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Morphinisé/morphinomane/morphinée: cultural representations of a French opioid crisis, 1870-1940

Abstract:

This article examines narratives of morphine use in France between 1870, when hypodermic administration of the drug became widespread, and 1916, when a law to restrict access to psychoactive substances was passed. The article considers three types of morphine users: addicts within the medical profession; a range of female morphine addicts from prostitutes to upper-class women; and writers and artists who defended their right to dispose of drugs as they saw fit in the years following the 1916 law. The article argues that morphine's visibility, its genderdness and its incompatibility with classic Republican values pertaining to masculinity, self-control and perfect femininity contribute in important ways to its cultural representation as a major crisis. Examining medical treatises, popular literature, visual culture and personal narratives, the article argues that the nineteenth-century figure of the *morphinomane* is an early manifestation of the emergent idea of the *toxicomane*, and is the vehicle via which opiates came to be negatively imagined towards the end of the nineteenth century. The context of the First World War gave these ambient concerns, which were specifically French, legislative urgency, connecting the nation to the international move towards the prohibition of psychoactive substances.

Morphinisé/morphinomane/morphinée: représentations culturelles d'une crise des opiacés en France, 1870-1940

Cet article examine plusieurs récits concernant l'utilisation de la morphine en France entre 1870 et 1916, dates entre lesquelles l'administration sous-cutanée du médicament s'est généralisée, avant le vote de la loi sur les stupéfiants visant à contrôler l'accès aux drogues pour le grand public. Nous considérons trois groupes de consommateurs de morphine: les médecins qui en abusaient; les femmes droguées de toutes couches sociales (dont prostituées, demi-mondaines et femmes de la haute société); et les écrivains et les artistes qui défendaient leur droit de disposer de la morphine comme ils voulaient, dans les années qui suivaient le vote de la loi sur les stupéfiants. Dans cet article nous soutenons que la visibilité de la morphine, ses connotations féminines, et son incompatibilité avec les valeurs républicaines conservatrices (prisant la masculinité, la maîtrise de soi, et la féminité idéalisée), amènent à une représentation de cette drogue comme source d'une crise culturelle importante. En nous appuyant sur des traités médicaux, des textes de littérature populaire, des éléments issus de la culture visuelle, et des récits de soi, nous suggérerons que la figure du·de la *morphinomane* au dix-neuvième siècle peut être

considérée comme une manifestation précoce du stéréotype du·de la *toxicomane*, idée émergeante à l'époque, qui finira par changer de façon négative la perception des opiacés dans la culture française à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle. Au moment de la première guerre mondiale, ces préoccupations sous-jacentes, spécifiquement françaises, revêtirent un caractère d'urgence et ont motivé l'adhésion de la France aux initiatives internationales de prohiber les stupéfiants.

Opium has historically occupied a privileged place in the European Romantic imagination, through its association with artists and writers who celebrated the psychoactive effects of hashish and opium, from Charles Baudelaire's and Thomas De Quincey's personal narratives, to the infamous experiments of the Parisian "Club des Hashischins" in the 1840s (De Quincey; Moreau de Tours; Baudelaire; Hayter). The history of psychoactive substances is an immense topic of scholarly interest, and one that is commonly narrated through the optic of crisis. Today, the United States is considered to be in the grip of an "opioid crisis" triggered by the over prescription of pain medication since the late 1990s. Yet, the phenomenon of mass addiction to prescription drugs and the associated perception of catastrophe is, of course, not new: the first major opioid crises of the modern era were generated by the synthesization of morphine followed by the development of the hypodermic syringe in the early 1850s. This brought morphine into general medical use in the later part of the nineteenth century (Dormandy 120; Padwa 40-41; Howard-Jones). Morphine's "heyday" as a mainstream drug in France specifically can be situated between the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, when it was widely used to ease the pain of the wounded and dying, and the early twentieth century, when, following the 1912 Hague Convention, the French government imposed a separate regime of control on the sale and possession

