



# **THE *PARISIENNE*: BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY**

Master Thesis

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## Abstract

The myth of the *Parisienne* appeared in the eighteenth century to give French femininity a new life. Over the centuries, the personage has evolved, changed and adapted to social and cultural movements. From *bourgeoise* to courtesan, to tom boy to sexy woman, she has always been characterized by this *je ne sais quoi* which made her envied by her fellow female friends. Moderation, elegance and sexiness are what the myth around her is about. Thanks to the publishing industry and popular media, the image of the *Parisienne* has travelled and it built her a reputation. Being victim of mystification has contributed to the myth of Paris too, rendering a chic and romantic image of the capital. Today, fashion icon and stubborn attitude are her distinctive features. More than an identity, being (and feeling) Parisian is a concept. Also a feminine ideal and symbol of independence, the *Parisienne* embodies the quintessence of femininity and is idealized (and idolized) in fashion press. The *Parisienne* is like this, she is beautiful, cool, unique and she knows it.

**Key words:** Femininity; Ideal; Modernity; Myth; *Parisienne*.

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## Table of content

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>First Chapter: All <i>Parisiennes</i> are French: the myth of the French woman</b>	5
1 Introduction	5
2 French women according to the international popular media	5
2.1 <i>Fashion and style press</i>	5
2.2 <i>Celebrities and movie stars</i>	7
2.3 <i>Literature</i>	7
2.4 <i>An enviable reputation</i>	8
3 French women according to the French popular media	10
3.1 <i>Fashion and style press</i>	10
3.2 <i>Media personalities and their blogs</i>	11
4 Conclusion	14
<b>Second Chapter: The <i>Parisienne</i> of today</b>	15
1 Introduction	15
2 Mystification of the <i>Parisienne</i>	15
3 The <i>Parisienne</i> 's distinctive features	17
3.1 <i>The Parisienne's style and appearance</i>	17
3.2 <i>The Parisienne's attitude</i>	21
4 Conclusion	23
<b>Third Chapter: Historical background of the myth of the <i>Parisienne</i></b>	25
1 Introduction	25
2 The origins of the myth of the <i>Parisienne</i>	25
3 The first half of the twentieth century	29
4 The second half of the twentieth century	33
5 Conclusion	35

<b>Fourth Chapter: Being <i>Parisienne</i> as an identity</b>	36
1 Introduction	36
2 Paris the capital	36
3 Being Parisian: a ‘pure concept’	39
4 Location and identity	40
5 A feminine identity	42
6 Conclusion	45
<b>Fifth Chapter: The <i>Parisienne</i> as a feminine ideal</b>	46
1 Introduction	46
2 A feminine type	46
3 A fantasy? Deconstruction of the myth	49
4 In <i>The Parisienne</i> documentary	51
5 Conclusion	52
<b>Conclusion</b>	53
<b>References</b>	56

## Introduction

« *Paris est la ville artiste et poète par excellence ; mais les plus grands artistes et les plus grands poètes de Paris, ce sont les Parisiennes. Pourquoi ? Parce que [...] les Parisiennes imaginent, achèvent, complètent à chaque instant une oeuvre réelle et vivante, car elles se créent elles-mêmes.* » Théodore de Banville (1881)<sup>123</sup>

In 1866 French author Théodore de Banville (1823-1891) wrote about ‘the Parisian women’ as ‘modern muses’. He described those ‘mysterious women’ as ‘modest and amorous, and insolent, and supreme masters of elegance’ (1867). Thus he painted an ideal portrait of Parisian women, during the Second Empire in France, under the reign of Louis Philippe I (1830-1848). To him, these ‘Parisiennes’ embodied a utopian idea of beauty, grace, elegance and youth. Banville idolized their genius and praised these mythical creatures (1881). Parisian women are the greatest artists and poets of Paris, because they create themselves, they are art, or so he contends.

Banville provided a late-nineteenth century portrayal of that archetype of the Parisian woman. This image has remained part of the Western cultural consciousness even unto today. Nowadays the most poignant representations of the Parisian woman, or the *Parisienne* as I will refer to her, are in the press and the media in general. Most of the clichés concern her fashion style, which, apparently, combines refinement, discretion and sexiness. The *Parisienne* wears a black little dress, a striped shirt (*la marinière*), a pair of jeans, black shoes, and a trench or leather jacket. She wears some make-up (red lipstick, predominantly) and has messy hair. She cherishes her body and soul. Everything is in the look, as it were, she is imperfectly perfect, she is effortlessly elegant. Or, at least, that is the idea of this ideal feminine personage.

Over the last century, the *Parisienne* has gradually become an inspirational model for thousands and thousands of women around the world, who are eager to cultivate an everyday style of timeless glamour, careless and easy chic; the style of, in other words, *le chic parisien* or *ce petit je ne sais quoi* as Antoine Laurain (b. 1970?) writes in his essay ‘La Parisienne Aujourd’hui’ (2014:

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Paris is the artist and poet city *par excellence*; but the greatest artists and the greatest poets of Paris are *les Parisiennes*. Why? Because (...) Parisian women imagine, achieve, complete a real and lively work at any time, because they create themselves.’ Banville, 1881: 7

<sup>3</sup> Photography credits: Photography 57; Baudoin in 75 *Parisiennes*. Gent: Snoeck, 2014.

17). The idea of the Parisian woman is glamorized by the media. Living women who are portrayed in the media as being *Parisiennes* and / or having perfected that style, are envied. So what is it about Parisian women that fascinates the world? This concerns French femininity, in fact. The publishing industry has provided the public a deluge of how-to guides and books filled with myths, clichés and stereotypes about being the perfect Parisian woman.

One can wonder how such a specific idealized character became so central to Western ideals about beauty and femininity. A hypothesis would be that the *Parisienne* is seen as a role model to follow. ‘*Les Parisiennes font d’elles-mêmes ce qu’elles doivent et veulent être*’ (‘Parisian woman make of themselves what they have to and want to be’; 1881) wrote Banville, and perhaps this self-fashioning of identity is something many women today aspire to. This praise of the Parisian woman is therefore modern. Banville already alluded to a ‘*formule parisienne*’. Do contemporary Parisian women have to follow a set of rules to be considered as such? And consequently, would that mean that when a woman is born in Paris she is a *Parisienne*? Banville continued and affirmed that a Parisian woman is from Paris but not necessarily, because ‘a beautiful, rich, elegant and spiritual woman is Parisian’ (1867). It would imply that a *Parisienne* is not grounded to the iconic city and appear to come from somewhere else as long as her social status allows her to do so. Banville then went back on his words saying that as she needs to breathe Parisian air to exist, she can only be in Paris, by Paris and for Paris (Banville, 1867).

This thesis aims at understanding the modern myth of the Parisian woman. I intend to highlight the feminine ideal the Parisian woman represents, through 19th century and 20th century literature and to see how this model has influenced and may still influence women nowadays. The female kind today seems to be willing to relate to someone they do not know (personally), namely a celebrity. So at a time where individualist societies prevail, it is intriguing to notice that people want to belong to the same group, while wishing to be original and different at the same time. In this thesis, I will confront the concept of the acquirement of an identity with the example of the *Parisienne*.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter will provide a view of French femininity as a global brand. It seems to be universally accepted — or, at least, propagated in the media — that French women dress, eat, parent, age and romance better than their fellow female kind. So to comprehend how the myth of the Parisian woman has emerged, it is relevant to first define the specificity of that French femininity. Western women seem to envy French women, but for which motives? A deluge of books have overwhelmed the public, claiming that French women are better than everyone else and in order to ‘compete’ with them, a particular way of life has to be

followed. Therefore it is essential to analyze how French women are described according to international and French popular media. I will use brand theory to make clear that media shape feminine representations, which will be useful to understand how French and Parisian women became a type.

The second chapter will focus on the representation of the *Parisienne* of today according to contemporary sources, namely *How To Be Parisian: Wherever You Are* (2014) by Caroline de Maigret (b. 1975), *La vraie Parisienne* (2015) by Anne Plantagenet (b. 1972) and Antoine Laurain's essay 'Parisienne Aujourd'hui: A la recherche de ce petit je ne sais quoi...' (2014). Considering all contemporary society's new information culture (ie., social networks, blogs, video, music,), the portrait of the today's Parisian woman is glamorized. Her distinctive features fall under two categories: her style and appearance, and her attitude. I will focus on her mystification first using Roland Barthes's theory of myth, to then emphasize the representation of her personage via modern sources.

The third chapter will discuss the emergence of the myth of the *Parisienne* and her journey until the 21st century. Well known French writers such as Gérard Bauër (1888-1937), Henry Becque (1837-1899) and Pierre de R gnier (1898-1943) have addressed the Parisian women specifically, their essays being collected in *La Parisienne de Paris* (2014).<sup>4</sup> These authors present a notion of the Parisian woman of yesterday, highlighting the particularity of her appearance and attitude. Each author deals with the *Parisienne*'s emancipation and the evolution of French social mores during the twentieth century; factors that have affected the representation of today's Parisian women. I will analyze these sources via a close-reading of the literature, and show that all believed in the mystification of that figure.

The fourth chapter will look at the concept of 'being Parisian' as an identity for women. First of all, it is sometimes forgotten that Paris belongs to France. Being Parisian seems detached to French culture, it is therefore useful to see how the city places itself towards the country. Being Parisian is apparently a 'cool thing' nowadays and is being sold as a 'concept'. But is there such a thing as being Parisian? In other words, is it a state of mind that goes beyond a style of dress or a particular diet? The idea of the *Parisienne* does not only stand for living in the capital of France anymore, but indeed more for acting like someone called 'Parisian'. The Parisian woman being part of the Parisian culture because of her cultural capital, the notion of Bourdieu's habitus and field theories (Bourdieu, 1980) are great tools to explain that reality is a social concept, because

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes from Bau r, Becque, Laurain and R gnier are taken from *La Parisienne de Paris* (2014).



to exist it is existing socially in relation to others. In particular I will employ Bourdieu's habitus to argue that location and identity are two intertwined notions. It is therefore necessary to link Parisian culture to its inhabitants, to see why a woman would claim to be a true Parisian woman, which I will do by means of feminine identity theories (Bourdieu and Butler).

The fifth and last chapter will focus on the *Parisienne* seen as a feminine ideal. To comprehend why there is such a frenzy around her, I will define her as a feminine ideal which will be relevant to the conclusion of the research as well as the concept of being a woman nowadays (especially via the representation of media). This will lead to an analytical discussion regarding the deconstruction of the myth of the *Parisienne* with Baudrillard's theory on simulacra and simulation, and an analysis of the documentary *The Parisienne* by Melinda Triani (2014).

Altogether, this thesis will offer an overview of the myth of the Parisian woman until today. She is beautiful, she is cool and she knows it: this is the mythical reputation that sticks to her. She has gradually taken the role of a feminine ideal for other women and it has been conveyed by the beliefs around her. As famous French blogger Garance Doré would say, 'the Parisian woman is an idea, a concept'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Doré, Garance. (2013)

## **First Chapter: All *Parisiennes* are French: The myth of the French woman**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will focus on French femininity viewed as a global brand in order to paint a picture of the myth of the *Parisienne* specifically. Obviously ‘the French woman’ and the Parisian woman are not the same woman, not every French woman is Parisian and vice-versa. Below I will elaborate on the characteristics ascribed to French woman (as an idealized type) from both international and French point of view. There is a nearly absurd multitude of press articles and books representing French women as an archetype for other Western women. Media tend to shape women’s models and create standards for femininity and feminine behavior that are upheld — or at least proposed as an ideal model — around the world. Why are French women envied by non-French (and particularly Western) women? What seems to be so special about them? This chapter will aim to answer these questions.

First I will analyse what image international popular media draw of French women. Subsequently I will focus on the representation of French women according to French popular media to show that the image differs. This chapter will make clear that both French and Parisian woman are subjected to a true mystification.

### **2. French women according to the international popular media**

#### **2.1 *Fashion and style press***

‘Sexy, effortless style is synonymous with French women’.<sup>6</sup> This is how many non-French press articles portraying the Gallic female start. The goal of such pieces is mostly to unlock the legendary secrets of style and beauty that French women apparently possess and hence to keep the myth of

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<sup>6</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

their special status going. Adjectives such as ‘beautiful’, ‘confident’, ‘attractive’, ‘funny’, ‘elegant’, etc. continue to contribute to such mystery. In ‘How You Can Acquire The Style of French Women’ American reporter Helen Grange gives an accurate representation of how the notion of French femininity is framed by the media; it serves as good as a starting point for my analysis. To sum up her words, French women are supposedly confident and effortlessly elegant. They are apparently considered among ‘the most attractive and intriguing women in the world’ she states; by who? No one knows. She interviews image consultant and life coach Donna Rae Patricios who declares that ‘it’s about knowing who you are and expressing it confidently through your dress. (...) For the French it’s not all or nothing, but everything in moderation’.<sup>7</sup> And regarding their fashion style, ‘they do casual the classy way, black is always a timeless and chic option’.<sup>8</sup>

So French women would represent that ideal every women aspire to be. American reporter Annie Tomlin is certain of the *natural* beauty of Gallic women, they ‘embrace their flaws: so French’.<sup>9</sup> Some beauty experts agree and reveal their secrets. Hairstyle and creator of film character Amélie Poulain’s famous haircut remarks that ‘French women are very sophisticated with beautiful textures, beautiful makeup, but it's never too much.’<sup>10</sup> Mac Cosmetics senior artist Tom Sapin adds that they always wear a distinctive sign of femininity, be it makeup, hair accessory.<sup>12</sup> The use of red lipstick in particular is seemingly very significant of their makeup routine, as well as what is called the ‘bedhead’ hairstyle, in other words, a well-thought messy haircut. On the Internet, there are even a multitude of step-by-step guides on ‘how to get French girl bedhead’, which shows to what extent French femininity as a brand is commercialized.<sup>13</sup> French women also seem to have other ‘rules’ regarding their hair, such as never dying them or using a hair-drier.

