, seems similar in general posture and situation to the prostitute in the monotype Waiting, ca. 1879 (Fig. 14), who also sits on a bed and twists her body in the direction of a bedside light source. The distinctions between them, and the identification of the latter as a prostitute, despite the absence of the male observer, the client, are clear and unambiguous. The woman in Retiring belongs only to herself at this moment: she is totally and unselfconsciously nude, her hair still damp and disarranged from her bath, with one arm, modestly but naturally placed by the artist to shield her genitals. Her counterpart in the brothel monotype, on the other hand, with her genital region fully exposed, her hair ostentatiously coiffed, and with a black ribbon adorning her throat and wrist, is a woman who is displaying her nakedness. The stiffness of her posture and the tense self-consciousness in the arrangement of her limbs bespeak the presence or imminent presence of an observer, the client for whom she waits.

Similarly, the woman in the pastel now known as “The Baker’s Wife,” ca. 1886 (Fig. 15), and the woman in an analogous monotype, In the Salon of a Brothel, ca. 1879 (Fig. 16), are clearly distinguished from one another. Although both are presented from explicit and ungainly rear views, “The Baker’s Wife” is at ease in her own space. She stands, stretching slightly and arching her neck; and although she is not classically proportioned, her posture is centered and self-contained, the contours of her body are comfortably smooth and round, and her hands are planted firmly on her buttocks in a gesture of familiarity with her own body that is an entirely natural one. Her brothel counterpart, on the other hand, stands uncomfortably in a public, not a private space. Her posture is awkward and off-balance. Her proportions are ungainly, her silhouette is jagged and angular, and her gesture is unmistakably vulgar, if not obscene.

In the works that he exhibited and designated as having bather or toilette themes, Degas’s intention, I believe, was to depict not prostitutes but “respectable” women. And in the Suite de nus, the group of pastels that he sent to the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886, these respectable women, as critics of the period recognized, represented a wide range of age, social condition, and class: from the working-class young woman who bathes in a cheap metal tub in a simple interior, in the Hill-Stead Museum’s The Tub (Fig. 17), whose poverty was stereotypically equated by one critic with immorality, 79 to “The Baker’s Wife” (Fig. 15), described in a review by Paul Adam as a “fat bourgeois ready for bed,” 80 to the smoothly plump and pamp-

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74 Edward Snow has written of Degas’s bathers: “These women are rendered as physical beings in their own right rather than as projected, complicit objects of masculine desire. [They are] delivered not only from the male gaze but from any introjected awareness of it” (E. Snow, A Study of Vermeer, Berkeley, 1979, 28). Eunice Lipton has also emphasized the sensuous privacy and self-absorption of the women in these works (Lipton, 1980, as in n. 67, 96-97). For a careful analysis of the ways in which Degas’s formal strategies work to externalize the male viewer from the female subject of the bather images, see C.M. Armstrong, “Edgar Degas and the Representation of the Female Body,” in The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives, ed. S.R. Suleiman, Cambridge, MA, 1986, 230-241. On the basis of these readings, Charles Bernheimer has concluded that contemporary critical reactions to the bather pastels, reactions like those of Huysmans, may be regarded as “a defense of the traditional prerogatives of male spectatorship, especially of the voyeur’s implied presence in a position of fantasized mastery, mounted in the face of the dislocation and problematization of that position” (Bernheimer, as in n. 61, 163).


77 Lipton, 1980, as in n. 67, 96.

78 Ibid., 95.


11 Degas, *Woman Combing Her Hair*, ca. 1878-80, monotype in black ink with pastel, 21.5 x 16.1cm. New York, Ittelson Collection (from Janis, 1968, No. 43)

12 Degas, *Nude Combing Her Hair*, ca. 1885, pastel on paper, 61.3 x 46cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Nate B. Spingold, 1956 (photo: Museum)

13 Degas, *Retiring*, ca. 1883, pastel on paper, 36.4 x 43cm. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Bequest of Mrs. Sterling Morton, 1969 (photo: Art Institute)

14 Degas, *Waiting*, ca. 1878-79, monotype in black ink, 10.9 x 16.1cm. Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mrs. Charles Gore, 1958 (photo: Art Institute)
pered upper-middle-class woman of a certain age, who luxuriates with obvious contentment while attended by her maid in the Metropolitan Museum’s *A Woman Having Her Hair Combed* (Fig. 18). Whether generalized or, less often, particularized to the point of quasi-portraiture (as in the case of Fig. 18), these images of women run the gamut from unidealized and matter-of-fact reportage (Fig. 15) to lyrical appreciations of the female body and of private moments of female self-absorption and sensual experience (Fig. 18). (Feminists of the period, like Maria Deraismes, were openly proclaiming now, for the first time, such experience to be a natural right even of “respectable” women.81)

One can only speculate on the irony for Degas of contemporary identifications of his bathers with prostitutes, especially in light of opinions like those held by Diego Martelli on the prostituted state of all women in patriarchal society, and wonder, indeed, if the more ambiguous of the bather images in this regard (e.g., Fig. 19, where the black stockings and ornate chandelier suggest a brothel setting) may not have reflected a conscious appreciation of that irony on Degas’s part. For while the bather images are for the most part very different in their focus and in their physical expressiveness from the grossly caricatured women of the brothel monotypes, selected pairings, as has been seen, will sometimes reveal startling analogies in posture and behavior between the women who are presented in both genres (Figs. 13-16). While one cannot rule out the strong probability that Degas, even though he worked from posed models, was simply drawing repetitively upon a large but not inexhaustible repertoire of stock figure types and poses (as he did in the ballet and racing pictures where figure types also occasionally recur), one also cannot entirely rule out the possibility that such repetitions and analogies were purposeful ones, made self-consciously for expressive or even ideological reasons. For such visual analogies, certainly, would seem to challenge most effectively (albeit privately and obliquely, since the brothel monotypes were not widely known) the regulationist position that prostitutes were by nature different from “respectable” women, the position that was being used throughout this period to justify the hotly contested segregation, exploitation, and commodification of the registered prostitute.

When Degas was at work on his brothel monotypes, then, there were two sides to the debate over prostitution in France that were being voiced openly in the press; and there is now compelling evidence to suggest that Degas would have been personally exposed to the “other” side of that debate, the feminist side, through his association with

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81 See Moses, 185.
Diego Martelli at this time. But even without positing Degas's complete agreement with Martelli's point of view on this or any other feminist issue, in the future, I believe, that point of view must form part of the necessary social context in which not only the brothel monotypes and bather images, but all of Degas's works from this period, including the revised (ca. 1880) version of "The Young Spartans," must be seen if their meanings are to be intelligently explored.

Although I would continue to argue, as I first did more than ten years ago in these pages, against the idea that Degas was a "misogynist," my intention now is not to assert that Degas was a "feminist" (as his socially progressive friend Martelli clearly was), but only to establish that feminism and its principles were an increasingly visible part of the modern world that Degas had set himself to interpret. In this context, then, as I have suggested, the wary response of the young men at the right in Degas's "Young Spartans" to the aggressive young women at the left may indeed reflect a component of fear and anxiety — not Degas's personal fear of women as later writers have claimed, but, rather, his perception of the fears of male society as a whole, as these would have been stimulated and evoked by the growing feminist movement of his period. We need not, in fact, attempt to attribute to Degas himself anything more than the confusion and ambivalence that were probably felt...
by most men of his generation toward the feminist move-
ment in order for these issues to be relevant to our under-
standing of the complex and highly charged meanings of
Degas’s images of contemporary life, both to the artist and
to his contemporaries.

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