

‘Murder in the Metro’: masking and unmasking Laetitia Toureaux in 1930s France

ANNETTE FINLEY-CROSWHITE and GAYLE K. BRUNELLE*

At 6:00 p.m. on Pentecost Sunday, 16 May 1937, Laetitia Nourissat Toureaux, an attractive twenty-nine-year-old woman wearing a striking green suit, a white hat and gloves, left a *bal musette* named L’Ermitage in the Paris suburb of Charenton-leaupeau and walked briskly towards a bus stop. Approximately twenty-four minutes later, she entered the Porte de Charenton metro station and made her way across a quay crowded with holiday-makers fresh from the nearby Parc de Vincennes. She took a seat in an empty first-class car while the other passengers crammed into the second-class cars. At promptly 6:27 p.m., the train left. When it arrived forty-five seconds later at the Porte Dorée station, the doors of the car opened on a shocking sight: a French military dentist and his companion entered the car and found Toureaux slumped in her seat, bleeding profusely, a nine-inch dagger buried to its hilt in her neck. She died before she reached the hospital, without naming her assailant, and left the Parisian police with a perplexing mystery on their hands. In the absence of any witnesses or physical evidence other than the knife, a standard ‘Laguiole’, it was a mystery they never officially solved.¹ The Police Mobile section of the Sûreté Nationale immediately took

* The authors wish to thank Professor Maura Hametz for commenting on early drafts of this article.

Addresses for correspondence: [AF-C] Office of the Dean, College of Arts and Letters, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529-0076, USA; e-mail: acroswhi@odu.edu. [GKB] Department of History, California State University-Fullerton, Fullerton, CA 92835, USA; e-mail: gbrunelle@fullerton.edu

¹ Even though Laetitia Toureaux’s murder was never officially solved, parts of the police dossier on her case still exist, although, as with most post-World War I documents, a derogation is required to access them. Archives Nationales (AN), F7 14816, ‘Meurtres attribués au C.S.A.R.: Affaire c/x Meurtre Laetitia Toureaux’. See also: Archives de la Préfecture de la Police/Paris (APP) 2 cartons ‘L’affaire Laetitia Toureaux’. These cartons contain the police investigation reports. They were lost for several decades and were only ‘officially’ rediscovered in 2002; however, it is evident that these cartons do not represent the entire scope of the police investigation of Toureaux’s murder. See also Archives de la Préfecture de la Police/Paris, Ea/137 III, file ‘L’affaire Laetitia Toureaux’. All of the

charge of the inquiry into her murder under the direction of the Police Commissioner Badin, who assigned Inspectors Moreux, Lavail, Charlier, Bernard, Petit and Coquibus to the case. On 18 May M. Bru was named the *juge d'instruction* overseeing the investigation.² After more than a year of seemingly fruitless detective work, however, the investigation was shelved, even though the police promised to follow up any new leads that came their way on such an important case.³

For the Parisian press, Toureaux's murder was a goldmine, a story that excited the imagination of Parisians for weeks, months and even years after the crime, and sold truckloads of copy. The fact that it seemed to be insoluble only added to its mystique. The morning after the murder, 'Le

newspapers in Paris, including the Communist papers, reported on the murder. Consulted for this article were: *Paris-Soir*, *Ce Soir*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *L'Intransigeant*, *Le Matin*, *L'Oeuvre*, *L'Humanité*, *La Liberté*, *Le Journal*, *Le Populaire* and *France-Soir*. Only a few writers have discussed Laetitia Toureaux, and fewer still have given her case any serious scholarly attention, despite the fascination which it seems to hold for ordinary French people. During the 1970s and as late as 1999 French television and radio aired documentaries on her life. Jean-Claude Valla, *La Cagoule, 1936-1937* (Paris: Éditions de la Librairie Nationale, 2000); Frédéric Monier, *Le Complot dans la République: stratégies du secret de Boulanger à la Cagoule* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1998); Christian Bernadac, '*Dagore*': *les carnets secrets de la Cagoule* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1977); Philippe Bourdrel, *La Cagoule: histoire d'une société secrète du Front Populaire à la Ve République* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1970, reprinted in 1992); René Delpêche, *Affaires classées. Crimes prescrits. Crimes sans châtime* (Paris: Éditions du Dauphin, 1968); Lawrence Osborne, *Paris Dreambook: An Unconventional Guide to the Splendor and Squalor of the City* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Adrian Rifkin, *Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900-40* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995); J. R. Tournoux, *L'Histoire secrète: La Cagoule* (Paris: Plon, 1973). Among the effects the police found on Toureaux's body was a *carnet* of metro tickets; four of the twenty were first class, which would support her family's contention that she only rode first class on Sundays, to protect her nice clothes.

² In France a distinction is made between the 'administrative police' and the 'judicial police'. The National Police are under the Ministry of the Interior and are administrative or 'municipal' police who work to prevent crime. The judicial police are under the Ministry of Justice and investigate crime. In Paris, both divisions are part of the Parisian Prefecture of Police although the criminal division is known as the *Sûreté Nationale* (*Sûreté Générale* before 1934). In 1907 twelve mobile brigades were created to aid the investigation of major crimes, and these brigades were given automobiles which greatly facilitated their work. Other brigades were added, and they all became known as the *Police Mobile*. In the interwar period the *Sûreté* was known for notorious corruption that included blackmail, drug trafficking and extortion, and regularly kept informants on their payrolls to aid in police work. The detectives and commissioners at the *Sûreté* were forced to work closely with the French court system. In fact, felonies had to be the subject of a judicial investigation conducted by a *juge d'instruction* before they could be tried in the courts. See Richard Frase (ed.), *The French Code of Criminal Procedure*, trans. Gerald L. Kock and Richard Frase (Littleton, Colorado: Fred B. Rothman & Company, 1988), 3-6; Benjamin F. Martin, *Crime and Criminal Justice Under the Third Republic, The Shame of Marianne* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 82-124.

³ AN, F7 14816, 'Monsieur Georges ALBAYEZ, Commissaire de Police Mobile à L'Inspection Générale des Services de Police Criminelle (*Sûreté Nationale*)'. The information in Albayez's report went to M. Bru, the *juge d'instruction* for the case. 'C'est [*sic*] importante affaire d'assassinat n'est pas perdue de vue par les enquêteurs, et dès qu'un fait nouveau parviendra à leur connaissance, celui-ci sera exploité immédiatement, et les résultats des nouvelles investigations seront consignés dans un rapport ultérieur.'

Crime du Métro' made sizzling front-page copy in all the papers as Parisians awoke to the shocking news that a beautiful young woman had been brutally assassinated in the underground Métropolitain. Who was Laetitia Toureaux? Why did she die? Was she an innocent victim, or one of the many adventuresses, real and fictional, with which the popular press swarmed in the 1930s? As days and weeks passed after the murder, the press concocted an increasingly dark and fantastic image of Toureaux. She worked in the coat room at a *bal musette* called L'As de Coeur but she also pursued undercover adventures as a police informant and private detective. Like many people, Toureaux led a complex life. Neither sinner nor saint, above all she was a mystery, and into the unknown spaces of her life journalists chose to read, or imagine, their own Laetitia, who resonated with the secret desires and fears of interwar French society. Ultimately, it was the journalists' reading of the strange facts surrounding Toureaux's mysterious life that shaped the investigation into her life and the coverage of her murder.

The paradox of the press coverage of Laetitia Toureaux's murder was that at least by mid-January of 1938 journalists and the police had very little doubt about who had killed her, and why. As early as 16 June 1937 the newspaper *La Liberté* had connected Toureaux's death to the assassinations of three more prominent figures, the Russian economist Dimitri Navachine, who was stabbed to death in the Bois-de-Boulogne on 26 January 1937, and the Italian antifascist exiles Carlo and Nello Rosselli, who were murdered in broad daylight on the road outside Bagnoles-de-l'Orne in Normandy on 9 June 1937.⁴ The Navachine and Rosselli murders were eventually traced to an extreme right organization called the Comité Secret d'Action Révolutionnaire, or C.S.A.R. The C.S.A.R., which the popular press quickly dubbed the 'Cagoule', or hooded ones (because of its penchant for secrecy and the members' rumoured wearing of black or red hoods to mask their identity), had authored a series of crimes in 1936–7 that included two bombings, at least five murders, and the destruction of several airplanes bound for anti-Franco forces in Spain. Financed and supported by powerful French industrialists and political figures (Michelin and de la Rocque), the Cagoule was dedicated to the overthrow of the Socialist-dominated Popular Front government and its replacement with a fascist-style dictatorship based on the Italian model as the preliminary to the re-establishment of the French monarchy. Members of the Cagoule trained militias, created huge stockpiles of weapons in Paris and the provinces, and organized a cell of terrorists who committed

⁴ Archives de Paris (AP), 212/79/3, 'Affaire du C.S.A.R. – Comité secret d'action révolutionnaire – et autres mouvements nationalistes de droite', Le Commissaire de Police Mobile Belin Chef de la 1ère Section à Monsieur l'Inspecteur Général, chargé des Services de Police Criminelle', Paris, le 17 juillet, 1937. See also, Jean Belin, *Secrets of the Sûreté: The Memoirs of Commissioner Jean Belin* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1950), 213–14, 229–36.

assassinations on their own account or at the behest of O.V.R.A. [Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascista], Mussolini's secret service, in return for arms shipments.⁵

