

Urban development and the culture of masked balls in nineteenth-century Paris

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ABSTRACT: This article links the nature of commercial masked balls in Paris in the 1830s and 1840s to urban development during these decades. The raucous and often destructive character of the balls, which united elites and popular classes under the mask's anonymity, coincided with a society undergoing social and political upheaval. The dress and conduct of revellers were expressions of their ambitions, fears and resentments. Changes in the urban landscape of the 1820s and 1830s – in particular, the construction of the *grands boulevards* and alignment of theatres sponsoring masked balls along this axis – sharpened potential conflict at such events by placing them in one of the most socially charged corridors of the city.

In the winter of 1844, the Paris prefect of police Gabriel Delessert circulated an order forbidding orchestras from playing specified instruments at night. For outdoor ensembles, it prohibited bass drums, snare drums, kettle-drums, cymbals, bells, hunting horns, smoke bombs, firearms and artillery pieces. For indoor performances, the ban covered only the bombs, guns and artillery. The ban was inspired by carnival and its masked balls, whose racket was prompting complaints almost daily. Delessert wrote that the percussive music 'overexcites the dancers and pushes them into disorder and at the same time disturbs the neighbours' sleep'.¹ By any standard, the growth in balls over the last two decades had been astonishing. In 1836, the Paris police counted some 180 public balls and more than 850 private balls on Mardi Gras, most of them involving some element of disguise. Based on such figures, the anonymous author of *La carnaval* (1840), tongue only partly in cheek, announced that half of Paris was dancing on Mardi Gras.² Delessert's order attests to their obstreperous presence in the city.

¹ G. Delessert, préfet de police, to MM. les commissaires de police de la ville de Paris et de la banlieue, 13 Dec. 1844, F²¹ 1046, Archives Nationales (AN), Paris.

² *Le carnaval* (Paris, 1840), 5; see also A. Faure, *Paris carême-prenant: du carnaval à Paris au XIX^e siècle 1800–1914* (Paris, 1978).

In Paris of the 1830s and 1840s, masked balls reached their height of popularity. They were an exaggerated version of the tremendous changes that transformed social hierarchies, when fortunes were made in sudden windfalls and just as quickly lost in sharp reversals. In this sense, they resembled the commercial public balls of eighteenth-century London, where, as Terry Castle has argued, the masquerade became a literary trope for fluidity of position.³ Aspects of the Paris balls were also strongly stamped by details unique to the city. These related to the location of theatres, the social complexion of neighbourhoods and changing patterns of urban development. Such factors made masked balls especially turbulent during the July monarchy (1830–48), when rich and poor gathered in the same theatres for entertainment and a fixation with crime kept mutual suspicion high. A spectacular eruption of violence during a masked ball at the Opera in 1837 exposed the social and political tensions just under the surface. Later in the century, the same factors pertaining to urban space contributed to a gradual pacification of balls, as Hausmannization displaced theatres, moved poorer populations to the suburbs and segregated spectators – and masked revellers – by class.

During the heyday of masked balls, the rich dressed as rag-pickers and thieves, and laundry-girls came as the aristocrats. The wealthy attended for the thrill of rubbing shoulders with supposed outlaws. The middling went to emulate or perhaps mock their betters. The less fortunate took the occasion to imagine themselves in another role. At the Opera ball, Paul de Kock was taken aback at having recognized a magistrate dressed as Arlequin. He was in the same ring of dancers as an ex-convict dressed in judicial robes. 'What shame such men would feel if they knew . . . whose sullied hands were touching their own!'⁴ But who was to say that the magistrate and the felon did not know exactly what they were doing?

Maskers during the July monarchy could regularly expect such encounters, which were made easier by the location of the most popular venues for balls. In the 1820s and 1830s, a constellation of theatres sponsoring balls came into alignment along a corridor that would eventually stretch from the boulevard du Temple to the place de l'Opéra. These *grands boulevards* joined commerce with pleasure, drawing together business, banking and new forms of shopping with a wide range of musical and dramatic entertainment.

The linked thoroughfares established another kind of connection. At their eastern-most end, the so-called Boulevard du Crime, were overcrowded working-class neighbourhoods, whose residents suffered disproportionately from poverty, vice and violence. At their western edge were prestigious new residential ventures that attracted the city's intellectual and financial elites. Such contrasts were what Colin Jones

³ T. Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, 1986).

⁴ J. Janin, *Un hiver à Paris* (Paris, 1846), 174.

has characterized as 'a two-tiered, two-speed city' that emerged in these decades, as the divisions between rich and poor widened dramatically and visibly.⁵ Balls brought these two worlds together, and the encounter was not always peaceful. Parisian carnival in these years was more provocation than play, more subversive than controlled, more expressive of hostility than fellow feeling.⁶

There had been commercial masked balls in Paris since 1715. Their chief quality in the old regime was decorum. The Académie Royale de Musique held a monopoly in the eighteenth century. The ticket price of 5 livres ensured that most revellers would be well-to-do, and an ordinance prohibited 'any insult or indecency'. Masks were not required, and many came without them. Balls were held once a week on Sundays between early November and Advent and three times a week from January until Lent. They took place in the Opera's main performance hall on the rue St Honoré alongside the Palais Royal. The evening began with a concert; dancing started at midnight and ended at sunrise. Anecdotal evidence from the time suggests that masks did not always hide their wearers' identities; nor were they always intended to do so. Balls here were reliably dull, however fashionable it was to gush about having attended. 'Crowds press against one, one is pushed and shoved, one yawns, one is bored. One chases love, pleasure, wit, and it all vanishes like the wind.'⁷

While the number of public balls grew in the early nineteenth century, they remained largely the province of elites through the Restoration. At the Opera, which held exclusive rights to sponsor balls on Saturdays, their character was unchanged from the old regime. 'The taste for disguise is entirely passé', wrote a visitor in 1825. 'In the first boxes they yawn; in the second and third they sleep.'⁸ A decade later, the Opera still upheld the proud severity of the simple domino. Its balls proceeded 'without dancing, without masquerades, without the confusion of costumes'. At other theatres in the city, however, maskers had begun to throw off such restraint. Early press notices convey gathering concern: the Variétés ball was a place of 'debauchery', the Saint-Martin was a scene of 'saturnalias', the Odéon was 'bacchanalian'.⁹ Revellers at the Opera would soon follow suit, to great devastation.

