Notes on Sources

The Vice Squad and the Fortune Teller

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In the darkness of my mind, images refuse to stay fixed, and yet, images often spark or solidify my historical interest. I had already started researching my first book, *Between the Sheets: Sexuality, Classified Advertising, and the Moral Threat to Press Freedom in France* (Cornell University Press, 2025), when I first saw Agnès Varda's 1962 film, *Cléo de 5 à 7*. The concerns of *Between the Sheets* might at first glance seem distant from those of this postwar film, which follows the eponymous Cléo, a young singer, around Paris from 5 to 7pm as she awaits a possible cancer diagnosis. My book explores the problems and possibilities of classified advertising during the Third Republic (1870–1940), tracing how marginalized people—especially women—made use of the back pages of the mass press to build lives and apartment-based businesses in Paris. Advertising does not figure in *Cléo de 5 à 7*, but the film opens with Cléo's visit to Irma, a fortune teller who reads tarot from her home office in a Parisian apartment building. The card reading is clearly important to the anxious and superstitious Cléo—who is looking for reassurance about her health but pulls the Death card—and to the formal construction of the film. Still, it would be easy to see this scene, which is the opening title sequence, as a mere launch point for Cléo's wanderings—in rehearsals, street scenes, cafés, art studios, cinemas, taxis, parks, and finally, the hospital. But part of my mind did not leave the fortune teller's apartment when Cléo did. It stayed with Irma and her illustrated cards.

Between the Sheets was originally supposed to include a chapter on the advertising practices of fortune tellers like Irma. Each time I sat down to write this chapter, however, things went in unforeseen directions in ways that felt out of my control. Fortune tellers refused to fit into the structure I was creating for my monograph, which was increasingly interested in the way that classified advertising posed a threat to republican moral order and the stability the Third Republic had constructed on the ground of monogamous heterosexuality.[1] Fortune tellers did not represent the same kind of moral threat as the sex workers, abortionists, and queer people who peopled my book's other chapters. While

[1] My work in *Between the Sheets* builds on Judith Surkis's *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920* (Cornell University Press, 2006), which explains how marriage came to be conceptualized as central to the social (and thus political) stability of France's Third Republic because of how it tied the masculine individual to the social order. *Between the Sheets* is interested in the ways women's sexuality posed a threat to this model, which required their dutiful, non-individualistic devotion to their normative families.

these practitioners were breaking laws on prognostication, those laws were rarely enforced.[2] Fortune tellers weren't directly or obviously a danger to the birth rate—they were largely imagined as dealing in concerns about (heterosexual) love and money. And so, for the most part, I put them aside.

