



Aaron Freundschuh. *The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Montaigne and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-Century Paris.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 272 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0082-9.

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The Courtesan and the Gigolo: The Murders in the Rue Montaigne and the Dark Side of Empire in Nineteenth-Century Paris is a carefully crafted and beautifully written account of a global subject, Henri Pranzini, and his alleged involvement in the 1887 murders of a courtesan named Marie Regnault, her daughter, and her maidservant. The uproar surrounding this particular crime, Freundschuh shows, was reflective of larger popular and political anxieties that resonated well beyond the Parisian capital: racialized notions of “urban insecurity,” transnational narratives of criminality and sexual danger, and fears accompanying the onset of mass immigration and the possibility of colonial migration to the metropole. The book seeks to demonstrate how the “colonial and criminal imaginaries” were linked in the debate about Pranzini’s participation in the Rue Montaigne murders. It focuses on the cosmopolitan criminal Henri (born Enrico) Pranzini, an “Oriental Don Juan” who seduced wealthy women to gain control of their fortunes.

Freundschuh has a real talent for transforming archival details into arresting stories. He engages in crime storytelling while analyzing late nineteenth-century crime storytelling, weaving together the life histories of the criminal, his victim, and the journalists and police officials involved in

the “Pranzini Affair.” In the process, Freundschuh demonstrates how their accounts, like the affair itself, were the product of the political culture of Third Republican France: persistent internal threats to democratic rule (namely Boulangism); an unsubstantiated panic about urban crime rates; discomfort with the human mobility associated with mass migration and empire-building; and the contemporaneous understandings of race and gender that added complexity to Pranzini’s trial.

The death of the eponymous courtesan Marie Regnault scarcely predates the “Jack the Ripper” murders of East London. It was the sixth killing of an upper-class sex worker in the 1880s in Paris and, unlike the Whitechapel murders that targeted streetwalkers, these women met their ends in posh Right Bank apartments. As for the gigolo, Pranzini was an Egyptian of Italian parentage with a history of petty theft and gambling. According to the racial lexicon of the time, Pranzini was a “Levantine,” the word used to describe Mediterranean Europeans from the popular classes who had settled in the Ottoman lands. He spoke seven languages, dressed in fine clothing, and presented as someone well above his station.

Freundschuh claims that the Pranzini Affair was the “first global murder investigation” (p. 11).

It was therefore a key moment in the late nineteenth-century “invention of international crime,” thanks in part to the mass circulation newspapers that recounted crime stories to an avidly reading public, along with the steamships and trains that carried cosmopolitan crooks across land and sea. [1] As with any microhistory, one might wonder about the broader conclusions that can be drawn from this particular case study. There are, however, a number of global criminals like Pranzini who used the increased mobility and anonymity of the era to their advantage. Recent studies by Julia Laite on turn-of-the-century pimps, and Matt Houlbrook on the “gentleman trickster” Netley Lucas, reveal strong parallels with Freunds Schuh’s account of Pranzini.[2] Thus what at first glance might seem like an exceptional story may be representative of life on the social periphery.[3]

Like many good crime writers, Freunds Schuh begins at the murder scene, zeroing in on the gentrifying, post-Haussmannization neighborhood where Marie Regnault resided. Using details from newspapers and novels, the author links the *quartier* to French Republican politics, sexual commerce, and embourgeoisement. Next Freunds Schuh turns to the Parisian popular press and its purveyors, in the context of journalistic encroachment upon police work and the remarkable career of the reporter Georges Grison: “The modern investigative crime reporter, thanks in part to Grison, became a recognizably individual urban type during the 1870s and 1880s” (p. 48). Freunds Schuh then broadens his lens to examine the national and global resonance of the crime. He captures the movement of people and ideas within and beyond Europe, including the circulation of crime stories in mass society; Pranzini’s travels through the empire, the imperial capital, and other “peripheral” lands; and the globalization of sex work at the end of the nineteenth century. A further layer of his analysis hinges on arguments about the racialization of liminal figures such as Pranzini

and the mobility of global subjects to, from, and within the French imperial nation-state.

The spectacle of Pranzini’s trial is the centerpiece of the book. The defense painted Pranzini as a “cosmopolitan infiltrator” by highlighting his sexual and racial “deviance”—an appeal to populist and nationalist elements and their disgust with the rising internationalism of the era. But was this really an “internationalism wrought by imperialism,” as Freunds Schuh claims (p. 270)? Or was the furor surrounding the Pranzini Affair more related to French anxieties about cosmopolitanism and the mobility of global subjects? To be sure, Freunds Schuh also argues that this is the story of a cosmopolitan criminal in a world where borders seemed increasingly permeable. But at times he strains to make his case more narrowly about empire. He describes Pranzini as a “new colonial criminal archetype,” and a “metonym for the dark side of European empire and, as such, a repository for national anxieties and undigested animus—by-products, in some measure, of republican France’s hasty construction of a worldwide empire by means of military conquest and violent repression” (p. 9).

But if Pranzini was a reflection of imperialism’s dark side, what about people from the colonies, real and imagined, who were far more racially marked than he? Can Pranzini, the Levantine, really stand in for an argument about the “male colonial antihero who returns unbidden to wreak havoc in the metropole” (p. 11)? Can Egypt and the Ottoman lands be discussed in the same breath as France’s formal colonies in Africa and Indochina? As Freunds Schuh points out, Pranzini was troubling to the Parisian social world he had infiltrated because he was so hard to identify. A cad, an arriviste, and a borderline European, the problem was that he blended in too well. Police investigators found nothing about his body or physiognomy that suggested an innate criminality. His clothing and lifestyle masked his working-class origins, allowing him to mingle in polite so-

ciety. He was not quite European, although probably could pass as one, with his whiteness as part of the ruse. At his trial, he was depicted as sexually predatory because he could move undetected from the seedier Parisian neighborhoods like Montmartre, to the elegant “Grands Boulevards” and respectable *quartiers* like the one in which the courtesan Marie Regnault was murdered. Pranzini was dangerous—a “cosmopolitan infiltrator”—precisely because he moved about the city unmarked.

These are the sorts of details that Freunds Schuh extracts so skillfully from court records, newspapers, novels, and more. He has done a remarkable job at both localizing and globalizing the crime story that was catalyzed by the murders in the Rue Montaigne.

Notes

[1]. Paul Knepper, *The Invention of International Crime: A Global Issue in the Making, 1881-1914* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

[2]. Julia Laite, “Traffickers and Pimps in the Era of White Slavery,” *Past and Present* 237 (2017): 237-269; Matt Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[3]. Edward Muir, “Introduction: Observing Trifles,” in *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe*, ed. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), xiv.

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