Journalists tend to agree that French women have that *je ne sais quoi*, something inexplicable and innate that makes them glamour and triggers everyone. Donna Rae Patricios, mentioned earlier, even speculates on the fact that they have a ‘special gene’ in their DNA, which is — apparently — ‘literally passed on from mother to daughter over generations’.<sup>14</sup> It would appear

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<sup>7</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

<sup>8</sup> Persad, Michelle. (2013)

<sup>9</sup> Tomlin, Annie. (2013)

<sup>10</sup> Tomlin, Annie. (2013)

<sup>11</sup> *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, film directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Tomlin, Annie. (2013)

<sup>13</sup> Lebsack, Lexy. (2014)

<sup>14</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

that non-French press articles all tend to come to the conclusion that French women are chic because they are born into ‘a society that reveres fashion and style’.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Celebrities and movie stars

Over the years, several factors have contributed to the myth of those desirable French women and eventually French femininity has emerged as an ideal representation for women, due to its display on the international stage. In the twentieth century, French celebrities such as Brigitte Bardot (b. 1934), Catherine Deneuve (b. 1943), Françoise Hardy (b. 1944) and later on Vanessa Paradis (b. 1972), Marion Cotillard (b. 1975) and Audrey Tautou (b. 1976) took to the spotlight and became the faces of true Frenchness in people’s minds. Their impact was tremendous, especially by way of the film industry; movies made the image of what a French woman apparently looked like available to audiences worldwide. Actress Brigitte Bardot in particular introduced a youthful and sexy image of French femininity in the 1960s. She quickly became a fashion icon for France as well as around the world. She revolutionized the codes of French femininity and in particular the image of the *Parisienne*, which will be discussed in the third chapter.

Movie stars had a great role in the representation of French femininity, which created a wave of excitement from the audience. It started in the 1960s when French women became an inspirational model for non-French women. They started to be idolized, and envied. That *chic parisien* started driving the other females of the world crazy. A lot of foreign movies started being filmed (and still are) in France and especially in Paris. The Hollywood industry presents the city as a setting for love stories (Rocamora, 2009: 22). It renders an authentic and romantic image where only *Parisiennes* live (*Midnight in Paris* (2011) by Woodie Allen for instance).

## 2.3 Literature

The demand for images of Frenchness from America increased and French femininity has appeared in the publishing industry as a new sub-genre in personal development books and novels. The French have found themselves put on a pedestal and looked at. An incredible amount of books on

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<sup>15</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

why French women were better than everyone else have emerged: *Chic & Slim: How Those Chic French Women Eat All That Rich Food and Still Stay Slim* (2011) by Anne Barone; *Two Lipsticks and a Lover: Unlock Your Inner French Woman* (2006) by Helena Frith Powell; *French Women Don't Get Fat* or *French Women Don't Get Facelifts* (2013) by Mireille Guiliano and many more. Via such best-selling books, French femininity ideal is marketed to the masses. Personal development strategies form the cause of these publications, which sell a supposedly French-inspired way of life that claim to change the reader's life. There, the impact of media has been remarkable. They offer the audience a variety of attitudes that can shape their personalities, providing social role models, appropriate and inappropriate patterns of behaviors, style and fashion (Damean, 2002: 89).

And if books are not enough, the content of it can be found on different websites. Mireille Guiliano, famous specialized author in French femininity, launched the *French Women Don't Get Fat* website.<sup>16</sup> A lot of advice on style and cooking recipes are listed which spread that idea of healthiness relating to French women.

Therefore, women can then identify themselves with the archetype of the French woman and integrate such a model in their lifestyles. Media portray a woman via three steps (Damean, 2002). First, her image is analyzed, followed by her private life and her career at last. The contemporary culture is focused on image and leisure activities, putting aside the work space. If we look closer at press articles, when the French woman is described, beauty and style are the two first distinctive traits. Then, her ability to love and raise children are mentioned to finish with her professional life. With this scheme, media manage to manipulate women's attitudes towards the alternative models of femininity (Damean, 2002: 93). In short, media representations of femininity happen to have a strong influence on women and on the way they shape their identities.

## 2.4 An enviable reputation

So French femininity spreads out thanks to a powerful representation in the media. It is highlighted by various meliorative adjectives and women seem to be fond of it. But one can wonder 'what is it that earns them this enviable reputation?'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *French Women Don't Get Fat* website <http://frenchwomendontgetfat.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

As American author Judith Warner explains in her article ‘Who Knew? The French Got Femininity Right’<sup>18</sup> that when she started living in France, she did not understand that frenetic enthusiasm towards French women. Writing about parenthood and women’s issues in general, she thought it was all preconceived ideas and that French women were just the same as any other women; until she came back to The United States. Indeed, after becoming mother of two and spending five years in France, she had to admit that something was different and then understood why books entitled ‘French woman are beautiful’ or ‘French women can do it better’ were being sold. She argues that American women had reached a point of selflessness and feeling of guilt that she had never perceived in France. There is constantly a feeling of re-assessment. The average American woman, according to Warner, is not self-confident, especially once she has children to take care of.

Of course, it is not to deny that Warner argues that part of the reason why American women are more entitled to feel the way they feel is because of different femininity rights in France. Indeed, women have access to better maternity benefits, which help them through the first years after giving birth. French society diffused a ‘realistic and humane view of modern women’s lives’, erasing the traditional sex roles. This, of course, has been allowed by the revolution of social mores in the twentieth century which led to women’s emancipation in the 1950s and so on.

In her article, Warner pinpoints the different way of life of both American and French women when it comes to combine the working and family life. She assesses that in America, once kids come into the picture, ‘women retain the right to compete in the marketplace, but lose the right to any kind of decent quality of life’. Warner does not really explain the reason why it happens. In comparison to the American female kind, Gallic women work as an ‘essential component of modern motherhood’.<sup>19</sup> It is an undeniable source of happiness in their lives and thus because of the impacts of the French revolution in the twentieth century. She concludes by saying that ‘if things are better for women there (in France), it is due to a profound and enduring social consensus that life should be made livable based on who they are and not on an abstract moralistic notion of how they ought to be.’ The self-confidence of French women is highlighted once more; characteristic very present in the press too. French women are in control of their lives.

However British writer Helena Frith Powell, author of *All You Need to Be Impossibly French: A Witty Investigation Into the Lives, Lusts, and Little Secrets of French Women* (2006), *Two*

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<sup>18</sup> Warner, Judith. (2001)

<sup>19</sup> Warner, Judith. (2001)

*Lipsticks and a Lover: Unlock Your Inner French Woman* (2007) and *More More France Please: The Little Lusts and Secrets of Life in France* (2007), posts in her blog that ‘the truth is that French women are not so blooming perfect’. Although she gives a positive image of French women in her books revealing their secrets, she writes an article titled ‘The Great Myth: Why French women aren’t so sexy after all’. She traces the steps on how she wrote the books while living in France. She argues that Parisian women and French women are different, which surprised her. She expected all French women to be elegant and stylish, such as the *Parisiennes*, although only classy chic women will be found in some Parisian districts: ‘This non-fat, ultra-chic race is confined to certain quarters of Paris’. Her books are not about contributing to the myth of French women but to show what they do differently, because she is certain one thing: that their way of life is distinct. She says that ‘there are practical things you can do to look more like the perfect Parisian icon. (...) Of course (...) and wouldn’t we just love to be like them?’ or how to idolize French women.

### 3. French women according to the French popular media

#### 3.1 *Fashion and style press*

Where Anglo-American fashion and style journalists glamorize French women and their innate elegance, French reporters deny those statements, claiming it to be pure fiction. For example, fashion and trend journalist for French fashion magazine *Madame Figaro* Peggy Frey lists six clichés regarding French women in her article ‘La Femme Française, ‘an American Dream’’: their natural beauty, uncontrollable appetite without getting fat, seductive style, effortlessly chic appearance, skills in raising their children and cooking.<sup>20</sup>

Frey insists that French women are a product of the Western world’s imagination. They have been victims of a mystification. Non-French women who aspire to resemble these particular women one day, have thrown at them characteristics such as ‘confident, funny, subtle and charismatic’, like if French women were the only ones to be ‘confident, funny, subtle and charismatic’. Frey even goes further, destroying the myth, by claiming that their secret is ‘to do

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<sup>20</sup> Frey, Peggy. (2013)

everything falsely: [they are] falsely coiffed, falsely dressed (...). No innate style on the horizon'.<sup>21</sup> It almost seems like French women are simply superficial. According to her, their motto is 'less is more', or the art to *pretend*, so to say. To rephrase the idea of Frey, French magazine *Le Figaro* wrote: 'We could maintain the mystery, feed the myth; but French women are known for being frank, they don't mince their words, so it's time to re-establish a few truths. It could be called: 'The Truth about French Women written by a French woman who is far from perfect and very much representative of her kind'', Frey herself.<sup>22</sup> What she tries to say is that all those stereotypes and ideas the world has about French women are all lies.

But if Peggy Frey contradicts what is written in the international media, Paris-based editorial makeup artist Violette argues that 'for the French, it's very particular: What we want is to be ourselves—not a better version of ourselves.'<sup>23</sup> Self-assurance surely defines French women, which can be seen in the way they lead their lives, namely having kids and a triumphant career at the same time; all idealized notions that form the basis of successfully selling books like *French Women don't get fat* (Mireille Guiliano, 2005) or *Ooh La La!: French Women's Secrets to Feeling Beautiful Every Day* (Jamie Cat Callan, 2013).

So French femininity is used as a brand to sell. It provides self-expression and even pleasure (Kathman, 2002: 25), which can be found in different domains. Fashion, for instance, uses and reuses of the 'French touch'. One piece of clothing that defines French women is the striped shirt, also called the *marinière*. It was introduced in 1858 for the French National Navy. Coco Chanel (1883-1971) turned it into a fashionable item and French luxury brand Chanel still uses it in certain collections. Jean-Paul Gaultier's *marinière* is one of the most known and distinctive piece of clothing since the 1980s. A lot of fashion brands have adopted it along the years and today, everyone commonly owns at least one of these blue and white stripe shirts, men included.

### 3.2 Media personalities and their blogs

Of course the digital revolution had an immense impact on the way French femininity, as it is known today, is perceived (Kathman, 2002: 24). The Internet offers a multitude of websites and blogs in particular, which list tips on how to be the perfect little French woman. The brand develops

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<sup>21</sup> Kirkova, Deni. (2013)

<sup>22</sup> Penketh, Anne and Kim Willsher. (2014)

<sup>23</sup> Ellenberg, Celia. (2014)



in response to new markets as an ‘ideal’ accessible to the targeted audience. By acquiring advice and information on French femininity, be it via books, movies or blogs, consumers trust the image of this global brand that is all about refinement, discretion, moderation and sexiness (Kathman, 2002: 25).

Therefore there has been a lot going on on the Internet. Fashion blogging emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Rocamora, 2011). At first independent bloggers were excluded from the fashion universe as brands were reluctant to engage with them. But gradually numerous blogs arose. In France, Parisian blogger Jeanne Damas was found thanks to her blog and has now appeared in American Apparel’s advertisements, had her article in *ELLE*.<sup>2425</sup> *Vogue Paris* even devoted an article to her and her clothes.<sup>26</sup> She is a great representation of the French woman and plays of it. Famous fashion blogger Garance Doré also wrote an article about Jeanne Damas.<sup>27</sup> Everything seems to assert her power in the fashion blogosphere. To continue, American-based fashion website *Refinery29* declared that Kenza Sadoun El Glaoui was one great fashion blogger in France.<sup>2829</sup> Garance Doré and Betty Autier also made an appearance; this illustrates the relevance of their blogs for the fashion world.<sup>30</sup> They have managed to claim a certain Frenchness and embrace it. Their blogs display their holidays all over the world, nights out in the capital, new purchases or coffee breaks; a simple idea that works and seems to inspire other women to live their lives differently. A couple of years ago, these websites were blogs and only available in French. They are now readable in English and sometimes Spanish. At first just a hobby, their blogs represent now an income. Some bloggers have been able to capitalize on this to rise to visibility and popularity and further consolidate their symbolic and economic capitals. They have an impact on fashion trends as they collaborate with French labels and create their own collections that are diffused at the international scale. Some of them are sent overseas by French brands to promote an event or just as the face of the brand. Considered as typical *Parisiennes* women for most of them, they are the faces of modern French femininity. This blurs the line between French femininity and Parisian femininity.

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<sup>24</sup> Jeanne Damas’s tumblr accessed via: <http://jeannedamas.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>25</sup> Laloy, Annie. ‘Rencontre avec Jeanne Damas’ in *ELLE*, (November 11, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Neyt, Jennifer. ‘Dans le Dressing de Jeanne Damas’ in *Vogue Paris*.

<sup>27</sup> Doré Garance. ‘Beauty Minute with Jeanne...’ in Garance Doré’s blog (October 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Colon, Ana. (2014)

<sup>29</sup> Sadoun El Glaoui, Kenza. *La Revue de Kenza* accessed via: <http://www.larevuedekenza.fr/>.

<sup>30</sup> Autier, Betty. *Le Blog de Betty* accessed via: <http://www.leblogdebetty.com/>.

Interesting to note that most of fashion bloggers are young, conventionally good looking women, whose posts also give a significant amount of space to established brands, often displayed on their model-like body. They established feminine standards spread by the media once again. In today's postmodern discourse, identity is a performance influenced by media which propose ideals (Damean, 2006) such as French women and their unconditional elegance. Media define femininity in relation to youth and beauty, those being norms in today's society. French women are always described according to their innate beauty but once again, these beauty standards are created by the media and just being followed by the Gallic kind. By pursuing these ideals, they indirectly obey to men's desires. In 1999, Margaret St John argued that French women had a particular relation to men. 'French women define themselves in relation to men. They defer to men; they dress for men; they flirt shamelessly with men; they trip up or denigrate other women for men.'<sup>31</sup> This is why French women are different she claims. Ten years later and French women are 'women who left dozens of brokenhearted men in their wake'.<sup>32</sup>

The new ideal of femininity strengthens the male domination, since women must look good with the only purpose of attracting and keeping a man. These new standards require that women should be young and 'slim, domestic workers, reproducers, loving wives and mothers, intelligent, ambitious career women altogether' (Damean, 2006: 93). Media display a utopian feminine picture. That is why only meliorative adjectives are attributed to the myth of French women. As the media are aware that those women exemplify an archetype, feminine standards become available to any women. But besides beauties and mothers, women also appear as professionals in the postmodern discourse (Damean, 2006: 91). Indeed French women are referred as business and/or busy women in the daily-life. They embody modernity and success, be it socially, professionally or at home with the children.