The Cagoule was exposed and dismantled by the French police after a failed coup on the night of 15–16 November 1937. One of the arrested 'Cagouleurs', a Michelin engineer named René Locuty, admitted that his superiors in the Cagoule claimed responsibility for Toureaux's murder, and another Cagouleur, Fernand Jakubiez, made a similar confession.⁶ In addition, the police seem to have had another secret informant of their own who also attested to the Cagoule's responsibility for the murder, and they determined that several of Toureaux's friends and associates were Cagouleurs.⁷ There is some doubt as to the veracity of the confessions, however, and it is at least as likely that the Italian secret service, rather than the Cagoule, was behind the crime. Even so, besides the first-hand testimony the police gleaned from informants and confessions, there also is a good deal of circumstantial evidence pointing to Toureaux's involvement with both the Cagoule and O.V.R.A., despite the undoubted police and journalistic paranoia regarding

⁵ The authors are preparing a monograph study of Laetitia Toureaux's life and murder and connection with the Cagoule. The most complete collection of documents on the Cagoule is housed at the Archives de Paris, 212/79/3, 'Affaire du C.S.A.R. – Comité secret d'action révolutionnaire – et autres mouvements nationalistes de droite'. See also AN, BB/18/3061/2 to 3061/9 'Affaire de la Cagoule. 1937–1951'. No serious monograph on the Cagoule has yet been written. Besides the works by Bernadac, Bourdrel, Monier, Tournoux and Valla cited above in note 1, see also: Henry Charbonneau, *Les Mémoires de Porthos* (Paris: Éditions du Clan, 1967); Fernand Fontenay, *La Cagoule contre la France* (Paris: Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1938); Pierre Péan, *Le Mystérieux Docteur Martin (1895–1969)* (Paris: Fayard, 1993); Franco Bandini, *Il cono d'ombra, chi armò la mano degli assassini dei fratelli Rosselli* (Milan: Sugarco Edizioni, 1990). Joel Blatt is currently working on a study of the Cagoule. Only in recent years has French fascism begun to receive the attention it deserves, as several scholars and much of the French public still deny that fascism was a serious force in interwar France. For some of the better treatments of the subject see: Joel Blatt, 'Relatives and Rivals: the Responses of the Action Française to Italian Fascism, 1919–1926', *European Studies Review* 2 (1981), 263–92; William D. Irvine, *French Conservatism in Crisis: The Republican Federation of France in the 1930s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); *Idem*, 'Fascism in France and the Strange Case of the Croix de Feu', *Journal of Modern History*, 63 (June 1991), 271–95; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1995); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The First Wave, 1924–1933* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Robert Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Zeev Sternhell, *Ni droite ni gauche: l'idéologie fasciste en France* (Paris: Fayard, 1983); *Idem.*, *Naissance de l'idéologie fasciste* (Paris: Gaillmard, 1989); Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); René Rémond, *Les Crises du catholicisme en France dans les années trente* (Paris: Éditions Cana, 1979, reprinted 1996). The name 'Cagoule' was first used by a writer in the *Action Française* and then quickly adopted by other journalists: Belin, *Secrets of the Sûreté*, 210.

⁶ AN, F7 14816, 'Déclaration de Locuty', 7 janvier, 1938; See also AP, 212/79/3, 'Copie du PROCES-VERBAL D'INTERROGATOIRE de LOCUTY [Réné] Pierre Jules, 27 ans Ingénieur à l'Usine MICHELIN . . .'; Joseph Désert, *Toute la vérité sur l'Affaire de la Cagoule, sa trahison, ses crimes, ses hommes* (Paris: Librairie des Sciences et des Arts, 1946), 72–3.

⁷ AN F7 14816, 'Renseignements Fournis par la 2ème. Section de l'Inspection Générale des Services de Police Criminelle, Relativement à l'Enquête Menée sur le CSAR', 1 August 1938., p.3; AN BB18/3061/5.

espionage that saturated Paris in the 1930s.⁸ On 14 January 1938, the evening paper *Paris-Soir* proclaimed that the Cagoule had ordered Toureaux's execution because she had betrayed their activities to the police.⁹ The renowned Commissioner of Police Charles Chevenier, who investigated Toureaux's murder, came to the same conclusion. In a police communiqué dated 15 March 1938 he stated, 'On remarquera que si les pistes suivies sont différentes, toutes aboutissent au C.S.A.R.'¹⁰ The outbreak of World War II, however, delayed the prosecution of the C.S.A.R. membership, many of whom had fled to Spain or Italy. Most of those detained in French prisons in 1937–8 were released and mobilized in 1939, and many Cagoulard leaders either secured positions for themselves in the Vichy government or ended the war on the side of the Resistance. Few were actually punished for their pre-war crimes and many former Cagoulards actually had become war heroes by 1945. The case of Laetitia Toureaux was thus largely forgotten. Eventually the files concerning her murder were sealed until 2038, long after those involved in her death and the pro-fascist Cagoule would undoubtedly be dead.

The focus of this article, however, is not on the facts of the case, as best as the police eventually unearthed them. Nor is it our intention to assess the historical significance of the C.S.A.R. Rather, this essay explores the way in which the press, in the absence of hard facts, made Laetitia into a lightning-rod for much of the cultural angst of interwar French society. As a cultural interpreter and powerful force shaping popular attitudes, the press used Toureaux's story to titillate its readers while simultaneously reinforcing bourgeois values. The journalists thus led the public into a mostly imagined

⁸ Toureaux clearly had worked as a 'mouche' (small-scale informant) for the police for some years prior to her death. She showed a special penchant for socializing with military men at a time when the extreme right was known to have found willing recruits in the armed forces. An ethnic Italian, she was working as an informant for the police during a period when they were keen to keep a close eye on the expatriate Italian community in France, and recruited women in particular for this type of espionage. The police characterized the manner of the crime – a single stab wound to the neck with the weapon left in the wound – as a distinctly Italian assassination technique. Police sources connected Toureaux with 'garagistes' (owners of garages which rented and repaired cars) at a time when Gabriel Jeantet, a garage owner and member of the Cagoule, was smuggling weapons in his rented cars from Switzerland to Paris. Moreover, the police found evidence that she corresponded with someone who went by the initials 'I-CH', who was a sympathizer with the extreme right, and who wrote to Toureaux from a fascist rally in Brussels, which was also the base of operations for a major arms supplier to the Cagoule. *Ibid.* See AN, F7 14816, 'Enquête effectuée au sujet de la dernière information,' p.5; 'Déclaration de Locuty,' 7 January 1938, stating that Laetitia Toureaux worked for the 'Intelligence Service' and Locuty's subsequent 'Déclaration' of 6 January 1940, retracting his earlier confession, AN BB 18/3061/5.

⁹ *Paris-Soir*, 14 January 1938. The information is also cited in AN, F7 14816.

¹⁰ AN, F7 14816, 'Rapport Le Commissaire de Police Mobile Chenevier à Monsieur le Commissaire de Police Mobile, Chef de la 1ère Section à l'Inspection Générale des Services de Police Criminelle', 15 March 1938. For more on Chenevier see, Jean-Émile Néaume, *Les Grandes Enquêtes du commissaire Chenevier: de la Cagoule à l'affaire Dominici* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

netherworld of seamy Parisian streets, bars and dance halls. Through narratives laced with argot attesting to the inside knowledge of the reporters, readers experienced vicariously the thrill of exploring a world forbidden to respectable citizens. The reporters publicized the more sensational aspects of Laetitia's private life and drew in the reading public by offering them the fantasy of involvement in the drama.¹¹ Yet by constructing each story as a morality tale where transgressors of middle-class norms invariably came to bad ends, newspapers ended their public's journey in the safe harbour of reaffirmed bourgeois values. Like the children of the bourgeoisie who delighted in 'slumming' in the *bals musette* or *guinches* of Paris, readers of sensational stories such as those published in the French weeklies *Détective*, *Fait Divers* and *Police Magazine* and the more respectable newspapers like *Le Petit Parisien*, *Paris-Soir* and *Le Matin* could share Laetitia's adventures without the danger and discomfort inherent in actually living in her world. Thus the Parisian press was able to mould Laetitia Toureaux's mysterious demise into a story which made sense to its readers, reinforced a law and order mentality in precarious times, and supported the established social order of the late 1930s.¹²

Embedded in each salacious adventure which *Détective* and its more highly esteemed competitors related were two discourses with cultural meanings at once at odds and yet, through the narrative format, eventually reconciled at the conclusion of the story. One discourse lured the reader into the violent, sexually arousing world of the street, inhabited by lower-class characters with *Parigot* slang names like 'Kiki', 'Fifi', 'Jojo' and 'Lili', whose lives seemed infinitely more exciting than those of the average reader. These unlikely heroes demonstrated courage, humour and an ability to accept the vagaries of fortune embodied by the nonchalant shrug and matter-of-fact 'c'est la vie' attitude which reporters attributed to them. Middle-class readers, especially women, could vicariously live out the fantasies of adventure and sexual danger denied to them in real life. In the dance halls and cabarets, they

¹¹ David Walker, *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the fait divers* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 6.