of narcotics with the Law of 12 July 1916.[1] Between these dates, access to morphine was only controlled by loose pharmaceutical regulations that were designed to restrict access to poisons. As with problem opioid users in the United States today, many patients were introduced to morphine by doctors; in nineteenth-century France, the situation was exacerbated by the fact that medical prescriptions could be used repeatedly by patients and exploited by unscrupulous pharmacists (Yvorel 1992 237-41; Retaillaud-Bajac 10-11).[2] In the 1870s, doctors generally did not consider morphine to be a problematic substance; by the 1880s and 1890s, however, this perception had changed, and morphine had developed a rich and complex cultural profile (Yvorel 1992 111-12). The lines between licit and illicit use became impossibly blurred, with doctors initially distinguishing between "innocent" iatrogenic users, often termed "morphinistes" or "morphinisés," and "guilty" luxurious users or thrill seekers, more commonly known as "morphinomanes."[3] By the 1890s, however, prolonged use beyond temporary medical necessity was generally considered to be a sign of underlying moral weakness (Padwa 40-49).

Nineteenth-century industrial processing had brought about changes to the way in which intoxicating substances were both produced and imagined. Substances broadly considered "natural" and therefore intrinsically "good" in their less refined states -- such as opium, wine and beer -- came to be conceptually opposed to corrupting, "industrial" substances, such as ether, morphine and pure alcohols (Coppel 41). This natural/artificial dichotomy offered a means of attaching intrinsic meaning to the ritual, social, and ultimately legal limits placed upon traditional intoxicants. The rise of morphine also coincided with a cultural paradigm shift away from the Romantic celebration of uncontrolled, dream-like states of mind, towards a renewed preoccupation with self-mastery, rationality, and the masculine cult of the

will within the European cultural elite (Ribot; Payot; Forth; Nye; Pick; Gilman). The morphine "epidemic" was therefore a discrete, time-bound and observable phenomenon that confronted Republican France with a disturbing vision of itself, and which troubled the politics of good citizenship and personal agency (Padwa 67-85; Maugeais 587).[4]

Morphine use generated observational narratives as it spread through polite society and the medical world, and these in turn made the ground fertile for changes in public opinion and for the official acts of prohibition, which followed. It is the purpose of this article to examine some of these narratives. Virginia Berridge has argued that cultural shifts and the regulation of drugs are closely intertwined: "[I]ncreased regulation […] impacts on culture and helps to change it; and that cultural change in turn opens the door for further regulation. It is an iterative process." (Berridge 2013 5). Historians of psychoactive substance use and drug regulation in France have observed, first, that morphine injection was evidently on the increase in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The relatively free supply of the drug created a situation in which morphine became more visible in and disruptive to public and private life (Padwa 67). France thus differed from Great Britain, whose pragmatic maintenance-substitution system was based on the perception that opiate abuse was a limited and diminishing problem, and one that did not interfere too much with the capitalist-Protestant work ethic.[5]

This article will demonstrate that the figure of the *morphinomane*, which emerged in late nineteenth-century France, was an early manifestation of the important stereotype of the *toxicomane*; but while the *morphinomane* disappeared, the *toxicomane* became culturally embedded in the twentieth century and beyond. The medical concept of *toxicomanie* began to emerge in the late 1880s, and referred to the

practice of putting medical substances to non-medical use (as distinct from other substances such as alcohol); it was this abuse that the 1916 French law specifically addressed (Yvorel 2016 15, 21). "Toxicomanie" with its component, "manie," borrowed from alienist discourse, carries rigid psychiatric connotations, distinguishing it semantically from the more generic English word, "addiction." Yvorel, among others, has argued that within the broader category of "toxicomanie," morphinomania is a "paradigmatic case" of a "morbid craving" which helped to shape later thinking around addiction in France (Yvorel 1992 111).

The *morphinomane* is, therefore, the vehicle that transports opium from being an ingredient of Romantic dreams to its destination as the defining substance of the despised and marginalized *toxicomane*. This article considers a variety of cultural documents that reflect and respond to elements of an emergent morphine subculture in order to show that journalists, authors, artists and other commentators expressed an especially high level of concern with morphine use in France on account of its visibility, availability, and the conflict between the drug's effects and French ideas about model Republican citizenship and traditional gender roles.