French femininity can also be looked at via social network Instagram. When *How to Be Parisian: Wherever You Are* (2014) was published, author Caroline de Maigret released a couple of videos on her Instagram account starring herself and performing the Parisian woman she describes in her book.<sup>33</sup> An *How To Be Parisian* Instagram account was also set up.<sup>34</sup> The latest Instagram account is still active and (re)posts pictures of people reading the book all over the world. The hashtag #howtobeparisian counts over 22 thousands publications. By capturing experiences, brands

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<sup>31</sup> St. John, Margaret. (1999)

<sup>32</sup> Grange, Helen. (2011)

<sup>33</sup> Caroline de Maigret's Instagram account, accessed via: <https://instagram.com/carolinedemaigret/>.

<sup>34</sup> How To Be Parisian Wherever You are's Instagram account, accessed via: <https://instagram.com/howtobeparisian/>.

let the consumers dive into that prototypical but fictional world (Kathman, 2002: 27). It is obvious that mass media, namely the press, TV shows and the Internet, remain important, but interactive media now must accept the principles of effective brand identity (Kathman, 2002: 31).

#### 4. Conclusion

This chapter has stressed why French women happen to be part of a myth. Elegance, moderation and sexiness are among their main characteristics, be it displayed in international and French popular media. Although French popular media have a more critical and pessimistic opinion about their compatriots, they do not seem to understand why they are being envied by the rest of the world. All this international press contribute to the myth, full of stereotypes and clichés according to the French. It is flattering for the Gallic female kind, who admit to live differently but so do Americans. The mystery is at its height. French women represent a feminine ideal, deeply influenced by the media that non-French women tend to value. This is one of the reasons why best-selling books on French femininity exist overseas.

Although all Parisiennes are French women, there seems to be a difference. Firstly, French women seem to be referred as a whole, as a group, whereas Parisiennes are a singular entity. Parisian women have somehow managed to dethrone French women from their seats. They are now the proud ambassadors of the country, leading the way to new horizons.

## Second Chapter: The *Parisienne* of Today

### 1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the representation of the myth of the *Parisienne* of today. First I will look at diverse myth theories in order to show why the *Parisienne* can be studied as a myth. Then I will focus on the different distinctive features she has, namely her style and appearance followed by her particular attitude. This section will be based upon three contemporary sources namely *How To Be Parisian: Wherever You Are* (2014) by Caroline de Maigret (b. 1975), *La Vraie Parisienne* (2015) by Anne Plantagenet (b. 1972) and 'La Parisienne Aujourd'hui: A la Recherche du '*petit je ne sais quoi*'...' essay written by French author Antoine Laurain (2014). Caroline de Maigret is a former French model and frequently perceived by the press as being a true *Parisienne* woman. She made use of her 'Frenchness' (and fame) to publish a guide on how to be Parisian. French writer Plantagenet draws seven portraits of Parisian women, including herself among them. She raises issues on feminine icons and identity in the contemporary world. By this I intend to give a clear depiction of the representation of the *Parisienne*.

### 2. Mystification of the *Parisienne*

By idealizing the *Parisienne* over the centuries, she has been victim of mystification. It is safe to say that the myth about her entails that supreme quintessence of womanhood. Being *Parisienne* seemingly signifies embodying a certain femininity mingled with fashion. Therefore, an explanation about myth comes useful.

To start simply, French author Antoine Laurain argues that a myth produces mental images that fall into a puzzle. The pieces are spread over the years and if one can see the finished image of this particular myth, it still remains imprecise (Laurain, 2014: 11). Consequently a myth flutters in the emptiness of signs, implying a multitude of meanings. According to what Dundes says, myths

can be looked at in many ways, which often can be employed at the same time without contradiction (Dundes, 1988: 167). 'A myth may have different emphases or levels of meaning' (Kirk, 1974: 39) as it often serves several purposes. Therefore it is seen as a cause or an explanation of some real phenomenon.

So what could have the reasons for the emergence of the myth of the *Parisienne*? Premises could be that the personage may have taken form to render a better image of the city after the revolution of 1789, to pacify the political climate. By spreading an image of attractive Parisian women, tourism increased in the capital which was advertised as a site for sexual purchase in the nineteenth century. Moreover Paris being promoted as the city of love and the fashion capital during the twentieth century (thanks to the film industry) could have reinforced the myth of the elegant and desired female inhabitant. It is essential to understand that the myth of the *Parisienne* constitutes an element of the myth of the city. They both render a romantic and powerful image of the location. Therefore the myth can have emerged to give more credibility to the capital and to attribute a stronger economic power at the international stage.

According to Roland Barthes, a myth is a communication system (Barthes, 1957: 683), it entails a message. It is understood as a semiology system. In his system, there are three terms: the significant (the woman body), the signified (the concept of femininity) and the relationship between those two terms, the sign (the *Parisienne*). So a myth can take the form of a word, a discourse, a language, a sound, an image and a photography. For example, the personage of *la garçonne* of the twentieth century (*Parisienne* of 1929) functions as a symbol of women's emancipation.

Moreover, feelings and emotions are associated with a myth. It reminds of the past. Its first function is to talk about things but by purifying them so that they become natural and eternal. The myth made up by the media changes the sign into an eternal truth. The myth replaces the explanation turning it into an assessment. No word is necessary anymore to understand the myth as the public opinion knows what message it conveys.

Therefore a myth is a collective representation produced by society, by history. Caillois agrees with Barthes and notes that 'myth belongs by definition to what is collective. It justifies, supports and inspires the existence and action of a community, of a people, of a profession or a secrete society' (Caillois, 2002: 154, cited in Rocamora, 2009: 125). Myths of course are spread by the media.

So if French authors created the myth as Rétaillaud-Bajac asserts (2014), they intended to diffuse a specific image of the Parisian feminine archetype and of femininity in general. By 'creating' the *Parisienne*, her uniqueness has been reinforced which turned her into a desired

product. The myth about her took form and magnified her personage in the nineteenth century especially. It has been developed since due to many authors who saw her as a representative archetype of the French capital.<sup>35</sup> The myth of the Parisian woman built her own scenario with a new meaning - the myth of Paris as the feminine singular (Prus, 2014).

### 3. The *Parisienne*'s distinctive features

#### 3.1 *The Parisienne's style and appearance*

In the same way that 'a garment can signify because it is named' (Barthes, 1990: 115) so can a fashionable type such as the *Parisienne*. In the same way that there are species of clothes, in fashion discourse there are species of fashionable women, including the *Parisienne* of course (Rocamora, 2009: 106). As she has always been associated to fashion, the Parisian woman has always been a recurrent figure in fashion media which depict the way she looks like, dresses and acts. It is not to forget that for many Parisian women, fashion has been part of their lives, be it personally and / or professionally. In Paris the capital of fashion, 'fashion is a way of living because it also is the means by which one makes a living' (Rocamora, 2009: 96). During the nineteenth century, 'half the female population lives off fashion, while the other half lives for fashion' (E. Raymond in 1867, cited in Higonnet, Paris: 117).

The *Parisienne* has been incorporated into the fashion discourse as 'women of fashion' who represent 'the very essence of female fashionability, the apex of alluring womanhood' (Rocamora, 2009: 95). Since she appears in fashion press next to professional models, she is turned into a model. She poses wearing fashionable cloths and because she is placed at the centre of magazines, it grants her a prominent position on the French but also international fashion map. Consequently, fashion media describe her as 'the most beautiful mistress of haute couture' (*Vogue* September 1995, p.168) or define her as 'a symbol of that elegance capture through the prism of idealization' (Cahier 2, February 2000, p.3, cited in Rocamora, 2009: 95).

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<sup>35</sup> Archetypes are forms or patterns that are universal, since they are collective opinion (Jung, 1941).

She is represented as a tastemaker because of living in the capital (Rocamora, 2009: 95). This gives her the 'right' of transmitting her knowledge on cool and trendy addresses and fashion advice to others, deprived of this so wanted 'fashion capital'. Therefore, magazines have been overwhelmed by notions such as 'tips', 'addresses' and 'secrets'. It has become a sort of automatic reflex now. 'These notions have also come to form the substance of the many contemporary guidebooks on Paris fashion; guidebooks that have helped reproduce the mythical status of the city and its female inhabitants' (Rocamora, 2009: 99). This explains why the analysis of a guidebook written by four French women (*How To Be Parisien Wherever You Are*, 2014) is relevant for the purpose of this thesis. It aims to unlock the mystery of the '*Parisienne*'s sexiness, elegance and classic chic'. Sections about 'Parisian tips' are presented, followed by specific habits on how to spend a day, week or weekend in 'the Parisian way' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 179). Traditional French/Parisian recipes also come along to even feel closer to the *Parisienne*'s way of life (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 194, 214). Lists of particular words the *Parisienne* uses (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 232), classic movies she sees (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 222), inspiring books she reads (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 96), stores she shops at (Fressange, 2012: 70-109; Maigret and Cie, 2014: 238-248): everything is exposed, everything that can make a woman 'more' *Parisienne*.

Her fashionable style and allure distinguish her not only from the other women but also from women from Paris, because as Fargue notes *Parisiennes* and 'women from Paris' are 'not exactly the same thing' (Fargue, 1964: 174). Delord completes it writing that 'not all women from Paris are *Parisiennes*' (Delord, 1841: 14). He comes up with a poetic image: if it rains, the woman from Paris opens an umbrella, surely not the *Parisienne*, as 'a pretty woman with an umbrella is like a pretty rhyme that is false (...) The woman from Paris takes care of her health, the *Parisienne* takes care of her allure. One is a woman, the other is a poet. Here is the difference' (Delord, 1841: 18, cited in Rocamora, 2009: 105). The *Parisienne* adorns herself. She daydreams and invents herself every day (Lurçat, 1999).

However if her fashionable appearance is one of her distinctive traits, it should imply that one could distinguish her easily from other fashionable women (Rocamora, 2009: 103). Since she has been changing and evolving in the past decades and centuries, it makes it difficult to identify her 'real' look. The type she embodies has been dealt with so much in the media that a diversity and multiplicity of styles are labeled '*Parisienne*'. In 1841, Delord already wrote in his *Physiologie* that 'there are so many varieties, so many surprises, so many contrasts among Parisian women' (Delord, 1841: 10). It almost seems as if the *Parisienne* is ephemera, an illusion.

The questions on what she wears and how she looks have surely been answered by the fashion press industry and other media. The *Parisienne* has become associated with a ‘recurring set of iconic and linguistic signs’ for instance the trench coat or *tailleur* (skirt-suit), which has gradually become ‘a sartorial sign of authority, independence, and rationality born of its association with the masculinity of modernity’ since the nineteenth century (Rocamora, 2009: 107). The function of the *tailleur* was to give her ‘a symbol of modern femininity defined as active, urban and emancipated’, especially with the arrival of French designer Yves-Saint-Laurent in the 1970s. The trench coat is an essential in the *Parisienne*’s wardrobe and ‘truth be told, if she could wear just a Burberry trench and nothing underneath, she would be in heaven’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 8).

Because of the Parisian style, one may think that she has innumerable cloths but she does not, in fact. She owns timeless seasonal garments and a few big — expensive — ‘hits’ of big brands. Simplicity characterizes her purchases. In *How To Be Parisian Wherever You Are* (2014), there is a non-exhaustive list of the ‘Essentials’ of the *Parisienne*: jeans, men’s shoes which are ‘the very essence of her style’, the bag, the little black blazer, ballet flats, a small silk scarf, the white shirt that is ‘iconic and timeless’, a long trench (again!), a thick scarf, the oversized sweater that slips off the shoulder, basic oversized sunglasses, an oversized shirt, the very simple but very expensive T-shirt (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 91). She does not wear much jewelry, only if it belonged to her family. And of course the *Parisienne* has a ‘signature item’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 30). It can be anything starting from a bag to a pair of shoes to her mother’s leather jacket. The particular garment functions as an emblem for independence and freedom that supposedly enhances an ‘attitude’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 31). Same goes for the miniskirt. It is something particular to the *Parisienne*. It is never too long and too short, the miniskirt plays the role of ‘hide and show’ also understood as elegance and sexiness, sign of feminine emancipation in the 1920s (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 100).

The *Parisienne* and Parisians in general are also known for wearing black. Why black? Because it goes with everything and eventually makes look thinner. Black can be perceived as a symbol of chic and modernity. Remember the iconic little black dress from Chanel and the suit from Yves-Saint-Laurent, who once said that ‘there is not one black, but many blacks’ (cited in Maigret and Cie, 2014: 107). Finally feelings of nostalgia and moroseness are carried by the color. ‘Black is the color of celebration, the color of nights that never end’ Maigret assures.

Despite of that, she can be provocative, sexy and extravagant but ‘never too much of it’. She has one ‘golden rule’: ‘less is definitely more’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 94) which explains her love



for the black color. This is what is going to distinguish her from the others. She is always into subtlety and moderation. Although she disdains the trends, she manipulates it in a careful and simple way which works for her. So, associations with simple and eccentric garments make her look which gives her this unique style.

Parisian women are known to be '*au naturel*'. The belief that it is innate is roughly spread by the media. Apparently the *Parisienne* spends hours in the bathroom but looks like she just woke up. That is the Parisian way, or the way of pretending. She does not wear a lot of make-up or if so it is discret. Of course she wears lipstick (preferably red), but leaves her skin 'free'. Her skin takes the form of a canvas of the past. Her 'skin retains the memory' Maigret writes (2014: 103). The feeling of nostalgia comes back again. The bedhead hair style makes its appearance too as talked in the first chapter. Her hair look natural, worn down or in a vague bun It is all about moderation and effortless preparation once again. 'Even in plastic surgery' it is all about sobriety. 'Simplicity is the key' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 37) although the *Parisienne* seems to pretend to think a lot about the way she looks. As if she cares what people think.

There is that very idealized idea that the *Parisienne* 'cherishes' her flaws which are 'the signs of a certain strength of character' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 37). She will never pretend to be something other than she is not; characteristic that makes her an ideal. She wants 'above all to become the best possible version' of herself 'outside and in, at any age' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 125).

