Frédéric Lix, "The Incendiaries: The Pétroleuses and Their Accomplices." *Le Monde Illustré,* June 3, 1871. Bibliothèque Nationale.

UNRULY WOMEN OF PARIS

Images of the Commune

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Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON

First published 1996 by Cornell University Press.

Printed in the United States of America

♾ The paper in this book meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences–Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gullickson, Gay L.
Unruly women of Paris : images of the commune / Gay L. Gullickson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8014-3228-6 (cloth : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-8014-8318-2 (paper : alk. paper)
1. Paris (France)—History—Commune, 1871. 2. Women revolutionaries—France—Paris—History—19th century. 3. Women's rights—France. I. Title.
DC317.G85 1996
944.081'2—dc20 96-19780

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condemned the French government; its critics have maligned the revolutionaries. As Stewart Edwards presciently noted in the preface to his centenary history of the Commune, "Objectivity is not to be expected of mortals writing their own story, the history of the events that have constructed the world they live in."[3]

Examples abound, but two should suffice. In his pro-Commune history, Frank Jellinek describes the Versailles troops' actions during the *semaine sanglante,* the final "bloody week" of fighting between the Communards and the army, as a "massacre," an "orgy," and an "uncontrolled slaughter," of the Communards, who "held out bravely" and, if they survived to be arrested, endured "torments."[4] In their college textbook, Paul MacKendrick and his colleagues present a different view. Using the language of the cold war, they refer to "Communards and sympathizers" who went on an "orgy of slaughter and destruction" during the "so-called Bloody Week," and they present a false chronology of events to explain and justify the national government's actions.[5] Two more different views of the Commune are difficult to imagine.

The legacy of the Commune extends well beyond politics, however. As Albert Boime has shown, it was a defining moment for two powerful generations of French artists, the Impressionists and the Post-Impressionists.[6] It was also, as this book seeks to demonstrate, a defining moment for Western conceptualizations of gender, not least because it gave birth to the powerful, evil, and imaginary *pétroleuses* (female incendiaries) who were accused of setting fire to Paris during the semaine sanglante. Exercising a powerful grip on the Western cultural imagination, the pétroleuse became the negative embodiment of the publicly active woman and cast a long shadow over debates about women's rights and proper roles. Although no longer well known by name, versions of the pétroleuse continue to shape our understanding of the past and remain a touchstone for Western notions of gender.

Representations of the Communardes: An Overview

The images or representations of the *communardes** in texts produced during or immediately after the Commune vary widely. Some male Communards and Commune supporters portray them positively. In the eyes of

* In French the female supporters of the Commune are *communardes;* male supporters, *communards.* I use these terms as well as the English phrases "female Communards" and "male Communards" when I am speaking of one or the other group. When I am speaking of women and men together, I use the ungendered English term Communards.

the pro-Commune journalist and historian Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, they were gallant young women, wounded lionesses, and the bravest of the martyrs who died on the barricades.[7] For former military officer Sébastien Commissaire, they were "idealistic girls"; for revolutionaries Félix Pyat and Benoît Malon, both elected members of the Commune, they were "self-sacrificing mothers" who fought "to make their children free."[8]

Negative views displayed more rhetorical ebullience. Conservative journalists and essayists vied with one another in hyperbole. Writing while the final battles were still being fought in Paris, the anti-Commune journalist Francisque Sarcey suggested that the women had been more ferocious and more evil than the men because "their brains are weaker and their emotions livelier."[9] Maxime Du Camp, whose four volumes on the Commune were designed to dissuade the French government from granting amnesty to the convicted and exiled Communards, thought quite simply that the women who "gave themselves to the Commune" were evil and insane. More than the men, he declared, "the women excel in acts of cruelty that they mistake for acts of courage."[10] Army Captain Beugnot referred to the communardes as "mad dogs,"[11] Edmond Lepelletier likened them to a Greek chorus crying for vengeance and urging on the men,[12] and Jules Claretie, musing on the women's militant speeches and actions, wondered "from what slime the human species is made."[13] Essayist Alexandre Dumas, fils, refused to call the communardes women at all. Instead, he used the term *femelles* (a term ordinarily used for female animals), "out of respect for the women whom they resembled—when they were dead."[14] And writer after writer identified them as megaeras, amazons, furies, viragoes, jackals, hecates, and madwomen, until these figures finally merged into one—the horrific pétroleuse.

Even supporters of the Commune found it difficult to accept all of women's revolutionary actions and could muster only lukewarm support for them. Gaston Da Costa, sentenced to death for his role in the Commune, felt compelled, for example, to distinguish between "good" and "bad" women and to distance himself from the latter whom he, like critics of the Commune, identified as prostitutes.[15] Jules Bergeret, an elected member of the Commune and one of its generals, opined from a slightly different perspective that women were destined "by their physical and moral nature" to remain within the "domestic sphere" and that the furies of the Commune had been driven into action not by a flaw in their nature but by the failures of the French government.[16]

These positive and negative images or representations of women were part of a nineteenth-century discourse about woman's nature and appropriate female behavior. Women had been a subject of discussion for centuries,[17] but industrialization had given the debate new urgency. As work moved out of the home and the scale of production increased in western Europe and America, women found it harder and harder to integrate productive work and child care. For working-class women, the choice between caring for their children and contributing to the family's income usually had to be resolved on the side of paid work. For bourgeois or middle-class women, the dilemma was usually solved by withdrawal from family-run businesses and concentration on domestic and charitable activity. Historians have identified the latter pattern as both the separation of spheres (productive and reproductive, or public and private) and the cult of domesticity.[18]

The separation of the bourgeois home and workplace led to increasingly dichotomized conceptualizations of male and female nature which, in turn, were used to justify the confinement of bourgeois women to domestic roles.[19] Bourgeois gender conceptualizations were never stable or uncontested, but the view that might be labeled normative (or conservative) characterized women as more emotional, nurturing, altruistic, passive, virtuous, and frail than men. These were the characteristics that suited women for a protected life of domesticity and child rearing. Men, in contrast, were fitted for the rigors of work and politics because they were stronger, less virtuous, more rational, more aggressive, and more self-interested.

Confronted with women whose behavior seemed more aggressive than passive, and who refused to remain in the domestic sphere, bourgeois men reflected again on woman's nature. Some viewed it as unified; others saw it as internally flawed; still others, as bifurcated. From the first perspective, women like the communardes were perceived as having violated their nature. The appeal of this theory was that it emphasized the unnaturalness, hence the evilness, of these women's behavior, although the ability of the women to violate their feminine nature, as well as what they became when they did so, was difficult to explain. In the latter two views, either aspects of femininity, such as frailty of mind, made women more susceptible to evil, or their very nature was divided between good and evil. Both theories explained the unruly woman's behavior. She had either succumbed to temptation, or the evil side of her nature had overwhelmed the good. These theories were logically more consistent than the first, but they turned even the most virtuous woman into a potential fury—an unsettling thought for bourgeois men in 1871.

Visible in these bourgeois versions of woman's nature are nineteenth-century Christian depictions of Mary and Eve as the embodiments of good and evil.[20] The iconographical presentation and meaning of Mary has

shifted over the centuries, but she remains the unique embodiment of maternity and sinlessness. Eve, in contrast, is one of a host of powerful, dangerous, and sinful women in Western culture, including the Amazons and Sirens of ancient Greece, the biblical Delilah, and the witches of medieval Europe. Mary might mediate for men with her son in heaven, but Eve and her sisters remained a source of temptation and danger in real life. They made it difficult for men to see publicly active, powerful women in nonthreatening terms. Thus, the communardes, who acted in most unladylike ways, were more likely to be represented negatively than positively, especially if the opponents of the revolution got to create the representations.

Gender and Allegory

In Western culture, the representation of governments and philosophical concepts in female form originated in the gender conventions of the Greek language and the goddesses of classical Greek myths. In Greek and other Indo-European languages, abstract nouns of virtue, knowledge, and spirituality are commonly gendered female. When those abstractions are personified, as they regularly have been, the gender of the word has carried over to representation of them in female form. The same is true of countries, cities, and political philosophies. Athena, warrior goddess and patroness of wisdom, and, to a lesser extent, the other Greek goddesses are the models for the personifications of virtues and governments.[21]

Nineteenth-century French painters and sculptors, like other Western artists, followed the Greek pattern and commonly represented countries, cities, and governments, as well as a broad range of political philosophies—liberty, equality, justice, victory, peace, war, fraternity, and glory, to name a few—in female form. (All these concepts bear the feminine grammatical gender in French.) Only artists and other members of the cultural elite were likely to know all the allegorical goddesses by their symbolic paraphernalia, but some figures were commonly recognizable.

The effectiveness of the female allegorical figures depended on gender conventions or stereotypes (positive and negative) and the exclusion of human women from the traits they embodied, conventions and exclusions that would have made it difficult for male figures to convey the same messages even if the gender of abstract nouns had been masculine.[22] Female figures radiated power when real women were presumed, or forced, to be powerless; they represented governments that excluded women from full citizenship; they embodied attributes that were thought to reside more fully, if not entirely, in men than in women.[23]

SYNOPSIS

La Commune de Paris

On July 15, 1870, the Prussian chancelor Otto von Bismarck's two-year-old plan to maneuver the French emperor Napoleon III into declaring war on Prussia finally succeeded over the issue of who would ascend to the vacant Spanish throne. Napoleon's ill-fated decision to challenge Prussia catapulted France into a year of warfare, civil strife, political experimentation, and tragedy. The emperor and a hundred thousand French troops were captured less than two months after the war began. Word of the army's defeat and Napoleon's capture reached the Parisian public on September 3. By the afternoon of the fourth, crowds of Parisians had invaded the Legislative Assembly meeting and then moved on to the Hôtel de Ville, the Parisian city hall, where a new republican government was declared.[1]

A crowd of citizens and national guardsmen greeted the new government with enthusiasm. Here was the peaceful revolution Parisians, consistently more republican than the rural French, had longed for. People sang the "Marseillaise." Crowds circulated in the streets. Vendors sold blue, white, and red tricolor cockades (the colors of the French republics) and red ribbons (the color of revolution). The statues in the place de la Concorde were decorated with small red flags. Red crepe fluttered from the lampposts. The enthusiasm of the Parisians seemed unbounded. Only the supporters of the now-defunct empire and the most radical social revolutionaries found the scene disturbing, the former because it meant the end of their hopes, the latter because they feared that the new republic would be hijacked and betrayed by the Right.

The Parisian deputies to the Legislative Assembly formed a provisional governing body pending new national elections, and General Trochu, who had divorced himself from the fate of the empire when word of its defeat reached Paris, agreed to preside over the new government. Many hoped that the Prussians' quarrel with the emperor would now end and an armistice be established. When this did not happen, Parisians turned to the task of preparing the city to resist the advancing Prussians. Trees were cut down for barricades and fuel, bridges over the Seine were blown up, houses that could shelter the enemy were destroyed, and an army of men trained to defend the city. On September 18 the siege of Paris began. The city was encircled, cut off from the outside world, and its citizens hunkered down to endure what turned out to be five months of bitter cold, hunger, disease, and finally bombardment. While they waited for the provincial armies to come to their aid, virtually every able-bodied Parisian man who was not already a member of the army joined the National Guard and prepared to fight the Prussians.