⁵ C. Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City* (New York, 2004), 294.

⁶ The literature on carnival and its interpretation is vast. The material in this article, more anecdotal than systematic, is not intended to support large conclusions about carnival in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. For those wishing to survey the range of approaches to carnival, see, *inter alia*: P.G. d'Ayala and M. Boiteux (eds.), *Carnavals et mascarades* (Paris, 1988); M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984); *Le Carnaval, la fête et la communication* (Nice, 1985); G. Cocchiara, *Il mondo alla rovescia* (Turin, 1981); Daniel Fabre, *Carnival ou la fête à l'envers* (Paris, 1992); J. Heers, *Fêtes des fous et carnavaux* (Paris, 1983); J.H. Johnson, *Venice Incognito: Masks in the Serene Republic* (Berkeley, 2011).

⁷ N. Desarbres, *Deux siècles à l'Opéra (1699–1868)* (Paris, 1868), 222; *Paris que tel qu'il est* (Paris, 1781), 28–9.

⁸ L. Montigny, *Le provincial à Paris*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1825), vol. III, 202, 208.

⁹ *Courrier des Théâtres*, 26 Jan. 1834; *La Quotidienne*, 9 Feb. 1835.

Parisian maskers wore costumes common to carnival in other times and places: clowns, pirates, Swiss peasants, fishermen, Arlequin or Pierrot from Commedia dell'Arte, kings or queens from the past and so forth. From the 1840s, clothing firms published catalogues of costumes for rent or purchase.¹⁰ Other costumes were more closely tied to the context. One costume emblematic of the age was the Chicard, a shambling character who wore his irreverence on his sleeve – and on virtually every other article of clothing he wore. The Chicard was a walking scrapheap of France's fallen regimes, a 'swift kick', as one writer put it, to 'every taste, every epoch, every glory'. His knee-breeches were eighteenth century, but his knees were bare; his top boots were Napoleonic, though he often wore only one; the fraying epaulettes recalled the revolutionary-era National Guard; and a feathered centurion's helmet was made of painted cardboard or an upturned pail. 'Every rag is derision . . . His cast-offs contain the whole of today's morality: bow before the lord of all, before the god of parody!¹¹ The stance exerted universal appeal, according to a small volume that sketched the character's 'physiology': under his clothes were students, dandies, cobblers, clerks, notaries and druggists. 'Here, all hierarchy disappears: there are no more categories, no more conditions; all are levelled, everything melts together in the great whirlwind of the costumes and dances.'¹²

Along with Balochard – a sloppy, drinking, hell-raising worker's costume – Chicard treated others with a cheerful contempt, 'especially those above him'. An ephemeral pamphlet co-authored by 'Chicard and Balochard' called Chicard 'above all, Republican' – a politically charged term in 1841 – since he lives and dies by liberty: 'the liberty of the dance'. Whatever cheek the pamphlet contained was softened by its silliness, but its irreverence was unmistakable.¹³

The female counterpart to Chicard was the Débardeur, a term originally used to describe workers who unloaded wood from river boats. It was a symbol of muscular freedom, and the women who wore it – imperfectly grouped under such names as *lorettes* and *grisettes* – embraced its associations. The costume was simple: a flowing white shirt open at the front, form-hugging black trousers and a worker's cap. When worn by a woman, the costume carried a charge. By all accounts, they spoke like dockworkers. The loose-limbed freedom of the Débardeur that the artist Gavarni depicted was a joyous repudiation of the constraints of dress and comportment that corseted the lives of French women at mid-century.

¹⁰ *Le Constitutionnel*, Dec. 1837; F. Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes. Bals publics et danse sociale à Paris de 1830 à 1870* (Paris, 1986), 163.

¹¹ T. Delord, 'Le Chicard', in Jules Janin et al., *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, ed. L. Curmer, 2 vols. (Paris, 2003), vol. I, 1038. See also C. Marchal, *Physiologie du Chicard* (Paris, 1842), 27–8.

¹² Marchal, *Physiologie du Chicard*, 60.

¹³ Delord, 'Le Chicard', vol. I, 1041; Balochard and Chicard, *Physiologie des bals de Paris* (Paris, 1841), 32–4, 54.

The signature dance of Chicards and Débardeurs was the cancan, which revellers danced only when the ball had reached a boiling point. It appeared typically in the midst of a quadrille. Its mockery was evident. The quadrille had begun as a polite group dance during the Consulate, more suitable for families than lovers although it also showcased couples and solos. In the 1830s, when the orchestra came to the section in the music for the *cavalier seul*, the Chicard improvised outlandish moves, circling his Débardeur, kicking his legs out high, twisting and plunging into deep bows and knee-bends. The woman sometimes responded by doing the same. By the standards of the day, it was shockingly sexual. Detailing an especially riotous carnival ball in 1835, an official came to the cancan and hesitated: 'here the pen refuses', he wrote.¹⁴ 'Its very name is trash', wrote *La Mode*.¹⁵ It was sensuous and taunting, an admirer wrote, lustful, mocking, contemptuous, erotic, brutish and clownish. 'Throwing her head back, with her mouth half-open, Margot faints before the gaze of her partner. Then she kicks her foot to his nose, which he grasps and blesses.'¹⁶ Other versions were less allegorical. At a masked ball at the Variétés theatre, a girl came enveloped in a cashmere and, at the height of the quadrille, slowly emerged from her wrap to perform the cancan in the nude.¹⁷ That the cancan could become a gaudy emblem of *La Vie Parisienne* late in the century says much about the institutionalization of scandal.