Specific controls on narcotics (*stupéfiants*) in France were introduced during the First World War, after the 1914 Harrison Act in the US, and alongside the 1916 amendment to the Defence of the Realm Act in Britain (first passed in 1914), partly in response to the spread of drug use in the armed forces, which the international prohibitionist apparatus sought to address (Retaillaud-Bajac 7-28). But in France these restrictions were also supported by a negative shift in public opinion away from celebrating "artificial paradises," remnants of which would hold until the countercultural movements of the 1960s (Retaillaud-Bajac 11-12). The French believed that the enemy was deliberately distributing morphine, dubbed the "poison

boche," in order to weaken the nation (Yvorel 2016 129), and they were acutely sensitive to any threat to the stability of the Third Republic and the nation's military might. France's draconian and idealistic legal apparatus concerning drug use, under which substitution treatments would be introduced very much later than in comparable countries, was driven as much by powerful fantasies linked to the reductive stereotype of the *toxicomane*, most enthusiastically promoted by the French press, as by the complex, everyday realities of morphine and heroin use (Retaillaud-Bajac 14-23; Coppel 157). French citizens in the later nineteenth century were expected to direct their efforts towards the common good and to exhibit restraint and control over the "passions": opiate use compromised the masculine ideal of autonomy and self-control, and, associated as it was with sensuality and excess, was perceived to be a direct threat to the strength of the nation's newest Republican values (Padwa 49).[6]

This article considers three key examples of the cultural framing and imagining of morphine use in France in order to shed new light on the movements of public opinion, which helped to underpin the 1916 French legislation. First, I consider morphine abuse where it was first observed: within the medical profession. I draw original parallels between doctors' observations published in medical treatises alongside fictional accounts of addiction within their ranks in the broader context of widespread beliefs about masculinity and the cult of the will. Second, I look at the figure of "la morphinée," or the depraved female addict, as she is represented in *fin-de-siècle* art, literature, and the press. These representations are placed in the context of cultural commonplaces relating to feminine evil, prostitution, emancipated women and unbridled female sexuality. Finally, I consider the backlash against drug restrictions articulated by two important but little-studied texts by counter-cultural

critics and unrepentant heroin users, Antonin Artaud and Roger Gilbert Lecomte, in the 1920s and 1930s. Their texts challenge the truth-value and stigmatizing power of the concept of "toxicomanie" and brilliantly expose the flawed logic of prohibition in France.

Morphine, masculinity and the medical profession

In 1947, medical historian Norman Howard-Jones argued that the medical profession had been "extraordinarily slow" to recognize the dangers of morphine addiction in the late nineteenth century, despite being well aware of the problem of opium-eating; he suggested this was partly because "many physicians did not care to admit their own addiction" (Howard-Jones 232-34). The majority of medical treatises on the morphine habit were written after 1885 by Parisian alienist doctors with some connection to the Salpêtrière hospital, one of the city's principal public asylums. Many of the doctors who studied "morphinomania" were themselves addicts, or had previously been, or had observed morphine abuse among colleagues and their juniors. This close-hand perspective shows how these doctors followed in the footsteps of their older colleagues who had experimented with drugs in the 1840s when the discipline of psychiatry was in its infancy (Moreau de Tours 1845). Male doctor-addicts are often cast as passive victims of the drug, their fault being a compromised will rather than a permanent state of weakness. We shall see in this section that morphine addiction within the medical profession was admitted to be a problem, and while some doctors did openly advocate restricting access to the drug, the question of prohibition was rarely explicitly linked to the problem of doctor addicts.[7] In contrast to the tone of the analysis of "luxurious" users outside the medical profession, the tone of writing on this issue is measured and sympathetic, and reasons are offered for

doctors having recourse to the drug.

The paradoxes of morphine map onto the paradoxes of gender in the case of nineteenth-century doctors. Christopher Forth, among others, has argued that "civilization" as both a process and a product requires the concealment of "true," rugged masculinity behind the veneer of a polite and refined image of bourgeois man (Forth 1-18). Yet, this civilizing process is also effeminizing for men, who, pursuing cerebral and sedentary lifestyles, lose contact with the "natural" power of their bodies and with working-class masculinity. I would argue that morphine is a precise example of a modern consumer product and civilized luxury, but one which weakens men and destroys the achievements of modernity. It is a means of indulging in "primitive" gratification, and yet also an advanced way of alleviating the pain of the "natural" body.