Paris never did surrender. Indeed, the city held out far longer and through far worse conditions than most had imagined possible while the political leaders and provincial armies tried and failed to come to its rescue. Finally, at the end of January, the Government of National Defense accepted Bismarck's armistice terms and surrendered the city to the Prussians. The French hurriedly held elections for a National Assembly, which in turn selected the elderly conservative statesman Adolphe Thiers to lead the government. On February 26, 1871, Thiers accepted the Prussian peace terms, ceding most of Alsace, one-third of Lorraine, and the city of Metz to the new German state, agreeing to pay 5 billion francs in indemnity, and permitting a triumphal march of Prussian troops through Paris.

Appalled at the government's capitulation to Bismarck's terms and angered that the Prussian troops who had starved and bombarded Paris were to be allowed to humiliate the city with a triumphal march, the Parisians grew daily more suspicious of the government's motives. As the date of the Prussian entry into Paris approached, the city seemed on the verge of hysteria. Armed crowds roamed the streets day and night. Working-class neighborhoods like Montmartre, Belleville, and La Chapelle barricaded themselves. Cannons that had been left in the zone to be occupied by the Prussians were dragged by hand to the hills of Paris for safekeeping. The Parisian newspapers unanimously called for calm and announced on the twenty-eighth that they would not publish again until the Germans had left the city. Many feared that the Prussians were looking for any provocation that would give them an opportunity to impose even harsher peace terms or to pillage the city.

On March 1, the Prussians entered Paris through the Bois de Boulogne, marched up to the Arc de Triomphe and then down the Champs-Elysées to the place de la Concorde and the Louvre. They were greeted with angry silence and closed shops. Well versed in political symbolism, the Parisians shielded the eyes of the statues representing the cities of France in the place de la Concorde with black hoods and flew black flags from the buildings along the parade route. Only a small crowd watched the troops march through the streets. The few shopkeepers who remained open to serve the Prussians were punished afterward with broken windows and furniture. Prostitutes who ventured into the Prussian camps were scolded and whipped. Engaging in their own symbolic theater, the German troops marched directly through the Arc de Triomphe on their way out of the city two days later, celebrating their triumph over the country whose earlier victories on German soil were enshrined on the Arc. The French, in turn, built a massive bonfire at the Arc to purify the soil the Germans had desecrated.

After the Prussians had left the city (but not their encampments around its perimeter), relations between the newly elected National Assembly (composed largely of political conservatives and royalists from the provinces) and working-class, republican Paris deteriorated rapidly. Ignoring the city's precarious economic condition, the assembly lifted the wartime moratorium on the sale of goods being held at the state-run pawnshop; announced that landlords could immediately claim all back rents due them; and made all debts due with interest within the next four months. Working-class Parisians faced the imminent sale of the furniture, clothing, and tools they had pawned during the siege and still could not redeem because they had no jobs and no money and, along with small merchants, were threatened with immediate eviction.

In addition, the national government turned what had been regarded as a patriotic right into a dole by declaring that only those national guardsmen who could demonstrate economic need would continue to receive pay. It also suppressed radical newspapers, sentenced the working-class leaders Auguste Blanqui and Gustave Flourens to death in absentia for their role in a brief flurry of revolutionary activity the previous October during the Prussian siege, and voted to move the National Assembly (which had been meeting in Bordeaux since the siege of Paris began) to Versailles, rather than back to Paris, thereby decapitalizing the city.

Finally, in a poorly planned and subsequently much-debated decision, Thiers sent French army troops in the early hours of March 18, 1871, to remove the cannons and other large guns the National Guard had dragged to the hills of Paris in February. Whether the military operation was simply badly handled or was designed to provoke a revolt so the government could crush and disarm the workers and national guardsmen is unclear. In any case, the predawn raid on the cannons was detected when the government failed to send horses to pull the heavy guns away. While the soldiers at Montmartre and other points waited for horses, they fraternized with the people, and military order was lost. Thiers and the rest of the national government withdrew from Paris to Versailles, and late in the day two French generals were killed. The steps that would lead to the establishment of a separate government in Paris (the Paris Commune) and a second siege of Paris, this time by provincial French troops, had been taken.[2]

With the withdrawal of the army, ministers, and government agencies from Paris, the leaders of the political Left scrambled to catch up with the crowd. Failing to understand that what they faced was civil war, the National Guard Central Committee, arrondissement mayors, and Parisian deputies debated options and then instituted self-rule for Paris, announced citywide elections for March 22, postponed them to Sunday, March 26, and tried to negotiate with the government in Versailles to reach a peaceful solution to the crisis. On March 28 the Paris Commune officially came into existence (although the term is commonly used to refer to the entire period of the revolution from March 18 to May 28) with the inauguration of the newly elected municipal council at the Hôtel de Ville.

The inaugural ceremony demonstrated the Parisians' mastery of political pageantry and symbolism. Civilians hung out of windows and thronged the square to watch the spectacle. Red, the color of revolution, was everywhere. Red sashes draped the shoulders of the newly elected members of the Commune and the outgoing members of the Central Committee, red streamers hung from the windows, a red flag flew from the roof, and a red scarf draped a bust of Marianne, the symbolic representation of the French republic.[3] Bayonets glinted in the sun, drums beat, bands played, and the crowd sang the revolutionary French anthem the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du départ." Cannons roared a salute along the Seine while the National Guard battalions, and regular army soldiers, artillerists, and marines, who had sworn loyalty to the Commune, marched endlessly across the square and down the streets, two hundred thousand strong, their banners topped by Phrygian caps.

On the surface, the situation looked hopeful. The elections had been a success. There was news of sympathetic uprisings in other cities.[4] The trash had been collected; the streets were cleaner than they had been since the beginning of the Prussian siege; and the city's fountains splashed water. Only the city's cats were missing, as the Reverend Mr. William Gibson observed, having been turned into "rabbit" during the siege.[5] It seemed pos-

sible, as the *Cri du Peuple* declared, that "the drums of Santerre will never roll again, nor rifles gleam from the windows of our Communal Hôtel de Ville, nor the Place de Grève be stained with blood."[6] The democratically elected Commune began to undo the decrees of the National Assembly and sought to negotiate with Thiers for Parisian home rule.

Below the surface lay a grimmer reality. Despite the relatively modest Parisian political demands, Thiers and the National Assembly refused to negotiate and prepared to do battle. In the beginning, neither side was well prepared for war and virtually all historians have agreed that if the Commune had marched upon Versailles in the first few days of its existence, it could have defeated the badly demoralized army. The leaders of the National Guard could not be certain of that, however, nor could they be sure that the Prussians, who still ringed the eastern side of Paris, would remain neutral. While the Commune hesitated, Thiers began to build an army that would remain loyal to its officers (as it had not on the eighteenth) and could be used to humiliate the city that had challenged his authority.

Loyalty was not a problem for the National Guard, but preparation and leadership were, and even as talk of a march on Versailles increased in the city, intelligent people worried about the ability of the guard to launch and win an offensive battle. On Palm Sunday, April 2, a scant five days after the elected Communal Council was sworn in, the Versailles troops attacked the suburb of Courbevoie, pushed the National Guard back, and captured the bridge over the Seine into the *faubourg* (suburb) of Neuilly. The war had begun. On April 3 the National Guard marched determinedly toward Versailles, only to fall into a trap set by the Versaillais. Versailles was relieved by its victory; Paris, horrified. People poured into the streets. National guardsmen beat the call to arms and dragged their cannons to the western walls. Thousands of men demanded to march on Versailles; women proposed to march in front of them.

All night long, guardsmen filed spontaneously out of the city, without organization, without provisions, without even forming up in their battalions, convinced that the soldiers would not fire on their fellow countrymen. The great offensive the Parisians had wanted since the beginning of the Prussian attack had come to pass. Women rallied at the place de la Concorde and waited at the city gates for word of the battle.

By evening it was clear that enthusiasm and numbers had not been enough for victory. Carts of dead and dying men trundled into the city. The army had remained loyal to its commanders, fired on the guardsmen, and routed them. Thiers was not inclined to be gracious in victory. On April 6 he increased the pressure on Paris by bombarding the western (ironically, the bourgeois) sections of the city. For the next seven weeks, cannon and

artillery fire trapped the residents of Neuilly in their homes, supplied background noise for life in Paris, and provided entertainment for the intrepid who walked up the Champs-Elysées to watch the battle.

In a terrible foreshadowing of things to come, the Versailles troops executed some of their captured prisoners on April 3 and 4, including two National Guard generals, and allowed others to be abused by crowds in Versailles. In retaliation, the Commune took a variety of hostages, including the archbishop of Paris and several priests, and threatened to execute them if Versailles continued to kill its Communard prisoners, a threat it did not carry out until May 24, during the final battle for the control of Paris.

As the war continued, the Commune debated and passed legislation that has earned it a place among the most radical of French governments. Petty fines for rule violations in factories were eliminated; the pay for legislators was set at the daily wage for ordinary workers; and the tools, furniture, and clothing people had pawned during the Prussian siege were returned to their owners free of charge. Night baking was abolished at the request of the bakers. Separation of church and state was declared, and education was secularized. The widows (legally married or not) and children of men who died "defending the rights of Paris" were adopted by the city. Women's work and wages were studied and meetings were held to discuss plans for improving women's education.

Working-class Parisians mourned the dead (by May 8, five hundred had died in the struggle for control of Fort Issy alone), avoided the wealthier areas of the city that were within range of the Versailles artillery, followed the progress of the war, and carried on remarkably normal lives under the circumstances. Following in the footsteps of the revolutionaries of 1789, people attended nightly political debates in churches. Aware of the power of symbolic actions, the Commune signaled its politics by flying the red flag of revolution, burning a guillotine in front of the statue of Voltaire (to disavow the Terror of the first French Revolution), pulling down the Vendôme Column (a symbol of despotism and militarism to republicans like the Communards, since it glorified the imperial aspects of Napoleon I's rule and was the site of an annual parade of Napoleon III's imperial troops),[7] and razing Thiers's house. Freemasons, in the first public demonstration in their history, marched through the city to show their support for the Commune. As the military situation worsened, however, liberal principles were sorely tested, and the Communal Council, like its conservative predecessors, shut down the opposition press.

Relegated to the margins of formal politics by a "universal" suffrage that excluded them, women found their own ways to express their support for the Commune. Neighborhood groups formed vigilance committees and

prepared to defend the barricades. Female orators denounced the government and the National Guard for cowardice and ineptitude. Female cooks, water carriers, and medical assistants accompanied the battalions of the National Guard into battle. Wives, sisters, and daughters carried food and drink to the defenders of the city walls. Women workers manufactured gun cartridges, uniforms, and sacks to be filled with sand for the barricades. André Léo (Léodile Champseix), the female editor of the Commune newspaper *La Sociale,* warned the Commune and National Guard leaders about the dangers of alienating women's support. Louise Michel, the Commune's most passionate supporter, joined the National Guard in battle. Elizabeth Dmietrieff, a Russian émigrée, and other members of the International Working Men's Association founded the Union of Women for the Care of the Wounded and the Defense of the Commune.