The 1831 edition of a Paris police manual for the municipal guard was a sign of the times. It detailed the procedures for booking revellers who danced indecently during masked balls: issue a warning and, if it remains unheeded, escort the subject to the nearest station for charges under Article 330 of the Penal Code, Outrage against Public Morals.¹⁸ The addition was thought necessary. In 1833, a dozen male students costumed as marquises and their maids were arrested for dancing obscenely at the Théâtre de l'Odéon's carnival ball. They were hauled to the prefecture still wearing their dresses. A month later, they struck again on the Left Bank, this time at the Théâtre du Panthéon's carnival ball, where they overwhelmed the four policemen on duty and responded with violence when others arrived. When the mayhem ended, 20 students faced charges of indecency or resisting arrest, and 8 were sentenced to jail.¹⁹

Officers who had the unenviable task of keeping order over this chaotic, masked crowd no doubt felt exposed and at perpetual risk. They suffered taunts, shepherded drunks, learned to tell real danger from play-fighting

¹⁴ Loraux, *Conservateur du Théâtre royale de l'Odéon*, 26 Jan. 1835, F²¹ 1110 (Théâtre de l'Odéon), AN.

¹⁵ Quoted in Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes*, 47.

¹⁶ E. de Lingères, comte d'Alton-Shée, *Mes mémoires (1826–1848)*, quoted in L. Séché, *La Jeunesse dorée sous Louis-Philippe* (Paris, 1910), 160.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ From *Manuel des sergents de ville* (1831), quoted in Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes*, 47.

¹⁹ See Faure, *Paris carême-prenant*, 55; préfecture de police, bulletin de Paris, 28 Jan. 1833, F⁷ 3886 (1832–33), AN; *Gazette des Tribunaux*, 17 Jan. 1833.

and endured the din of bass drums and shouted conversation in halls filled beyond their limit. Henri Gisquet, prefect of police in the early 1830s, regularly appealed to the interior minister for restrictions on the number and frequency of carnival balls and asked for funds to cover the cost of posting guards. On rare occasions, police pleased the crowd and joined in the carnival antics, sometimes to their own professional discredit.²⁰ More commonly, their patience ran thin and tempers flared. Maskers at balls 'go about leaping and bounding and teasing the police', a journalist wrote, 'who end up looking petty and small'.²¹

A report filed by the inspector-general of the Variétés theatre lists instances of police brutality during its masked balls of 1836. In early January, a young man in a first-level box costumed as a simpleton and playing the part used his foot to raise the hat of a sergeant standing below him. He was seized, beaten and thrown into the street 'with the greatest brutality'. Another night, agents surrounded a man in a sailor's costume who, they claimed, had called them 'dirty spies'. The sailor offered to leave on his own accord. Instead, he was taken into the hall, driven down the stairs with kicks to the kidney and dragged along the sidewalk by his cravat.²² A riot erupted at the Opera ball that same year when police tried to expel a group of maskers for indecency. The crowd sided against the police and forced a temporary retreat. When the guard returned with reinforcements and 'brutally attacked' maskers who refused to obey their orders, a violent struggle broke out inside the theatre.²³

Stories of individuals who were caught up in the vertigo reveal something of its collective madness. Two shop assistants from the countryside who were arrested for obscenity at the first Opera ball they ever attended were chagrined. 'My mistake was that I can't dance', one of them explained in court. He had watched others and tried to do the same. 'I had hardly even touched the parquet and in half a minute I was in the clink, where I looked pretty bad in my Mother Goose costume.' Some were proud and indignant. 'I worked out my steps the night before', another explained. 'I didn't learn it at the Opera – I dance as I do because I have my own ideas.' Others, like a young artist named Alexis, were unrepentant. Cautioned by a gendarme for his dancing, he responded first with insults and then with abuse, ripping the shoulder braid from his uniform and hurling a stack of plates at his head. He spent three months in jail.²⁴

The proliferation of balls in the nineteenth century tracked the growth of Parisian theatres more generally. In the late eighteenth century, the

²⁰ See *Gazette des Tribunaux*, 6 Feb. 1838.

²¹ *Le Corsaire*, 4 Feb. 1833, quoted in Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes*, 68.

²² Rapport de l'inspecteur-général du Théâtre des Variétés, à messieurs les administrateurs propriétaires, 11 Jan. 1836, F²¹ 1133 (Théâtre des Variétés), AN.

²³ Préfecture de police, bulletins de Paris, 6 Jan. 1833, F⁷ 3886 (1832–33), AN; ministère du commerce et des travaux publics, 14 Jan. 1833, AJ¹³ 182–VI, AN.

²⁴ *Gazette des Tribunaux*, 27 Sep. 1837 and 13 Feb. 1840, quoted in Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes*, 56, 49; *Gazette des Tribunaux*, 6 Mar. 1843.

boulevard du Temple had been a centre of popular entertainment, with outdoor vendors, mimes and mountebanks competing with plays, puppet-theatres and acrobatic displays. The rage for melodrama, which coupled bloody plots with sentimental dénouements, earned the district its title as the 'Boulevard du Crime'.²⁵ With the fall of Napoleon, an 1807 decree limiting the number of theatres in Paris to eight lapsed, and new enterprises sprang up near those already in existence. Melodrama remained popular, a point the *Almanach des Spectacles* of 1823 made with fitting style:

Tautin has been stabbed 16,302 times, Marty has been poisoned in various ways 11,000 times, Fresnoy has been murdered 27,000 times, Mlle Adèle Dupuis has been the innocent victim of 75,000 seductions, abductions or drownings, 6,500 capital charges have tested Mlle Levesque's virtue and Mlle Oliver, whose career is scarcely launched, has already tasted the cup of crime and vengeance 16,000 times.²⁶