In 1885, an eminent alienist physician, Benjamin Ball, who had studied under the prominent degeneration theorist Bénédict-Augustin Morel and the great hysteria professor Jean-Martin Charcot, developed his expertise on morphine addiction at the Salpêtrière. Ball wrote: "One enters into morphinomania through the door of pain […] through the door of sorrow, worry and fatigue […] and through the door of pleasure [*volupté*]." (Ball 11-12). In French, the concept of "volupté" -- best known through Baudelaire's evocation of "luxe, calme et volupté" in his poem, "L'invitation au voyage" (Baudelaire 1868) -- carries connotations of "sensual pleasure" and is commonly evoked in discussions of recreational or luxurious use. Ball highlights here three ways in which morphine may be linked to failed masculinity: the inability to withstand pain can be construed as a lack of the masculine virtue of stoicism;[8] sorrow is the result of heightened emotions and moods; fatigue may be attributed to an absence of physical vigor; and "volupté" is indulged in

as a result of failing sexual self-restraint or of excessive appetite.

Medical case studies paint a picture of a profession pushed to the limits of their masculine powers. Ball and his fellow medical commentators are broadly sympathetic towards the problem of addiction within their ranks, which they explain in three ways: first, as a means of seeking "oblivion" in the face of devastating personal or professional failure; second, for intellectual stimulation; third, as relief from everyday occupational stress (Pichon 23). There are therefore both positive and negative functions attributed to morphine use: the removal of stress and sadness, and the provision of stimulation. Accounts of doctor addicts present us with a clear "type" of man who is vulnerable to morphine: the sensitive, perhaps melancholic, highly intellectual and deep-thinking doctor with a turbulent mind and unsteady emotions. Although the figure of the doctor marries with the image of ideal masculinity -- rational, self-disciplined, skeptical, controlled, virtuous and devoted to his profession -- those who struggled to measure up to this ideal were especially vulnerable to addiction.

One of the reasons for this, nineteenth-century doctors argued, was that medicine was a uniquely arduous profession. Dr Paul Rodet, director of a hydrotherapy establishment in Auteuil (Paris), wrote a prize-winning essay on morphinomania in 1897 in which he observed: "One is surprised at first to find that a great majority of morphinomaniacs are doctors. Yet, when one thinks about this a little, it is no longer surprising if one considers the degree to which we are exposed to overwork in the medical profession." (Rodet 3).[9] Rodet says that young doctors are particularly vulnerable, while they attempt and often fail to establish their careers, and are most likely to seek "artificial sources of consolation." (Rodet 44). Dr Ernest Chambard, himself a morphine user who died after contracting tetanus from an

infected needle, takes this point further by comparing the doctor's occupational stress to the ordeal of the common prostitute.[10] Chambard argues that for every doctor crowned in professional glory, there are others who are "crushed by work that is barely remunerated, and humiliated by the desperate and sometimes shameful demands of their clientele. […] Medicine is the most glorious science, the noblest of professions, it is true, but also the vilest of occupations." (Chambard 42). The comparison is perhaps questionable, but in juxtaposing clinical examples of doctor-addicts with prostitutes who use morphine in order to face up to the grueling demands of their nightly labors, Chambard brings into sharp focus the everyday struggles of doctors to match ideal standards of masculinity. Both medicine and prostitution have in common a level of intimacy with the suffering human body and a clientele whose needs are difficult to entirely satisfy.

Morphine is also identified as a powerful stimulant, required to help doctors cope with the intellectual demands of their work. Dr Georges Pichon, another prominent expert who fell victim to the drug that he studied, argues that men of letters and physicians will take morphine in proportion to the "cerebral activity" demanded of them, and that intellectually superior people need artificial stimulation when natural sources run out (Pichon 23). Ball, who notes that intellectual work almost always requires a stimulant such as alcohol or caffeine, corroborates this view, stating that clinical professionals "often prefer morphine." He says: "No one is more vulnerable to contracting this lethal habit than the doctor," calling it a "professional disposition" (Ball 11).