The wealthier part of the bourgeoisie was unsympathetic to the revolution from the beginning, believing, with Edmond de Goncourt, that when the "men from the very bottom" of the social ladder spoke of liberty, equality, and fraternity, they had "the enslavement or death of the upper classes" in mind.[8] The international and non-Parisian French press consistently but inaccurately referred to the Communards as "Communists." Bourgeois men who had joined the National Guard during the Prussian siege abandoned their units and fled Paris to avoid being forced to serve the Commune. Meanwhile, in Versailles Thiers and his generals continued to train the army and prepared to teach the Parisians "a lesson."[9]

As the war continued, conditions in the isolated city deteriorated, disagreements among its leaders multiplied, and fears of an invasion escalated. The propaganda disseminated by Versailles had convinced people outside of Paris that the Commune, far from being a defense of the republic, was a threat to it. If this revolution were allowed to succeed, the government warned, it would institute a new reign of terror. No one outside Paris, either in the provinces or in other countries, came to the city's assistance. Still, most Parisians found it impossible to believe that French troops would actually invade the city and kill its citizens.

On Sunday evening, May 21, the unthinkable occurred. The Versailles army entered Paris through an unguarded gate. Having been told to take no prisoners, the troops instituted a seemingly endless nightmare of street fighting followed by the surrender and then the execution of the Commune's defenders. Trapped in the city by the Versailles troops on one side and the Prussians on the other, the Communards retreated from barricade to barricade. As they fell back, some set fires to prevent the army's pursuit. Others, in anger and desperation burned the Tuileries Palace, Hôtel de Ville, and other buildings. Still others executed some of the Commune's

hostages, including the city's archbishop. Rumors circulated that female incendiaries, called pétroleuses, had set the fires, and the bourgeoisie, angered at the disruption the Commune had caused in their lives and fearful for their property, readily believed them.

Thousands of Parisians died defending the barricades and on the Parisian killing fields of the Parc Monceau, the Luxembourg Gardens, the Ecole Militaire, and the Père-Lachaise Cemetery. Machine guns made the killing fast and easy although the victims did not always die immediately. Women and children as well as adult men met this summary "justice." By the end of the week the conquering Versailles troops had lost fewer than nine hundred; the Communards, more than twenty thousand. At least thirty-eight thousand more were marched to Versailles, exposed to the taunts, insults, and physical assaults of bourgeois women and men. Those who survived the march (and many did not, for soldiers dispatched those who walked too slowly or collapsed from exhaustion, as well as those who displeased them) faced months of incarceration and investigation.

The courts martial that tried the Communards assumed the defendants were guilty and brought them swift judgment. Ten thousand were convicted (a thousand in absentia); twenty-three were executed; forty-five hundred were incarcerated in French prisons; and forty-five hundred more were deported to New Caledonia.[10] Like the prisoners' march to Versailles, the voyage to the South Pacific was deadly for many. On board ship, the prisoners were confined to large cages and guarded by machine guns. Some who survived the journey were incarcerated with common criminals; others were left to fend for themselves in the inhospitable climate, terrain, and culture.

As would be the case a quarter of a century later in the Dreyfus Affair, the justness of the trials and sentences for people who, in many cases, were accused only of political crimes raised questions that could not be permanently ignored. Finally in 1880, when the republicans gained control of the National Assembly and the presidency of France, a general amnesty was granted to the Communards, and they were allowed to return from exile. Greeted enthusiastically by the French Left that had worked for their return for almost a decade, the thousands who had suffered in French prisons, languished in exile in London, Switzerland, or Brussels, or endured the hardships and futility of life in New Caledonia resumed their lives and their political interests.

The Commune's cultural and political significance did not end with its defeat or even with amnesty for its convicted supporters. The deaths of both the Communards and the hostages during the semaine sanglante, the last, bloody week of fighting in May, made the Commune a central refer-

ence point for both the Left and the Right. For the Right, it provided a warning about the dangers of working-class revolt. For the Left, it provided both a positive and a negative example of how to conduct a revolution. (Lenin studied it carefully.)[11] The Mur des Fédérés (Wall of the Communards) in the Pére-Lachaise Cemetery,[12] where, legend has it, the Commune's last defenders perished, became a place of pilgrimage for admirers of the Commune ranging from French workers to would-be revolutionaries from all over the world (fig. 3).

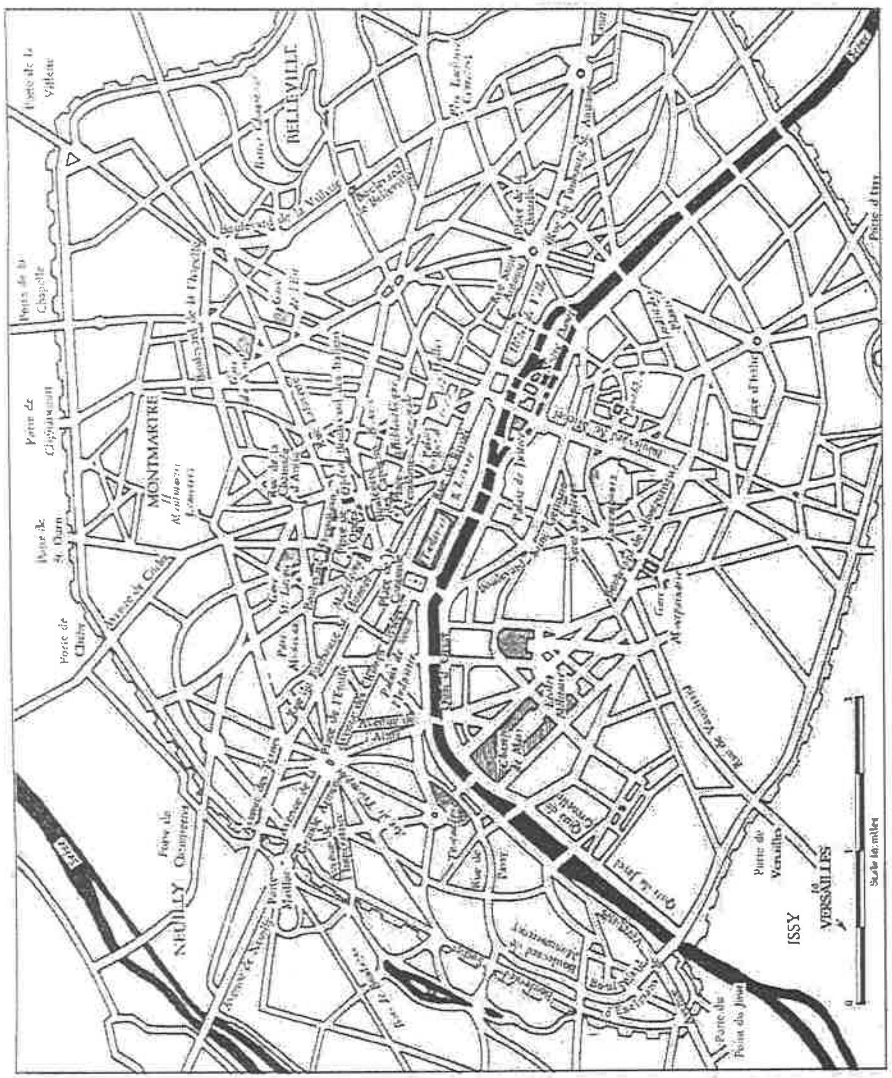

Figure 3. Map of Paris, 1871

CHAPTER FIVE

Les Pétroleuses

During the final week of the Commune, when the Versailles and Communard troops fought in the streets of Paris and thousands of Parisians lost their lives, one of the most powerful political symbols of the nineteenth century was created—the pétroleuse. Virtually overnight, this representation of the dangerous, unruly female incendiary came to symbolize the evils of the Commune for its critics. She could not have been imagined without the fires that burned furiously in parts of the city, but she also was the heir of the female representations already circulating—the gun-wielding amazons, furies, viragoes, female orators, and cantinières. They preceded her on the Commune's stage and made it not only possible but easy for the bourgeoisie to believe in her existence.

For conservatives, the fires and the sinister pétroleuse were a godsend, since they distracted attention from the army's slaughter of the Parisians. For the Communards and their supporters, they were albatrosses they could not throw off. Long after it was apparent both that the fires had been set by men and that they had not been as devastating as was first believed, defenders of the Commune found themselves trapped into refuting charges that they had hired women to commit arson and destroy Paris. With the creation of the pétroleuse, the Communards lost control of symbolic imagery and propaganda. Despite repeated efforts, the Communards in exile were unable to shift public attention to the unwillingness of Versailles to negotiate or to the bombardment of Neuilly, the executions of prisoners, and the extraordinary death toll of the semaine sanglante. Instead, the pétroleuse lingered in people's minds, a powerful personifica-

tion of evil with which to condemn the Commune and to question the very nature of woman. With the fires and the execution of its hostages, the Commune lost the struggle for Paris and for the hearts and minds of the world.

The Semaine Sanglante

The Versailles forces invaded Paris on the night of May 21–22. Well indoctrinated at Versailles to hate the insurgents of Paris and following orders to take no prisoners, they moved methodically through the city, killing working-class Parisians.[1] Hardly better prepared to fight the army in Paris in May than it had been to attack Versailles in March, the Commune abandoned all attempts at a unified response at the outset and called for the defense of the barricades. On the morning of the twenty-second, Charles Delescluze, the gray eminence of the Commune, a veteran of the Revolution of 1848 and the Commune's last civil delegate of war, declared, "Enough of militarism and staff officers with their gold-embroidered uniforms." It was time for "the people" to take over. They "know nothing of clever maneuvers, but when they have rifles in their hands [and] cobblestones under their feet, they do not fear all the strategies of the monarchical school. To arms, citizens! To arms!"[2] In the afternoon, the Committee of Public Safety followed suit, placarding Paris with its own call to the barricades: "Rise up, good citizens! To the barricades! The enemy is within our walls. Do not hesitate! Forward! For the republic, for the commune and for liberty! To arms!"[3]

The mystique of the barricades was great. With them, Parisians had defeated kings and won revolutions in 1830 and 1848.[4] As Mark Traugott has observed, they had become "as much a representation of the revolutionary tradition as an instrument of combat pure and simple. . . . [they] mobilize[d] prospective combatants and reinforce[d] the bonds of solidarity among them" by linking them with preceding generations of revolutionaries who had similarly built and defended barricades in Paris.[5] In the preceding weeks, all over the city, groups of national guardsmen had posed in front of barricades for photographers.[6] So the decision to fight from the barricades was popular, but it also would be deadly, for the Commune could not win at the barricades against a well-trained and determined army.