The Théâtre des Variétés, on the boulevard de Montmartre, and the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, on boulevard Saint-Martin, were among the oldest theatres in the quarter. Those on the easternmost end of the boulevard du Temple were the Théâtre de Madame Saqui, Théâtre des Funambules and Petit Lazari. Not far from them were the Gaîté and the Ambigu-Comique. In 1821, the Opera moved from its hall near the Bibliothèque Royale on the Square Louvois to the rue Le Peletier just off the boulevard des Italiens, scarcely three blocks from the Variétés. The Cirque Olympique staged shows involving horses, the Théâtre-Historique sponsored historical dramas and the Délassements-Comiques mounted the sorts of reviews for which the Folies-Bergères became famous. In 1839, the Théâtre du Vaudeville moved from a site near the Louvre to a hall on the boulevard de Bonne-Nouvelle between the Variétés and the Saint-Martin.²⁷

While not all these theatres sponsored balls, every major ball of the city was here. The popularity of masked balls was a direct expression of the centrality of such theatres to popular entertainment in the first half of the century. Unlike in eighteenth-century Venice, outdoor carnival revelry was comparatively rare in Paris, particularly in the nineteenth century.²⁸ The boulevard theatres saw balls as a natural extension of their offerings, and they had a ready pool for widening the appeal of indoor masquerades from elites to the popular classes. Discerning the social status of masked revellers is difficult, but the profile of audiences

²⁵ See M. Carlson, 'The golden age of the boulevard', *Drama Review*, 18 (1974), 25–33.

²⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 31.

²⁷ J. Hillaret, *Dictionnaire historique des rues de Paris*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1997), vol. I, 264–5, 278–9, vol. II, 37, 151, 192–3, 462–3, 656; J. McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France* (London and New York, 1993), 14–20, 30–4; F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, 1993), 122.

²⁸ An official report noted 'very few masks' in the streets during Mardi Gras of 1844 but 'an immense crowd of them in public balls' (F⁷ 3892, AN).

along the boulevards gives a rough idea of the probable mix. Recent work by John McCormick has modified the traditional view, set out by Maurice Descotes, that by 1830 theatre audiences were largely segregated by social class.²⁹ Reviewing ticket prices across a range of theatres, McCormick notes that the price of the least-expensive seats at virtually all theatres stayed the same or dropped between 1827 and 1835, even as the price of other seats rose. It seems likely that the Vaudeville and Variétés (where a Débardeur danced the cancan in the nude) drew fashionable audiences at this time.³⁰ Here and elsewhere, strong evidence exists for a broad range of classes among spectators well into the July monarchy. 'In the first half of the nineteenth century', McCormick writes, 'a successful melodrama at a boulevard theatre would attract many middle- and upper-class spectators in addition to its more familiar popular audience.'³¹

The critic Jules Janin confirms anecdotally what McCormick asserts. 'A more complete fusion of the highest and lowest is inconceivable', Janin wrote of audiences at the Funambules, where the gifted mime Jean-Gaspard Duburau performed until just before his death in 1846.

There I saw a confusion of lace and unspeakable rags, of velvet and filthy smocks; perfume merged with the sharp smell of garlic, a bouquet of camellias rubbed up against a cone of fried potatoes and clogs against silk slippers; here holes and stains, and there a white glove in all its purity; here callused hands, there the hands of a duchess.³²

Such commingling was a testament to the continued appeal of boulevard dramas across the social spectrum. It also bore witness to the diverse populations living at either end of this corridor, who came into close contact as spectators and at balls under the cover of masks.

Victoria E. Thompson has identified the decade of the 1830s as a period of increased awareness of differences in class, as population shifts within Paris brought rich and poor into closer proximity. In 1804, Thompson points out, an observer described socially segregated neighbourhoods, whose residents 'would make one believe that the immense population of this capital was composed of different people'. Three decades later, the borders were more porous. Fanny Trollope remarked on the 'dingy jackets' and 'uncomely *casquettes*' that by 1835 seemed ubiquitous. The physical mobility of the lower classes, Thompson demonstrates, was commonly associated with disease, vice and insurrection.³³

²⁹ M. Descotes, *Le public et son théâtre* (Paris, 1964); D.Z. Davidson repeats Descotes' conclusions in *France After Revolution: Urban Life, Gender, and the New Social Order* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 78, 100–2.

³⁰ See McCormick, *Popular Theatres of Nineteenth-Century France*, 21–4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6, 78–80.

³² J. Janin, *Histoire de l'art dramatique*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1853–58), vol. I, 406–7.

³³ L. Prudhomme, *Miroir de l'ancien et du nouveau Paris, avec treize voyages en vélocifères dans ses environs* (1804), and Fanny Trollope, *Paris and the Parisians in 1835* (1836), quoted in V.E. Thompson, 'Telling "spacial stories": urban space and bourgeois identity in early nineteenth-century Paris', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 523–56. Sharon Marcus

What Fanny Trollope and others expressed – the uneasy sense that a discontented and desperate mass lived in and amongst more respectable folk – was evidence of a major demographic change taking place. Between 1800 and 1830, the city's population rose from 550,000 to nearly 800,000. By 1850, it had surpassed one million. New residential developments, which rose by 30 per cent over the same period, were one way of addressing the growth. For instance, investors attracted wealthy buyers to a new neighbourhood near the Opera just north of the rue Le Peletier. A journalist for the *Journal des Débats* called the quarter a New Athens for its concentration of artists, writers and intellectuals.³⁴

Despite the new construction, however, housing capacity could not keep pace with new residents. The growth was fuelled principally by single men from the countryside seeking employment. The result was overcrowding, disease and delinquency, especially in the industrial eastern half of the city. Such changes worked to heighten Parisians' anxiety about security. In his classic work *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris*, Louis Chevalier asserts that crime was the single greatest preoccupation of Parisians during the July monarchy. It was 'at the center of Parisians' imaginations, fears, consciousness; it figured in the most famous novels, philosophical tracts and sociological works; it gripped all classes, was linked to all events'.³⁵