¹² *Détective* was founded by Gaston Gallimard in 1928 as a weekly magazine to exploit the public interest in crimes and scandals in interwar France. It was modelled on *Detective Fiction Weekly* published in New York and was similar to other French publications such as *Police et Reportage* and *Réalisme et Scandales*. *Détective* enjoyed a rapid success and actually tripled its readership in its first year of publication. It was especially popular with medical doctors. By the end of its second year it enjoyed a weekly circulation of 800,000. It ran until 9 May 1940 when most of its writing staff was mobilized for World War II. See Catherine Maisonneuve, 'Détective Le Grand Hebdomadaire des Faits Divers de 1928 à 1940', Thèse (Université de droit, économie et sciences sociales de Paris II, 1974); Claude Bellanger, Jacques Godechot, Pierre Guiral et Fernand Terrou (eds), *Histoire générale de la presse française* Tome III, *De 1871 à 1940* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 598–99; David Walker, 'Cultivating the fait divers: *Détective*', *Nottingham French Studies*, 31 (1992), 71–83; Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 148–9.

could escape, if only for a time, the constraints of gender and class. Working-class readers also found a release in the perspective of the popular press, which transformed their familiar and mundane public spaces into stimulating arenas of seduction, heroism and villainy. Their part of the city exuded an attraction for their social betters that seemed to enhance their own status.

The second discourse reassured both the upper and lower strata of the reading public that this stimulating world of the streets was doomed to tragedy. Denizens of the *bals musette*, especially if they were women, never came to a good end. Happy endings were reserved for those who adhered to bourgeois values and submitted to patriarchal authority, insisted the journalists. Adventurous women like Laetitia were never truly victims, for their own intrepid determination to venture into the city streets brought about their downfall. One might safely visit the Rue de Lappe, but one had to flee in advance of the police raid. To stay was to court sexual danger and almost certain disaster. Too much familiarity with the working-class entertainments led to a loss of innocence that barred a fallen woman from returning to the parlours of the respectable bourgeoisie. Men could enjoy more exposure to the wine and easy women of the *bals*, but they too risked a fall from grace if they succumbed to the temptations of the milieu. A working-class woman could aspire to enter the ranks of the middle class only by eschewing the slightest taint of the *bal musette*. Unlike her more affluent sisters, she could not afford to flirt with the amusements of her peers if she hoped to rise in the world. This was the lesson that Laetitia's life taught.

This article argues that Laetitia acted out the textual complexity of these discourses, and attempted to realize both fantasies in her own life. The police combed her apartment meticulously. In it they found shelves full of novels and popular magazines as well as touches of bourgeois material culture such as lace curtains and stylish furniture.¹³ The evidence from her life also suggests that she aspired to upward social mobility and bourgeois respectability. Yet ironically she could fulfil this dream only by utilizing her experience in the working-class environment she sought to flee. Laetitia's life gave the Parisian police and press information about the streets of Paris that helped to make the otherness of that world intelligible to them. Yet in another layer of irony, Laetitia's own images of both the bourgeois and the working-class milieus were deeply influenced by the very publications that in turn incorporated her life and death into their fantasy of the Parisian streets.

Thus we have a discourse between Toureaux and the police detectives and the journalists who investigated and reported on her murder built as much

¹³ *Paris-Soir*, 19 May 1937.

on fiction as that found in the often highly embellished, even fantastic, articles in the Parisian papers and weeklies. Toureaux's life embodied this intertextual struggle spelled out in the newspapers and scandal sheets as she attempted to reconcile two competing readings of the working-class world she inhabited and enjoyed.¹⁴ The press narrative of Toureaux's murder and the fictional construct erected of her life must also be understood as a product of the way gender was perceived in 1930s France, since the journalists viewed Laetitia through the discursive prism of gender. They portrayed her as someone who purposefully eschewed the role of respectable housewife and mother in order to invent a far more decadent and exciting life for herself in the Paris underworld. In the press, gender was the aspect of Toureaux's identity that really mattered. It was not just how she had lived – or died – that sold copy: it was that she was a woman who had pursued a double life and died in a pool of her own blood that sensationalized the story. Her story reflected a pronounced hostility toward women that permeated French interwar society and grew more intense as the 1930s progressed.¹⁵

The 'fallen woman' and the *bal musette* of the 1930s

Much has been written on the tendency of late nineteenth- and early

¹⁴ For more discussion of the cultural readings of early twentieth-century French newspapers see Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*.

¹⁵ Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 7. The literature on gender in the interwar period is still growing but much of it focuses on Germany and Italy. For a general overview of the subject, see Claudia Kooz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Robin Pickering-Iazzi (ed.), *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Françoise Thébaud (ed.), *A History of Women in the West*, Vol. v, *Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Melanie Hawthorne and Richard Golsan (eds), *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1997); Martin Durham, *Women and Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1998). For more on women and culture in interwar Europe, see Dominique Desanti, *La Femme au temps des années folles* (Paris: Pernoud, 1985); Steven Hause and Anne Kenney, *Women's Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Paul Smith, *Feminism and the Third Republic: Women's Political and Civil Rights in France, 1918–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Kevin Passmore, 'Planting the tricolor in the citadels of communism: women's social action in the Croix de feu and the Parti social français', *Journal of Modern History*, 71 (1999), 814–51; James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Position of Women in French Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980); Michael B. Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French between the Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Joachim Schlör, *Nights in the Big City: Paris, Berlin, London 1840–1930* (London: Reaktion, 1998); Katharina von Ankum (ed.), *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

twentieth-century writers both in educated circles and in the popular press to project upon the city their discontent with moral decay, working-class culture and female sexuality. Magazines and newspapers in particular were caught in the tension between their need to titillate and their desire to uplift morally the reading public.¹⁶ Journalism was becoming increasingly professionalized in France: the first schools of journalism were founded in the 1920s and 1930s and the first national *syndicat* of journalists was organized. There were roughly 3000 journalists in Paris in the 1930s, 97.5% of them men who were struggling to achieve bourgeois respectability as their profession gained serious social standing.¹⁷ Even so, there were no restrictions on the press in the 1930s to keep journalists from writing anything they wanted to invent about a particular story or criminal investigation. Police chiefs often held press conferences with journalists to keep the reporters' imaginations from running wild on sensational stories and to impress on them the necessity of not publishing information that might compromise a case. But that did not keep journalists and police from socializing in order to pump each other for information, nor did it prevent unscrupulous journalists from posing as police officers in an effort to obtain confidential information from unsuspecting informants. These very journalists helped to define the cultural logic of the 1930s as contemporaries understood it. Their sensational stories, embedded with multiple cultural meanings, involved them and those who bought their papers in an ongoing dialogue based on a kind of fantasy that sustained their collective imaginations. Journalists served the police by disseminating stories and photographs about crimes that frequently caused witnesses to come forward. They also created public opinion by educating their readers. Yet they often distorted their accounts and purposely misinformed the public for the sake of a good story.¹⁸

Nowhere was the penchant for sensationalism with moral overtones more evident than in the simultaneous fascination and revulsion of the French press with the *bals musette*. Journalists exploited the venue of the *bals* for story ideas and since Laetitia Toureaux frequented these nightspots, there was added incentive to explore them in print. It was in the *bals* that the journalists found leads to crimes, informants and the colourful characters

¹⁶ Belin, *Secrets of the Sûreté*, 232; Bellanger, Godechot, Guiral, et Terrou (eds), *Histoire générale de la presse française*, Vol. iii; Raymond Manevy, *L'Évolution des formules de présentation de la presse quotidienne* (Paris: Éditions Estienne, 1956); Christian Delporte, *Les Journalistes en France (1880–1950): naissance et construction d'une profession* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Pierre Andreu, *Révoltes de l'esprit: les revues des années 30* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1991); Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹⁷ Delporte, *Les Journalistes*, 229, 282–3, 314–18.

¹⁸ Walz, *Pulp Surrealism*, 79; Marcel Sicot, *Servitude et grandeur policières, quarante ans à la Sûreté* (Paris: Les Productions de Paris, 1949), 196–200.

who populated their articles. Like *flâneurs*, journalists observed with a jaundiced eye the pleasures of the bals without belonging to or truly understanding the culture that generated them.¹⁹ What made the *bals* so interesting to the reading public is that they were frequently located in *quartiers défavorisés* scattered throughout the city with heavy concentrations around the Bastille and especially on the notorious Rue de Lappe, a sordid street not far from Les Halles where pimps, prostitutes and homosexuals were known to congregate. These working-class neighbourhoods were historically home to the many immigrants who flocked to Paris in search of work. The *bals musette*, which featured accordion music and indoor and outdoor dancing, were owned and operated by and catered to a clientele of immigrants mostly of Italian and Auvergnat origin. Most *bals* were small and crowded, havens where the lower classes huddled on red imitation-leather banquettes and danced to tangos, waltzes and javas beneath prised balls hanging from the ceiling. The *bals* were in many ways reminiscent of the traditional village festivals of rural France and Italy. Alcohol was served in the *bals*, and women like Laetitia danced with men for a small fee. The fee was paid to the establishment, and in theory no woman had the right to turn down a dance. No doubt shady characters and criminals roamed the dance floors and back rooms, and pimps and prostitutes worked the *bals* in search of clients. By the 1930s, however, the *bals* had ceased to be the dens of iniquity they had been at the turn of the century. Several of the newer *bals* had grown larger and brighter and featured well-nickelled bars. L'Ermitage, for example, was huge: it included a main floor, balcony and outside pavilion and could accommodate up to 800 clients. More often the *bals* were the retreats of the respectable working class desperate for some fun. Although the *bals* were never as popular with the Parisian public as the Montmartre cabarets, by the 1930s they were increasingly attracting emboldened bourgeois visitors from Passy and Neuilly eager to get a glimpse of the nightlife of their social inferiors.²⁰

The disparity between the mundane reality and journalistic fantasy derived from bourgeois projections of middle-class anxieties about the city in general and the working class in particular onto the *bals musette*. The opportunity the *bals* provided women to interact informally with men aroused the fears of the journalists and confirmed their belief that denizens of the *bals* and their female clientele especially were exciting but dangerous,

¹⁹ Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992).