On May 22 women and men, adults and children rushed to strengthen the barricades that remained from the March 18 confrontation and to build new ones. Passersby (mainly journalists and bourgeois men who could not resist the allure of battle) were pressed into service, but the Communards did most of the building.[7] Men and women labored with enthusiasm and optimism. Edmond de Goncourt saw a woman near the Opéra pulling up paving stones, and Catulle Mendès watched a "tumultuous swarm of men, women, and children, coming and going, carrying paving stones" to construct a barricade on the Chaussée-d'Antin.[8] In another part of town, Augustine-Melvine Blanchecotte watched the building and defending of a barricade on her street, and she too commented on the fervor of its builders and defenders. "I have a barricade at my door," she wrote on the twenty-third. "Women and children built it to the tune of the *Marseillaise.* Four others are being built, beside it, opposite it, to the right and to the left of it. . . . The barricade guards, sentinels of the street, feverishly watched the street all night; some of them have fallen from fatigue."[9]

As the shelling and fighting continued and "the ambulances passed, red with blood," the building of the barricades intensified and the mood turned somber. On May 24 Blanchecotte reported, "Our barricade, judging from the expressions of the guardsmen, is becoming serious. . . . They have procured the murderous machines: a machine gun is already installed and a large cannon awaits its place."[10]

Similar scenes were repeated everywhere. The newspapers of May 24 extolled the courage and energy of the people as they prepared for battle. (For most of the Commune press, this would be their final edition.) In the *Tribun du Peuple* Lissagaray reported "along the entire line heroic courage, fierce resolution. Men, women, children, have risen up in all of the high *quartiers.* This is the battle front that we present to the royalists."[11] Félix Pyat's passionately pro-Commune newspaper, *Le Vengeur,* reported that "on the barricades, one sees women, children, and the elderly; everyone understands the grandeur of the battle and is united in a supreme effort."[12] The *Journal Officiel* reported that "the children construct the barricades that their fathers defend, and women, themselves mothers, guns in their hands, build up the courage of the citizens by their words and actions."[13]

In actuality, the battle had been lost by the time the newspapers appeared on the twenty-fourth, although the fighting would continue for several more days. There were to be no victories and little grandeur for the Communards, whose zeal was no match for the Versailles troops' indoctrination and training. Indeed, the desire of Versailles to send an unmistakable message to future generations who might contemplate revolution, combined with the Communards' knowledge that surrender meant not just the death of their ideals but literal death, kept the battle for Paris going long after it was lost.

Even if they misjudged the possibility of victory, the newspapers were right about the age and sex of the city's defenders. Women as well as men,

children as well as the elderly defended the barricades.[14] On Blanchecotte's barricade, "a hardy, strapping boy of twenty years, with a very sweet and fine figure," sat astride the cannon during the day, waiting for the Versaillais. At night, "old men who cannot fight as well as the young men," stood guard. This night, an old man, "who shivered under his thin jacket," had taken the watch. In the morning, "an old woman arrived, bringing him his soup." When the battle reached the barricade in the afternoon, women and national guardsmen defended it. "Women prepare the guns, the men fire them," Blanchecotte observed before she retreated to the basement of the building. When she emerged, "there was blood everywhere; by the doorways, by the sidewalks, a red rivulet ran," and the young artilleryman who had sat "so dreamily, on his cannon" the morning before, lay among the dead.[15]

Louise Michel was present at the end of the Commune as she had been at the beginning, carrying a message from General Dombrowski to the Montmartre Vigilance Committee, defending the Montmartre cemetery with a detachment of the National Guard, and fighting from one barricade to another with guardsmen and other women long after she knew the Commune had been defeated.[16] In the working-class sections of the city, the women who had worked together in the vigilance committees and the Union des Femmes built and defended several barricades.[17] The barricade at the place Blanche at the foot of the Montmartre cemetery was defended by women (see fig. 13). So, according to Lissagaray, were the intersections of the boulevard Saint-Michel and the rues Racine and de l'Ecole-de-Médecine.[18]

Those who fought, also died. On May 24 Lissagaray watched children fight alongside the men as they were pushed back from the Bourse to Saint-Eustache. There, he observed acerbically, "when the guardsmen were outflanked and massacred, the children had the honor of not being excluded."[19] On the twenty-fifth, he reported that "a young girl of nineteen, Marie M...., dressed like a marine gunner, rosy and charming, with black curly hair, fought all day," at the Château-d'Eau barricade, only to be killed by a shell that landed in front of her.[20]

Sebastien Commissaire watched a company of young women, armed with chassepots, make their way toward one of the barricades in Montmartre. "The little column did not go far," he reported. "Arriving at the place Pigalle, where there were the beginnings of a barricade, it was met by lively gunfire from the boulevard Clichy. Then it was turned and taken from the flank by a battalion coming from the rue des Abbesses and the rue Houdon. All of those who were part of this little troop were killed or taken prisoner. From my window, I saw several of the women, whom I had

seen go down the street with their arms a few moments earlier, marched back up it, disarmed and surrounded by soldiers."[21]

Louis Jezierski, a writer on military affairs, reported that there were a "good many armed women" among the Communard troops, including "one small force composed entirely of women."[22] Archibald Forbes, the foreign correspondent for the *Daily News*, heard that the place Vendôme "had been held for hours by twenty-five Communists [*sic*] and a woman," and he saw the corpse of another "Hecate who fought on the Rue de la Paix barricade with a persistence and fury of which many spoke."[23] Elizabeth Dmietrieff was wounded but escaped capture at the barricade of the faubourg St. Antoine.[24]

As rank-and-file guardsmen and civilians fought and died and the Communal Council dithered, Raoul Rigault and Théophile Ferré, the angriest and most violent of the elected members of the Commune, determined to settle old scores and to avenge the massacre that was occurring all around them. Close to seventy prisoners held by the Commune would not survive this quest for vengeance.[25] First, Rigault engineered the execution of Gustave Chaudey, who had been in charge of the Hôtel de Ville on January 22 when the Breton troops had fired on and killed demonstrators. Chaudey had been imprisoned by the Commune because he had taken responsibility for the decision, although he had not given the order to fire. Ignoring his declarations of his republican credentials and his pleas for mercy, Rigault ordered his death.[26]

Next, Ferré decided to execute some of the Commune's hostages who were being held at La Roquette prison.[27] Six of them, including Monsignor Darboy, the archbishop of Paris, and Judge Bonjean, the president of the Parisian courts, met their deaths on the twenty-fourth.[28] Two days later, about fifty more La Roquette prisoners were marched through the streets to the *mairie* of the twentieth arrondissement and then to the rue Haxo, where they were executed by a crowd of men and women seeking their own revenge for the deaths of friends and kin. Jules Vallès, editor of the *Cri du Peuple*, and two other members of the Commune tried to prevent what was soon known as the massacre of the rue Haxo. They knew full well that this vengeance was immoral (even though Versailles was executing prisoners wholesale) and would be used as proof of the "evils" of the Commune.[29] Among the thousands killed by the Versailles forces were forty-two men, three women, and four children who were dragged to the garden on the rue des Rosiers where Generals Lecomte and Clément Thomas died. There, they were forced to kneel before being shot. Deaths like these, however senseless, had no similar impact on public opinion, however, since the victims were not public figures.[30]

While the hostages died, the killing of the Communards continued. Those who fought on were hungry, tired, dirty, wounded, scorched by the sun and then soaked by the rain that began to fall on the twenty-sixth, forced to retreat from barricade to barricade, and surrounded by corpses. The best that might be said for the Communards, as Lissagaray noted, was that they died well.[31] Those who fought were shot; those who surrendered were shot; those who hid in houses were dragged into the streets and shot,[32] until the last barricade fell on Monday, May 29, at eleven o'clock in the morning. Even then, the killing did not stop; prisoners continued to be taken, lined up in parks and cemeteries, and mowed down by machine guns.[33] Not everyone died immediately, of course, and at night, screams of agony could be heard from the piles of bodies.[34]

The Communard newspapers were no longer publishing and the conservative French papers had no journalists in Paris, but British journalists roamed the city along with displaced Communards and bourgeois observers. On Tuesday, May 23, Archibald Forbes reported on the sounds of the battle:

> About 10 the din began again. Shell after shell burst close to us in the Boulevard Haussmann, and there came the loud noise of a more distant fire, which seemed to be sweeping the barricade. In the intervals of the shell fire was audible the steady grunt of the mitrailleuses, and I could distinctly hear the adjacent Boulevard Haussmann. This dismal din, so perplexing and bewildering, continued all night.[35]

Lissagaray's account of the semaine sanglante often lapses into the first person. As a Communard supporter, he emphasized the killing, along with the noise and the fires. Writing about the night of the twenty-second (the end of the first day of fighting), he reported, for instance, "with nightfall, the fusillade slackens but the cannonade continues. A red glow rises from the rue de Rivoli. The Ministry of Finance burns. Throughout the day, it has received part of the Versaillais shells aimed at the Tuileries terrace, and the papers piled up in its upper stories have caught fire. . . . Then begin the seven tragic nights. . . . There were nights more noisy, more glaring, more grandiose, when the fires and the cannonade enveloped all of Paris, but none penetrated the soul more mournfully. . . . We seek each other in the gloom, speak in low voices, giving and taking hope. . . . Henceforth there will be no more rest."[36]

Blanchecotte spent the night of the twenty-third hiding with her neighbors. Her report indicated no lull in the fighting during the long hours of the night. "The raking sound of the machine guns, the cannon fire from the Panthéon which shook the house, the screams of the shells, the furious fusillade that seemed as if it would break down the door and let in the bullets, the racket of the paving stones, the yells of the combattants, the falling of bodies, the certainty of a nearby explosion, all this seemed to last an eternity,"[37] she wrote in her diary.

Conservatives and foreigners emphasized the damage to the city that became visible with daylight. "Looking out, and cautiously, up the Boulevard Haussmann," Forbes continued, "I saw before me a strange spectacle of desolation. Lamp-posts, kiosks, and trees were shattered and torn down. The road was strewn with the green boughs of trees which had been cut by the storm of shot and shell."[38] Goncourt wrote a similar account of the ruins of Auteuil.