Demographic change and a heightened awareness of social difference affected the character of balls, where inhibitions fell under cover of the mask, in several ways. One was to raise hopes for a fortunate encounter. A letter published in a newspaper from a young woman taken with a masker at a ball conveys a common dream: 'If he really is a former notary from one of our towns in the Midi, and if his family is rich and well-regarded, and if everything else he told me is true, then may he return to the ball this Sunday. I'll be there in the same costume, standing in the same place.' A journalist at another ball overheard a young woman say to a man who claimed to be a broker, 'For us, a masked ball is our stock exchange.'³⁶

Another went in the opposite direction, thrusting criminality into maskers' consciousness. Alongside Chicard, Balochard and the Débardeur, the stage character Robert Macaire was also a popular costume. Macaire's comic exploits as an escaped criminal who made a fortune posing as a banker drew audiences to the boulevard theatres throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Maskers improvised variations on his signature costume, which the actor Frédérick Lemaître, who premiered the role in *L'Auberge des Adrets*,

makes a complementary point in arguing that there was an important shift among writers and artists in representations of the Paris between the July monarchy and the Second Empire, from a fascination with public display and observation to submission, enclosure and privacy (see S. Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, 1999)).

³⁴ See Jones, *Paris: Biography of a City*, 282–95; *La Nouvelle Athènes. Le quartier Saint-Georges de Louis XV à Napoléon III* (Paris, 1984).

³⁵ L. Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. F. Jellinek (New York, 1973), 1.

³⁶ *Vert-vert*, 4 Feb. 1837; *Les Coulisses*, 10 Feb. 1842.

had reputedly copied from a tramp. Its classic form was a tattered green cutaway with tails, dented silver buttons, a white waistcoat but no shirt, dirty red trousers, an orange-brown cravat, a crumpled top-hat and ladies' slippers.³⁷

The costume's popularity was evidenced by an innovation one carnival season at the Porte-Saint-Martin theatre. At 2 a.m. on Mardi Gras, dancing was halted, the stage was cleared and the theatre's resident troupe of actors performed the first act of *L'Auberge des Adrets*. The date, the hour, the raucous crowd and the drama's anarchic irreverence assured a riotous performance, but this version carried an additional twist: the participation of the spectators. Notices in the press had given them their cue. They were to flood the stage in their costumes when the villagers danced with Macaire and his sidekick. The maskers did just that, joining the actors in a spree that lasted until dawn.³⁸

A third effect of mixed populations in balls came in the open defiance of elites even as maskers embraced the aura of privilege some theatres radiated. On the night of 25–6 January 1835, revellers went on a rampage at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. The Odéon, which dated from before the French Revolution and enjoyed a status second only to the Comédie-Française, was situated between the student-dominated Latin Quarter and the fashionable Saint-Germain district. At the height of the frenzy, maskers mutilated statues of Molière and Corneille, gouged chips from the marble staircase and scrawled a moustache and beard on the bust of King Louis-Philippe. They wrenched gas candelabra from the walls, dismembered chairs, walked across couches in their muddy boots, defaced paintings and cracked the chandeliers' crystal globes. Officers reported having been helpless before the 'hideous spectacle'. Alcohol-laced punch had flowed 'in rivers', fights raged beyond control and dancers disrobed. At some point, revellers began using the upper-level corridors as latrines.

An investigation faulted the ball's management for having distributed 3,000 tickets amongst the student population at the nominal price of 20 centimes. Police Prefect Gisquet pleaded with the interior minister, Adolphe Thiers, to shut down the weekly Sunday-night balls. The theatre's conservator M. Loraux seconded the demand in a letter to the minister of public works, adding sarcastically that such modes of recreation among France's most promising students filled him with 'the highest expectations our country's future glories'. Yet Thiers let the balls continue, provided their entrepreneur pay for all damages and raise ticket prices to 3 francs. This was not the first time Gisquet had been overruled on such a request. The reasoning that saved the Odéon balls before probably played a role now as well. Two years before, when carnival disruptions had threatened

³⁷ T. de Banville, *Mes souvenirs* (Paris, 1882), 213.

³⁸ The theatre journal *Vert-vert* carried a notice of the play on 27 Jan. 1834 that said spectators would be invited to join the troupe in dancing 'le fameux galop des voleurs et des villageois'.

to close the balls, merchants in the Latin Quarter successfully petitioned the king to spare them on the grounds that cancelling them would damage their livelihood. The minister of commerce had initialled his agreement in the margins of the petition, and Louis-Philippe sided with the merchants.³⁹

There may have been an additional reason owing to urban geography. Students of the Latin Quarter had been instrumental in the revolution that brought Louis-Philippe to power, and their behaviour during carnival continued to carry political overtones. Officers on call noted that students at the Odéon ball sometimes belted out the 'bloody refrains' of Jacobin songs or harassed supposed *legitimistes* for supporting absolutism.⁴⁰ The police also discovered that a private carnival ball in 1833 sponsored by young people belonging to 'popular societies' planned to contribute their proceeds to help political detainees and promised heavy surveillance.⁴¹ For a regime that was trying to hold the political centre steady in the midst of blistering attacks from the republican left and ultra-royalist right, such gestures were unsettling. The authorities might have supposed that the consequence of outright cancellation would provoke yet greater unrest. The 1835 decision to continue with them may indicate that officials viewed the balls as a kind of pressure valve, a chance to blow off steam rather than let the political discontent find more threatening expressions.

Nevertheless, given the widespread carnival turmoil in these years, such decisions are surprising. The kind of violence that erupted at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1835 – particularly in its wanton desecration of this venerable theatre with mud and human waste – took effrontery to a level substantially more defiant than reversed social and sexual roles or indecent dances had done. Maskers certainly knew that the seats they trampled on Sundays cushioned the finery of elites on the other nights of the week. It would be hard to call their aggression displaced. It was confrontational and overtly political.