'In Paris, pretty women run the streets, it is nothing extraordinary, just have to look around' (Plantagenet, 2015: 60). The *Parisienne* is presented as a beautiful and elegant woman. '*Vive Paris! Seule ville au monde où les femmes se sentent belles à tout âge audacieuse, conquérantes...*' ('Long live to Paris! Only city in the world where women feel beautiful at any age, audacious, defiant...'; Plantagenet, 2015: 47). The emphasis is set on the age. It is not a problem for the *Parisienne* to get old. She is proud to age and assume her years. She shines along the years as Plantagenet says and refers to French actresses such as Juliette Binoche, Emmanuelle Béart and Sophie Marceau. The accentuation is also put on Paris, implying that male Parisian inhabitants are lucky to be surrounded by beautiful women. Therefore if being a *Parisienne* can be interpreted as *looking* like one (Rocamora, 2009: 105), it can also be understood as *feeling* like one (Maigret and Cie, 2014).

### 3.2 *The Parisienne's attitude*

The Parisian woman is not all about style and allure. She also stands out because of her attitude. She is a free and modern young woman (Laurain, 2014: 13). She eats organic and shares her life on the social networks. She works in the fashion or communication fields. She knows better London and New York than any French provinces and complains about Paris although she would never leave the capital. She is pretentious and starts all of her phrases by '*moi je*'. She is charming and stubborn apparently (Laurain, 2015: 18). She is known for that inexplicable '*je ne sais quoi*' that makes her so special which is represented via her independence, conversational skills, sexiness and aptitude to (fall in) love.

The *Parisienne's* myth appears in the form of a symbol of independence. The personage is characterized by 'freedom', a 'rebellious *esprit*' and 'irony' (*Vogue*, September 1996, p.45). She does not belong to anyone (Maigret, 2014: 108).

She combines her professional life with her personal life, juggling with her children with ease because 'the Parisienne does not stop existing the day she has a child (...) she doesn't give up' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 24). This assessment can be linked with Judith Warner's argument about French women where they do not seem defeated once they give birth. She is an independent mother, a proud 'mother with flaws' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 24).

If the *Parisienne* is sometimes indecisive (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 46), she does what she wants. She is not afraid of rules and gets her way out of any situations, in Paris at least: 'she's mastered the city' because 'the city is after all her stage' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 53, 54). Same image appears in Plantagenet's book (*La Vraie Parisienne*, 2015) with *l'Actrice* who smokes and swears when driving. She also complains about Parisian traffic jams but still drives through the city every morning (Plantagenet, 2015: 147) which explains why she is always late (Plantagenet, 2015: 68). Interesting to note that the narrator calls her by her profession and not by her name supposing that her identity is based on her profession. The use of the capital letter makes it even more ironic and fake.

The *Parisienne* is usually represented as that strong and independent woman, owning the city and in control of her life, although she is always busy and in a hurry!

As Delord wrote, 'the gaze of women from Paris is always *spirituel* (witty)' (Delord, 1841: 33). Since the *Parisienne* is perceived as the ultimate incarnation of the French, she is also the best

representative of this spirited womanhood, the ‘speciality’ of Parisians being ‘de faire de l’esprit’ (to display wit) (*Vogue*, April 1990, p120). Parisians want to look ‘smart’. *L’esprit parisien*, as it is so called, happens to identify and define Parisian inhabitants. In the nineteenth century, authors and sociologists talked about the art of doing the *conversation*, or the art of ‘*savoir-parler*’, which is a recurrent feature of the *Parisienne*. ‘A natural distinction, an *esprit* that borrowed from exhibitionism when it failed to manifest itself through conversation’ is somehow essential for the *Parisienne* to exist (Fargue, 1964: 173). In other words, ‘to be Parisian meant to converse’ (Higonnet, 2002: 33).

Rustenholz continues and notes that the *charme* of the *Parisienne* lies in the fact that she is ‘animated by *l’esprit*. Let’s (say) that she is silhouette by a stroke of *esprit*’. Her ‘body (is) shaped by *l’esprit*’ (Rustenholz, 2001: 8) which makes her unique. She needs moments to ‘reconnect’ and appreciate simple moments in life and by herself. What she enjoys the best is to ‘analyze the true meaning behind people’s words’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 235). She reads (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 96) and essentially shines thanks to her personality: ‘it’s her personality that sparkles and nothing else: the signs of intellectual wealth’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 104).

Although she sometimes pretends to look intelligent, she never takes herself ‘too seriously’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 40). The *Parisienne* plays. She has a rebellious spirit (Rocamora, 2009: 119) and always has something to say.

As Bauër already called her in 1929, she is ‘une rosée du coeur’ (‘who is tender in love’; Bauër, 1929: 62). She does everything with love. She likes to seduces men but never get ‘caught’ into a relationship as she does not ‘need anyone else to be happy’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 137). Her happiness mostly relies on herself. So ‘the *Parisienne* is in love with the idea of love. (...) Her entire life revolves around the flutterings of her heart’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 144). This idillic tone implies that she does not get attached to men. Is it too dangerous? In Maigret’s book, there is even an ‘ABC’s of cheating’ with the golden rule being ‘deny deny deny’ (2014: 190-191). This will fall together with the personage of Clotilde du Mesnil in Becque’s play (1885) where she goes from one lover to another one, very easily (see Chapter 3). Two centuries later and the *Parisienne* has not changed much when it comes to men apparently. ‘She is incredibly faithful, just not to the same man’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 144). It senses the feeling of frivolity that has been sticking to the myth since its emergence.

Therefore, the *Parisienne* likes to play with men. She is the one who controls her love life and not the other way around. Tips like ‘how to destabilize a man’ appear in Maigret’s book for

instance (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 80). She wants to be attractive and pretends to care about what her 'date' thinks. 'She savors the effect it has on him' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 17). Her image is adventurous that is why she wants to 'draw a clear distinction between herself and other girls' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 16). It is also because the *Parisienne* is free and independent that she has been associated with the idea of sexuality, an 'emancipated sexuality'. She is 'emancipated both spiritually and bodily' (Rocamora, 2009: 121).

Not only in love, the *Parisienne* talks about sex. A lot. She is an emblem of seduction and one of her rules should be to 'always be fuckable' according to Maigret. She embraces her body and therefore her femininity; image even more emphasized when Caroline (*La Vraie Parisienne*, 2015) assumes that Parisians have no fear in talking about sex and buying sex toys, thing she will never do: 'ce sont des trucs de Parisiens' ('those are Parisians's stuff'; Plantagenet, 2015: 124, 129). Caroline represents that provincial woman who truly thinks that Parisians have a better and easier life. Not much self-confidence, she is sexually repressed and is the total opposite of the *Parisienne* according to her. She ends up divorcing her husband who cheated on her. She organizes a gigantic party to celebrate it, implying that she is better off without men in her life.

Caroline is not the only character divorcing in the novel, Chloé who is the perfect exaggerated version of the typical *Parisienne* is too. The end of her marriage opened gates for her as she now feels 'free'. She is empowered by the divorce and is proud to say so 'with this so Parisian shamelessness' (Plantagenet, 2015: 98). So it seems as is the *Parisienne* does not trust men when it comes to bring her joy. She decides when she wants to be in love, apparently.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this chapter it has been shown that the myth of the *Parisienne* of today is perceived as a fashion icon. Her conversational skills, her independence and overall attitude constitute the femininity she embodies today. The myth created around the personage still exists, especially in the representation made of her in contemporary sources. So the *Parisienne* is 'an ideal of the active, elegant, *spirituelle*, ardent French woman' (*Vogue*, September 1995, p.167). She personifies a sort of untouchable feminine model for foreigners. When French writers tackle the subject, only irony is sensed, making it difficult for the analysis of the myth of the *Parisienne*.

Of course, the character has changed and evolved, so has the myth. Repeated patterns of the feminine image structured the relations between the myth and French society; and later on around the globe. The mystification of this woman has definitely reframed the codes of femininity.

### Third Chapter: Retracing the myth of the *Parisienne*

#### 1. Introduction

To understand better who the *Parisienne* of today is, it is essential to have a look at her origins and retrace it. For that, I will focus on the first appearances of the Parisian figure, namely in the eighteenth century. I will explain then that the nineteenth century glorified the personage. The *Parisienne* turned out to be idealized and idolized. The twentieth century enhanced that refined femininity due to the evolution of social mores in the French society and it is vain to note that many figures contributed to the evolution of the myth.

#### 2. The origins of the myth of the *Parisienne*

Delord notes in his *Physiologie de la Parisienne* that she is ‘a myth, a fiction, a symbol’. She can be encountered in ‘all the places where women show themselves’ (Delord, 1841: 9). She is first and foremost a character defined by her ability to appear and be seen and fashion is her realm of election. No one will know when she appeared exactly and especially not the myth. Some argue that the myth took form in Molière’s play *L’Ecole des Femmes* (1662) because of the representation of a modern form of femininity (Laurain, 2014: 15). However, thanks to French Austrian-born Queen Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) and her extravagant fashion tastes, women living in Paris started to adopt a common fashion sense. Her ‘*Ministre des Modes*’ Rose Bertin (1747-1813) had a considerable role and was seen as the cause of Marie-Antoinette’s excessive dresses. Everyone wanted to be seen and the garment became the symbol of social parade. This ‘*culture des apparences*’ permitted the transformation of societies where new ideologies emerged. The

consequence happened to be the evolution of French social mores (Roche, 1989: 633).<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the garment became one of the identity marks of the French capital.

With the success of French writer and philosopher Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), the image of the Parisian woman spread around. Rousseau (1712-1778) gave birth to a sophisticated and mores-free type that all Europe was going to glamorize. According to Rétaillaud-Bajac (2014), him and his colleagues French authors Restif de la Bretonne (1734-1806) and Louis-Sébastien Mercier (1740-1814) were the creators of the myth of that famous Parisian femininity. They defined the woman as a eager type of fashion. '*La mode domine les provinciales, mais les Parisiennes dominant la mode et la savent plier chacune à son avantage*' ('Fashion dominates *les provinciales*, but *les Parisiennes* dominate fashion and know how to turn it to their advantage' Rousseau, 1967: 190). They described her as 'not so tall, skinny and pale' and her outfits would always be what distinguished her from the other women. That way, she would socially show off and stand out of the crowd to therefore increase her social reputation. She was coquette, fresh and had an opinion about everything. What characterized her was to follow fashion trends. Stubborn and outgoing, she was curious and loved to charm men. As Rousseau noted, it seemed like marriage in Paris was not the same thing than elsewhere (Rousseau, 1967: 192). Her folly and frivolity with men was one of her characteristics. Sometimes the *Parisienne* acted like a frivolous woman; character trait that Henry Becque highlighted in his play *La Parisienne* (1885).<sup>37</sup>

So, Paris was at the phase between the aristocratic and monarchic traditions and new dynamics that would lead to an openly consumption society. After the French revolution of 1789, the bases of that Parisian femininity were already set. Therefore that feminine type was not going to be invented but worked on and mostly idealized. The nineteenth century glorified the personage and brought an elation around a refined and enchantress femininity, much needed among that dominant manliness period. What is important to note is that the nineteenth century emphasized the *Parisienne* as an individual, as a type. She used to be referred as a whole, as a group of women and was from then on going to represent a singular feminine: herself.

She embodied Paris as an appealing and graceful form. She was mainly defined by her taste for clothing style. The fashion industry became the main Parisian economic resource. This fondness for clothes was partly explained by the darkening of men's suits. Where suits became mere, women

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<sup>36</sup> Roche's main argument is that the culture around clothing in a social context underwent a profound transformation from the reign of Louis XIV to that of Louis XVI

<sup>37</sup> see analysis below.

dived into the art of jewelry (Perrot, 1981). Their styles were enhanced with delicateness. This was seen in the press especially. The *Parisienne* got reinvented and perfected. She was a '*jolie poupée*' ('a pretty doll'), sexually active. This is where the myth took its form too. Paris was a city where women were sexually opened. For the foreigner who heard of or visited Paris, its female inhabitant personified a seductress. At the same time she played with fashion to give herself more allure and credibility, she played with men. For that, she used different textures, colors, *décolletés* to transmit a message or a better, more sensual image of herself. The Parisian myth became so fixed that its hedonist side prevailed over the rest. It displayed an elegant and desired picture that conveyed an idealized representation of the woman. She embodied the sophisticated flower of a modern civilization in order to reinforce her own myth, linking popular culture and national identity (Edelstein, 2007: 3).

Late nineteenth century, French dramatist Becque painted a portrait of the Parisian woman of his time in his play *La Parisienne* (1885). He presented Clotilde Du Mesnil, who held the main role as a confident and intelligent woman of the bourgeois social class. From the very beginning, her very ambitious husband Du Mesnil and her passionate lover Lafont are introduced (Act I Scene 1 and 2: 179, 184). Clotilde is in control of the situation. Once she gets tired of her love affair with Lafont, a new one begins with Simpson. Although Lafont suspects her to have other affairs with other men, which she denies, it does not seem to bother her much. She tried to be 'lenient' she says (Act I Scene 10: 229). She eventually confesses her other love affair but still held this manipulative position towards Lafont. This is her main characteristic, her control over men as Rousseau would note later on.

*'Apprenez que des soupçons ne suffisent pas, et que pour accuser une femme, il faut avoir la preuve entre les mains. Quand cette preuve existe, quand la femme est véritablement coupable, un galant homme sait ce qu'il lui reste à faire, il la quitte... ou il se tait.'*<sup>38</sup> What concerns her the most is that Du Mesnil and Lafont's friendship would be compromised if her husband found out about their secret affair. Clotilde is a trustful wife, according to Du Mesnil and she does remind him that it is not a man like Lafont that will make her forget her obligations towards him (Act III Scene 3: 239). She does know that marriage entails her to certain duties, but it does not seem to prevent her from flirting with other men. She is loyal to marriage but not to her husband. Infidelity was a very

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<sup>38</sup> 'Learn that suspicions are not enough and that to blame a woman, there is to be a proof. When this proof exists, when the woman is really guilty, a courteous man knows what he has to do, he leaves her... or keeps quiet' (Act II Scene 5: 213).



common thing in the bourgeois social class in the nineteenth century. Du Mesnil also has love affairs as it is presumed later in the play. As her new fresh love affair will not last she will go back to her old passing romance with Lafont. At the end, the situation is the same than at the beginning, with a husband who is being cheated on and does not know it, who, himself, has a love affair with the best friend of his wife, who knows it and does not really mind; and Lafont, finally, who stays although is very jealous and used to satisfy Clotilde's carnal pleasures; feature that will be found in the portrait of the *Parisienne* one century later.