> There is confusion and destruction such as a cyclone might make.
>
> You see enormous broken trees whose shattered trunks look like a bundle of kindling; pieces of rail weighing a hundred pounds that have been thrown on the boulevard; manhole covers, lead plaques four inches thick, reduced to fragments the size of a cube of sugar; bars of grillework twisted and knotted around each other like the handle of a wicker basket. . . .
>
> Underfoot there are unexploded shells, pieces of gun carriages, pieces of cannons, broken boxes with 4 de M written on them, debris and slag of every kind; in the middle of all this, water from the broken water mains gurgles like springs.[39]

The number of Parisians killed by the soldiers during the semaine sanglante and its aftermath is unknown, for thousands were buried in mass graves without being counted or identified. Estimates range from a low of seventeen thousand by General Appert, who headed the National Assembly investigation of the Commune, to a high of fifty thousand by various newspapers. Most historians subscribe to a figure of twenty thousand to thirty thousand, frequently settling on twenty-five thousand. This count does not include the fifteen thousand national guardsmen who were killed by the Versailles troops before the invasion of Paris began. Whatever the precise figure, the death toll was enormous compared to Versailles' losses—877 dead and 6,454 wounded.[40] It was also enormous for the nineteenth century. In the Revolution of 1830, the army killed two thousand Parisians; in the June Days of 1848, between fifteen hundred and three thousand, with hundreds more executed without trial.[41]

As the mass executions continued, some journalists rebelled and filed horror stories with their editors. On June 1 the *New York Tribune* carried a lengthy story about the execution of a group of thirty-three "Communists,"

including seven women. The prisoners were "made to kneel close together," and a large firing squad took aim. Then "a volley was fired, and when the smoke cleared away a horrible sight was presented. Three of the women, who were in the middle of the row, between the men, were still living, and writhing in agony. A second volley was fired and a third, and not until the sixth did all the prisoners cease to live. The dead bodies were then flung onto the three scavenger carts and carried away to be buried." On June 10, it was still publishing accounts of the "vindictive" government troops under the headline, "Paris after the Capture... Brutality of the Versaillists."[42]

Shorter reports, reflecting the journalists' growing dismay appeared in other newspapers. On May 25 a *New York Herald* correspondent reported, "The slaughter is awful."[43] On the twenty-sixth the *Daily News* correspondent revealed that some of the Commune's leaders had approached him for help, and he found it "heartrending to see the misery which has now overtaken them . . . and to be unable to do anything for any one."[44] The *New York Times* reported on May 27 that "the slaughter of the Nationals [Communards] is frightful and the Versaillists . . . are killing all prisoners," and continued on the twenty-ninth that "there are rumors of awful cruelties perpetrated by the Versaillists."[45] On June 1 the *Standard* published its correspondent's opinion that "it is high time that these wholesale and indiscriminate butcheries should cease." On the fifth he added that "the remembrance of the scenes of horror I have myself witnessed in the way of reprisals makes me shudder as I write." On the seventh he chastised the Versailles troops for having shot people "down like dogs" and focused on the treatment of women: "It is not too much to say that a large proportion of these victims, especially as regards women, had no offence proved against them."[46]

The Female Barricade Fighters

The female barricade fighters had symbolic as well as practical importance. The last news items in the last issues of two of the Commune's major publications emphasized the participation of women and children in the building and defense of the barricades.[47]

Although the fighting went on for several more days, it was appropriate that these newspapers' final words were about women and children. With these reports, the Commune returned symbolically to its origins. Like the women who had created the Commune by defending the city's cannons with their bodies, women were preparing to defend it on the barricades.

Like the women of March 18 *and* like those who grieved for the dead and wounded in the ensuing weeks, the barricade fighters were represented as mothers. That they were armed demonstrated their seriousness of purpose, not their kinship with the Commune's more controversial warriors and female orators, whom even radical men found troubling allies. The women wanted, Pyat said, "to make their children free." They were willing to sacrifice themselves (and, if need be, their children and husbands) for the sake of the revolution. They did not relish the struggle or their own participation in it. Their actions were not aggressive but defensive, not self-serving but self-sacrificing, not self-centered but altruistic. Their nobility and heroism symbolized the Commune.

Others would interpret women's presence on the barricades as a violation of their feminine nature, especially since they were armed with guns and bayonets. For these observers female combatants represented all that was dangerous about women and all that was evil about the Commune. The women's dangerousness was often represented in sexual terms. Catulle Mendès was delighted to mention that a group of women "tucked their skirts up and passed them through their belts," so they could pull a machine gun down the street to a barricade; he described them as "livid, horrible and superb."[48] Jezierski (and Vizetelly, who quoted him) mentioned the short skirts worn by a "small force composed entirely of women."[49] Forbes wrote of the zeal and tenacity of one female fighter,[50] but not everyone was convinced of the women's fighting ability. Jezierski and Vizetelly, for instance, reported that "these Amazons" were "hardy and daring, but at the last moment they shrank from death."[51]

In addition to the mothers of the barricades, Commune supporters presented other positive images of the revolution's female defenders. Lissagaray described a cantinière with a bloody handkerchief tied round her head as a "wounded lionness" and wrote of "a young girl of nineteen, rosy and charming, with black, curling hair, dressed as a marine fusilier," who fought "desperately" on the barricades for a whole day.[52] Commissaire reported on a "company of young women, armed with chassepots, . . . bareheaded and dressed in black," which made its way pluckily toward battle, and he felt "pity and compassion" when he heard one young woman confess to another that the fusillade scared her.[53]

Observers of all political positions shared one thing in common, however, and that was an inability to ignore the female barricade fighter. Had the Commune won the battle against Versailles, some image of her—a "lionness," a "rosy and charming" young woman, or a self-sacrificing mother—might have taken its place alongside Delacroix's Liberty in the pantheon of revolutionary iconography. Had the fighting not been accom-

panied by fires, a "livid, horrible, and superb" amazon of the barricades might have become the Commune's negative representation. But the barricade fighters were eclipsed by another female figure who arose from the ashes of Paris to become the personification of the Commune.

The Fires

The Versailles sweep through Paris began late on Sunday night, May 21. At no point did the battle go well for the Communards, although they did manage to halt the troops' advance at various points. By noon of the twenty-second, the army had captured the entire western side of Paris. Already, Versailles's incendiary shells had started a fire at the Ministry of Finance, and attempts to put it out had failed. As the army's shells continued to ignite buildings, the Communards added to the conflagration by setting fires to cover their retreat. By nightfall of the twenty-third, fires burned from the Madeleine to the rue de Rennes. The Palais Royal and the Louvre library had been set ablaze to halt the advance of the Versaillais, and the Tuileries Palace, out of revenge against the monarchy whose restoration the Communards feared would now occur. On Wednesday the twenty-fourth, the Hôtel de Ville was ignited as the Communal Council, Committee of Public Safety, and War Delegation abandoned it, partly to conceal their retreat and partly to deny its conquest to Thiers.[54]

Charred paper from the Ministry of Finance and Louvre library floated on the wind. The press reported that the museum itself was on fire. Like a reflection of the blood that ran in the streets, at night the city glowed red; smoke, sparks, and ashes rained down on the earth. For everyone who saw them, the fires were, as Gibson recorded, "a sight such as we shall never forget."[55] Journalists reported that it was "hard to breathe in an atmosphere mainly of petroleum smoke" and that "the sun's heat is dominated by the heat of the conflagration, and its rays by the smoke."[56]

An American woman who had spent part of her childhood in Paris, including the weeks of the Commune, later voiced a common sentiment: "I was often frightened during the Commune, but I do not remember anything more terrifying than the fires."[57] Gaston Cerfbeer, also a child at the time, remembered later that a friend of his had pointed out "a stirring of black things in the street moving rapidly. 'They are,' she told me, 'the rats from the ministry. Thousands of them, chased out by the fire.'"[58] Goncourt's servant told him that she "slept with her clothes on the whole time, . . . and provided herself with a mattress to put on her back to protect herself from all that was falling outside from overhead, in case the house was set on fire."[59]

Observers who watched from outside Paris were perhaps even more susceptible to rumor and alarm than those in the city. As they watched from the hills outside Paris and snatched at bits of charred paper, they were convinced that the entire city was burning to the ground. The *Standard*'s correspondent reported on the twenty-fourth that Versailles had "been in a state of indescribable agitation" since an early hour.[60]

When the fighting ended, it became apparent that the fire damage was not as great as had been imagined by either the journalists in the city or those who had watched from a distance. The Louvre museum, for instance, had not burned. The special correspondent for the *Standard* of London wrote from Paris on May 30 that he was "convinced that the first exclamation of the vast majority of those who may come over to see for themselves the destruction wrought in Paris will be, 'How grossly these newspaper correspondents have exaggerated.' Had I not been in Paris myself on Wednesday and Thursday, witnessed the tremendous conflagrations, and heard the unceasing crack of artillery, mitrailleuses, and musketry, I should certainly have myself been of the opinion that the accounts of what had taken place had been, to say the least of it, highly coloured. . . . the damage is exceedingly partial."[61]

The damage to the Commune's reputation was another matter. Bourgeois journalists, editorial writers, letter writers, and memoirists ignored the killings and focused on the fires. They could not find enough terrible things to say about the Communards. The *Times* opined that "the Red Republicans of 1871 . . . have revealed a spirit too inhuman to have been credited beforehand, and by their last act they will be 'damned to everlasting fame.'"[62] The *Standard* declared that "the recent news from Paris has inspired the civilised world with disgust and horror. The destruction of the beauty and splendour created by the art and taste of the most artistic and tasteful people in the world . . . the wanton annihilation of the treasures accumulated in the Tuileries . . . the yet more atrocious attempt to destroy the Louvre . . . these are crimes unprecedented in modern history, and only to be paralleled, and feebly paralleled, by some of the worst atrocities of the barbarians who ravaged the various provinces of the decaying Empire of Rome."[63] The *New York Herald* called for more executions: "Our advice is no cessation of summary judgment and summary execution. Devils let loose from their own place cannot be too soon sent home. . . . Root them out, destroy them utterly, M. Thiers, if you would save France. No mistaken humanity."[64] Céline de Mazade and her friend Berthe

Amiard-Fromentin voiced similar sentiments in letters. Mazade hoped that the government would "continue to give no mercy to these monsters," and Amiard-Fromentin exclaimed, "How the blood flowed and still flows! One is without pity for these miserable incendiaries."[65] These vindictive sentiments would linger for a long time.

The Pétroleuses

How women came to be held responsible for the fires is the intriguing question, since there is clear evidence that, while women may have participated in the burning of the Tuileries Palace, the vast majority of the fires were set by men.[66] Indeed, women were not the first to be blamed. On Wednesday, May 24, Adolphe Thiers condemned the setting of the fires in a speech to the National Assembly at Versailles. Ignoring the army's use of incendiary shells as well as the inevitability of fires in a city under attack, he blamed the Communal Council and the National Guard: "These miserable wretches have for a long time had a scheme to make Paris an immense ruin in case their own plans did not succeed. They have set fires. . . . The insurgents have made use of petroleum. . . . These atrocious villains . . . have tried to deliver the entire city up to the flames. . . . They have done more: they have used petroleum bombs against our soldiers, and several of them have been wounded."[67] By Thursday, May 25, when the destruction was thought to be far greater than it actually was, the press began to focus on vengeance rather than strategy and accident as the source of the fires. The *Times* (whose political conservatism is revealed in its persistent use of the term "Communist" rather than "Communard") declared that the fires were "wrought without a shadow of provocation; . . . it is an act of deliberate and demoniacal malice . . . a mere act of revenge, when the Communists saw their cause was ruined."[68] The editors of *Le Figaro* also subscribed to the revenge theory when they began to publish again on May 30. On the thirty-first, the paper reported that the fire at the Ministry of Finance (set by the incendiary shells of Versailles, *not* by the Commune) "was carefully and diabolically prepared, kerosene bombs [*bombes à pétrole*] [and] cartridges strewn everywhere, constantly rekindled the flames."[69] The *New York Herald* had a different theory—hereditary depravity. "Paris was always peculiarly susceptible to communistic tendencies," it announced on June 4. "If the theory of hereditary depravity be correct, then we have an explanation for the horrible ferocity and absurd idealism of the Paris mob. The city was largely settled by desperadoes, to whom morals and religion were idle, meaningless words, and their descendants have for centuries made the French capital the most disorderly metropolis in Europe."[70]

Rumors escalated and suspicion began to fall on noncombatants, including male fire fighters, women, and children. The *Times* on May 26 and *Le Gaulois* (a Versailles newspaper) on May 29 reported that firemen had been shot when it was discovered that they were pumping petroleum rather than water into the flames, and both announced that windows were being barricaded to prevent the fire bombing of houses by women and children. Walking through the city, the *Times* correspondent had discovered that "the fears of petroleum and explosions are universal. The inhabitants had either stopped up, or were engaged in stopping up, every chink through which petroleum might be thrown into their houses. . . . The precaution was taken because *women and children*, partisans of the Commune, have in numerous instances been detected throwing petroleum into houses."[71]