²⁰ Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War: Popular Culture in the Era of the World Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 108; Brassai, *The Secret Paris of the 30's*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), n.p., see chapter 'Les Bals-Musette'; Paul Cohen-Portheim, *The Spirit of Paris* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1937), 33–4.

the source of good copy but hardly models of domestic propriety.²¹ Demand for crime stories was especially strong in the decade before World War II and, as Charles Rearick notes, 'it was not hard for many people to locate themselves in such a world and even to identify with the antisocial characters.'²² *Détective* was one of the first weekly magazines in Paris to take advantage of the new field of photo-journalism and stimulate the public with suggestive photographs that emphasized the thrust of their headlines.²³ 'Sous les feux des rampes électriques, les couples guincent. Des romans d'amour s'ébauchent qui se terminent parfois dans le sang', ran the cover story headline of a 1937 issue. In the accompanying photograph, a seductive woman gazes triumphantly at the reader, her arms draped possessively around the neck of her male conquest. He looks away – out of modesty or guilt? Is she a fallen woman of whom he is ashamed? That certainly is the implication of the picture.²⁴ Jean Chiappe, the director of the Sûreté in the early 1930s, found the left-leaning *Détective* so distasteful that he banned the public display of posters of its covers throughout France.²⁵ The journalists at *Détective* were ambiguous, however, in their portrayal of the *bals*. On the one hand, they warned readers about the perversions of the dance halls where young girls easily fell into prostitution, while on the other hand they glorified the dangerous and exciting life to be found there. What drew journalists and readers to the Laetitia story was that she had worked and played in a number of the *bals musette*: Le Lotus in the Latin Quarter, Le Petit Balcon on the Rue de Lappe, Aux Sept Arbres in Maisons-Alfort, Chez les Vikings not far from the Rue d'Assas, and of course, L'As de Coeur on the unsavoury Rue des Vertus near the Boulevard Sébastopol.

The journalistic accounts of Laetitia Toureaux's life and death reveal that for the press she embodied a fundamental contradiction in the image of women in 1930s France. The experience of World War I created a conscious sense among the young of Europe especially that the values and mores of the old order were moribund. People sought modernity, which meant youth, action and adventure. Nowhere was this attitudinal change more significant than in the perceptions of gender relations and the role of women. Mary Louise Roberts argues that during the post-war period 'gender was central to how change was understood'.²⁶ This was the era of the female adventuresses

²¹ Claude Dubois, *La Bastoche, Bal-Musette, Plaisir et Crime, 1750–1939* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1997).

²² Rearick, *The French in Love and War*, 142.

²³ Delporte, *Les Journalistes*, 229; Jacques Wolgensinger, *L'Histoire à la Une, la grande aventure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 105–13.

²⁴ Marcel Montarron, 'Les Musettes de Paris', *Détective* No. 451 (17 June 1937).

²⁵ Walker, 'Cultivating the *fait divers*', 72.

²⁶ Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 5; Mary Jean Green, 'Gender, Fascism and the Croix de Feu: the "women's pages" of *Le Flambeau*', *French Cultural Studies*, 8 (1997), 229–39; Siân Reynolds, *France Between the Wars, Gender and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

who littered novels and the popular press. Women had more independence to work, more money, and more opportunities to spend it freely although the depression of the 1930s severely limited their spending power. Some women also stretched the boundaries of the permissible in their sexual and social lives, and here too they found inspiration and encouragement, as well as cautionary tales, in magazines such as *Marie-Claire*, a new kind of publication launched in 1937 to appeal to the female reading public. Thus a tension existed between the old and new values with the dominant theme emphasizing the need to reaffirm the terrible risk of female sexual and economic independence from male control. The 'new' woman always seemed to have more fun, but she also came to a predictably tragic end unless she bridled her ambitions and spending habits and cut short her flirtation with independence to re-enter the domestic world of submission to male authority. As the 1930s drew to a close, extreme right organizations in particular began to insist more and more frequently that only the domestic and maternal roles of women really mattered. In many ways, Laetitia Toureaux's portrayal in the papers prefigured the fear of the liberated woman that became stereotypical in propaganda during the Vichy regime.²⁷

These changes added to the tremendous reservoir of anxiety in interwar society. France in the 1930s, caught in economic depression with rising unemployment and frequent strikes, was deeply divided by uneasy class relations, seemingly overburdened with foreign immigrants and haunted by the fear of another European war. Laetitia Toureaux, an Italian immigrant, an ambitious lower-class woman who seemed determined to enjoy a lifestyle above her class, a beautiful, mysterious widow with an active, and slightly unsavoury social life, seemed to embody many of the fears of the French about gender, class and culture. By the same token, her adventures as revealed and then rehashed in the press sustained the lust of the reading public for stories of daring, mysterious women. Her downfall, however, satisfied their need to preserve the traditional moral order. Like Icarus, Laetitia was doomed to fall to earth, the victim of her own ambitions and escapades, as much or more than of the assassin's knife.

Reporting the 'Other' in Laetitia Toureaux

In the first few days after the murder, journalists and the Parisian public were eager to view Laetitia Toureaux as an innocent, a 'douce brebis', a little naive, perhaps, maybe even a flirt since she was on her way home from a dance hall when she died, but essentially a victim of cruel fate.²⁸ 'C'est malheureux! C'était une belle fille,' the politically neutral *Paris-Soir* lamented

²⁷ Hawthorne and Golsan, *Gender and Fascism*, 7.

²⁸ *L'Oeuvre*, 25 May 1937.

shortly after her death. In the same issue, Toureaux's employer at the wax polish factory, the Laboratoire Maxi, where she worked gluing labels onto jars, spoke of her diligence and intelligence, noting that she was 'parfaitement digne et respectable' and that 'son dévouement aux oeuvres sociales était remarquable'.²⁹ He went on to say that she was particularly committed to social causes that included caring for homeless children. He added that she belonged to the Ligue Républicaine du Bien Public, a well-known public service organization. Likewise she belonged to the Union Valdotaïne, a respectable society for Italian immigrants. Her special interest was the care and protection of impoverished young children, and witnesses claimed that she regularly gave money to a poor boy who lived on her street. Her co-workers added that she was friendly and extremely generous.³⁰ A delegation from the Ligue and another from the Maxi factory attended the funeral. M. Orsini, who led the group from the Ligue, described Laetitia as devoted to everyone.³¹

Laetitia Toureaux's parents were separated. In 1920 her mother had moved to France with the children, while her father remained behind in the Val d'Aosta in Italy. Both parents were unanimous in their praise of their daughter. Despite his bitterness toward Toureaux's mother, her father was effusive in his admiration of Laetitia. 'C'était ma fille chérie, que j'aimais plus que tout au monde; ma seule joie encore; les autres m'avaient abandonné, il y a maintenant dix-sept ans. Elle seule revenait tous les ans au pays. Elle était gaie, sincère, intelligente ...'³² Her mother declared that 'elle était pour moi la féé de la joie'.³³ Laetitia was also close to her sister and two brothers. Her youngest brother, Riton, told *Déetective* magazine he was her 'vrai copain' and spoke of how radiant and happy she was on the day of her death.³⁴ In sum, her co-workers, friends, and family were unanimous in their praise of her probity, ambition and good nature. A widow who insisted on wearing widow's weeds two years after her husband's death, who lamented his death repeatedly to her closest friends and visited his grave nearly every Sunday, who looked after homeless children and had a smile for everyone she knew, Toureaux seemed the model of fidelity and respectability. In the numerous interviews the police conducted in the first days after her murder, the two words that came up over and over again in the descriptions of Laetitia were 'sérieuse' and 'gaie'. The police inspectors could not find anyone in her circle of associates with a bad word to say about her, let alone a motive to kill her.

²⁹ *Paris-Soir*, 19 May 1937. For more on *Paris-Soir* see: René de Livois, *Histoire de la presse française*, tome II, *De 1881 à nos jours* (Lausanne: Éditions Spes, 1965), 471–6.

³⁰ *Paris-Soir*, 19 May 1937; AN, F7 14816, p.5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 23 May 1937.

³² *Ibid.*, 21 May 1937.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1937.

³⁴ Henri Nourissat, 'Ma dernière danse avec ma soeur', *Déetective* No. 449 (3 June 1937), 4.

Within five days after her murder, however, public opinion, led by the press, began to turn against Toureaux, now exposed as a disturbing 'other', an ambitious social climber who lived beyond her means. Troubling hints of a double life, of nights spent at *bals musette* and engaged in even more nefarious activity, began to surface. 'LAETITIA TOUREAUX DÉPENSAIT PLUS QU'ELLE NE GAGNAIT: AVAIT-ELLE UN AMI?' ran the headlines in *Paris-Soir* on the evening of the 21st of May.³⁵ The story went on to recount that the victim's apartment had been decorated with a taste and elegance that seemed beyond the means of a mere Italian factory worker, no matter how economical and Francophile she might have been. The papers also revealed that on the night of her murder, Toureaux's purse contained a book of first-class metro tickets. They questioned how a simple factory worker could afford such a luxury. This revelation also raised concerns about her virtue since it was a well known fact that prostitutes haunted first-class metro cars. The police also discovered letters in her apartment, hundreds of them, the newspapers disclosed, from many different men.³⁶

Soon journalists delved into her past and revealed that the young widow's marriage had been clandestine. Her late husband, Jules Toureaux, hailed from a Parisian bourgeois family of much higher social standing than Laetitia's immigrant, working-class origins. Jules and Laetitia had a morganatic marriage and Jules never revealed to his parents anything about her role in his life. He had kept a secret apartment where Laetitia lived and he was only a frequent visitor.³⁷ Adding to this mysterious double life was the fact that Laetitia preferred to be called 'Yolande' as opposed to her given name. Worse, Toureaux's night life began to appear more and more risqué. Journalists had a field day dropping jargon about the 'milieu' she frequented, the *bals musette*, cafés and bars around the Bastille and Les Halles where she loved to dance. These were the haunts of brutish characters, the addicts of 'coco' and opium, the 'tueurs' and 'durs' who loved to give themselves over to the pleasures of the dance and the easy sex available for the taking.³⁸ 'La route n'est pas longue non plus; pour certaines femmes, du musette au trottoir,' warned the writer Marcel Montarron in *Déetective*, leaving the reader with the impression that Laetitia had done far more than just work the coat room in L'As de Coeur.³⁹ Meanwhile, in the basements and backrooms of these establishments, insinuated the newspapers, French, Neapolitan and Algerian gangsters regularly plotted to 'supprimer' their enemies. The working-class men and women who in fact comprised most of the clients of these

³⁵ *Paris-Soir*, 21 May 1937.