Regarding her appearance, Clotilde Du Mesnil seems elegant. The first lines of the play describes her as 'dressed, gloved, wearing a hat' (Act I Scene 1: 179). She cares about her appearance as she changes clothes for diverse events, from city clothes to bathrobe. Only one reference is made about her children, whom she likes to spoil, although certain tasks, like buying them clothes, are done by the maid (Act I Scene 2: 185). This shows a sort of detachment from the family life.

Becque drew the portrait of a beautiful and intelligent but superficial and pretentious Parisian woman. She is a seductress and uses her charms to acquire what she wants: 'do not come to invite me but to see me' she says to Simpson (Act III Scene 3: 239). She is very self-confident in her relationship with Du Mesnil. She shows a particular devotion to him and ironically wonders what he would have done without her in his life (Act II Scene 8: 225). Her '*parisianisme*' is brought up by her attachment to the city and denigration of the province. She could not live outside of Paris, that is a fact. Plus in her opinion, if a man leaves Paris, he must have a good reason for it (Act III Scene 2: 233).

So some of those characteristics depicted by Becque in 1885 come back in the portrayal of the *Parisienne* of the twenty-first century. This contributes to the propagation and symbol of the myth. The *Parisienne* proudly claims her sexual freedom, with no regret and remorse; ideas already advanced for the mind set of that time. Bauër would later on criticize Becque's play. He wondered about the accuracy of his words and if forty-five years later, that play was not giving a false image of the Parisian woman. In Bauër's *La Parisienne* (1929), he shared his fear about Parisian women being reduced to infidelity as Becque implied. Because of an evolution of the social mores seen early twentieth century, infidelity in marriage was outdated according to him (2014: 43).

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new kind of woman appeared. She would never be seen again: *la Grande Cocotte* (Laurain, 2014: 16). She was defined as '*femmes à la beauté prodigieuse et au destin exceptionnel ayant fait usage de leurs charmes pour tourner la tête des hommes riches*

*qu'ils fussent rois ou hommes d'affaires*' (Laurain, 2014: 16).<sup>39</sup> *La Grande Cocotte* was a courtesan during *La Belle Epoque*.<sup>40</sup> She was an actress, model, prostitute and / or singer. What interested her was money, and fame perhaps. She proudly showed off her expensive jewelries to stand out of the crowd. She joined every social events of the capital. Audacious and independent, she also multiplied love affairs with rich and known men which granted her a reputation. Although she was extravagant, provocative and sensual, her story usually ended in a disastrous way, be it by committing suicide, in misery or by sinking into oblivion. Among the famous courtesans were La Belle Otéro (1868-1965), Liane de Pougy (1869-1950), Cléo de Mérode (1875-1966), Mata Hari (1876-1917) or Kiki de Montparnasse (1901-1953). They quickly became the muses of great painters and set the bases of the *Parisienne* as they would be immortalized on canvas. Also called *Les Grandes Horizontales*, they took Paris as the stage of their existences where eccentricity reigned. They lasted until the First World War to give the *bourgeoises* the place.

### 3. The first half of the twentieth century

Interestingly enough, due to an effect of homogenization and the merger of Paris and its suburbs, the *Parisienne* gradually tended to blend into the French woman, claiming to be the most prestigious ambassador of the country. It is around this time that she lost her reputation of frivolity turning it into delicateness. Thanks to touristic guides especially, a more realistic image of her was depicted. She started being seen with simple chic and casual style. Late nineteenth early twentieth century, the type of the bourgeois appeared in the Parisian life. That woman embodied a new representation of the *Parisienne*, the one of the 'showing'. She was honorable and sensual, with the capacity to adopt fashion trends. She displayed a national identity and brought seduction and style together.

Consequently, new orientations were taken in women fashion collections. Symbols and aesthetics of the *Parisienne* femininity were about to change drastically. This movement took the

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<sup>39</sup> 'Women with a great beauty and incredible destiny making good use of their charms to drive rich men crazy, be they kings or business men.'

<sup>40</sup> *La Belle Epoque* is an historic period spreading from late nineteenth century to the early of the first world war. It marked the social, economic, technological and political developments of that period all over Europe.

form of an opposition to the masculine genre: magnificence of the female body (Perrot, 1984), importance of details and accessories (gloves, hats, jewelry...), sophistication of the clothes. The *bourgeoises* excelled in extravagance.

To illustrate the *Parisienne* of the first half of the twentieth century and to stress that different kinds of women lived in the capital, I will have a close-reading analysis of the novel *La Femme* (1928) by French writer Pierre de Régnier.

In the novel, a particular view on Parisian women after First World War is represented. It relates the several love affairs of Bernard, a simple man looking for love. Ten women are presented. Each embodies a feature of the 'ideal woman'. The story goes from elegance, beauty and admiration to trivia, delight and frivolity. The woman is only here to satisfy desires at a certain moment of Bernard's existence. He goes from one woman to another. There is no attachment. There is Suzy, the comedienne, who played with Bernard; Marianne, who he thought he liked; Alice, who fell deeply in love with him; Ninette, who was too young; Simone, who he desired; Marthe, who he shared a romantic idyll with; Betty, who made him run after her; Hélène, who he fell in love with and Rosine, who could not care less about him.

These women represent Parisian women in all their splendors but also Régnier's life which was all about debauchery, nocturnal adventures and folly in the Roaring Twenties. The novel is mostly aimed at young men willing to seduce women, especially *Parisiennes*. He addresses to the reader in a direct way 'tips on how to act with women' (Régnier, 2014: 166). Although it is called *La Femme*, Régnier describes women living in the French capital. If they do not all originate from Paris, they embrace the Parisian lifestyle. They are independent and intelligent. Most of them are beautiful, natural, elegant and content. Their appearances are emphasized which conveys the impression that their physiques tell more about their personalities than usual. Their attitudes as much as their characters make these women *Parisiennes*.

In my opinion, Rosine, Bernard's favorite, appears like the Parisian woman depicted in the press nowadays. She embodies a modern personage with one goal in life: the pleasure of being satisfied ('*dont la folie consistait à vivre selon bon plaisir*' (of which the folly was to live happily), 2014: 173). She is the last personage before the ideal woman, maybe the closest to her. She is compared to a '*fleur violente et tardive (...) d'un été mûr et désabusé*' ('violent and late flower (...) of a mature and disappointed summer', 2014: 173) meaning that she represents the innocence of that endless summer ready to explode at any time. She is free of doing what feels right. Rosine

has a certain lightness of character which charmed Bernard. It almost feels like she has that *je ne sais quoi* that still defines French women today.

Furthermore, each chapter's title is formed by a feminine name and what characterized her the best. Among the features of these women come theater, deception, love, youth, desire, pleasure, snobbism, wildness and folly. Bernard experiences different loves with different women. It eventually leads to the last chapter called '*La femme idéale*'. So, it can be assumed that if all the women of this novel were to be reunited, they would form the perfect woman. Régnier's attempt to describe 'the ideal woman' ends with questions and assumptions as the last chapter is a succession of dots. She has no name. Her particularity is her perfection. Régnier leaves the last words to the reader opening up the mystery on women, on femininity. Does the ideal woman exist? And if so, is she necessarily *Parisienne*?

So the evolution of mores led to remarkable social changes and to the (re)definition of femininity, as French critic Bauër relates in his essay of 1929. He led a surprisingly modern analysis for his time that could still be assessed as current today. *How To Be Parisian: Wherever You are* (2012) keeps the same ideologies than the ones he presented. It is interesting to have a look at his words since he reflected on women during the post-war atmosphere in the French society. His aim was to define the distinctive features of contemporary Parisian women. He also stood against Becque's description of the *Parisienne*, as mentioned earlier. His idea of the Parisian woman is summed up at the end of the essay with the following sentence: '*les Parisiennes ont cet avantage de ne pas vous prendre pour des dieux*' ('*Parisiennes* do not pretend like you are gods', 2014: 98), implying that their natural attitudes prevailed overall. Although he seemed unsatisfied of his work on defining the distinctive features of Parisian women in 1929, it renders a great image and comprehension on the changes associated to the social revolution of the twentieth century.

Three reasons bound to the mores and evolution of the personage are exposed. First, the spread of trends and death of middle social classes made the type banal, which gave the audience the impression that the *Parisienne* was too much thought of and mass-produced. Then, she turned out to be influenced by the foreigner, which was something new for her. Lastly, the most important motive is that she took back her social authority; social authority that became a sort of seduction. This was the main newness of the mores during the twentieth century. In fact, becoming responsible of her own status granted her intelligence and decision, as much as beauty and frivolity (Bauër, 2014: 77).

After the first world war, a new dimension of social life appeared in France, which contributed to the evolution of the Parisian woman. She started to master the art of fashion and dance with only one goal in life: idleness; same purpose as Rosine in *La Femme* (Régnier, 1928). However by following and adopting new trends, a standardization of her style appeared, which erased individual differentiations and led to a plain ordinariness (Bauër, 2014: 54). Her particularism slipped into in the masses which Bauër summarized with two notions: *uniformité du désir*, meaning that everyone wants the same thing at the same moment and *uniformité de la production*, implying the capacity of meeting certain needs by the society (2014: 55). Her aptitude to imitate constituted one of her main characteristics which made her lose her specificity. She did so well that ideas from overseas were incorporated into the French way of living. This is when she started to be influenced by different waves that her image changed. In 1929, Bauër already emphasized the worldwide phenomenon she was (2014: 41). She became international: '*elle a banalisé son caractère. Elle a même banalisé son type*' , ('Her character made commonplace. She made her type something part of the everyday life'; Bauër, 2014: 53). This is why he assured that there was a difference between 'the' *Parisienne* and 'a' *Parisienne*. No generalization could ever be made because 'resemblances create the type' (Bauër, 2014: 42).

Consequently, the *Parisienne* of 1929 was new: she was brunette, petite, flat and boyish. She was called *la garçonne*. She rejected traditional femininity and took the form of an emblem of emancipation. The tomboy look was born. This androgynous aspect brought more freedom to women's fashion embracing its perks: playing with the details. But this tomboy style raised questions. The French and so Parisian model of femininity was countered. '*Comment concilier, en effet, l'image de cette femme libérée qui fume la cigarette et change les pneus de sa voiture avec les entraves d'un statut qui la prive encore de droits citoyens et politiques élémentaires?*'<sup>41</sup> (Retaillaud-Bajac, 2014). Although French women rights were limited, they defined their style: short hair and a determined attitude. Style and attitude contributed to the perception of French women that is current today: as being very stubborn, apparently.

Of course, this change was possible because of the diffusion of Parisian haute couture and especially because of the influence of Gabrielle Chanel, also known as Coco Chanel (1883-1971). She was the first one to break off the extravagant style of *La Belle Epoque* (late 19th century - 1914), there were no more aesthetics of the excess. Nevertheless, the *Parisienne* was charming (Bauër, 2014: 59). She was all about subtlety, always smiling. She was '*incapable de rancune, de*

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<sup>41</sup> 'How to combine the image of this liberated woman who smokes cigarette and changes her tires' auto with the constraints of a status preventing her from basic citizen and political rights?' (Retaillaud-Bajac, 2014).

*mesquinerie, capable, au contraire, de tout comprendre et de tout pardonner* ('incapable of harsh feelings, meanness, on the contrary, she can understand everything and forgive everything'; Bauër, 2014: 62). She preferred the big adventure (Bauër, 2014: 74) which also brought the consistent rush that sometimes defined her, idea that is going to stick to her until today (in *How To Be Parisian: Wherever You are* (2014), in *The Parisienne* (2015)). The Parisian woman was (is) in a hurry! Wherever she went (goes). '*Elle obéit à la cadence et aux nécessités de son temps*' ('she obeys to the rhythm and needs of her time'; Bauër, 2014: 76). She knew how to appreciate the time she had although she always seemed busy. As French writer Honoré de Balzac said: '*A la femme de Paris, le génie de la démarche*' ('to the woman of Paris, the genius of the appearance'). The *Parisienne* had that desire to comprehend why the world turned around. What she enjoyed was to make things alive and embrace her knowledge; her curiosity prevailed (Bauër, 2014: 95, 98).

In the 1930s, thanks to the film industry, a new peculiar image of Parisian femininity saw the day. French filmmaker Sacha Guitry (1885-1957) was one of the first to create this new feminine conception, made of charm and stubbornness. Guitry had five wives (all actresses) during his life and claimed his love for women. He played in most of the movies he directed and gave a big part to Jacqueline Delubac (1907-1997) whom he was married for four years. Jacqueline Delubac embodied this figure of the Parisian woman at that time. Guitry pointed out a form of modernity. This novel woman could say what she thought in a graceful way. She knew how to enter in a room and make all the glances directed at her (Laurain, 2014: 18). French actress Arletty (1898-1992) and Jacqueline Delubac had a tremendous impact on the way the *Parisienne* would be depicted later on. They both became the muses of filmmakers, photographers, writers (Pierre de Rénier, Louis-Ferdinand Céline), making them famous. They were the archetypes of 'this emancipated *Parisienne*' (Rustenholz, 2001: 11). They both fashioned the representation of the *Parisienne*, giving it a new twist for the second-half of the twentieth century.

#### 4. The second half of the twentieth century

In the 1950s, the *Parisienne* did not stop glowing, in particular because of the rise of French fashion designers such as Christian Dior in 1947, Coco Chanel in 1954 with its incredible success

towards the Americans especially (Charles-Roux, 1974: 478) and new talents such as Givenchy, Yves Saint-Laurent and Pierre Cardin. Paris embraced the status of the capital of elegance as well as the *Parisiennes* of 'Queens of Fashion' (Rétaillaud-Bajac, 2014). Of course what gave the *Parisienne* this particular image was due to the city itself. Paris was known for its liberalism and tolerance when it came to social mores. People were eager for cultural and intellectual dynamism but also for personal and sexual liberation. Paris personified a place where everything was possible.

This is why famous women such as Audrey Hepburn (1929-1993), Jackie Kennedy (1929-1994) or Grace Kelly (1929-1982) took part of this movement and claimed loving Paris like anyone else before. So although fashion, elegance and *savoir-vivre* were based in Paris, the Parisian DNA entered foreign women's minds. American icons adopted it, making the type worldwide faster. The *Parisienne* was not bound to the city anymore but became international.