Most suspicion fell on women. On June 3 *Le Monde Illustré* published both a verbal and a visual representation of them (see frontispiece.) "The women show particular venom," it announced. "These furies glide through the rich quarters, profiting from the darkness or the desertion of the streets that the civil war has caused; and fling their little vials of petrol, their devil's matches, their burning rags [into cellar windows]."[72] E. B. Washburne, the American minister to France, quoting an unnamed source, gave even more detail:

> Here is a description of a *Pétroleuse:* "She walks with rapid step near the shadow of the wall. She is poorly dressed; her age is between forty and fifty; her forehead is bound up with a red checkered handkerchief, from which hang meshes of uncombed hair. Her face is red, her eyes blurred, and she moves with her eyes bent down. Her right hand is in her pocket, or in the bosom of her half-buttoned dress; in the other hand she holds one of the high, narrow tin cans in which milk is carried in Paris, but which now contains the petroleum. If the street is deserted she stops, consults a bit of dirty paper that she holds in her hand, pauses a moment, then continues her way, steadily, without haste. An hour afterward, a house is on fire in the street she has passed. Such is the *pétroleuse.*"[73]

The fear of such treachery would keep the cellar windows of Paris closed throughout the long hot summer that followed the Commune. Yet, it was absurd to be so fearful, as Colonel Wickham Hoffman of the U.S. Legation pointed out: "The windows were barred, and the cellars in Paris are universally built in stone and concrete. How [the pétroleuses] effected their purpose under these circumstances is not readily seen. If this was their *modus operandi,* they were the most inexpert incendiaries ever known."[74]

Rumors about the number of women involved grew rapidly. At first only the isolated woman was suspected, but soon reports were claiming that

"many" of the arrested women were pétroleuses.[75] On May 28 and 29 *Le Gaulois* reported that men, women, and children had been paid ten francs per building to start fires. Washburne repeated this story in his memoirs, embellishing it with the "information" that eight thousand men, women, and children had been employed to distribute incendiary devices.[76] It quickly became commonplace for newspaper stories and the titles of illustrations to refer to all of the arrested communardes as pétroleuses, regardless of whether they were charged with the specific crime of incendiarism.

The credibility of the "reports" was enhanced by their specificity. *Le Gaulois* was especially inclined toward detail. On May 28 it reported that the pétroleuses were "armed with tin boxes, about the size of a large sardine can and containing a mixture of kerosene [*pétrole*], tallow, and sulfur," which they lit with a match. (Most people actually believed that the women carried bottles, not boxes.) On the twenty-ninth it reported that during the month of April the Commune had infiltrated "its most fanatical partisans" into the ranks of the firemen "whose mission was to stir up the fires when they were beginning to die out."[77]

Although men were also thought to be setting fires, women were widely regarded as more active than men and as the greater villains. M. Chastel, a librarian, reported in a letter on Wednesday, May 24, that it was "especially the women who are setting fires to the houses. Many have been taken in the act and shot at once."[78] Washburne declared in his memoir, "Of all this army of burners, the women were the worst."[79]

Children were commonly regarded as women's accomplices. Washburne, for instance, announced: "Whenever it was possible, the *pétroleuse,* who was to receive ten francs for every ten houses burnt, would find some little boy or girl whom she would take by the hand and to whom she would give a bottle of the incendiary liquid, with instructions to scatter it in certain places."[80] Children as well as women, if they were deemed suspicious looking, were arrested and executed. Residents and journalists reported seeing the bodies of dead children as well as child prisoners. Washburne and Hoffman reported the deaths of six or eight children (their accounts vary), the eldest "apparently not over fourteen," who were "caught" carrying petroleum in the avenue d'Autin.[81] Georges Renard remembered seeing a row of dead women and children lined up along the wall of the Collège de France.[82] Goncourt recorded in his diary on May 26, that he had seen "a band of frightful street urchins and incendiary hooligans" who were being held in the train station at Passy.[83] On May 28 Chastel reported that he had seen a large number of prisoners including "women and children, who sometimes were obliged to run to keep up with the rest, or they would have been trampled on by the horses."[84] And on the thirtieth the *Journal des Débats* announced that groups of "fifteen to twenty national guardsmen, civilians, women and children" were being systematically executed at the Place Lobau.[85]

Women were accused of other crimes as well, most notably the poisoning of the Versailles troops. These stories harked back to Jules Allix's 1870 plan to arm female warriors with *doigts prussiques.* On May 27 the *Times* reported that ten soldiers had been poisoned by a cantinière; on May 28 Edwin Child wrote to his father that forty men had been poisoned.[86] Eventually the story of the poisoners appeared in all the newspapers covering the fighting. Again the number of women assumed to be involved in this crime and the number of their victims escalated rapidly. The accusations lacked the staying power of the accusations of incendiarism in a city that had seen huge fires, however, and the press and public devoted far more attention to the pétroleuses.

The Prisoners

The horror of the semaine sanglante did not end with the street fighting and executions in Paris. Thousands were taken to Versailles to be interrogated and tried. Young and old, male and female, somewhere between thirty-five thousand and fifty thousand were marched out of the city, guarded by soldiers, some tied together in groups with cords, others manacled in pairs.[87] After a week of steady fighting, the prisoners were exhausted and bedraggled even before the long trek to Versailles began. Journalists and memoirists recorded their impressions of the prisoners' weary countenances, torn clothing, dirty faces, and dragging bodies.[88]

Male and female prisoners alike were treated inhumanely and humiliated. They were forced to walk bareheaded and without food and water under the hot May sun and through drenching rain. Those who could not keep up with the pace of the march and others for no discernible reason were executed along the roadside. All were subjected to the taunts and abuse of Parisians and Versaillais who had opposed the Commune.

As early as the twenty-fourth the *Daily News* correspondent reported that "the behavior of the crowd was far more horrible [than the horrible condition of the prisoners]. 'Shoot the wretches!' they cried. 'Show them no mercy!'"[89] The librarian Chastel similarly reported that the crowd "hooted" the prisoners as they passed along.[90] Bingham, the *Pall Mall Gazette* correspondent, recounted in his published diary: "For many a long day after the insurrection was quelled long caravans of prisoners were to be seen

wending their way to Versailles, innocent and guilty alike, to the great delight of substantial citizens . . . [who] revenged [them]selves indiscriminately."[91] The *Times* reported that "escorts with prisoners are continually passing through the streets followed by a jeering job."[92] The *New York Tribune* repeated the story on June 7 for American readers.[93] Even *Le Gaulois* reported that "the crowd, exasperated by the preceding days, accosted [the prisoners] with invectives and cries of 'Kill them!'" and "even some stones were thrown at the prisoners."[94]

Many found it painful to watch the exhausted and taunted prisoners trudging through the streets, often to be shot without trial. The *Times* correspondent in Versailles called it a "harrowing" experience; Goncourt said he felt "horror"; and Blanchecotte wished that she lived on the moon, so she "would not have to encounter another of these sad processions.[95] Still, people could not shake off their fascination with the prisoners and especially with the pétroleuses.

Accounts likened them to the Furies of Greek myth, wild animals, witches, and madwomen, and dwelled on the ugly and the beautiful. Goncourt described a group of 66 women and 341 men:

> Among the women there is the same variety [as among the men]. Some women in silk dresses are next to a woman with a kerchief on her head. You see middle-class women, working women, streetwalkers, one of whom wears a National Guard uniform. Among all these faces there stands out the bestial head of a creature, half of whose face is one big bruise. . . . Many of them have the eyes of madwomen.[96]

Edwin Child wrote to his father on May 28:

> The women behaved like tigresses, throwing petroleum everywhere & distinguishing themselves by the fury with which they fought, a convoi [*sic*] of nearly four thousand passed the Boulevards this afternoon, such figures you never saw, blackened with powder, all in tatters and filthy dirty, a few with chests exposed to show their sex, the women with their hair dishevelled & of a most ferocious appearance.[97]

The conservative *Paris-Journal* reported on May 31:

> In the midst of the atrocious scenes that shock Paris, the women are particularly distinguished by their cruelty and rage; most of them are widows of Communards. Madness seems to possess them; one sees them, their hair down like furies, throwing boiling oil, furniture, paving stones, on the soldiers, and when they are taken, they throw themselves desperately on the bayonets and die still trying to fight.[98]

Gibson, who was not in Paris during the week of fighting and did not see the prisoners himself, nevertheless recorded in his diary on May 27, "We learn that women, more like furies than human beings, have taken a fiendish part in the work of destruction."[99] Bingham called the female prisoners "hideous viragoes, . . . furies intoxicated with the fumes of wine and blood."[100] The Reverend Mr. Ussher of Westbury, who was more sympathetic than Bingham, nevertheless told Ernest Vizetelly that he was "particularly struck by the awful expressions which he noticed on the [women's] faces. . . . It was, indeed, for the most part something unnatural, a compound of savagery, revengefulness, despair and ecstatic fervour. . . . Many of them were now sheer furies."[101]

The *New York Tribune* correspondent similarly singled out women when he reported briefly on May 26 that he saw "a long file of prisoners pass, many fierce women and soft girls, all bare-headed and begrimed, linking arms with [one another] proudly as they marched."[102] *Le Figaro* in an article about the last group of prisoners to be marched from Paris to Versailles, on June 2, declared that the journalists were not alone in their fascination with the female prisoners. The crowd had the greatest interest in the women, who came after the men, it reported. It was looking for the pétroleuses. When people saw them, they "devoured them with their eyes," and "they tried to discern the leaders who had inspired this terrible battle in the sinister heads of these witches; they stared at the hands that had poured the incendiary petroleum on the monuments of Paris."[103]

Many contrasted the women's demeanor and behavior, both before and after capture, to that of their male comrades. Goncourt found that none of the arrested women had the same "apathetic resignation" as the men. "There is anger and irony on their faces."[104] *Le Figaro* reported that the women and children in the convoys of prisoners "marched with a hardier step than the men. . . . The men are more solemn and seem to be asking themselves if it would not have been better to think before serving against their brothers in the army." The older women, in particular, were presented as unbowed. "Their mouths have a kind of sardonic smile; their feverish eyes glow like hot coals. One of them regards the crowd with the glazed eyes of a dead person and seems placed there to personify the sinister *tricoteuse* of the revolutionary tribunals."[105] The *Times* correspondent reflected on the fighting, "More courageous than the men, the women show fight to the last moment, and meet their death, according to the accounts of those who have witnessed their executions, with an undaunted

courage."[106] In contrast to the women, the male prisoners who march through the pages of the *Times* "are depressed, walk with bowed head, and shedding tears, which trace muddy streaks down their blackened cheeks."[107]

Goncourt even managed to see the women's demeanor as sexually provocative; certainly he attributed no such attitude to any of the men:

> The rain increases. Some of the women pull up their skirts to cover their heads. A line of horsemen in white coats has reinforced the line of foot soldiers. The colonel . . . shouts: "Attention!" and the African infantrymen load their guns. At this moment the women think they are going to be shot and one of them collapses with an attack of nerves. But the terror lasts only a moment; they quickly renew their irony, and some their coquetry with the soldiers.[108]

Gender and Judgment

The heroic mothers and splendid tigresses of Pyat, Lissagaray, and the editors of the *Journal Officiel* were no match for the furies, madwomen, witches, harpies, seductresses, and pétroleuses of the conservatives. Forgetting, or perhaps never understanding in the first place, the political grievances that had triggered the revolt, the lack of violence with which the Communal Council had governed the city, and the no-prisoners policy of the national government which had prolonged the semaine sanglante, bourgeois men and women were obsessed with representations of the women on the barricades as immoral and unnatural. Children and men had committed crimes, too, but their actions (and, hence, they themselves) were rarely seen as quite so evil.