³⁶ *L'Humanité*, 25 May 1937.

³⁷ *Paris-Soir*, 19, 21 May 1937; *France-Soir*, 1 June 1957; APP, E/A 83/7-8; Delpêche, *Affaires Classées*, 26-8.

³⁸ *Le Populaire*, 25 May 1937.

³⁹ Marcel Montarron, 'Les Musettes de Paris', *Déetective* No. 450 (10 June 1937), 2.

businesses were suspect, tainted through association and innuendo. After all, *bals musette* were where young girls 'mènent parfois leurs corps ... vers des mésaventures', cried *Le Petit Parisien*, one of the top five daily newspapers published in Paris in the 1930s.⁴⁰ The newspaper was noted for its propagation of republican ideals and its moral judgements. It catered to the female reading public. By May 27 the journalists at *Le Petit Parisien*, who were particularly interested in Laetitia's virtue, labelled her 'une fille légère'.⁴¹

Despite bourgeois discomfort with Laetitia Toureaux's love of dance and dance halls, her acquaintances found little unusual about her night life, although her *concierge* did comment that Laetitia had a lively sentimental life and that she spent many evenings at the *bals*.⁴² More judgmental observers, however, found her habits unusual and reported that she kept odd hours. Worse, she moved about the city alone, day and night, with what her contemporaries perceived as a masculine freedom from fear.⁴³ For Toureaux, the metro was more than just a means of transport. It was also a liminal space from where she could emerge at any time, day or night, ready to assume a new identity, to play a new role, to present a new face to the world.⁴⁴

While it is possible that Toureaux supplemented her income with occasional prostitution, like many working-class women who danced with men for money and were reputed to be 'entraîneuses', the police never turned up any information that Laetitia had actually charged for sex. Rather they discovered that she had an active and exciting sex life, and in 1936 engaged from time to time in sexual encounters 'en plein air' with her then boyfriend, Giovanni Gasperini, in the Bois-de-Bolougne.⁴⁵ The police turned up at least four lovers whom she took between 1934 and 1937, after her husband's death, and they considered rumours that she had several others. 'La belle Italienne' clearly liked men, attracted them, and spent what spare time she had in their company. It is also possible that she was the mistress of

⁴⁰ *Le Petit Parisien*, 22 May 1937; For similar stories see, *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937, 31 May 1937; *Le Populaire*, 25 May 1937; *Ce Soir*, 29 May 1937. For more on *Le Petit Parisien* see, Francine Amaury, *Histoire du plus grand quotidien de la 3e République, Le Petit Parisien, 1876-1944* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972).

⁴¹ *Le Petit Parisien*, 27 May 1937.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 17 May 1937.

⁴³ Oral interview with authors of former boyfriend of Laetitia Toureaux who wished to remain anonymous, Paris, France, 3 August 1997.

⁴⁴ Nourrissat, 'Ma dernière danse', 5. Nourrissat recounted that on the last day of his sister's life, she put on a new green dress and had her brown hair coloured blond.

⁴⁵ APP, 'L'affaire Laetitia Toureaux', Procès-Verbaux 57/1 Interrogation of Giovanni Gasperini. Gasperini claimed their relationship only lasted a few months, but they remained friends afterwards. It's hard to decide what Laetitia was doing with Gasperini since he was a known fascist. Was their relationship part of her sleuthing? The fact that Gasperini was married at the time of his affair with Toureaux doomed it to failure. Gasperini was also linked tangentially to Jean Filliol, a member of the Cagoule who may have been Laetitia's assassin.

a wealthy politician, as the newspapers avidly speculated. Still, there are more mundane explanations for her lifestyle, which appeared to journalists to be overly comfortable for a mere factory girl. Her nicer pieces of furniture derived from her marriage to Jules Toureaux. So too did at least some of the jewellery she was wearing the night of her murder, including the nicest of her rings, a gold band inscribed 'J.T. à L.N. II.9.29'. Her brother claimed that the new green outfit she was wearing at the time of her death had been made by her mother.⁴⁶ Moreover, the letters in her apartment mostly came from her father and her boyfriend, René Schramm – over seventy of the letters were from Schramm, who was a soldier stationed in Longwy.

On May 22 the papers released the most sensational information of all about Laetitia: she was a private investigator who worked for the Agence Rouff and used the undercover name 'Yolande'. 'Nous levons le voile sur l'étrange vie de Laetitia Toureaux, l'égorgée du métro' ran the subtitle to the cover story in *Déetective* on 27 May 1937.⁴⁷ *Paris-Soir*, known for its sensational journalism, exposed Toureaux as 'un limier en jupons' and concluded that her life appeared to be more and more adventurous.⁴⁸ For the journalists at *Police Magazine*, 'Le Crime du Métro' had now become 'L'énigme du Métro', with the focus of the stories fixed squarely on Laetitia and her secretive life.⁴⁹ The papers disclosed that M. Rouffignac, head of the detective agency that employed Toureaux, had recommended her for a job at the Maxi factory. It seemed that M. Dalit, the director of the factory, needed someone who not only would be a good worker, but also would keep an eye on potential union activists.⁵⁰ Perhaps, suggested the journalists, someone from the criminal milieu Laetitia frequented or one of the targets of her espionage murdered her. The 'douce brebis' had now become a 'méchant mouton'.⁵¹

And yet, despite the dogged police investigation and the journalistic frenzy, Toureaux's case remained unsolved. As the police seemed to have run into a dead end or were at least unwilling to tell all that they knew, the journalists, always a few steps beyond the facts at every juncture, continued to report on the case. The closest that they came to the truth in the days immediately following her murder was in an article published on 23 May in *Paris-Soir*:

Mais Laetitia Toureaux, qui connaissait bien les milieux italiens et qui faisant des voyages d'ailleurs (beaucoup moins fréquents qu'on ne l'a prétendu) entre la France et l'Italie, pouvait être employée comme

⁴⁶ Nourrissat, 'Ma dernière danse', 5.

⁴⁷ *Déetective*, No. 448 (27 May 1937).

⁴⁸ *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937.

⁴⁹ *L'Humanité*, 27 May 1937; *Police Magazine*, 6 June 1937.

⁵⁰ *Paris-Soir*, 22 May 1937.

⁵¹ *L'Oeuvre*, 25 May 1937.

indicatrice soit par la police d'État, soit par des organisations ou des groupements privés.⁵²

Could her work as a private detective, or as a police informant, have led to her death? 'Ce serait un trafiquant de drogue, devenu à l'insu des familiers de Laetitia Toureaux l'ami de la malheureuse à seule fin de mettre un terme à ses fâcheuses activités policières,' speculated the evening paper *L'Intransigeant* in June.⁵³ But could the journalists ever confirm this hypothesis? Not if the police had anything to say about the matter. They seemed determined to keep the lid on the whole affair. Other newspapers, especially *La Liberté* and *Paris-Soir*, were more *au courant* regarding the progress of the case, perhaps because their reporters had cultivated better contacts within the police. Police reports indicate that some of the inspectors on her case were aware of Toureaux's work as an informer at the time of her death. They eventually concluded that the dangerous Cagoule had a hand in the murder,⁵⁴ but in 1937 they were not eager to publicize what they knew about her, since this might have compromised their attempt to expose the C.S.A.R. Moreover, because of competition and mistrust within the various divisions of the police force and political pressure from the government, the inspectors at the Sûreté were probably somewhat tardy even in divulging this information to their colleagues in the Paris prefecture.⁵⁵

What ensued between the journalists and police during the weeks after Laetitia's murder was a duel in which the journalists sought to pressure the police into looking beyond the ordinary Parisian criminal milieu for the killer. The press suspected, perhaps because of leaks from the Sûreté, that the Toureaux case was linked to the 'political' murders of Dimitri Navachine and Carolo and Nello Rosselli. Increasingly reporters became convinced that the police were holding out on them. The agents at the Sûreté, by contrast, used the newspapers as a source of leads, since they knew that the journalists had their own informants familiar with Toureaux's habits and milieu. Yet once

⁵² *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937.

⁵³ *L'Intransigeant*, 6 June 1937.

⁵⁴ In the 1948 trials of the suspected members of the Cagoule arrested in 1937, government prosecutors accused the organization of the murders of Dmitri Navachine, Carlo and Nello Rossi and Laetitia Toureaux, among others. The police also attributed several terrorist bombings and attempted bombings to the Cagoule, which stockpiled significant arsenals in Paris and the provinces. AN, F7 14816, 'Affaire Toureaux', 'Affaire Navachine', AP, 212/79/3, 'Affaire du C.S.A.R.'