From 1960 on, thanks to the press revolution, images of Parisian women spread around much faster than before. The French capital was still claiming its uniqueness which gave more strength to its feminine inhabitants. An other factor that changed the *Parisienne* forever was the sexual revolution of 1960-1970. French actress Brigitte Bardot personified that novelty. She changed femininity codes and displayed a great new vision of France around the world. Americans even came up with the term '*bardolâtrie*' to characterize that enthusiasm around her (Choulant, 2009: 73). She embodied this liberated and spontaneous sensuality and broke the standards of a sophisticated elegance (Laurain, 2014: 20). She acted like this coquette and minx *Parisienne*, in particular in the movie *Une Parisienne* by Michel Boisrond in 1957. She flouted the conventions which permitted the democratization of fashion and offered a whole new perspective for women to enter into active social life.

From a foreigner's perspective, France and Paris especially, stayed until the 1970s this imaginary site for pretty girls and easy flirt. With the arrival of French designer Yves Saint-Laurent, fashion was adapted to a new kind of women, namely the business class. Women started wearing suits, blurring the feminine/masculine genre. Yves Saint-Laurent brought power and seduction together which owed him success (Laurain, 2014: 21). French actress Catherine Deneuve (b. 1943) was his muse who he dressed in *Belle de Jour* (by Luis Buñuel, 1967). Although she played a prostitute and probably 'contributed to the production of the Parisian woman as a figure of sexual consumption', she immediately took the spot of an icon of Paris fashion. Her figure will never be 'dissociated from the glamorous fictional images' (Rocamora, 2009: 94). Although she is a famous actress, her Parisian quality seem to prevail (Rocamora, 2009: 98).

It is during the 1980s that France saw appearing a totally different genre of *Parisienne*. A anti-Bardot, anti-Deneuve, it was French model Inès de La Fressange. Until today, she is still seen by French and foreigners as the *Parisienne* by excellence. She represents that timeless embodiment of Parisian femininity. She even wrote *La Parisienne* (2012) where she relates how the *Parisienne* looks like, but also how to look like one, an effortless style made with seven pieces: a male blazer, a trench (of course!), a navy blue sweater, a tank top, a little black dress, a pair of jeans, a leather jacket and some bags. No woman like her has seen the day so far. She represents a time that is now over for French society, which supposes that the *Parisienne* has a temporal effect.

## 5. Conclusion

The origins of the myth of the *Parisienne* are vague. They go back to the eighteenth century and over the time she had to deal with different cultural waves which led to social changes that also changed her personage. Because of globalization and standardization she became cosmopolite. Today, the *Parisienne* is not only from Paris, she is international. More and more foreign celebrities represent French luxurious brands, paradoxically, pretending to embody the famous inhabitant.

With Inès de La Fressange a new *Parisienne* emerged: a cool elegant women in comparison to the eccentric one from the nineteenth century. The *Parisienne* comes from a long way but managed to build up a strong identity that remains idolized by other female kinds.



## Fourth Chapter: Being *Parisienne* as an Identity

### 1. Introduction

This fourth chapter aims to highlight the concept of ‘being Parisian’ as an identity for women. However if the figure of the *Parisienne* has gradually become considered as a myth, the city of Paris contributed to that construction. This is why I will first focus on the myth sticking to the capital of France and especially on the reason why Paris holds that position of ‘centre’, of superiority towards the *provinces*. Then I will give an insight into the idea of feeling Parisian, to later on explain how location can affect identity. Lastly, I will explain that being Parisian is closely related to a feminine singular and therefore is relevant to the purpose of my thesis.

### 2. Paris the capital

American journalist Richard Bernstein wondered ‘what makes a Parisian a Parisian?’ to then supposed that ‘perhaps, Paris is represented by a young woman, very casual in a black skirt and a silk blouse with a scarf having dinner with a somewhat older man in some class café, (...) and looking as though she could transform a cowgirl’s outfit into an instance of haute couture, because in her case, it is not the clothes that make the woman but the Parisian woman who makes the clothes’ (Bernstein, 1991: 74-75). So the idea of being Parisian rests upon the embodiment of this female figure apparently. But before there was even a woman, Paris placed itself at the centre of France, detaching itself from the rest and asserting a certain superiority over the *provinces*.

‘So powerful is Paris, both in real and in symbolic terms, that the rest of France has famously been depicted as a ‘desert’ (Gravier, 1972 cited in Rocamora, 2009: 10). This binary opposition between Paris and the rest, namely the province, is not new. As Balzac noted, ‘France in the nineteenth century is split between two large zones: Paris and *la province*; *la province* jealous of Paris, Paris thinking of *la province* only to ask money for’ (Balzac, 1841: 302). The idea of

'*parisianisme*' which signifies the 'mores and habits of Parisian inhabitants' got emphasized (Balzac, 1841: 228). It already transmitted the idea of the supremacy awarded the capital and its association with prestigious practices. Although it had its perks, today it has taken a pejorative sense implying the arrogance of the Parisians: 'the contempt for Paris can be read as much as an expression of envy and fascination as of disdain' (Rocamora, 2009: 12). Therefore the city takes the place of epitome of France, proclaiming its superiority over the *province*, and the *Parisienne* over the *provinciale*.

In Plantagenet's book *La Vraie Parisienne* (2015), Caroline is the provincial who just moved to Paris because of her husband. She feels ashamed and not at ease in the capital. She has idealized the image of 'the true *Parisienne*' being 'self-confident, haughty, half-Marion Cotillard half Charlotte Gainsbourg, tall, the fringe that stays in one place, skinny, pretentious, 48 kg, 1.73m. (...) In other words, a knockout, sexy, spicy, witty, the embodiment of good taste, a fantasy for the world' (Plantagenet, 2015: 8). The idea she has of the female inhabitant is the one depicted in the media: that independent woman that no one can compete, even less Caroline. She consistently has to prove something to show that she can be 'as good as' the *Parisienne*. In fact, because she is originally from the South of France, she believes that she will never be as elegant as the Parisian woman. Only because she can not. Although she tries, she will never reach that model, like Inès de La Fressange for instance (Plantagenet, 2015: 132). It almost seems as if it is a real life complex for her. However, despite of this lack of confidence, she happens to 'become more *Parisienne* than anyone else' by the end of the novel, only because she learnt how to 'master the codes'. She even changed her name to Carolina (Plantagenet, 2015: 161).

In *How To Be Parisian Wherever You Are* (2014), the opposition between Paris and the provinces is reinforced — with exaggeration. The *Parisienne* is not at ease if she is out of Paris. 'She has now truly left her comfort zone. For her, the country is nothing more than the sum of its missing parts. (...) Defending the countryside would mean renouncing the city, changing religions, running the risk of being excommunicated, and becoming forever after the poor little *Parisienne* who got lost in a field of wheat' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 122-123). It is a dramatic image that is depicted in this paragraph, which intends to show the discomfort of the *Parisienne* outside her dear Paris. She seems to feel disconnected and 'swears to never live there (the *province*)' (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 183). This emphasis on the binary opposition and uneasiness in the 'country side' reveals the attachment Parisians have to their home town.

Therefore 'Paris poses a problem. Is Paris France or not-France? Does the city condense and express the country in the same way that it focuses social, economic, political and cultural life?' (Parkhurst Ferguson, 2000: 1053), which later on raises the question of what makes France French? Its cuisine of course Ferguson claims, but this is not the question here. The fact that Paris seems to stand for the whole country can easily lead to the following assumption: 'outside of Paris, France is nothing' (Rocamora, 2009: 9). This could explain why non-French authors put French and Parisian women in the same category.

If this image of 'Parisian superiority' has been conveyed throughout the last centuries, the multiplications of novels on Paris during the nineteenth century played a considerable role. Writers such as Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), Victor Hugo (1802-1885), Gustave Flaubert (1821-1881), Emile Zola (1840-1902) and Marcel Proust (1871-1922) were partly responsible of great naturalist novels. They articulated a great image of the capital where everyone wanted to be and an impression of freshness which brought people from the provinces to gradually move 'up' to the capital. Paris quickly became associated with 'social success' according to Balzac. 'The capital is a place where specific rules of conduct and social codes develop, and whose mastery is necessary to one's rise up the social ladder' (Rocamora, 2009: 14). The city became a place for 'fashionability and love affairs' and eventually the 'centre of France', and of everything else. It was (and still may be) a symbol of the revolution (1789) and an emblem of freedom, although it was a site for pleasures at some point. With the rise of tourism, the capital became increasingly perceived as a destination for the purchase of sexual encounters (Rocamora, 2009: 19), which gave birth to *les Cocottes* as discussed in the previous chapter.

Not only literature but fashion press, movies and photography too have contributed to consolidate Paris's position on the collective imaginary, offering the audience impressive visions of the city (Rocamora, 2009: 17). In the twentieth century, images spread around the world, especially thanks to the press revolution, tour guides and famous painters. Renowned French photographer Robert Doisneau (1912-1994) gave a romanticized vision of the capital. He captured simple moments representing the Parisian daily life. *Le Baiser de l'hôtel de Ville* (1950) is one of his most famous photography presenting a man and a woman kissing on the side-walk in front of a café: very Parisian. It rendered the image of a passionate youth all around the world, conveying that feeling of romanticism that would stick to the French capital.

### 3. Being Parisian: a 'pure concept'

If Paris claims its superiority, so do its inhabitants: the Parisians. Antoine Laurain introduces the definition of the term *Parisian* in his essay (2014: 11):

**Parisien, enne** : adj. and noun. From Paris. Regarding Paris,  
its region. That carries the mark of Paris. That belongs to Paris.

According to him, a Parisian is someone who 'carries the mark of Paris', who 'belongs to Paris'; it does not only mean who lives in the capital but entails a mythical signification as if the Parisian had it in his heart. What does it say? The Parisian is attached to his city — of course. But is there a Parisian more Parisian than the others?

In contemporary sources, French authors dive into the insight of the *parisianisme*. Books about how to be Parisian or how to recognize a Parisian flourish on the market (i.e. *Les Parisiens sont pires que vous ne le croyez* ('Parisians are worse than you think') (2015) by Louis-Bernard Robitaille). The best-seller *Dessine moi un Parisien* ('Draw me a Parisian' 2012) depicts typical Parisian behaviors according to its author Olivier Magny. The table of content is a great tool to analyze the diverse characteristics attributed to Parisian inhabitants. A list of expressions, places, things defines them in fact: 'putain' ('shit'), 'wearing black', 'Roland-Garros' (yearly tennis ball event), 'le PSG' (Parisian soccer team), 'the snow' (rare in Paris but when it happens it is a chaos), 'Berthillon' (old famous ice-cream place in the centre of Paris), 'Jacques Brel' (French singer of the 1960s), 'parler anglais' ('speaking English' or what Parisians can not do apparently); all great clichés that are specific to the Parisians.

Moreover as Olivier Magny writes, '*la vie à Paris se raconte davantage qu'elle se vit*' ('life in Paris is being more talked about than enjoyed'). It offers a quite pessimistic view on the Parisian life, where the 'bragging' about the experience matters more than the experience itself. Being Parisian and not living in the capital is either an insult or a praise. Therefore, a multitude of books have emerged on how to be proud to be Parisian, how to live the Parisian life to the fullest or how to 'become' Parisian in ten lessons, supposing that being Parisian is unique — and challenging.

The construction of Parisian social figures is a key element in the symbolic construction of the Parisian, as if there were Parisians who were more Parisians than others, or Parisians on who signs of the Parisian collective imaginary could be better understood. Symbolic figures help in the

functioning of the city. Those figures can express the tensions of a city to pacify it better. The agitated tension in Paris between memory and modernity, past and unexpected change set symbolic figures such as the *Parisienne*, who has existed since the dawn of time, always fashionable (Robert, 19: 2004)

#### 4. Location and identity

‘The *Parisienne* is seen as a monument, like a postcard. She represents the city’ (Florence Müller, IFM interview). Paris being the city that creates and undoes the trends has given birth to this kind of woman who excels in the science of the being and of the appearance. Without those external factors, the *Parisienne* would not be the woman she is. Bourdieu talks about ‘points of references’. Fundamental to Bourdieu's view is that an idea can not be understood totally in reference to itself. Rather, it is necessary to situate the concept in terms of other points of references in meaning and practice. Then, the idea of the *Parisienne* is referred to the city of Paris. The *Parisienne* has grown in a specific atmosphere and evolved because of different factors, such as the evolution of social mores during the twentieth century which has been dealt with in the third chapter.

Ideas about the Parisian woman did not only circulate via ‘information about institutions — such as academies, journals, magazines, galleries, publishers, etc.’ but also thanks to ‘persons, their relationships, liaisons and quarrels, information about the ideas and problems which are ‘in the air’ and circulate orally in gossip and rumor’ (Bourdieu, 1980: 32). So the basis is created by ‘people’ (authors such as Rousseau, or naturalist novelist Zola as it has been said) but also by the field of knowledge and institutions into which it is offered, namely the city of Paris.

Despite of taking the form of a complex idea, the *Parisienne* as a woman occupies a certain position in the *field* she evolves, lives in. Therefore, she has different types of capital: an economic capital first which denotes the material assets she has (money, property); then a cultural capital that is the cultural knowledge and the competencies that she builds up and uses. Her preferences and tastes are also included and this cultural capital marks the distinction between members of different *fields*; a social capital which indicates her network resources by ways of connections with family, friends,

associates and else; and a symbolic capital which is the general framework of all the above mentioned types of capital. It involves her prestige and reputation.

In fashion press, it is not to deny the role the Parisian woman. She happens to be the holder of a 'high cultural capital, as fashion capital consisting of knowledge, with tips and addresses shared, but also possessions — she displays her favorite items' (Rocamora, 2009: 98). The *Parisienne* stands as a cultural capital of Paris. She contributes to the myth of the city. She represents the material embodiment and personification of the French capital, of its *esprit*, and 'in the same way that the spirit of Paris has been celebrated, so has that of its freshly manifestation' (Rocamora, 2009: 118).