Undistracted by the misery and humanity of the prisoners, editorial writers and columnists far from the scene voiced opinions about the women. Francisque Sarcey, an ultraconservative columnist for *Le Gaulois*, offered his readers the analysis of a physician on May 28, while the killing of Communards was far from over. In his view, the women, or at least most of them, had not set fires for money. On the contrary, they had been "under the epidemic influence of the incendiary mania," which the doctor suggested, resulted not from willfulness but from the misery of the Prussian siege. "The revolt of March 18 struck the last blow to those already disturbed brains; and the mental derangement ended in a violent explosion, seizing at the time the largest part of the population. It is one of the most astonishing cases that physiologists have observed, this epidemic of madness, which is well known to *médecins aliénistes* [psychiatrists]." Having laid out this "medical" theory of *folie contagieuse* (contagious insanity), the doctor (and Sarcey) then explained women's involvement in the setting of fires: "The women carry in this attack of madness an exaltation more ferocious than the men; it is because they have a more developed nervous system; it is that their brain is weaker and their sensibility more lively. They also are one hundred times more dangerous, and they have caused without any doubt much more evil."[109] Sarcey had reservations about the implications of this theory for retribution (if the women were mad, punishment might not be appropriate), but he was absolutely convinced that the women were more dangerous and had caused more evil than the men.

Two weeks later, he returned to the question again. This time his experts were men "whose judgment and word" he could not doubt and who had "spoken with him with an astonishment mingled with horror of the scenes they had seen, seen with their own eyes." These unimpeachable eyewitnesses had told him of "young women, with pretty faces and dressed in silk," who had come down the street armed with revolvers, "firing at random" and asking, "with proud mien, loud voices, and hate-filled eyes," to be shot. When the soldiers accommodated them, they died, with "insults on their lips [and] contemptuous laughs, like martyrs who, in sacrificing themselves, accomplish a great duty." Sarcey found much to contemplate in this report.[110]

Whether the silk dresses of the women meant they were bourgeoises acting against their class interests or prostitutes acting in theirs, is unclear. Other accounts are not so ambiguous. Many ascribed the fires to prostitutes. The *New York Herald* wrote floridly on the twenty-eighth about the "loose women of Paris, those debased and debauched creatures, the very outcasts of society, . . . knowing no shame, dead to all feeling, without homes, without friends, no little ones to claim their attention," who had set the fires.[111] The government reiterated this theory later, when it tried the female prisoners, and in the official National Assembly report on the Commune, General Appert declared that the 850 women who were taken to Versailles were "almost all nomads, given up to disorder and prostitution." Well over half of them were married, he was forced to admit. Nevertheless, even they "did not give the appearance of having a regular life and, like the others, had for the most part long since forgotten all the sentiments of family and morality."[112]

The *New York Tribune* correspondent did not agree. He noted the variety of female prisoners: Some "were dressed as vivandières. . . . One had a child strung on her back. The arm of another was in a sling. The habit-skirt on another pretty brunette was covered with fresh blood. Another Ama-

zon was wounded." Whereas "they all showed symptoms of fatigue," he declared, they "still wore a defiant air, and did not seem to belong to the class with which the Magdalen asylums are peopled."[113] *Le Gaulois* had an entire catalog of guilty female types which included prostitutes but was not limited to them "the amazons of the Commune, the incendiaries of the monuments and of Paris, the poisoners of the French soldiers, the pimps and prostitutes of the Satraps of the Hôtel de Ville, the promulgatrices of the code of free union in free debauchery, the female dethroners of God . . . and priestesses of Marat, . . . the heinous shrews who invented the motto 'Murder and kerosene [*pétrole*].'"[114]

Others cataloged crimes according to sex and age. The *Times* suggested that it was a case of "women forgetting their sex and their gentleness to commit assassination, to poison soldiers, to burn and to slay; little children converted into demons of destruction, and dropping petroleum into the areas of houses; soldiers in turn forgetting all distinctions of sex and age, and shooting down prisoners like vermin, now by scores and now by hundreds."[115] The catalog in the *Standard* was pithier, but it, too, believed women had forgotten their sex. "Men have forgotten their chivalry, women their sex, children their innocence," it wrote on the thirtieth.[116] The anti-Commune *New York Herald* declared in the same vein, "Knowing no shame," the women had "unsexed themselves."[117]

Exactly what women became when they forgot their sex and acted violently was not entirely agreed. Some saw them as inhuman (e.g., creatures); some as immoral (e.g., furies, harpies, and witches); some as debased and debauched (e.g., prostitutes); and some as madwomen. It is difficult to know exactly what the *Standard,* the *Times,* and other critics meant by the phrase, but the *Times,* by linking their sex with gentleness, and the *New York Herald,* by referring to "lack of shame," give us some clue. For many, the gentleness and purity these women seemed to have forgotten or lost were essential parts of their nature, synonymous with femininity.

No comparable loss of essence was implied by men's actions. They might have committed crimes. They might have forgotten to be chivalrous, might have shot prisoners like vermin. But they had not ceased to be masculine, had not forgotten their sex or violated their essential nature (although they might have forgotten their humanity). Although it is perhaps an oversimplification, it is relatively accurate to say that for many nineteenth-century observers, women's crimes were crimes *against* femininity, not *of* femininity, whereas men's crimes were crimes *of* masculinity.

Bourgeois culture conceived of woman's nature as bifurcated or dual. Man's nature was more unified. This difference made it possible for women to seem more duplicitous than men. A virtuous woman could become wicked. Exactly how this happened was not clear, but if a woman shook off the restraints of civilization, the church, and the family, she could go from being Mary to being Mary Magdalene, from being pure and moral to being impure and immoral, from virginity to prostitution, from feminine reticence to promiscuity. Only one-half of these dichotomies was truly feminine. The other half was still female (i.e., not male) but also somehow antifeminine. If woman's nature was fundamentally fissured, if the moral mother could become the seductive fury, then the communardes had not so much violated their sex as they had become another part of it, not willfully but inevitably. They had moved from the good to the bad side of their nature. No longer virtuous and maternal, no longer staying in their homes to care for their children, they had become the incarnation of evil, tempting men, corrupting their children, and burning the homes in which they "naturally" belonged. Indeed, one of the "crimes" ascribed to the pétroleuse was that she had corrupted her children and turned them into little incendiaries. Such women had lost or forgotten or violated their femininity.

Some analysts worked with other dichotomies having to do with particular aspects of nineteenth-century notions of gender. For them, women's weakness (versus men's strength) was the explanation for the pétroleuses and other wicked women of the Commune. Sarcey's physician offered a version of this theory in his view of women's weaker brains and livelier sensibilities. Jules Bergeret, an elected member of the commune, voiced another. "The woman is destined, by her physical and moral nature, to remain within the narrow circle of the domestic hearth," he wrote. But if the sanctity of the home were violated, as Bergeret believed it had been by the Versailles invasion of Paris, "then, and only then, do women rise up enraged." "You may call them furies," he declared, "but it is society that has driven these passive creatures into madness."[118]

The inevitable conclusion of such theories, as both Bergeret and Sarcey could see, was a radical alteration in the question of guilt and innocence. For Bergeret, this was part of the theory's appeal. If society had driven the women to fight, then "he who would strike them without pity was himself condemned."[119] For Sarcey, on the other hand, the idea that women were not responsible for their actions and should not be punished was unthinkable and he backed away form it immediately. Having already suggested that there were "horrible shrews" among the demented women, "who know what they are doing and act cold-bloodedly," he demanded that they, at least, be punished. "Those who have schemingly contributed to spread this madness, who have excited and carried it to this state," he wrote, "let us hope that at least they will not escape the severe punishment

that they merit."[120] How the wicked were to be distinguished from the merely mad was unclear. What was clear was that it was one thing to draw a distinction between the nature of man and the nature of woman which would define the pétroleuses as evil and another to draw a distinction that would absolve women of responsibility for their actions.

Punishment

The Versailles soldiers wreaked great vengeance against the National Guard and the Commune leaders when they invaded the city, killing men by the hundreds and thousands. Even republicans who had not supported the Commune were executed.[121] In addition to simple execution, the soldiers used various forms of humiliation against their victims. This was true for both men and women, but the punishment meted out to women often had a sexual dimension that was absent in the treatment of the men.

Several men reported that women's clothing was torn or stripped off before they were executed. Recall Child's report that some of the prisoners who were marched through the streets had their "chests exposed to show their sex."[122] On May 26 the *Times* correspondent reported that thirteen women, "caught in the act of spreading petroleum" had been executed "after being publicly disgraced in the Place Vendôme."[123] The ripping of the women's bodices to reveal their breasts may have been the least of this humiliation, judging from other reports. Bergeret, citing the journals of Versailles as his source, reported that the women who were arrested in the first, eighth, and ninth arrondissements were taken to the place Vendôme, "stripped, raped, and massacred."[124]

Sometimes the humiliation followed execution (more or less). Georges Jenneret, quoted from the *Droits de l'Homme* of Montpellier, "As for the women who were shot, they treated them almost like the poor Arabs of an insurgent tribe: after they had killed them, they stripped them, while they were still in their death throes, of part of their clothing. Sometimes they went even further, as at the foot of the faubourg Montmartre and in the place Vendôme, where some women were left naked and defiled on the sidewalks."[125] Lissagaray reported a similar scene in the eleventh arrondissement. Risking arrest for his support of the Commune, he walked cautiously toward the *mairie* on the twenty-eighth. There, he saw a dead woman and "a marine fusilier [who] was dividing the entrails that protruded from her with his bayonet."[126]

Symbolic undressing also occurred. Goncourt reported that some of the women he saw being marched through the city were concealed behind

veils until a "noncommissioned officer touched one of the veils with a cruel and brutal flick of his whip" and demanded, "'Come on, off with your veils. Let's see your slutty faces!'"[127] Unveiling a woman's face, like tearing her clothing, accomplished several objectives. On the simplest level, it revealed her sex. Since some of the women were dressed in National Guard uniforms, tearing their bodices to show their breasts confirmed that they were women. But more than simple identification was going on here. Soldiers undressed and unveiled women to humiliate them.