⁵⁵ In his memoirs, Jean Belin, one of the inspectors on Laetitia's murder case, implied heavily that she was a police informant and that officers at the Sûreté were aware of this fact. He wrote in 1950, 'I am not prepared to state that she had acted as an informer, although it seems likely such was the case. I mention this particular aspect of the case because it is quite possible that a number of police officers may have been in the know': Belin, *Secrets of the Sûreté*, 214. On police corruption, secrecy, and mistrust see, Martin, *Crime and Criminal Justice*, 102–6; the government also pressured the Sûreté in 1938 not to pursue Cagoulards who had fled to Italy since France was trying to cooperate with Italy at that point to keep Mussolini away from Hitler.

the *Cagoule* was exposed, and it became clear that Toureaux was probably one of its victims, the police also sought to deflect the journalists from that 'piste'. Even more potentially explosive was the allegation which kept surfacing and which the *Sûreté* finally confirmed in a report in August 1938, that Toureaux had been an agent for the secret service. It seems she probably worked for the *Deuxième Bureau*, the police arm of the French army that was also involved in investigating arms trafficking.⁵⁶ Now it was the police who did nothing to deflect the press from interpreting Toureaux's death as little more than the tawdry murder of a small-time adventuress, although they were not wholly successful. As late as 1962 *France-Soir* ran an article claiming that she was condemned to death by her milieu because she had rendered services to the police.⁵⁷

The idea of Laetitia Toureaux as a female private detective or 'cachottière', as her brother Virgile called her, fascinated the press and the reading public.⁵⁸ Popular culture in the 1920s and 1930s was steeped in real and fictional detective literature. *Déetective* magazine, which chronicled real-life murder mysteries and spy cases as well as fictional sleuthing, and reported on notorious criminals, gangsters, pimps and prostitutes, enjoyed fabulous success in the 1930s and was widely read.⁵⁹ The escapist stories which filled it, many of them featuring intrepid women, allowed ordinary people to live out their fantasies. The more respectable newspapers also followed closely cases such as the 'Affaire Prince' and the assassination of Dmitri Navachine in the Bois de Boulogne. Parisian journalists explicitly connected Toureaux's case to these and other unsolved murders which they reported. The police and press also suggested that notorious murderers on the run, such as René le Balafre, Max le Roquin, Pierrot-le-Bancal and his girlfriend in London, Fifi-la-Françoise, might have committed Laetitia's murder.⁶⁰ Toureaux, it seemed, would have been fair game for any one of these gangsters because she inhabited their dark underworld of indigence and crime. Moreover, she may even have been informing on them for the police in Paris and London, suggested the press, which, if true, meant that she was even more duplicitous and licentious than the criminals whom she spied on, and more interesting.⁶¹

As Michael B. Miller points out, 'spy fiction between the wars was never as good as fact'.⁶² French cities, and especially Paris, swarmed with spies and adventurers in the 1930s, and nowhere were the spies thicker than in

⁵⁶ AN, F7 14816, Août, 1938, 'Renseignements Fournis par la 2ème. Section de l'Inspection Générale des Service de Police Criminelle, relativement à l'enquête menée sur le CSAR'.

⁵⁷ *France-Soir*, 2 July, 1962.

⁵⁸ *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937.

⁵⁹ For example some of *Déetective's* most sensational reporting included: 'L'Affaire de la Malle Sanglante', in 1929, 'L'affaire Violette Nozières', in 1933 and 'L'Affaire Prince', in 1934.

⁶⁰ *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937; 1 June 1937; *Le Petit Parisien*, 27, 29, 31 May 1937.

⁶¹ *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937; *L'Oeuvre*, 27 May 1937; *Le Populaire*, 27 May 1937.

⁶² Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro*, 69.

the Italian emigrant circles where pro-Mussolini and anti-fascists carried their covert battles into France. The political tensions of the era, the conviction that the post-war period was a breathing space rather than a permanent peace, and the strides which professional espionage had made during World War I meant that there was a high demand for intelligence on the part of governments. The Italians had begun infiltrating their emigrant communities in France even before World War I, and stepped up their activities in the post-war period. The French police also used Italian immigrants to spy on their compatriots, and there is evidence that Laetitia Toureaux may have become a police informant as early as 1929.⁶³

But how seriously should Toureaux's sleuthing have been taken? Was she really an experienced professional, liable to embroil herself in the kind of cases where her clients, or her quarry, might have been willing and able to murder her? The dilemma of the journalists was that the men most likely to know about this, her employer at the detective agency, Georges Rouffignac, and M. Badin, the police commissioner in charge of the case, seemed unable to make up their own minds on this issue. On 22 May, Rouffignac stated in *Le Petit Parisien*, 'J'ai l'impression qu'elle connaissait son métier de détective avant de le pratiquer à mon service.' He went on to explain that, 'Quand cette jeune femme s'est présentée chez moi, j'ai tout de suite constaté que je n'avais pas affaire à une débutante dans le métier. J'ai l'impression qu'elle avait appris ailleurs que chez moi à faire des filatures.'⁶⁴ In an interview with *Détective*, Rouffignac continued to praise her sleuthing prowess. 'C'était une employée modèle, parfaitement experte dans l'exercice de ses fonctions. Je lui ai confié des filatures très délicates, des enquêtes ardues. Elle s'en est toujours tirée à merveille.'⁶⁵ Privately he spoke with Police Commissioner Badin about her work in L'As de Coeur. Rouffignac explained that Laetitia had confided to him that she wasn't afraid of the clientele of the *bals musette* where she worked and danced.⁶⁶ In all probability Rouffignac had arranged for Laetitia to work in the cloakroom of L'As de Coeur as part of her sleuthing work for him. While the police never admitted this in their investigative report, an interrogation of one of Laetitia's friends did point to the fact that she tried to arrange for other girls to work in the *bals* for Rouffignac as part of his private police force.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Paris-Soir*, 26 May 1937; Donald N. Baker, 'The Surveillance of Subversion in Interwar France: The Carnet B in the Seine, 1922-1940', *French Historical Studies*, 10 (Spring, 1978) 3, 486-516, 507; Gary S. Cross, *Immigrant Workers in Industrial France. The Making of a New Laboring Class* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 106-7, 115-16.

⁶⁴ *Le Petit Parisien*, 22 May 1937.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Paul Bringuier and Marcel Montarron, 'Le Crime du Metro', *Détective* No. 448 (27 May 1937), 14.

⁶⁶ APP, 'L'Affaire Laetitia Toureaux', Rapport Général, 306.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Interrogation 64/1 of Victor Riou and Yvonne Cavret. Essentially coat rooms were used as information drop sites for clandestine operations between the wars. Rouffignac was involved in 1937 in placing operatives in the *bals musette* to work for him gathering information.

Yet Rouffignac contradicted himself repeatedly with regard to Laetitia in his newspaper interviews and offered a darker image of her to some reporters. In describing her demeanour when she first went to work for him, Rouffignac told *Le Matin* on May 25 that when he offered her his best council and advice, assuming that he was dealing with a novice, Laetitia had smiled and responded that she would figure it out on her own.⁶⁸ According to a remark from Laetitia that Rouffignac offered in *Paris-Soir* on 22 May, she appeared even more confident about her abilities as a sleuth: when Rouffignac offered to instruct her on the ins and outs of sleuthing, he claimed that she declared, 'Pas la peine, je sais le faire.'⁶⁹

Yet, when the journalist queried him, 'N'avez vous pas l'impression que ce travail n'était pas nouveau pour elle?', Rouffignac changed course completely: 'Pas le moins au monde. Tenez, par exemple, pour rédiger son rapport de filature, elle patauge lamentablement. Sur ce chapitre, il a fallu lui apprendre l'a b c du métier.'⁷⁰ Rouffignac was not alone in his willingness to disparage Toureaux's work. The police too seemed to have concluded that she was inept at her profession. 'L'examen des notes et des papiers', stated a police communiqué, 'fournis à ce sujet démontre péremptoirement que Laetitia avait peu d'aptitudes pour ce genre de mission et que ses rapports ont un caractère puéril.'⁷¹ The same day Badin himself stated in an interview with the press his conviction that 'Laetitia Toureaux, policière inexpérimentée n'a pu soulever de haine assez puissante pour légitimer l'hypothèse d'une vengeance.'⁷² The next day Badin went further, suggesting that Toureaux's assassin was probably 'un suiveur entreprenant ou un malfaiteur qui ne voulait à son sac.'⁷³

Rouffignac and Badin appear to have been disingenuous with the press on this issue, and they never fully explained to the public Rouffignac's involvement with the investigation of Toureaux's murder. Despite the sloppy, thin reports about her cases that she supposedly prepared for him, Rouffignac had employed Laetitia for at least thirteen assignments, many of which involved her following adulterous husbands. Moreover, he recommended her to M. Dalit, the director of the Maxi factory, not only as a good worker, but also as a subtle sleuth well able to keep an eye on her co-workers for him without their suspecting anything, and Dalit certainly had no complaints about her work. Nor did any of the people who worked with Laetitia at the Maxi factory suggest that she had aroused the slightest suspicion that she was anything other than a well-liked colleague. The police, too, or the

⁶⁸ *Le Matin*, 25 May 1937.

⁶⁹ *Paris-Soir*, 22 May 1937.

⁷⁰ *Le Matin*, 25 May 1937.