These examples are relevant to the question of prohibition, because doctors were thus able to locate the cause of morphine addiction in the arduous demands of their work, which diminished the core of masculinity they possessed,

rather than in individual moral failings. Discourses of prohibition were more likely to be directly focused on those perceived to be animalistic and "uncivilized": women (especially prostitutes), the proletariat, and the racially inferior. In the obituaries of Chambard and Pichon, penned by admiring colleagues and published in the prestigious journal the *Annales medico-psychologiques*, morphine abuse is only hinted at obliquely; however, more clearly referenced are the individual emotional and intellectual sensibilities of the men who succumbed to the "poison" they had spent their professional lives studying. Chambard is described as an "elite mind," but one who suffered unbearable grief after the loss of his wife: "This man of elite intelligence was also a man of the heart […] Chambard's work was also the cause of his loss. Science, such as he loved it, knows magnificent summits, but also terrible precipices, and he fell into one of these precipices." "Notice nécrologique du Dr Ernest Chambard" 332-33). Similarly, Pichon is described as being too gentle and emotional to cope with the demands of the profession: "To great qualities of mind, Pichon also added rarer ones, those of the heart; he showed a rare level of fragility of feeling, a limitless devotion to his friends, a constant kindness towards his inferiors and above all an infinite goodness towards the sick." ("Notice nécrologique du Dr Georges Pichon" 329-30). These observations, and particularly the striking common references to the heart and the hypersensitivity of the typical morphine user, reveal admiration, but also a profound anxiety about the frail edifice of masculinity presented by these men. Sensibility, a virtue so highly prized by the Romantics, is here cast as a fatal weakness. Medicine is the paradigmatic occupation of the rational, modern, male-dominated, urbanized society; anything that degraded the profession was thus to be feared.

There is a marked contrast between the sympathetic way in which doctor-

addicts are dealt with in the medical literature and the moralizing tone of one key fictional account, Léon Daudet's classic "detox" novel, *La Lutte* (*The Struggle*, 1907). Daudet was a medically trained writer of fiction, an ardent monarchist known for his anti-Republican, reactionary and later anti-Semitic views, and his novel tells the story of a doctor who becomes addicted to morphine after self-medicating for symptoms of tuberculosis. The first-person narrative view cast over the period of addiction is one of self-reproach in view of the narrator's destructive inability to resist temptation and achieve mastery over his passion for morphine. Despite having a *bona fide* medical pretext for starting to use morphine, the novel follows a narrative of salvation where a young protagonist in denial of his addiction moves (via religious enlightenment, medical detoxification in Germany, and a mountaintop retreat with a hermit Catholic priest) from a life of vice and debauchery in the company of women of ill-repute to an existence of moral purity under the life-affirming influence of a good woman, the appropriately named "Blanche." The doctor's propensity for morphine is aligned with his old life of moral and physical weakness, led in the company of a dissolute "Jewess" called Minna Sem, who functions in the text as a mere cipher and a personification of the seductive drug. He is duly rewarded for his renewed self-possession by being cured of tuberculosis at the same time. Daudet's novel dramatizes the anxieties expressed in the medical writings previously discussed. The narrator presents two versions of himself: the good and the bad doctor who loses his professional integrity by abusing his power, and the robust and the weak man, whose masculine strength is compromised. The fear expressed is that a good man could be drawn into a world of transgression and transformed into a dishonorable version of himself, but the novel ultimately offers a simplistic message celebrating the triumph of the will over the forces of evil.

On the one hand, morphine abuse within the medical profession was considered to be fundamentally different from other categories of use: it was not strictly therapeutic, but despite its victims it was understandable and could theoretically be managed with discipline and treatment informed by a deep belief in the ideal image of masculine self-command and sobriety, which the figure of the nineteenth-century doctor epitomized. These examples illustrate the paradoxes of masculinity and how it relates to morphine: morphine was a useful medical tool and a symbol of progress, but it also threatened to, and indeed did, destroy many of its luminaries. Addiction within the medical profession generated anxiety about the frailty of men, and, although it would always be difficult to prevent doctors from accessing morphine, stricter regulation was recommended by prominent *hygiénistes* in order to make it more difficult to maintain a long-term habit. The image of the emasculated and depleted *morphinomane* was the polar opposite of the vigorous and disciplined doctor, and in this sense as a profession they had an ideal to look towards and a negative model to fear.