The violence at the Odéon was a prelude to a riot of still greater consequence two years later. It, too, involved a theatre with elite connotations, the Opera, which bordered the boulevard des Italiens. Until now, the Opera had resisted the forces that characterized masked balls elsewhere. High ticket prices for its balls had kept them largely upper-class affairs. There were few costumes. High fashion rather than concealment dictated dress. Masks were optional and, when present, worn chiefly

³⁹ Administrative correspondence, Théâtre de l'Odéon, 26, 27, 28, 29 Jan. and 8 Feb. 1835; petition from 23 merchants addressed to Louis-Philippe 6 Feb. 1833, F²¹ 1110 (Théâtre de l'Odéon), AN.

⁴⁰ Letters from Henri Gisquet to the ministre du commerce et des travaux publics, 17 Jan. and 3 Feb. 1833, F²¹ 1110 (Théâtre de l'Odéon), AN. Such behaviour recalls the political displays in theatres against Louis XVIII and Charles X that Sheryl Kroen has documented, although at the Odéon and later at the Opera social rebellion seems at least as prominent as political defiance (see *Politics and Theater: The Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815–1830* (Berkeley, 2000)).

⁴¹ Préfecture de police, bulletins de Paris, 18 Feb. 1833, F⁷ 3886 (1832–33), AN.

by women. When four musicians appeared in 1835 dressed as women, they were received with hostility.⁴² Guardians of tradition defended these sedate occasions, but the Opera management judged them a financial failure. In search of greater profits, the entrepreneur Louis Véron, who was appointed general director of the Opera in 1830, set in process a series of innovations that led directly to the debacle of 1837.

Véron was an inventor and businessman whose efforts to revive the sagging fortunes of the Opera were already paying off with monumental stagings of Grand Opera when he began seeking ways to make its balls more lucrative. In 1833, he dropped ticket prices from 10 to 5 francs, which brought dire predictions that the 'crapulous class' would invade the sanctum of art. One critic wrote that tickets should cost at least 10 francs 'so that pleasure will have a human face'. That was a strange way to express one's distaste over social contamination at a masked ball, where the pleasure was presumably in not seeing the human face, but it conveyed how segregated socially the Opera ball still was at the time.⁴³

Over the next two years, Véron tried attracting crowds by selling raffle tickets. At the end of the ball season ticket stubs were drawn and prizes suited to bourgeois tastes awarded, including fashion lithographs, bronze figurines, a cashmere shawl, a Japanese tea service in silver and an original oil painting of Jean-Jacques Rousseau eating cherries.⁴⁴ Véron then tried to stir excitement by bringing the famed horses of Franconi's 'Equestrian Circus' onto the dance floor for synchronized stunts. The crowds still stayed away.⁴⁵

So in 1837, the administrator in charge of balls Henri Duponchel transferred the entrepreneurial rights to M. Mira, who turned to a surefire solution: Philippe Musard. Musard was one of Europe's best-known conductors, and he was one of the principal reasons masked balls at the Variétés theatre were so successful. He was a brilliant popularizer. Having travelled to England in his early twenties, where he led dance orchestras at the Vauxhall for 15 years, Musard returned to Paris in 1830 to perfect the pastiche. Working closely with promoters to rent halls and recruit audiences unaccustomed to classical concerts, he programmed single movements from Beethoven or Mozart and a pot-pourri of operatic overtures and arias reset to dance rhythms. In 1835, the *Ménestrel* called him a second Napoleon. Around the same time, Hector Berlioz burned Musard's quadrille based on tunes from *Don Giovanni*.⁴⁶

Pathologically shy, physically awkward and cursed with a pockmarked complexion that observers by turns judged to be yellow, grey or faintly

⁴² *La Quotidienne*, 13 Jan. 1835; *Le Carnaval. Histoire des bals de l'Opéra, tableau des fêtes, travestissements, mascarades et carrousels qui ont eu lieu chez toutes les nations depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris, 1835), 23.

⁴³ *Courrier des Théâtres*, 8, 9 Jan. 1833.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 Jan. 1834; *La Quotidienne*, 13 Jan. 1835.

⁴⁵ *La Quotidienne*, 11 Jan. 1836.

⁴⁶ For an excellent survey of Musard's career, see Gasnault, *Guinguettes et lorettes*, 95–107.

green, he cut a sinister and sombre figure. Possessed of superhuman endurance and a trademark black suit buttoned up to the neck, Musard conducted roughly 20 masked balls each season, each beginning around 10:30 at night and pressing on until sunrise.⁴⁷ When he judged maskers to be careening around the hall at a suitably breakneck pitch, he would raise a chair over his head and smash it into pieces. It was a signal for the so-called infernal gallop, the ball's climax, which participants described as an electric wave.

Mira's instructions to Musard were to bring to the Opera what he had created at the Variétés, a genuine masquerade ball where men and women dressed in character costumes and hid their identities behind masks. It was a stroke fully in keeping with the populist spirit of Véron. On Sunday 5 February, posters two-and-a-half feet tall appeared throughout Paris with 'GRAND BAL MUSARD' – code for the kinds of abandon that the Opera had yet to see – emblazoned in the sheet's biggest black capitals and promising an orchestra numbering a hundred. The words 'Costumed' and 'Masked' announced a break with the Opera balls' tired dress of evening wear and delicate dominos. The Variétés' formula – cranked-up music led by a man strangely possessed and an adoring crowd of Macaires, Chicards, Balochards and Débardeurs – was about to visit the temple of high art.