⁷¹ *Paris-Soir*, 26 May 1937.

⁷² *L'Intransigeant*, 26 May 1937.

⁷³ *Le Matin*, 27 May 1937.

Deuxième Bureau, had seen fit to hire Laetitia and were evidently satisfied enough with her work to employ her in what turned out to be the extremely dangerous assignment of infiltrating the Cagoule.⁷⁴ Again, she performed her task very competently, and the Cagoule uncovered her activities only through a subtle ruse, and after she had allegedly fed the police vital information on their gunrunning from Switzerland.⁷⁵ Rouffignac and a police inspector, M. Cettour, had sponsored Toureaux for membership in the Ligue du Bien Public, patronage they are unlikely to have afforded to a flighty, incompetent employee.⁷⁶ Finally, Rouffignac and Badin never made known to the public even after the exposure of the Cagoule that several of Rouffignac's other operatives had infiltrated the right-wing group.⁷⁷

Finding themselves adrift, with plenty of suggestive evidence that Toureaux's murder stemmed from her detective work, either for the police or for Rouffignac, but unable to uncover any conclusive proof, journalists began to accuse the police of stonewalling. The leftist newspapers were especially aggressive in their recriminations against the police. 'ON NE VEUT PAS SAVOIR QUI A ASSASSINÉ LAETITIA', shouted the headlines of *L'Humanité* on 29 May. 'Tout est mis en oeuvre pour que ne soit jamais découvert l'assassin.'⁷⁸ 'Qu'attend M. Badin?', asked *L'Oeuvre* the same day. 'Il n'y a plus de grandes raisons d'espoir; on s'achemine petit à petit vers le classement et l'oubli.'⁷⁹ The socialist paper *Le Populaire* concluded: 'l'enquête sur l'affaire Laetitia Toureaux demeure au point de mort.'⁸⁰ The police response was to counter that they in fact had not given up, and that such accusations from the press not only were unjustified and scurrilous, but impeded them from doing their job.⁸¹

As the journalists found themselves increasingly frustrated in their efforts either to extract from the police or to confirm on their own the exact nature of Laetitia's work as a police informant, they resorted to speculations about her life and death that degenerated into the absurd, but which in the absence of hard facts served to keep the story alive, sell copy, and turn Toureaux into a woman of 'petite vertu'. Her sexuality, in particular, was fair game. More than a flirt, it seems that she had been a real vamp, a dangerous seductress whose lovers supplied her with the money to support her parvenu lifestyle. Perhaps a *voyante* could uncover the truth about Toureaux's unknown lovers, and even pinpoint the one who killed her. One of the soothsayers the

⁷⁴ AN, F7 14816, 'Déclaration de Locuty', Police memo detailing Laetitia's work as a private investigator, c.1938.

⁷⁵ AN, F7 14816; AP, 212/79/3.

⁷⁶ *La Liberté*, 26 May 1937.

⁷⁷ APP, 'L'Affaire Laetitia Toureaux', file 84/1, 'Verifications au CSAR'.

⁷⁸ *L'Humanité*, 29 May 1937.

⁷⁹ *L'Oeuvre*, 29 May 1937.

⁸⁰ *Le Populaire*, 28 May 1937.

⁸¹ *Paris-Soir*, 31 May 1937.

journalists hired, a 'Madame D', suggested that her killer was from the south-east of France, and someone very close to her.⁸²

Immediately after Toureaux's death, it became apparent that she had at least one male admirer in the military. The evening of her death she carried in her purse a note arranging a meeting with one of them, Jean Martin, a sailor stationed at Toulon. Martin denied that the two had been lovers. 'Je n'ai jamais été son ami,' Martin insisted. 'C'était une copine, pas plus. Je la croyais sérieuse. Elle me dit que, dans la journée, elle travaillait dans un laboratoire.'⁸³ The police quickly investigated and ruled Martin out of any role in the murder. They also eliminated as a suspect Toureaux's boyfriend, René Schramm, the soldier stationed at Longwy who had very much wanted to marry her. This did not stop the press, however, from reading more into Toureaux's penchant for military men. 'Il ne faut pas, cependant, oublier que Laetitia étrangère de naissance aimait à fréquenter soit les marins de Toulon, soit les soldats en garnison sur la ligne Maginot.'⁸⁴ Was she a spy, then, using her wiles to infiltrate the French military, or simply a promiscuous camp follower? Was 'Yolande' merely a pretty, new, familiar name she had chosen for herself or was it the sinister sobriquet of a woman determined to mask her true identity with a criminal alias, as the press insinuated? Was her tumultuous romantic life simply a desperate escape from the loneliness generated by an early widowhood or a reflection of the notorious appetite of a sexual predator? For the press, there was no innocent facet of her life.

Toureaux also had a taste for black and brown men, asserted the journalists. A South American, no, a North African, no, a Jewish Algerian, had loved her and killed her in a fit of jealous rage. Jealousy? No, it was sexual frustration; she was a tease whose habits were 'irregular'. In fact, her assassin might have been a woman, maybe someone she had tailed, but maybe a more intimate associate, even a female lover.⁸⁵ At every step of the investigation, both of the police and of the press, Toureaux's sex played a central role informing how she was viewed. Was Toureaux a living embodiment of Victor Margueritte's heroine in his popular postwar novel *La Garçonne*, a 'bachelor girl' who pursued financial independence and sexual pleasure wherever she could find them in the new age of the emancipated woman?⁸⁶

Toureaux offered a perfect tableau for the press to explore and expound upon issues of gender and, to a lesser extent class, with which interwar France struggled. World War I had offered opportunities for women to enter the

⁸² *Ibid.*, 30 May 1937.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 19 May 1937.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 31 May 1937.

⁸⁵ *L'Oeuvre*, 28 May 1937; *L'Humanité*, 29 May 1937; *Paris-Soir*, 30 May 1937, 1 June 1937, 6 June 1937; *Le Journal*, 6 June 1937.

⁸⁶ Anne-Marie Sohn, 'Between the Wars in France and England', in *A History of Women*, Vol. 4, 94; Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 46–62.

work-force for the first time. This, in turn, accelerated their entrance into mass consumer culture, while also offering them an economic independence which some women, at least, sought to translate into greater sexual freedom. In reality, most women, even if they worked in the factories and department stores when young, eventually abandoned this life for the traditional roles of wife and mother. But they continued to be drawn to the allure of the narrative of the modern woman, with its sexual titillation and thrill of adventures shared vicariously from a safe distance in the popular literature. For the average reader, Laetitia Toureaux was a dangerous 'donneuse', made even more threatening in her immigrant guise.⁸⁷

Toureaux additionally was the quintessential modern female consumer, and part of the journalists' discomfort with her lifestyle lay in the fact that she seemed to consume beyond her means.⁸⁸ Again, the problem was one of both class and gender. All of the newspapers remarked on the brand new, expensive-looking suit she was wearing the day she died. Only one saw fit to mention that it had been a gift.⁸⁹ News reports made much of her apartment, which she had furnished 'avec goût', yet only one report remarked that she had only cold running water.⁹⁰ Her clandestine marriage, with its overtones of social climbing, made good copy, but none of the reports alluded to the fact that her portion of Jules's estate amounted only to her furniture and a small sum of money left in a savings account; the rest went to his parents who disavowed her.⁹¹ The money barely covered the medical bills from Jules's terminal illness and the expense of his funeral, all of which Laetitia paid herself. Moreover, the apartment, at 3 rue Pierre Bayle, was located in a working-class district of Paris, a block from the cemetery Père Lachaise. Yet the newspapers scrupulously added up every *centime* of her income, or what they could uncover of it, and, rather than lauding her for working hard to keep up a respectable appearance on a meagre income, insisted that she must have made ends meet with the help of a lover. At the same time, some hinted, she was a welfare cheat who collected unemployment benefit while working for the Agence Rouff. Thus, Toureaux's drive to achieve a bourgeois lifestyle, or at least the veneer of respectability, even if it meant working day and night, became a reason to condemn her. Journalists faulted Toureaux

⁸⁷ For information on Parisian views of immigrant women see Rearick, 92.

⁸⁸ Female material consumption began to increase in the late nineteenth century. For more, see: Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois culture and the department store, 1869–1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Luisa Passerini, 'The Ambivalent Image of Women in Mass Culture', in *A History of Women*, Vol. 4, 324–42; Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Charles Rearick, *The Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: Entertainment and festivity in turn-of-the-century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁸⁹ Nourissat, 'Ma dernière danse', 4.

⁹⁰ *Paris-Soir*, 19 May 1937.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

both for her class, and for her evident desire for upward social mobility. They never let the evidence about Toureaux's lifestyle get in the way of the image they created of her or the judgement they passed on her as they focused on the titillating details about her real and fictionalized sexual escapades. Thus the journalists blurred the parameters between what had been her real life and the fiction they created of that life.

Toureaux was a woman who seemed determined to remake herself, and in the process push the accepted social boundaries into which she had been born. She seemed to embrace duality. She avidly sought out the adventurous life of a detective and male companionship in the *bals musette*, while refusing to reject the bourgeois respectability she thought her due. By day she was a conscientious, sober, hardworking woman whose co-workers in the Maxi factory liked and respected her. By night, she roamed the streets and corridors of the dance halls, sleuthing for pay and adventure alike. She walked alone at night, fearlessly, attested numerous witnesses, including the ticket takers at the metro and the men with whom she danced at L'Ermitage.