Morphine, femininity and *la morphinée* of the fin-de-siècle

We have seen that there was a fundamental conflict between the effects of morphine and the idea of the self-possessed nineteenth-century man. In the case of French women, the same model of self-mastery did not apply: virtuous femininity consisted, rather, in self-effacement, devotion and selfless motherhood.[11] The family was the central unit of French society, formalized in the Napoleonic Civil Code of 1804, according to which woman's role was legally codified as subservient to men; Republican marriage was also defined as a relationship of ownership of the woman by the man. Women were not expected to pursue their own interests or to seek

pleasure.[12] The relationship between women and morphine, as we shall see in this section, was deeply symbiotic. Where men are cast as autonomous agents, and hapless victims who must cultivate inner strength in order to resist the temptations of intoxication, the "normal" state of woman in the French imagination already had much in common with pathologically intoxicated states. Women were typically viewed as only civilized to a limited extent and considered to possess an undeveloped capacity for autonomy and self-control. Therefore, prohibition was necessary to save them from themselves, as civilization also "insisted on domestication of women" and on their roles as the "moralizing agents of society" (Forth 7). As civilization was typically associated with both progress and decline, women could (apparently without contradiction) be simultaneously cast as important moral influencers, and as too weak and impressionable to be allowed access to the professions and the public sphere (Forth 7).

Morphine is commonly personified as female. Many of its metaphorical traits are feminine: it is represented as seductive, corrupting, monstrous, and enfeebling. In this sense, the logic of prohibition meshes more obviously with the stereotype of "la morphinée" that emerged in the 1890s, and which only existed in this feminine form. If morphine abuse was viewed by and within the medical profession as a regrettable but correctable habit, luxurious use was experienced as more threatening because it could be located outside of the medical sphere of influence. Male doctors may have had their autonomy compromised by morphine, but women and morphine were viewed as logical and inevitable companions. These views were commonly expressed in the press, visual culture (notably the illustrated press) and popular literature. Examples of each will be considered in turn.

Due to its action as a painkiller, morphine is a paradoxical substance, at

once a "miracle remedy" and the "sickness of the century" (Liedekerke 123). Many discussions of morphine dwell on these dichotomized views of the substance in line with the axes of pleasure and pain, good and bad. The association of morphine with pleasure is expressed in French via the concept of *la volupté*, or sensual pleasure:

> More than among men, it seems, morphine found enthusiastic followers among women, fervent and passionate apostles. The press and medical literature also give the impression that doctors, writers, journalists and novelists unanimously agreed that morphine was an affliction that particularly affected the fairer sex. The "new vice" was, above all, a feminine/female passion [un vice féminin]. (Liedekerke 114-15).

It is likely that the statistical importance of female morphine abuse is exaggerated.[13] However, as Liedekerke argues above, this is certainly the impression created by the press and literature and it was, therefore, an important cultural belief. The adjective "féminin" in French means both female and feminine, so morphine is here associated with both women and the metaphorical processes of weakening and feminization. Liedekerke (115) argues that the term "morphinomane" did not enable observers to differentiate between the peculiarly feminine vice and other types of morphine addiction, so the concept of "la morphinée" was created and used particularly from the late 1880s.

One of the earliest examples of journalistic commentary on women came in 1881 in one of Jules Claretie's regular satirical columns on contemporary Parisian life and manners, "La Vie à Paris," published in the center-left daily newspaper, *Le Temps*. Claretie, having already published a satirical novel about the life and loves of a young medical intern at the Salpêtrière in the same year, was particularly confident and flippant in his association of women with morphine: "Women, of which some, for example, claim triumphantly their *rights*, have for a number of years now won one right in particular, a new and very fatal one that I shall call the Right to morphine. […]" (Claretie 1881 379). Claretie reproaches women in particular for seeking to

forget difficult life experiences. He takes issue with the loss of self and individuality that morphine use entails: "Alas! They give up their very selves ["leur moi"], these poison-lovers, these drunkards of morphine whose number is increasing terribly." (381). Vice here is defined as the defeat of reason, ego loss and the dissolution of the self. Claretie also keys into contemporary anxieties about the loosening of traditional hierarchies and changing gender roles, notably the stereotype of the virilized and emasculating "New Woman," an ideology which recast the familiar notion of the emancipated bluestocking. (Roberts 25; McMillan 141-42).