The immediate reaction – popular joy and official trepidation – touched both sides of that formula. When Duponchel saw the posters go up, he went straight to the French interior minister Adrien Gasparin to ask that he cancel plans. At the very least, the Variétés crowd would cheapen the refined atmosphere, he told him; moreover, they would probably import their offensive talk and crude dances; and unfortunately, given experiences elsewhere, violence could not be ruled out. Gasparin, who was prefect in Lyon at the time of the silkworkers' riots and knew first-hand the danger of urban violence, agreed. Workers immediately started pulling down the posters. The Opera was ordered to sell no more tickets. But at some point on Monday – here accounts differ – Mira met with Gasparin with ominous news: discontent over the cancellation was brewing in the streets and Paris would explode if the Opera's Mardi Gras ball did not take place. Crowds gathered outside the Opera on the rue Le Peletier demanding that the ball go on, and by nightfall the government was receiving regular reports on their size and mounting restlessness. After midnight, someone in the government authorized the ball. The one stipulation was to move 'MUSARD' away from 'GRAND BAL'.

The change was unlikely to have made a difference. On Mardi Gras, hand-made signs went up at the Variétés announcing 'Musard Ball at the Opera', and in the early evening maskers moved through the city with

⁴⁷ Théophile Gautier, quoted in E. Goubert, 'La littérature des bals de l'Opéra', *La Revue*, 1 Apr. 1914, 381; Desarbres, *Deux siècles à l'Opéra*, 274; L. Huart, *Le bal Musard* (Paris, n.d. [1850]), 2.

signs urging merry-makers to attend.⁴⁸ The police commissioner prepared for a crush by requesting 30 armed officers of the municipal guard and giving them careful instructions on how to handle indecent dances or obscene language: be sure to issue a warning before any arrest so that maskers would see their mildness. The scruple showed that he had no idea what was coming.

The interior of the Opera was bathed in dim red light 'as if to imitate a fire' when maskers began streaming in near midnight. Estimates later placed the total at 5,000 to 6,000. The tide came in so abundantly that Commissioner Bruzelin, who had thought 30 officers would be adequate, quickly realized that he had grossly underestimated the task. In no time, the crush paralysed officers at the perimeters of the hall and isolated others in boxes above the fray. Bruzelin managed to send the word that 30 more officers were urgently needed and instructed his agents to issue no warnings and make no arrests, seeing that the crowd might well turn hostile should something spark its indignation.

Costumes of every colour flooded the dance floor, where the spectral light transformed maskers and their elation, as one of them later said, into a strange spectacle resembling noisy phantoms. They moved together in couples or bands of four or eight as the whole assembly slowly pinwheeled the hall. But with the throngs still streaming onto the floor, the mass began to grow chaotic. Bruzelin sent out a small party to block the doors so no more maskers could enter. His reinforcements were slow in coming, and as he still waited for them to arrive, he helplessly beheld – was forced to behold, as he later wrote – the scene unfolding before him.

The female dancers in particular, he said, abandoned themselves to every sort of shamelessness and obscenity – things no carnival, no Mardi Gras, had yet seen and which even the loosest morality would condemn. 'For six hours I watched, an unwilling and silent witness: I deplored my position!⁴⁹ Mme de Girardin, present and enraptured, wrote that people were 'pressing and pushing and knocking into one another'. She continued: 'they turned and twirled and passed by again and again, never stopping, and there were bells ringing and drums pounding and the merciless orchestra never slowing and now even accelerating, and when there was no moment even to think the gunfire began, perfectly imitated. It was a civil war, it was a massacre. The illusion was complete.'⁵⁰

Musard had moved into the infernal gallop and was firing blanks. At some point, maskers jimmed the lock on Louis-Philippe's private box and spread out on his couches to drink punch and raise toasts. Others broke into his son the duc d'Orléans' box, where they lit all the candles on his branched chandelier, and into another box belonging to the Spanish banker

⁴⁸ Letter from Adrien Gasparin to the duc de Choiseul, 16 Feb. 1837, F²¹ 1066, AN.

⁴⁹ M. Bruzelin, 'Copie d'un rapport adressé à monsieur le conseiller d'état, préfet de police, le 8 février 1837, par le commissaire de police du quartier du Roule', AJ¹³ 182-VI, AN.

⁵⁰ Mme Emile de Girardin, *Lettres parisiennes*, quoted in Faure, *Paris carême-prenant*, 91.

Aguado, where the ash from a discarded pipe was still smouldering on his carpets the next afternoon. Around 6 a.m., someone in the delirious crowd came across an abandoned carnival crown and shouted that Musard must be made king. A cry went up of *Vive Musard! Vive le roi du quadrille et du galop!* as maskers including Pierrots, Arlequins and Robert-Macaires dragged him out of the orchestra pit, crowned him, lifted him onto their shoulders and carried him twice around the hall.⁵¹ Commissioner Bruzelin, at last having got the reinforcements he had called hours ago, gave the order to begin making arrests and requisitioned the director's box adjoining the stage for a holding cell. Officers hoisted trouble-makers in from the front, who forced the door at the back and scampered out to rejoin the fray, disguised by masks.⁵²

Although the damage was in the thousands of francs – there were broken light fixtures, damaged tiles and smashed chairs – the destruction might have been worse.⁵³ Commissioner Bruzelin's prudence in not provoking the crowd with early arrests, a high-stakes gamble since they were clearly beyond controlling, probably averted genuine violence and possibly bloodshed. Eventually, the drunken and exhausted crowd, kept on their feet by Musard's quenchless baton, stumbled out into the night.

'What an exquisite example of the delicate pleasures of society! All honour to the most gallant nation in Europe! Highest thankfulness for the emancipation of July!' The sarcasm could have been predicted from the royalist *Quotidienne*, whose readers considered the Opera to have been already under siege by the vulgarizing Véron. It was seasoned with class-based vitriol. 'What we have dreaded for six years has now come to pass: the Opera has opened its doors to the scum.' The more centrist press, also mindful of the sullied image of the theatre, was hardly less scathing. 'Before long, we will be seeing "No Smoking" signs on the walls of the world's premiere stage', commented the *Corsaire*. 'Soon, they will be selling cider and chestnuts in the corridors.' The *Revue musicale de Paris* declared, simply, that nothing of this kind had ever been seen in the annals of operatic history.⁵⁴ The Boulevard du Crime had invaded New Athens.