And if Paris gives the *Parisienne* her form and identity, it can be explained by the fact that location surely influences its inhabitants. The myth of love that sticks to the city for some reasons (mainly due to the film and publishing industries) has enhanced the idealization of Parisian inhabitants and romanticized their lives. This all points at the notion of Bourdieu's 'habitus'. The habitus of someone signifies his or her tendency towards a certain kind of behavior which is a disguised expression of the respective capital endowment and composition. Such tendency is universal and appears like pillar holding together every-day practices such as a routine, a taste for a certain dish or sport (Bourdieu 1984: 171). For the *Parisienne*, her habitus can be seen in the way she acts and dresses but also in her representation in fashion press. It is a tool of internalization which gives the individual the impression of an act of creation, freedom and unpredictability, whereas such acts are socially linked to the habitus itself. Therefore, her habitus is the same than all other *Parisiennes*, as they share similarities in their capitals. It is a conduit for reproduction which has been perpetuated for the last centuries.

So if 'there is no need to be born in the capital to personify the spirit of the city' (*Libération*, 27-8 January 2001, p.41 cited in Rocamora, 2009: 101), it is 'enough to be there' (Rustenholz, 2001: 9). In this sense the atmosphere of Paris suffices to the creation of the woman. 'Paris changes women without changing its *esprit*' (Louise Vilmorin, 2000: 27). The capital is responsible for that female kind: she is not necessarily French, for one can be 'Parisian by birth or at heart' *Vogue* states (November 1996, p.95). This explains why foreign female celebrities like Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793), American-born French dancer, singer, and actress Josephine Baker (1906-1975), German-born French actress Romy Schneider (1938-1982) and British actress and singer Jane Birkin (b. 1946) proclaimed themselves *Parisiennes* after living in the capital for some years. Baker once said: '*J'ai deux amours, mon pays et Paris*' ('I have two loves, my country and Paris'). They

were not ‘born in Paris’ but ‘reborn there’ (Maigret et Cie, 2014: 10). They claimed to be *Parisiennes* in their heart and surprisingly enough all happened to be exuberant, fearless, successful and eventually timeless icons; in other words, all shared the same characteristics.

Women become ‘encapsulated in the symbolic heart of France: Paris’ (Rocamora, 2009: 100). The *Parisienne* emerges as a figure of distinction, superior to the provinces (so the rest of France) but also to the rest of the world. As American author Richard Bernstein argues, ‘to be Parisian is to belong to a world apart, to an intellectual and moral category, not of class, race and gender, but of a qualitative difference from the rest, an essential worldliness’ (Bernstein, 1991: 73); Paris being compared to the ‘centre of the world’. Paris has gradually taken the title of ‘capital of fashion’ being the creator of fashionable beings, namely the *Parisiennes*, and standing on the ranks of prestigious city (*Vogue*, April 1997, p.107).

Although the press have created a feminine and romantic universe around ‘the city of love’, its inhabitants surely play off it. If Parisian women are what they are, it is partly due to the international representation of Paris. As former *Vogue Paris* editor-in-chief and fashion stylist Carine Roitfeld (b. 1954) says, ‘through our choices, it is a universe we create and which we make alluring’.<sup>4243</sup> Paris expresses and incarnates itself in the *Parisienne* (Rocamora, 2009: 112).

## 5. A feminine identity

The concept of being Parisian is closely linked to womankind. There are barely any books or articles about Parisian men, which implies that there is no demand for such a model. Paris has always been associated with (and represented by) that idea of the feminine singular. Consequently, the notion of the *Parisienne* shows that there is a type, a group with distinctive features (from men’s ones and from the other woman, *provinciales* and foreigner). Parisian women tend to embody an ‘imaginary community’ which seems to define a feminine model, an identity, Paris or even a particular idea (Robert, 2004: 302). They discipline the multitude into an ordered whole that creates

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<sup>42</sup> Carine Roitfeld, cited in Baudriller. ‘La Tentation du Luxe’, in *Stratégies*, no. 1235 (3 May 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Carine Roitfeld was also the character of the documentary *Mademoiselle C*, relating the launch of her own magazine and her Parisian past.

the illusion of identity without which value and meaning would not be attributed to certain objects and styles (Rocamora, 2009: 106).

Mass culture provides the audience with a variety of models that reflect cultural beliefs and gender stereotypes. Each model highlights certain qualities, yet some models prevail. The media offer both traditional representations of women as well as different, 'emancipated' ones for instance (Damean, 2002: 92) such as the *Parisienne* in the twentieth century especially. These particular representations of women spread a feminine identity that the audience can decide to adopt (or not). Because as French writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) elaborated on, in her existentialist and feminist essay *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), '*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*'.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, according to her, femininity is a cultural process, not an innate one. Traditionally, a feminine identity was constructed in relation to the child and to the man. The woman was a mother and a wife. Today media define femininity in relation to beauty and youth, as these are dominant values in the contemporary culture (Damean, 2002: 91).

In modern identity theories, identity is performed. The body serves to project information. This is done through movement, clothes, speech and facial expressions. For Butler, gender is an act that has been rehearsed. She does not see it as an expression of what one is but as something that one does. So the *Parisienne*'s identity emerges as a mode of 'self-making' through which she becomes socially perceivable. This explains why Paris has been associated with femininity over the years. One can say that feminine identity has been successfully constructed if the external observers can recognize a 'feminine' body associated with a 'feminine' behavior.

However for Bourdieu, identities have to be understood in relation to power. When defining and controlling social groups, power relationships are involved. Institutions and agents who, thanks to their positions in the social structure, manage to impose a sort of power in society, are able to do and undo social groups, so identities. The *Parisienne* is part of this imaginary community that has been 'created' via the myth of the personage so it is a shared belief for the public opinion. The media have that ability of fashioning the representations of that type and so of the identity attributed to the *Parisienne*.

So, the *Parisienne* identity is attainable through 'performative' enactments, in Butler's sense, 'fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means' (Butler, 1999: 173). The signs convey through the goods promoted in fashion press for example (Rocamora, 2009: 123). The woman herself becomes objectified into goods. By selling the

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<sup>44</sup> 'We are not born as women, we become women' (ed. Gallimard II, p13)



image of the *Parisienne* in magazines, what she wears, where she goes, what she does, her concept is purchased 'in the form of a commodity' (Betterton, 1989: 13). As she consumes clothes, she defines her identity the way the media shaped it.

The assumption that Paris holds this feminine characteristics is emphasized when it comes to Parisian man. The process of 'becoming' Parisian for a man is incomparable to the struggle the woman has to go through, according to Bauër. If a *provincial* is smart enough, he can easily be considered as a Parisian, because he has the aptitude of adapting to fashion trends (Bauër, 2014: 48). For a *Parisienne*, it is different. There is 'a set of qualities' to acquire to feel like a Parisian woman. The notion of 'delicateness' sticks to the figure and is a trait that a *provinciale* could never acquire: this delicateness of talking, acting, walking. So as Rocamora writes, 'Paris is a she, to the point that it brings femininity out of its inhabitants' (2009: 112). *Vogue* adds that 'Paris is a woman' (November 1996, p.161), 'Paris is a female city' (September 1994, p.218), attributing the female gender to the Gallic city. French daily *Libération*, author and journalist Philippe Lançon also sees the capital as a woman, namely the *Parisienne* and with its streets and monuments being her body (Citron, 1961 (2): 2). Plus, female figures have personified Paris over the centuries, the prostitute and the courtesan especially which represented the *Parisiennes* as sexually promiscuous.

What is even more relevant in the association of Paris and femininity is that not only the media have played a role in this representation. Writers did too. Most of the available sources of the twentieth century and earlier were written by male authors, for a male audience. The personage was immersed in a masculine discourse until then. Therefore, the possible origin of the myth come from a 'masculine construction' (Robert, 2004), perhaps even a male fantasy. There has never been women so gracious, beautiful, elegant than the French, than the *Parisiennes*. The myth sets its bases on a male gaze that has emphasized a particular female body and *esprit*. One can wonder if the performance of the *Parisienne* as such is not just based on male desires.

Only modern sources have been written by women, which is ironic because contemporary descriptions are either exaggerations of the features (questioning the message and truth of the statements) or the *Parisienne* as a symbol of femininity — and ideal. A stand against male dominance? Not only, because the figure of the *garçonne* in the 1930s who broke off all the feminine ideas of the *Parisienne* was mainly invented by Coco Chanel.

In *How To Be Parisian Wherever You Are* (2014), Maigret 'asks' a Parisian how he sees a *Parisienne*. She is apparently 'never satisfied', 'full of herself', 'arrogant', 'snob', close to

‘megalomania’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 4-6) but does everything ‘with love’; as if the *Parisienne* is reduced to love.

## 6. Conclusion

In this chapter, the concept of being Parisian has been exposed in order to understand the construction of identity of the *Parisienne*. The city of Paris has played a great role in shaping the representation of its women because of its central position, geographically and socially. The capital is seen as the cradle of femininity which has gradually led to the construction of a feminine ideal. The *Parisienne* has been turned into the icon of the feminine eternal in the imaginary. Although Paris is now one of the capitals of fashion, the *Parisienne* remains a muse for creators and designers.

## Fifth chapter: The Parisienne as a feminine ideal

### 1. Introduction

In this last chapter, I will put into perspective the feminine ideal the *Parisienne* of today represents for womankind. Because of standardization and fashion her personage is not fixed. Because her identity has changed and evolved, the lines between myth and reality have become blurred. Thanks to her heritage, international popular media and French public opinion, a strong image is displayed of the myth which could be leading to a deconstruction with Baudrillard's theory on Simulacra and Simulation.

Finally, a visual analysis will be relevant to see where the myth of the *Parisienne* stands today. Thanks to the documentary *The Parisienne* directed by Melinda Triani (2014), it will become clear that the *Parisienne*, be it a myth or a reality, is idealized.

### 2. A feminine type

Today the *Parisienne* is a urban type that gives the illusion of an 'imaginary community' (Charle, 1998: 195-205), supported by *genius loci*<sup>45</sup> and feminine essence. According to Rocamora, the *Parisienne* is as much an imagined as a living reality (Rocamora, 2009: 90) which can not bound her to an 'arbitrary definition' as French professor at IFM (*Institut Français de la Mode*) Florence Müller notes. The Parisian woman is a lively personage who evolves. Her type is complex because of the myth floating around and of the image popular culture gives. Her femininity is idolized and easily becomes a model. Elegance, moderation and sexiness: these are the distinctive features that have characterized her until today.

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<sup>45</sup> In contemporary usage, *genius loci* usually refers to a location's distinctive atmosphere. In this case, the city of Paris.

Florence Müller places the *Parisienne* between classicism and avant-garde movements. Although her type is still full of life, her myth not so much. Today the *Parisienne* embodies perfection. She is represented by several women who are succeeding to Inès de La Fressange, namely Charlotte Gainsbourg (b. 1971) or Lou Doillon (b. 1982) seen as a prototype of the *Parisienne* underground (*Vogue*, November 1998, p141). Silhouettes presented during catwalks of Isabel Marant's and Jacquemus' collections also render a good image of the contemporary *Parisienne*. Inès de La Fressange, for instance, was even present on the catwalk for Chanel Spring Summer Collections 2011, twenty-five years after her model career ended.<sup>46</sup> She embodied this timeless chic *Parisienne*, in this eighteenth century romantic setting Karl Lagerfeld recreated for the occasion. Inès de La Fressange is usually referred as the *Parisienne* by excellence (Laurain, 2014: 23; Plantagenet, 2015: 132). She is the author of *La Parisienne*, guide aiming to unravel the secrets of all Parisian women. Thanks to her fame, she has also been working in partnership with Japanese clothing brand Uniqlo since 2012, where she sets the daily essentials of her wardrobe: trench, blouse, high-waisted jeans and v collar cashmeres sweaters.

For over a century in literature, art and fashion magazines she has been the person who sets trends and gives advice on what to wear. She has personified a fashion capital as it has been seen in the fourth chapter. In other words, she is 'the consecration of taste, the baptism of fashion' (Martin-Chauffier, 2007: 35 cited in Rocamora, 2009). She is granted so much credit that the *Parisienne* is presented as if she was a muse of all times. She captives the world to the point that her flaws become qualities. Fantasy, freedom and taste on one hand, frivolity, superficiality and arrogance on the other. The *Parisienne* exists to make an impression. She represents this absolute model of elegance and refinement which is sometimes compared to the 'Céline woman' also known as 'the incarnation of sophistication'.<sup>4748</sup>

Consequently, her being depicted as a representation of the 'quintessence' of femininity indicates the feminine ideal she embodies. 'Spirited, emancipated and fashionable, *la Parisienne*, according to discourse, is an ideal of femininity (Rocamora, 2009: 121). She is 'celebrated as an icon of modernity' (Steele, 2004: 316) and not only outside of France. In the Gallic country, a monthly feminine magazine *La Parisienne* has been released in the capital, since October 2008, directly aimed at its female inhabitants. The type has been exported and adapted to the *Parisienne*

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<sup>46</sup> Mouzat, Virginie. (2010)

<sup>47</sup> Céline is a French luxurious brand, founded in 1945, which is proper to the Left Bank women's style.

<sup>48</sup> Comments by former Céline's art director Ivana Omazic in *Vogue* October 2005 p.84, cited in Rocamora, 2009: 103.

itself, in Paris. Readers are ‘seduced into embracing Parisian feminine selfhood - a selfhood that is very much for sale’ (Hugues, 1994: 127).

The *Parisienne* presents itself as a self-confident women who is ‘aware of her qualities and her faults (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 3). Her *natural* skin shows her imperfections but she is proud of it: ‘make the best of what nature gave you’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 160). This self-acceptation inspires the other female kind. The *Parisienne* knows how to be and feel unique, she ‘likes to stand out from the crowd’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 76). This cynical representation of her emphasizes the fact that *Parisiennes* always know what to do and what to say: ‘always look as if you are gazing at the sunset. Even during rush hour in the Métro. Even when picking up frozen pizza from the supermarket’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 67).

Also on the Internet, the *Parisienne* is talked about. Women show their idealization of the type. Garance Doré is the French blogger by excellence, not the Parisian but the French one. Never lived in Paris, she moved to the United States. Her blog can be seen as relevant as an essay, since she reflects a type of woman today. Fellow women on her blog also have an opinion when Garance Doré writes an article about the *Parisiennes*. It can be significant to pay attention to certain comments as French and non-French women debate on the topic. They all come to the conclusion that being *Parisienne* is an attitude. This is what changed with the *Parisienne* of the twentieth century, who was only perceived as a fashion icon. The *Parisienne* of today is more than this: she is the embodiment of a type of femininity. A *Parisienne* dresses to flatter herself and then ‘forgets about it’. ‘She is the definition of studied effortlessness. Everything is super thought about, but she looks like she just woke up in the morning exactly the way she appears in front of you’.<sup>49</sup> One comment was particularly relevant: ‘*La parisienne, c’est une réalité. C’est, pour moi, plus une façon de vivre, qu’une personnalité. Toutes les filles peuvent être des parisiennes, si elles le veulent vraiment. Il suffit juste d’aimer profondément Paris et d’en aspirer son essence. Une parisienne est une femme qu’on oublie jamais*’.<sup>50</sup> This passage enhances her nature. The mythical aspect is almost forgotten to refer to a legend.