For men, simply being captured and thus rendered powerless was humiliating, as their reportedly passive behavior in the convoys demonstrated to the crowds along the way. Since women were supposed to be powerless anyway, capture alone would not humiliate them, as their reported defiance and coquetry "indicated." Merely imprisoning them was not sufficient punishment; more was needed. Stripping a woman (not to mention raping her and thus violently reminding her of woman's powerlessness) was intended to accomplish the desired humiliation. It would reveal to the world, or at least to the spectators and firing squads, that she was only a weak woman after all, not a fury with the power to burn houses and kill men.

In addition to capture, men were subjected to other forms of humiliation. Some were shot in the back; others were forced to kneel before their executioners. Prisoners in convoys had to remove their kepis and turn their uniform jackets (if they wore one) inside out. Goncourt found that the turning of men's jackets made them seem "half undressed," even though they remained fully clothed.[128] Here, the ritual degrading of men stopped, presumably because even mild forms of humiliation (compared with rape) put men in the passive position of women and thereby emasculated them, and because the punishers were themselves men.

For women, undressing went further. But no matter what men did to the women, the pétroleuse remained a frightening but compelling figure, a fury with unbound, flying hair; a defiant madwoman, captured but wild; sometimes ugly and sometimes beautiful, often seductive, and always more powerful and more fascinating than her cowed male counterpart, who, once arrested, became serious and unnaturally passive, while she continued to appear unnaturally aggressive. To make matters worse, the sexual humiliation, rape, and killing of women had some potential to produce repulsion not against the women but against the soldiers. After all, in the proper bourgeois order of things, women would be protected by men. To degrade and kill them, even if they had gotten out of their proper place, was problematic. As the *Standard* pointed out, it could happen only if men forgot their chivalry.

The Bourgeoises

Just as men repeatedly "described" the female prisoners, they also commented over and over on the bourgeoises who taunted and tortured the prisoners as they marched through the streets. The *Times* reported on May 27 that the jeering mob following the prisoners contained "more women than men among its ranks—women who hoot and clap their hands and insult their victims to their hearts' content"; and reiterated Voltaire's misogynist declaration that a Parisian woman was "half tiger and half monkey!"[129] Forbes reported the lynching of a communard by a mob and Versailles soldiers on May 24 in similarly misogynist language: "Very eager in their patriotic duty were the dear creatures of women. They knew the rat-holes into which the poor devils had squeezed themselves, and they guided the Versaillist soldiers to the spot with a fiendish glee. . . . They yell, . . . `Shoot him! Shoot him!'—the demon-women most clamorous of course."[130]

Cerfbeer long remembered the columns of prisoners and how the spectators had treated them. As the prisoners made their weary way through the city, he recalled in 1903, "one heard no cry of pity; horrible epithets, insults, *injuries,* rained down upon them along with pieces of charred wood and stones. . . . Above all, the women were without pity, screaming 'Kill them! To death!'"[131] Even Maxime Du Camp, one of the Commune's severest critics, was distressed by the women's behavior: "When a band of prisoners appeared, people rushed toward them and tried to break through the cordon of soldiers who escorted them and protected them; the women were, as always, the most agitated; they broke through the military ranks and beat the prisoners with umbrellas, crying: Kill the assassins! Burn the incendiaries!"[132]

Whether the women in fact behaved substantially differently from the men is unclear. What is clear is that many male and some female observers perceived and judged that behavior differently.[133] The perception was born of bourgeois notions of class and gender which made the behavior of the bourgeoises as appalling and even more surprising than that of the working-class communardes. Unlike the communardes, the bourgeoises could not be dismissed as loose women, living in disorder and prostitution, or as suffering from *folie contagieuse.* Indeed, it was precisely because they were perceived as having middle-class homes, husbands, and children, and hence as having been relatively protected during the ordeals of the two sieges, that their vengeful public behavior was so troubling.

Perhaps even more than the communardes, the bourgeoises confirmed men's fears about the nature of women. If bourgeois women could lose control, "forget their sex," and become furies, then all women were potential viragoes, and no woman could be completely trusted to remain loyal, submissive, and nurturing. To make matters even more complicated, the bourgeoises also violated the code of middle-class behavior toward defeated enemies. The *New York Tribune* reported on Wednesday, May 31, "The women of Versailles display a *cowardly violence* against the helpless prisoners."[134] The journalists expected bourgeois women, like their men, to be brave under duress and gracious in victory, not cowardly and vengeful. Coming on top of the unexpected and frightening behavior of the communardes and violating gender and class codes at the same time, the behavior of the bourgeoises seemed to provide proof both that French society was in a state of collapse and that every woman was a potential fury.

The bourgeoises could not be punished by arrest and imprisonment as the communardes could. They had broken only the laws of propriety, not the laws of the state. But their unladylike behavior could be thoroughly condemned in the press, and it would not soon be forgotten by bourgeois men.

The Pétroleuse and the Artist

Artists and caricaturists produced visual representations of the pétroleuses, sometimes to accompany the descriptions of journalists and sometimes to stand alone. These images, perhaps more than the written descriptions, gave staying power to the myth. In the artists' hands, however, the variety of pétroleuses described by reporters and other eyewitnesses—the implacable fury, her hair disheveled and unrestrained, her eyes wild with insanity; the madwoman, her face distorted by rage; the stunning beauty; the coquettish and seductive young woman—was lost. Replacing them were two major images—the hag and the victim.

In unsympathetic representations, artists emphasized the hideous, stripping the women of the compelling fury and sexuality of the written descriptions. They became banshees racing around Paris with their cans of petrol (fig. 17); hags pouring petrol through windows, sometimes assisted by their corrupted children (fig. 18); or in one of the most vicious anti-communarde cartoons of the period, a pig (fig. 19), a reversal of the myth of Circe, who seduced the companions of Ulysses with her beautiful voice and hair and turned them into swine.

The horror and rage conservatives felt toward the pétroleuses is obvious in the caricatures, as is their sense that these were unnatural women. Natural women do not have pigs' snouts, crouch around cellar windows like Macbeth's witches around a cauldron (see frontispiece), or race through

FIGURE 17. Eugène Girard, *The Emancipated Woman Shedding Light on the World.* Bibliothèque Nationale.

FIGURE 18. [Nevel] Untitled—pétroleuse and child. Bibliothèque Nationale.

FIGURE 19. Dubois, "A Pétroleuse. Ah! If her man could see her." *Paris sous la Commune.* Bibliothèque Nationale.

the streets with burning faggots and cans of petrol. By emphasizing the hideous in their drawings of the pétroleuse, the anti-Commune cartoonists went one step farther than the verbal descriptions in their hatred of women. But they also missed one of the things that made the journalists' pétroleuse so horrifying, and hence so hated—her sexuality.

For the conservative artist, the pétroleuse was to be the embodiment of evil, not a sexually attractive woman who could command the attention of men or a victim for whom the viewer might feel sympathy. To draw Goncourt's beautiful young fury with wild curly hair, steely eyes, and reddened cheeks would have been counterproductive. Attraction or sympathy on the part of the viewer would interfere with the message of the caricaturists. Baring the breasts of the pétroleuses, as the written accounts indicate occurred, was also impossible. It might have confused the message by reminding viewers of the powerful and virtuous bare-breasted goddesses of contemporary and classical art and caricature, or by turning the pétroleuses into victims.[135]

Frédéric Lix, in his representation of the pétroleuses for *Le Monde Illustré* (see the frontispiece) emphasized the evil of the female incendiaries by foregrounding them and juxtaposing them to ideal bourgeois women—a well-dressed, nurturing mother with a child in her arms and a well-coiffed, well-dressed young woman. They, along with a defenseless old man, are fleeing (or in the case of the woman at the upper window, trying to flee) a burning building. Lix's subjects illustrate what he saw as the horror of the pétroleuses and the Commune. Evil had triumphed. Working-class women, who had "forgotten their sex," had taken control and were destroying the city. Men, in the form of two national guardsmen, who should have been in charge at least of the women of their class, had turned their backs and stood passively by. Defenseless (and good) bourgeois women, children, and old people were no longer safe in their homes. The world had been turned upside down in more ways than one.

In sympathetic representations, artists stripped the pétroleuses of both their sexuality and their fearsomeness and hence of their power. Their pétroleuses were young, attractive women (fig. 20), captured and afraid, who shrank back in fear against the walls where they were about to be executed. Powerless and helpless, these pétroleuses were not the furies of the bourgeois imagination but innocent victims of the Versailles soldiers. They could not be sexually seductive or coquettish or strong, or they might appear to be in some way responsible for their fate. Nowhere to be seen in these drawings is the woman whose beauty and defiance attracted Goncourt: "Among these women there is one who is especially beautiful, beautiful with the implacable fury of a young Fate. She is a brunette with

FIGURE 20. "The End of the Commune: Execution of a Pétroleuse," *The Graphic,* June 10, 1871. Bibliothèque Nationale.

wild curly hair, with eyes of steel, with cheeks reddened by dried tears. She is *planted* in an attitude of defiance."[136]

Although the artists eliminated sexuality from their drawings, the pétroleuse had to be immediately recognizable as female. For sympathetic artists, her femininity (as distinct from her sexuality) was integral to her victimhood. For unsympathetic artists, femaleness rather than femininity was the issue. If the figure could be misconstrued as male, the power of the message would be lost. Some caricaturists did draw an occasional *pétroleur,* but this figure soon disappeared from the histories and memoirs of the Commune. For men, the horror of the fires could be represented adequately only in the figure of the unnatural woman, the female incendiary. As a result, the drawings always depicted the pétroleuse in a dress, even though the written accounts indicate that *communardes* often wore men's clothing.[137]

In the pétroleuse, the Commune acquired its own particular and powerful representation of the unruly woman. Beside her, the amazons, furies, viragoes, harpies, and *vivandières* of history (and of the earlier days of the Commune) paled into insignificance. Her image would illustrate memoirs, histories, and textbooks for more than a century. What made her so frightening was the perversion of nineteenth-century femininity that she embodied. Unlike unruly women from the Amazons of ancient Greece to Jeanne d'Arc, she did not fight men on their own terrain, where they might be expected to win, inasmuch as even the strongest, fiercest woman was after all still a woman, and would, they believed, flinch from death. Instead, she turned the cunning and deviousness that was thought to be charming in the most feminine women[138] to evil purpose; she crept through the night to burn and destroy.

How could men fight this unruly woman who perverted femininity? How could men know which women were likely to succumb to this evil? How, indeed, were men to avoid the seductive power of such women? The answer, they hoped, lay in the punishment of any woman—pétroleuse or poisoner—who had perverted her femininity. And so, women who were thought to be pétroleuses were executed by the soldiers, taunted by the good bourgeoises of Paris and Versailles, and brought to trial for their "crimes." And in good symbolic fashion, a woman who was accused of poisoning forty soldiers was "taken to her home to be shot at the door of her house as an example."[139] William Gibson, who made this statement, saw no need to elaborate on what kind of an example the soldiers had in mind (assuming, no doubt, that no elaboration was necessary), but there can be little doubt about the meaning he read into this act. A woman's place was

in her home. If she left it to behave unnaturally, she was no longer truly a "woman," no longer deserving of a "man's," protection, and she would be killed. Shooting a woman on her doorstep symbolically reinforced the message. Indeed, the entire semaine sanglante might be seen as a warning to the men and women of Paris of the kind of retribution they could expect if they rebelled again. Other warnings would sound from the courts in Versailles.