In a further example, on 1 June 1886 columnist and sometime author of popular fiction, Georges de Labruyère, known mainly as a socialist commentator, asserted in *Le Figaro* the view that women were more susceptible to this kind of addiction:[14]

> Morphinomaniacs belong generally to the female sex. There are few male morphinomaniacs, because man is better defended against it, he works and smokes. […] Morphine [...] relieves [women's] nerves, consoles their sorrows, and sends them off to sleep in dreams of fortune and pleasure. Once habituated, the [female] morphinomaniac no longer even fights it and does not wait for a pretext, a hot flush, a bit of a migraine, in order to administer to herself the precious liquor. (Labruyère n.p.)

Men are "better defended" because they are expected to possess a core of self-control that women do not; women go directly to the drug for pleasure and oblivion because they lack the innate ability to "fight" temptation. The chosen examples of women who reach for morphine because they are either menopausal ("a hot flush") or hypochondriacs ("a bit of a migraine") are defective women who will naturally display weakness.

The press perpetuated the perception that women had a particular propensity for morphine. There is little discernible difference between commentators from different sides of the political divide.[15] An article on "Morphinomanes" published in

the conservative, high-society daily newspaper *Le Gaulois* on 12 March 1890 claims: "Morphinomania's main victims are women, and […] woman is as adept at satisfying her passions as she is weak at resisting them." The unnamed journalist offers a series of brief portraits of male and female *morphinomanes* for reasons of "sickness," "spleen," "for the heart," "fashion," and "curiosity." The women are singled out with physical portraits where the male examples are designated by the roles of poet and statesman. This implies that men are drawn to the drug for intellectual stimulation and to alleviate cerebral stress, but that women resort to morphine for reasons of personal disappointment and *ennui*. In the example of "spleen," the journalist writes: "30 years old. Blonde. Very slim, very graceful. Pretty, but a little faded. Bored." This type of morphine abuser, according to the article, uses it as a "pastime." She is attracted to the pretty paraphernalia associated with the Pravaz syringe, and she takes morphine if she has nothing better to do, like dinner in town, or an opera or ball to attend.[16] She thinks she is saving herself from boredom, but she is killing herself. The other type of woman is the one who has experienced life's disappointments: "Older than 30. Brunette. Cold beauty. Ardent temperament. Has experienced life […] One day fell out with someone with a stronger will than her own or came up against cruel indifference. The shock was so brutal she was as if broken by it."

By 1896, medical commentators were also repeating the view that women were the core of the problem. In the section "Bloc-Notes Parisien" of the *Le Gaulois*, signed by the anonymous satirical commentator "Tout-Paris" (Parisian high society), on 30 October 1896 the journalist interviews and reports the comments of a "famous" but unnamed doctor on the morphine problem. The doctor is cited as saying: "Women form the majority in this army of unbalanced people and I don't hesitate to believe that at least 30,000 of them appear in the total figure." Female addicts are also

associated with the more general weakening of the French race in the *fin-de-siècle*. In the illustrated Sunday supplement to the conservative weekly newspaper *Le Petit Journal* of 21 February 1891, an unflinching tableau (Figure 1) by Georges Moreau de Tours, son of the psychiatrist of the same name, entitled simply "Les Morphinées" (by now an established term) is presented unambiguously as an abuse. However, it is also something women will naturally be drawn towards without the correct moral direction:

[Insert Figure 1 here]

> Two women, both young and beautiful, have given themselves over to this terrible passion. One of them is already under the influence of the poison, she sleeps; the other is preparing to join her in the land of nightmares, she is injecting herself with morphine. The painter ought to have depicted them haggard, their reputations blackened, as they will be in several months; perhaps might he thereby have contributed to curing those desperate people who, in their criminal insanity, are in the process of polluting the pure blood of France. (8).