In this Laetitia Toureaux was not alone. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a period in which women sought to claim for themselves the freedom of the city. Like men, women found in the nocturnal city 'a theatre in which men *and* – if in a very restricted measure – women could experiment with themselves and the possibilities open to them'.⁹² Many women joined the ranks of spies, criminals and adventurers living on the edge in big international cities, and many other women read about and admired them for their daring. This was an era that could not make up its mind about women, that worshipped at the same time a wanton waif in the person of Edith Piaf, and a fearless 'new' woman, Amelia Earhart.⁹³ By following a lifestyle that fell outside the traditional roles for women, these heroines were both admired and feared, and none was allowed in the reports about them to be truly happy.

Clearly the Parisian journalists and their reading public were uncomfortable with the 'other' life Laetitia Toureaux chose. Instead of portraying her as a dignified widow who sorely missed her late husband, they focused on her as an independent and arrogant woman who embodied the *femme moderne*. Identifying her as such, they revealed their own fear of her independence by condemning her sexuality. Moreover as a foreigner, Laetitia was placed in the ranks of other famous twentieth-century foreign women associated with loose morals like Josephine Baker and Barbara Hutton.⁹⁴ All the papers ran pictures of Toureaux and remarked on her

⁹² Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 194.

⁹³ Miller, *Shanghai on the Métro*, 226ff; Rifkin, *Street Noises*, 120ff; Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 15.

⁹⁴ Rearick, *The French in Love and War*, 92.

handsome appearance. Yet this was just a way of emphasizing that she was not round, robust and maternal but rather slim, quixotic and sensual. The gendered discourses of the news reports expose apprehension over an ambitious, attractive woman who often held more than three jobs and tried to take charge of her own life. The contradictions within postwar society are made explicit in these texts. Opportunities existed for women like Toureaux to live full lives as independent women, but such women were also condemned in the popular press for acting on their options, and journalists and their public doubted these 'other' women could ever really be fulfilled. This made reproaching Toureaux simply a matter of placing her in the good woman/bad woman paradigm, subsuming her in a traditional narrative that criticized female emancipation and associated it with promiscuity, a narrative which continues to appear in popular culture even in the present day.⁹⁵

The freedom Toureaux enjoyed was unnatural and threatening in the narratives of her murder, and thus the journalists chose to portray her not only as a fallen woman but also as one whose sexual difference was menacing. Toureaux had been married and as a widow she should have enjoyed respectability. But the five-year marriage had been both clandestine and childless, robbing Laetitia of any way of fitting into the heightened patriarchal emphasis on the conventional domestic role of ideal wife and mother. Worse still, it meant that Laetitia and women like her were the reason for France's declining birth rate. On the one hand, Toureaux's freedom made her interesting and alluring to the reading public; on the other, it unmasked her as dangerous and threatening. Such conflicting messages about gender roles, Mary Louise Roberts believes, 'demonstrated the erratic movement back and forth in postwar discourse between optimism and anxiety concerning change, between proclaiming the new world and clinging to the old'.⁹⁶

Toureaux used her sexuality to get what she wanted. Her good looks made her popular at the various *bals musette* where she danced. They also facilitated her sleuthing. As one paper noted, 'une femme jolie et habile est toujours très appréciée des services secrets'.⁹⁷ As a private detective she may have taken lovers in order to procure information related to her investigations. The Communist Party newspaper, *L'Humanité*, even speculated that she had a 'protector' in high political circles.⁹⁸ The Sûreté also suspected that she was the mistress of either the Cagoule chief, Eugène Deloncle, or Gabriel Jeantet, one of Deloncle's closest associates, although they were never able to

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*, 158–9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹⁷ *Paris-Soir*, 23 May 1937.

⁹⁸ *L'Humanité*, 25 May 1937.

prove their hunch officially. Whatever the truth about Toureaux, she was willing to take risks, and the Parisian public read into the discourses that this steamy sexuality mixed with independence and adventure was the ultimate cause of her murder.

Nowhere was the press's dislike of the ambiguities of Toureaux's life, of her stubborn refusal to fit easily into the good woman/bad woman paradigm, more evident than in an article published on 25 May in the leftist paper, *L'Oeuvre*. The author used the image of Toureaux as a 'wolf in sheep's clothing', a shady woman of questionable morals interloping onto the terrain of the honest working-class woman, as a metaphor for the duplicity it ascribed to the government and its police.

Cette histoire de Laetitia, malgré l'imagination débordante de tous les apprentis-Simenon, finit par ne plus amuser personne ... Et nous avons l'idée, au surplus, qu'elle commence à énerver pas mal de braves gens. ... A défaut de conseiller intègre, on nous a dès l'abord dépeint une jeune fille pure, familière de la messe et de la Ligue du Bien public, quasiment décorée du ruban rouge, et sympathique avec ça: d'une vie régulière, bien vue de son concierge, de son archevêque et de son percepteur. Une douce brebis ... Puis, au bout d'une semaine de réflexion, on apprend que le prix de vertu, après avoir été préposée à l'arrière-boutique d'un établissement chinois, était tenancière des lavabos d'un bal-musette: dans la coulisse, elle présidait aux marchés réguliers, aux mariages spéciaux et aux trafics divers ... Mieux: à ses moments perdus, dans une usine, elle était appointée pour moucharder les copains – ce qui, sauf le respect qu'on doit à sa mémoire, peut être considéré comme le dernier des métiers. Il nous importe peu que la douce brebis ait été, en réalité, un méchant mouton ... C'est la méthode d'information qui ne nous plaît pas.⁹⁹

In this passage we see how the press twisted the facts of Toureaux's life into a commentary on the informants, frequently women, whom the police recruited to spy on union organizers, socialists and Italian immigrants alike. Toureaux, working in a 'Chinese establishment', is flirting with racial transgressions. Rather than plying her real job checking the coats of customers in L'As de Coeur, here she is presiding over the toilets of the dance hall. Moreover, she is in charge of all sorts of shady deals, sexual and otherwise, that were imputed regularly to take place in nightclubs. By day, she interrupted her work in the Maxi factory to spy on her co-workers, an activity which *L'Oeuvre* naturally viewed as the lowest of professions.¹⁰⁰ As a police informant the Laetitia portrayed in the media was an enemy of her class. As a 'loose woman,' she was an enemy of her sex. Moreover, *L'Oeuvre*

⁹⁹ *L'Oeuvre*, 25 May 1937.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

concluded that the police were deliberately misleading the public with images of a female adventuress when the true nature of the crime was clearly political:

Car on a menti, pendant une semaine à toute une population, et on a cherché à faire naître des craintes imbéciles: les fonctionnaires de la police étaient des incapables et peut-être davantage encore; l'inévitable député du Front populaire était dans le bain, ce qui expliquait tout, et ainsi du reste ...¹⁰¹

Conclusion: the significance of 'Le Crime du Métro'

Rather than viewing Toureaux's complicated, perplexing life in the context of the struggle for survival of an immigrant women in Depression-era Paris, the press saw her in simple black and white terms. Although in the years to come the police concluded that the Cagoule executed Toureaux, during the weeks and months following her death the press concocted from the crime a morality tale that emphasized the perils of transgressing the boundaries of gender and class. Yet Toureaux's life, or the parts of it that can be reconstructed more than half a century after her death, refuses to fit into the context of a morality tale. For *L'Oeuvre* and many other papers, Toureaux was a Jezebel, pure and simple. In reality, she was a hard-working woman, who hustled paying jobs wherever she could find them. Her private detective work was unusual for the era; her work as a police informant far less so. Like many young women in the 1930s, Toureaux spent her earnings on a veneer of bourgeois respectability which she scraped together as best she could. Nor were the pleasures she took and the company she found in the *bals musette* at all out of the ordinary for an Italian working-class woman. Here, especially, in 1930s France, we see Toureaux time and again judged in the press by the standards of a class and a gender that were not her own. If Toureaux had been a man, would her tale have been different? Quite probably. Her sexual peccadillos committed 'in the line of duty' would more likely have been overlooked, and her daring lauded. The journalistic accounts of Toureaux's life and death, however, imprisoned the unfortunate woman in her 'otherness' and clearly reveal a darkening climate of hostility towards women in the 1930s that became commonplace throughout Europe in countries where the extreme right emerged victorious.¹⁰²

Even so, Toureaux should not be perceived simply as a victim. Although her life certainly was fodder for journalistic imagination, Toureaux also was

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² This article does not seek to grapple with the literature on French fascism. The authors, nonetheless, take the position that the Vichy regime was fascist, at least by 1943. See Soucy, *French Fascism: The Second Wave*.

an avid consumer of the competing narratives of women the press produced. Even *Déetective* magazine noted that Toureaux was not easy to decipher and possessed at least three personalities: the elegant and refined bourgeois widow, the secretive and seductive private investigator of the dance halls, and the good-natured and friendly factory worker.¹⁰³ With hindsight we can see that the many faces of Toureaux embodied the range of roles for women and their contradictions commonly found in the popular press. Above all Toureaux was a skilled actress and in every facet of her life she wore a mask corresponding to her conception of the stereotype of the widow, the spy, the factory worker. Even today it remains difficult for the historical investigator to ascertain with certainty the identity of the real Laetitia Toureaux. Nevertheless, perhaps Toureaux's greatest crime was not that she had loose morals and lurked in unsavoury places but rather that she read the narrative of the powerful woman in the text and acted on that narrative. In the end what the cultural logic of the stories generated by 'Le Crime du Métro' tells us is that Laetitia Toureaux was ultimately an interloper into a domain where in 1930s Paris women were allowed only in fiction.

¹⁰³ Bringuier and Montarron, 'Le Crime du Métro', 4.