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<sup>49</sup> Comments on Garance Doré’s article about the *Parisiennes*.

<sup>50</sup> The *Parisienne* is a reality. It is to me more a way of living than a personality. Every girls can be *Parisiennes*, if they really want so. It just essential to deeply love Paris and to aspire its essence. A *Parisienne* is a unforgettable woman (Amandine on Garance Doré’s blog post about the *Parisienne*)

### 3. A fantasy? Deconstruction of a myth

The authors of *How To Be Parisian Wherever You Are* (2014) aim to ‘dispel the mystery’ about Parisian women, in other words they want to deconstruct the myth and beliefs foreigners may have concerning the *Parisienne*. They take down each stereotype or cliché, one by one. She does not have a particular gene that keeps her from getting fat, she is not a perfect mother: she is a woman before being a mother. Her ‘natural’ look is not natural after all and the *Parisienne* is selfish and snob. In a nutshell the *Parisienne* is ‘imperfect, vague, unreliable and full of paradoxes. But (...) funny, attentive, curious and ironic (...) methodical and yet shambolic, proud and yet self-deprecating, loyal and yet unfaithful’ (Maigret and Cie, 2014: xvi). The *Parisienne* is just ‘trying to spin every episode of her existence into a very good story’ so they say. The book is colorful and full of different styles and fonts, some photographs of the authors themselves with husbands and sons (Maigret and Cie, 2014: 54), of Paris, of garments. Because of the international success of the book, it has been translated in twenty-five languages at least but never in French, paradoxically. The publication is available in France of course but not in French; which raises questions. Did the authors want to accentuate the Parisian *snobisme*? Did they want to underline the falsehood of the *Parisienne*? Or is she just the product of a male fantasy? It is obvious that her figure has been commercialized and she is now a product of consumption, which almost erases her supposed existence.

Baudrillard’s notions of Simulacra and Simulation could be useful to look at to comprehend that paradox. According to him, simulation is the experience of the real through what one knows. The simulacra is the representation of it (be it an object or an image). His theory is that society lost contact with reality. Because of the simulacra copying itself again and again, it blurred the points of references between the image and what it initially represented. The simulacra ends preceding and defining what the real is. Simulations take over the relationship with real life, creating a hyperreality which is a copy that has no original. This hyperreality happens when the difference between reality and representation collapses and the society is no longer able to see an image as reflecting anything other than a symbolic trade of signifiers in culture, so not the real world. Three orders of simulacra exist: the first in which reality is represented by the image (map represents territory); the second order in which the distinction between reality and representation is blurred (the myth); and the third order of simulacra is that of simulation which replaces the relationship

between reality and representation. Consequently reality itself is lost in favor of a hyperreality. Mass media shape these symbols as agents of representation, not as messages. The media create a new culture of signs, images and codes without referential value. So contemporary society consumes these meaningless signs of identity and the distinction between the real and the simulation can not be made.

By associating the myth of the *Parisienne* with Baudrillard's theory, it can be understood as followed: literature, art, media, fashion, all had an impact in the construction of identity of the *Parisienne*. Some similar features have come along (such as an independent woman) but because of post-modern ideologies, her representation has been blurred; it has been lost in reality. Who is the *Parisienne* and the myth that sticks to her? Does it still convey the same symbol than when it appeared for the first time? The image of the *Parisienne* has always been synonym of elegance, a metaphor for feminine essence. However by copying her style over and over in fashion press, is not she stuck in that paper reality and therefore lost the meaning of her existence? Normative femininity is made of a series of disciplinary practices regarding the body, its gestures, its appetite, its shape and its aspect (Damean, 2002: 91). Every aspect of her is known, is depicted. She is exposed so she can be an accessible type to the masses, loosing her specificity, her authenticity. The commodification of the *Parisienne* has led to the deconstruction of the myth in a way.

Inès de La Fressange says it herself. She published a book about the *Parisienne* because she had enough of always answering the same questions journalists asked about the qualities and flaws of the *Parisienne*; also because she was not pleased when repeating her trendy addresses in the capital.<sup>51</sup> She wanted to transmit things that apparently are obvious for *Parisiennes* but not for foreigners. She knows what her status entails relating to the woman. What she does not comprehend is why there is a frenetic enthusiasm when it comes to French women. In Paris 'no one cares'. When someone tells a *Parisienne* that her jacket looks cool, the *Parisienne* is never going to say 'thank you' but 'it is an old one, I've had it forever'. There is that detached way of pretending that foreigners do not have, apparently.

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<sup>51</sup> Paquin, Paquita. (2014)

#### 4. The Parisienne documentary

As a last and relevant example, I will focus on the documentary *The Parisienne* (2014) directed by French reporter at *La Mode La Mode La Mode* Melinda Triana. This 52 minute-long movie follows independent women who have conquered Paris in order to earn their freedom, to find love or professional fulfillment. They all represent the *Parisienne* of today, from one way or another. Melinda Triana tries to dress a portrait of the *Parisienne*, of the twenty districts of the capital, running around that Paris of fantasy, that stereotyped Paris. This visual analysis aims to catch the essence of this mystic figure in her natural element, the city, and to summarize this last chapter.

Melinda Triana puts together images that catches the attention. She starts off with the line: ‘she is the incarnation of perfection on Earth. After her there is nothing. Or God, perhaps.’ The tone is set. The image of a natural, insolent and funny woman, embodying that Parisian chic, begins. ‘She breathes Parisian air; it is all about feeling Parisian, not being Parisian’. Of course she talks about Catherine Deneuve, this ‘fixed image’ of the *Parisienne* she says.

Caroline de Maigret and her three fellow partners also have their sequence along the documentary. They all argue that the *Parisiennes* have a certain freedom in relation to men. This idea of romanticism and chivalry intrigue the world. They are modern and this liberty gives them a nonchalant but elegant attitude that everyone envies. One of the usual clichés when it comes to the Parisian woman is her addiction to the cigarette. It is pretty well reported in the documentary, as almost all of them do smoke, from sixteen to seventy years old; characteristic that have been missing in the written sources however.

Of course Melinda Triana refers to French figures such as Arletty, Brigitte Bardot, Isabel Marant, Lou Doillon. *The Parisienne* brings together a lot of stereotypes. The Gallic kind is that young classy woman with a particular look. She is a ‘*reine de l’équilibre*’ (‘queen of moderation’) as Lou Doillon tells. So the documentary draws the conclusion that the constructed identity of someone who is perfectly dressed is very strong in contemporary media. Every *Parisienne* takes care of her appearance, of her look. But such assumption can already be found in the first sources that refer to the period of Marie-Antoinette for instance. Only the fact that the *Parisienne* is emancipated and sexy is a very recent addition to the type and can be traced back to the 1960s with French actress Brigitte Bardot. This points out the considerable role of media in shaping feminine identity.



## 5. Conclusion

Surprisingly enough, if the *Parisienne* is built on clichés and stereotypes, it still seems that there is a clear consensus on what she supposedly is. All the descriptions tend to come to the same point: her typology takes the form of that feminine ideal. And except French reporters who claim that those assumptions are false, everyone seems to agree that Parisian women deal with things differently. Perhaps, this is where her strength comes from. Although it may be in the look, being and feeling Parisian is an attitude. But there is a fine line between myth and legend? She used to be referred as a myth and now tends to be called a legend, emphasizing on the timeless effect she has. Where does the line end? So as *Vogue* noted in 2000, '*la Parisienne est une légende, donc, elle existe plus que les autres femmes, et ce pour l'éternité*'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> 'The *Parisienne* is a legend, so, she exists more than other women, and this for the eternity' comment by Amélie Nothomb, *Vogue*, August 2000

## Conclusion

« *La Parisienne est un animal imaginaire. Comme la licorne. Sans que personne ne l'ait jamais vue, tout le monde la connaît.* » Jean-Louis Bory (1919-1979) <sup>53</sup>

If there is one sure thing to say, the *Parisienne* has adapted, changed and evolved throughout the centuries (Laurain, 2014: 31). In my thesis, it has been shown that all *Parisiennes* are French. Both have their own myths although more similarities than disparities are found between the two types. International popular media tend to idealize Gallic women. The idea of them being 'better' is sold thanks to the publishing industry mostly, and now more via the Internet. Not considered so mystical anymore, the *Parisienne* of today is an urban type. She is surely put on a pedestal by womankind although the myth has been weakened by feminist waves and destabilizations of the masculine / feminine roles over the past century. Today the myth takes the form of cultural heritage and site for images and clichés dedicated to the world of fashion, advertisement and tourism. She is represented as a fashion icon and an independent and sexy woman. The *Parisienne* was a pioneer figure in the construction of modern femininity determined by her elegance, refinement, ease in society but also by her art of seduction. She brought a new breath into a world where males dominated, who were partly responsible in the construction of her myth. Nevertheless, her personage contributed to women's liberation in the French society in considerable ways. This Parisian femininity got embodied by celebrities, who still are remembered as *Parisiennes* (i.e. Liane de Pougy, Arletty, Brigitte Bardot).

'So potent has the term *Parisienne* become in fashion discourse that its simple evocation, like that of the word '*Paris*', suffices to affect the meaning of a sentence or image and anchor it to the realm of all things fashionable and desirable. As Taxile Delord wrote in his *Physiologie: 'Parisienne. The word says it all'* (1841: 25)' (Rocamora, 2009: 105). Not only used in the fashion discourse, the *Parisienne* was proper to Paris, its environment. The idea of feeling Parisian arose and she became the embodiment of this *parisianisme*. She contributed to the myth of love attributed to the city; the Parisian charm so to say. This explains the reason why the *Parisienne* is sometimes

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<sup>53</sup> 'The *Parisienne* is an imaginary animal. Like a unicorn. Without anyone ever seeing her, everyone knows her' 1958 cited in Robert, 2004: 302.

compared to Eros, god of love and creative power in Greek mythology. During the time of *La Belle Epoque*, she was characterized as a prostitute which was turned into a seductive power. Today the capital stays the decor of numerous ads for French luxurious brands which maintains the myth of the Parisian chic, elegance and femininity (Rocamora, 2009).

Gradually, the *Parisienne* constructed an identity which was soon to be commodified and so standardized. Because of an increasing banalization and ‘stereotypification’ of the genre, the type lost its interest and uniqueness. Due to fashion press, she was sold as a product available to everyone. ‘*De femme incarnée jadis, elle tend à devenir de plus en plus un pur concept*’ (‘From incarnated woman long ago, she gradually tends to become a pure concept’; Laurain, 2014: 23). The *Parisienne* after being victim of mystification was victim of materialization. Still seen as a the essence of femininity, some talk about a ‘fabricated femininity’ (Garb, bodies: 87). Her figure has been commodified; from bags to perfume to piece of clothes.

If she keeps being characterized by this supposedly inimitable *je ne sais quoi*, the *Parisienne* is now only a feminine type among others. For Fargue summed up the past and present, perhaps future, representation of the *Parisienne*: women ‘were Parisian because they considered that life should be exclusively devoted to pleasure, frivolity, snobbism, rapture and uproar’ (Fargue, 1964: 172). A mixture of all the personages of Régnier (mainly of Rosine), or Clotilde from Becque. In Plantagenet’s novel, *La Vraie Parisienne* (2015), after describing six or seven *Parisiennes*’s portraits, the story ends with the portrait of Diane, a homeless girl wearing a red coat (2015: 170). The author implies that the *Parisienne* represents that unfixed and vague image, in fact. It is not a matter of social class, appearance, taste or attitude, it is just a concept that everyone desires without even knowing what it really means.

What is interesting to comprehend in her type is how she develops her style and asserts her personality. The myth has seen the light during the eighteenth century and has been very much talked about in the past decades, in particular because of the media. The real question here is why ‘the Parisian killer grace’ she embodies is envied (Rocamora, 2009: 120). A believable premise would be that the glance of the other that makes her alive and the best proof of this existence is that endless desire to copy her.<sup>54</sup> She just shines.

However, the *Parisienne* is unfinished. The myth about her is a philosophy, a sociological reference and a literary model. Numerous books about her have been written with the attempt of describing the figure as an ideal or just a woman. It is impossible to really pin down the image she

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<sup>54</sup> Back cover of Denuelle, Sabine. *La Parisienne dans l’art*. Paris: Citadelle & Mazenod, 2011.

represents today. ‘Each day she reinvents herself’ (Rustenholz, 2001: 13). The myth, if it still exists, would remain imprecise and enigmatic, because when it belongs to everyone, its timeless eternity is in danger (Laurain, 2014: 32). French photographer Baudoin tried to capture the myth in fact. During six years, he took seventy-five pictures of *Parisiennes*, from every districts of the capital. It was turned into a book. The photography on the front page of my thesis is number fifty-seven with the caption: ‘Vanessa, fashion artistic director, Batignolles, 17th’. This *Parisienne* represents the myth in modernity. The temporality she lives in is her own time, it is her own reality. Her defiant look says it all: everything is in the attitude. When Baudoin was asked during an interview if he had met ‘the’ *Parisienne*, his answer was no. He argued on the diversity and complexity of catching a ‘real’ *Parisienne* today. It raises the question of who the *Parisienne* is beyond the clichés. This imaginary figure has been created and consists of a mere copy of the previous one.

Lastly, I will conclude this thesis where it all started; with one quote from French author Théodore de Banville: ‘*Si vous voulez savoir comment agira une Parisienne dans une circonstance donnée, prenez le contrepied du lieu commun généralement admis et vous le saurez exactement. Soyez assuré qu’elle fera toujours le contraire de ce qu’indique le vulgaire poncif d’élégance ou d’esprit*’ — or the art of being unique.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> ‘If you want to know how a Parisian woman will behave in a given circumstance, take the opposite of the politically correct and you will know. Be sure that she will always do the contrary of what the vulgar cliché of elegance or *esprit* is.’ (Banville, 1876)

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