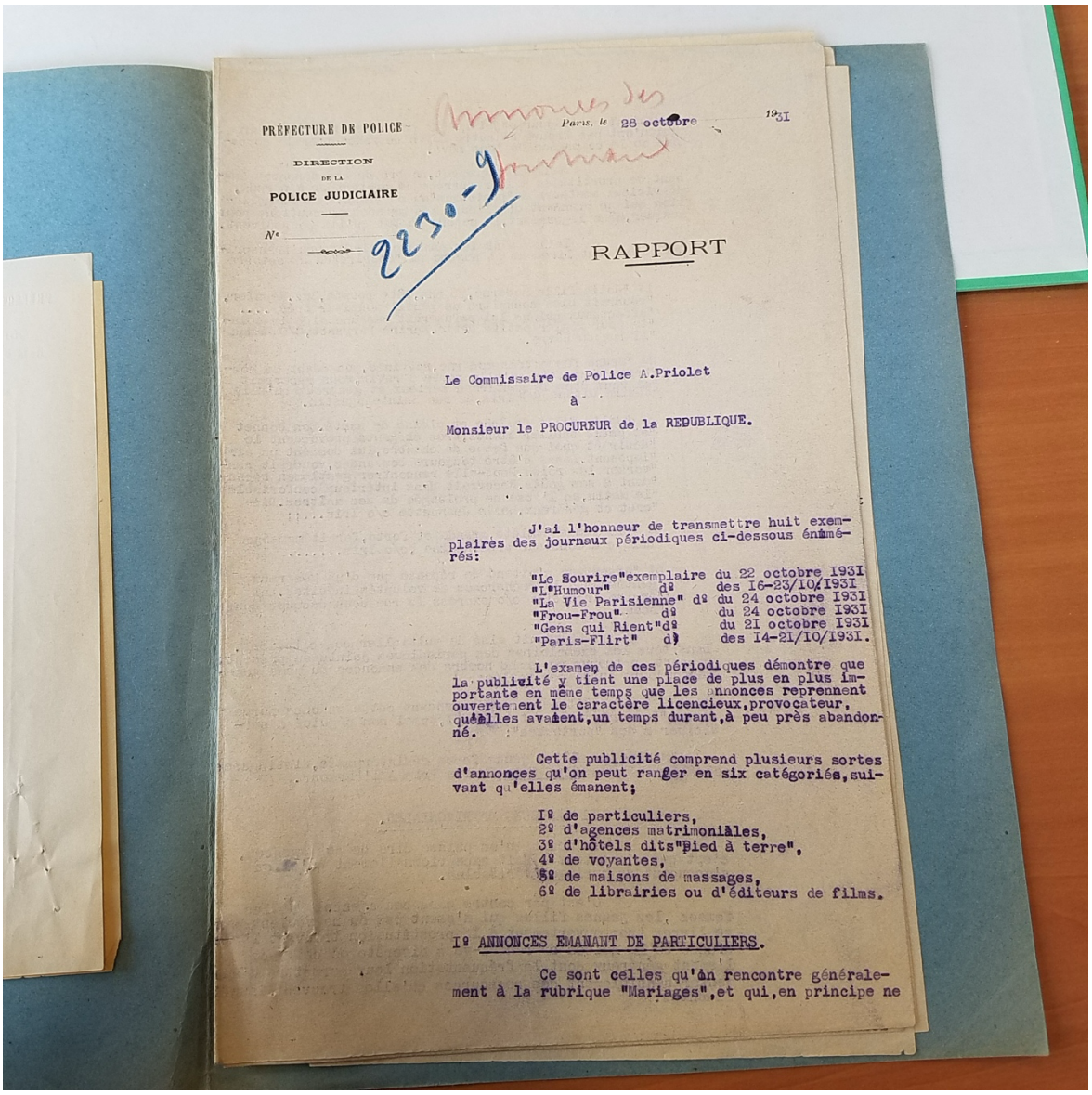
It still troubles me, though, that I didn't find a way to write fortune tellers more thoroughly into the story *Between the Sheets* tells about the world the classifieds built. The occult in its many forms cohabits with the history of sexuality I explore in ways that still await explanation. In the early twentieth century, for example, suggestive *journaux légers*[3] like *Le Sourire*, which were filled with ads for sexual books, services, objects, and relationships, largely seen as the province of men, also included a column for fortune tellers, who were imagined to be catering primarily to women. In what follows, I want to examine one source that exemplifies this strange overlap: a vice squad report on advertising in these magazines—important sources within *Between the Sheets*—that was concerned with ads for divinatory services alongside sexual ones (figure 1).

Sent by Captain Albert Priolet, head of the vice squad, to the public prosecutor (*procureur de la République*) on 28 October 1931, the report originally included eight periodicals (one issue each of *Le Sourire*, *La Vie Parisienne*, *Frou-Frou* and *Gens qui rient* and two each of *L'Humour* and *Paris-Flirt*) published earlier that month.[4] The report divided the ads—which the vice squad regretted were taking up more and more space and returning to being openly "licentiousness and provocative," despite promises of better self-surveillance—into six categories, made up of ads placed by "1. individuals, 2. matrimonial agencies, 3. hotels called 'pieds à terre,' 4. fortune tellers [*voyantes*], 5. massage parlors, 6. bookstores or publishers of films." Many of the ads featuring individuals purportedly looking for their soul mate were, the report stated, placed by "prostitutes looking for a generous protector, connoisseurs of 'orgies [*partouzes*]' or flagellation sessions." Five ads from the 22 October 1931 edition of *Le Sourire*—including one for "an athletic woman, tall and strong, would give unique massage to well-off man"—served to illustrate the point. According to the report, matrimonial agencies rarely dealt with real marriages, instead frequently serving as intermediaries for those looking to prostitute themselves as well as for those looking for orgies, flagellation, "pederasty," or other "rare pleasures." Pieds à terre likewise were not real offers of housing but were instead discrete "hotels that only receive couples by 'rendez-vous'" and massage parlors

[2] David Allen Harvey, "Fortune-Tellers in the French Courts: Antidivination Prosecutions in France in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *French Historical Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 131–57.

[3] In this context, describing these periodicals as "légers," or light, implied both that they were superficial—the opposite of the "journaux graves," or serious newspapers—and that they were immoral, given that describing a woman as "de moeurs légères," of easy virtue, was a euphemistic way of calling her a prostitute.

[4] Archives de la préfecture de police de Paris, BA 2243.



PRÉFECTURE DE POLICE

DIRECTION DE LA POLICE JUDICIAIRE

N°

Paris, le 28 octobre 1931

RAPPORT

Le Commissaire de Police A.Priolet

à

Monsieur le PROCUREUR de la REPUBLIQUE.