The government realized that the debacle risked becoming a major embarrassment. The Opera's management suspended Musard, fined Henri Duponchel 10,000 francs and ordered him to pay for all damages to the hall. The judgment was a travesty, and everyone knew it. Duponchel, after all, had been the first to urge the ball's cancellation; and the government had acted against his wishes in permitting it to go on. But Gasparin needed a scapegoat.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *La Quotidienne*, 13 Feb. 1837.

⁵² C. de Boigne, *Petits mémoires de l'Opéra* (Paris, 1857), 182.

⁵³ See M. Gentily, 'Rapport au monsieur le commissaire du roi', 8 Feb. 1837, AJ²¹ 1066, AN.

⁵⁴ *La Quotidienne*, 13 Feb. 1837; *Le Corsaire*, 11 Feb. 1837; *Revue musicale de Paris*, 12 Feb. 1837.

⁵⁵ Adrien Gasparin to the duc de Choiseul, président de la commission spéciale des théâtres royaux, 11 Feb. 1837, F²¹ 1066, AN; Leon Pillet, Commissaire Royale de la Commission

The postscript to the story, given the acrimony and indignation, was as telling as it was unforeseen. After two lacklustre seasons of Restoration-style carnival balls at the Opera in which revenues again sagged and crowds of all classes flocked to other theatres' masked balls, Musard returned to the Opera as its principal carnival conductor. His triumphant return was greeted, moreover, with the eager consent of the government and all the theatre's regulatory bodies. With him came the trademark smashed chairs, howitzers and infernal gallops, the cancan, *chahut* and *cahucha*, and the usual assortment of Robert Macaires, Chicards, Balochards and Débardeurs.

His reign would last ten years, from 1839 until 1849, with renown, revenues and attendance to eclipse all other establishments. One of the conditions imposed after the fiasco of 1837 – that ticket prices be doubled, presumably to keep the 'scum' away – did nothing to diminish the crowds' lust for the event nor pacify their frenetic celebrations. It was, after all, at the Opera where the two shop attendants, one dressed as Mother Goose, were arrested for obscenity in 1843, where a poor champagne-filled marquise was arrested before plunging from her bedroom window to her death in 1846 and where, in 1842, Heinrich Heine watched masked dancers kick their legs high into the air with the dawning conviction that the French held nothing sacred.

The architectural historian David Van Zanten writes of the 'consumerist fantasyland' that had begun to appear near the Opera at the time of the 1837 carnival riot. Projects were already underway to bring restaurants, hotels, luxury-goods stores and banks west of the rue Le Peletier. Its crown jewel would be the monumental Palais Garnier, the next home of the Opera, begun in 1861 and inaugurated in 1875. In the coming decades, the area would draw the Jockey Club on rue Scribe and the spectacular dining rooms of the Grand Hôtel.⁵⁶ The opulence that maskers were beginning to see as they made their way to the Opera ball no doubt sharpened the guile of those prone to mock and stirred resentment among those inclined to anger. Some were likely from distressed neighbourhoods at the eastern end of the boulevard.

These processes would in the end help to tame the balls that had made the urban carnival season synonymous with disorder. The popularity of masked balls among Parisians faded in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the riotous scenes that for a time had accompanied them subsided. Under Haussmann's direction, buildings along a strip of the boulevard du Temple were razed in 1862 to make way for the place de la République. Among the theatres demolished were the Théâtre-Historique,

Spéciale des Théâtres Royaux to Gasparin, 15 Feb. 1837, F²¹ 1066, AN; Gasparin to the duc de Choiseul, 16 Feb. 1837, F²¹ 1066, AN; report of commission spéciale des Théâtres Royaux, 16 Feb. 1837, AJ¹³ 182-VI, AN.

⁵⁶ D. Van Zanten, *Building Paris. Architectural Institutions and the Transformation of the French Capital, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1994), 43.

the Folies-Dramatiques, the Funambules, the Cirque Olympique and the Gaité. Workers' slums were cleared for new commercial and residential buildings, and their occupants were moved to outlying suburbs. Theatres of the *grands boulevards* drew more exclusively from the upper classes, while those elsewhere – including the Théâtre de Montparnasse, the Théâtre de Montmartre, the Batignolles and the new Théâtre du Châtelet – attracted working-class audiences.⁵⁷ In short, the corridor that had brought together rich and poor as both spectators and masked revellers was less and less a gathering-place. Audiences grew more segregated by class, as the public spaces where, in Jules Janin's words, perfume had mingled with the smell of garlic became the exclusive domain of elites.

There are factors beyond changes in the urban landscape that also shaped the changing contours of balls in the nineteenth century, including the rhetoric and incidence of social mobility, evolving notions of selfhood and changing associations of the mask itself.⁵⁸ The physical separation of the wealthy from the needy and relocation of theatres catering especially to popular classes were nevertheless crucial in altering the tone of balls on the *grands boulevards*.

By the mid-1860s, those wearing costumes to the Opera ball on the rue Le Peletier were a small minority. Women in dominoes more typically wore elegant dresses, and men, most of whom circulated without masks, came in evening wear. After a 20-year period during which balls had displayed social resentment, political protest and a confusion of classes, the dominant mood was conformity. As they had in the eighteenth century and Restoration, elites once again set the tone. One detail in particular stands out from a newspaper account of the 1868 Opera ball. 'When the shops open, one sees young men in jackets, frock-coats and even workers' shirts slipping secretly into the neighbourhood's clothes-sellers, where one is able to rent the obligatory black trousers and accustomed vest.'⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Hillaret, *Dictionnaire historique des rues*, vol. II, 541–3; Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry*, 127–8.

⁵⁸ See J.H. Johnson, 'The face of imposture in post-revolutionary France', *French Historical Studies*, 35 (2012), 291–320.

⁵⁹ *Le XIXe siècle*, 17 Jan. 1868.