J'ai l'honneur de transmettre huit exemplaires des journaux périodiques ci-dessous énumérés:

"Le Sourire"exemplaire du 22 octobre 1931
"L'Humour" dº des 16-23/10/1931
"La Vie Parisienne" dº du 24 octobre 1931
"Frou-Frou" dº du 24 octobre 1931
"Gens qui Rient"dº du 21 octobre 1931
"Paris-Flirt" dº des 14-21/10/1931.

L'examen de ces périodiques démontre que la publicité y tient une place de plus en plus importante en même temps que les annonces reprennent ouvertement le caractère licencieux,provocateur, qu'elles avaient,un temps durant,à peu près abandonné.

Cette publicité comprend plusieurs sortes d'annonces qu'on peut ranger en six catégories,suivant qu'elles émanent;

1º de particuliers,
2º d'agences matrimoniales,
3º d'hôtels dits"pied à terre",
4º de voyantes,
5º de maisons de massages,
6º de librairies ou d'éditeurs de films.

1º ANNONCES EMANANT DE PARTICULIERS.

Ce sont celles qu'on rencontre généralement à la rubrique "Mariages",et qui,en principe ne

Figure 1. Report, vice squad chief Albert Priolet to the public prosecutor (*procureur de la République*), October 28, 1931, Archives de la préfecture de police, B A 2243. Photo: Hannah Frydman, 2016.

were clandestine brothels for men and women. The ads for bookstores and print sellers were "by far the most numerous and the most eye-catching [*tapageuses*]," with engravings that "underline the questionable character of these ads," which promise obscenity with suggestive titles but deliver, at best, artistic nudes.

Stuck in the middle of the report, at number 4, the vice squad called attention to ads for fortune tellers. The report noted that, despite being punishable by fine in article 479 §7 of the Code pénal, those offering divination services advertised widely in the magazines under examination. *La Vie parisienne* even featured an "occult sciences" advertising column. Unlike the other five categories of ads, the report did not suggest *voyantes*' ads were in any way licentious, despite the fact that the raison d'être of this document was to convey information about the licentiousness of advertising in periodicals known for their erotic humor. Maybe squad investigators sensed a common thread between sex and divination but also couldn't express exactly what it was. Maybe the commonality was simply marginality, operation on the ragged edges of respectability, although fortune tellers' ads could be found in the mainstream press as well. For example, starting in 1932, *Paris-Soir*, the highest circulation daily in the 1930s, also included an "occult sciences" rubric on its classified page.

As I show in *Between the Sheets*, sex was chased out of the mass press and into more explicitly erotic magazines in the interwar period, but fortune telling continued to inhabit the center of the era's media ecosystem. Nonetheless, observers persisted in seeing a connection between fortune telling and prostitution. A few years later, in a series of articles called "Traffickers of Mysteries [*Trafiquants de mystère*]" in the Communist daily *L'Humanité*, journalist Henriette Nizan noted the geographic proximity between the offices of fortune tellers [*voyantes et cartomanciennes*] and houses of prostitution, the way fortune tellers had the same authority as madams [*patronnes de maison close*], and how fortune tellers decorated and furnished their apartments in the manner of brothels [*maisons de passe*].[5] Nizan's observations were intertwined with a regret that "none of the witch's accoutrements surround the art of the card reader"—no owls, snakes, cauldrons, or toads. In her explorations of "magical Paris," she "found only a bourgeois and 'plush [*cossue*]' atmosphere, the most abominable taste and the complete absence of the picturesque." These were businesses and, much as the police had found the "curious" photographs advertised in the saucy papers to be unexciting, less than obscene, Nizan found the fortune tellers' offices disappointing, lacking in mystery.

If these *voyantes* belonged in my book it was for the same reasons the vice squad was interested in them: because of how they had launched businesses, because they were marginalized women who found ways to make money working from apartments and using inexpensive classified advertising. Agnès Varda's Madame Irma might fit into this story, but for some reason I didn't and don't want her to. Maybe it's the magic of that

[5] Henriette Nizan, "Trafiquants de mystère : II. Géographie des voyantes," *L'Humanité*, 6 January 1937, 4, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k406951b.

opening scene in *Cléo de 5 à 7*: in a film shot largely in black and white, the only shots in color are those depicting the fortune teller's tabletop and Cléo's tarot spread from above. I don't want to rationalize and domesticate this divinatory work or take the promise of magic out of it, as Nizan's reporting and Priolet's report did. In a history written in black and white, I want this story to be in color. Now I'm looking for a new context, away from the police officer and the skeptic, that will allow sex and clairvoyance to coexist without being emptied of their mystery.

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