The journalist adds a comment on the inevitable march of degeneration: "Whoever has drunk will drink, as they say; whoever has injected, will inject. And during this time, our beautiful race, once so strong and brave, will fall into decline" (8). The figure of "la morphinée" personifies France in a state of degeneration, giving herself without resistance into the hands of her enemies. "Morphine abuse is intellectual suicide, it is the impotence of the body." (8). Here, a clear double standard emerges: where morphine use for the purposes of intellectual and physical stimulation for doctors is justified -- or at least rationalized -- in the case of women, the damage to the intellect and body is emphasized. The same action is framed as invigorating in the cases of men, and pathological for women. In addition, women are blamed personally for the destruction of the "race" that morphine use entails.

As morphine is personified as female, women are also transformed into semi-human creatures with extraordinary sexual power in these images. Painter and society

illustrator Albert Matignon in 1905 produced an oil painting "La morphine," showing a group of women in a boudoir scene, which according to Bram Dijkstra "showed her to be half-virgin and half-vampire while in the throes of an opium dream among the paraphernalia of her addiction" (Dijkstra 359).[17]

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Other images were more naturalistic, for example Eugène Grasset's 1897 lithograph of "La morphinomane" (Figure 2). This is an arresting and intimate portrayal of addiction: it captures a fleeting moment of tension before the rush of the drug through the woman's body, as well as the enduring cyclical state of withdrawal and temporary relief. The woman's nervous, wrinkled brow; the vacant eyes that suggest silent pain; teeth clenched over her lip; the index finger of the right hand poised to squeeze the morphine through the loaded syringe; the crab-like left hand gripping her thigh to assist the thrust of the needle into the skin. The boudoir scene, with hues reminiscent of Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of prostitutes, is suggestive of the *demi-monde*. The woman's loosened black hair, nightdress and blue-gartered black stockings, along with the little perfume bottle posed delicately on the table, compose an intimate picture of the ritual preparation for her next encounter. Dijkstra notes that the image is "chilling in its clinical accuracy." (Dijkstra 359). The image clearly connects prostitution with morphine, and seems to stand as a stark warning of the pathetic and desperate state to which women may be reduced.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Morphine is also personified in an extraordinary book jacket illustration, drawn by Manuel Orazi, for Victorien du Saussay's sensationalist novel, *Morphine: roman passionnel* (Du Saussay 1906; Figure 3). Here, the female figure depicted on the cover represents morphine: a vampiric, sphinxlike, semi-human, powerfully

sexualized (and arguably racialized) nude figure, adorned with jewels. A serpent bracelet crawls up her arm and a golden necklace dangles provocatively between her bare breasts; she bears animalistic claws and vampiric jaws. Her fingers are adorned with rings, and her gaze engages the viewer with a look of defiant triumph. Significantly, with the exception of one or two rare illustrative plates in the medical literature, there is a complete absence of male morphine use in the illustrated press, medical literature and popular iconography (such as poster art and book jacket images).

As we might expect, as the press is littered with examples of morphine-addled women, *la morphinée* also crops up regularly in books of the period. Popular literature typically depicted two types of women who used morphine: on the one hand, bored and dissatisfied upper-class women, and, on the other, "emancipated" women for whom the drug was a symbol of selfish rebellion. These types also link to two important attitudes: first, alarm at how easily upper-class women could be corrupted; and second, concern at the emancipation of women and weakening of the traditional feminine role. There is already a substantial critical literature on the popular literary material on morphine use and abuse (Liedekerke and Spagnoli), so I will dwell on just two illustrative examples here that link to our question of how and why currents of public opinion were influenced by the perception of "la morphinée." The stereotype of the *morphinée* was necessarily reductive, in line with Sander Gilman's observations of the function and purpose of stereotypes in ordering the world and channeling anxiety: "The anxiety present in the self concerning its control over the world directly engenders a need for a clear and hard line of difference between the self and the Other." (27). The function of this type was, therefore, to

reinforce traditional sex-role stereotypes and to warn against the consequences of deviating from them.

In the novel *L'Évangéliste*, by Alphonse Daudet (father to Léon Daudet), morphine is mentioned briefly in a story about a woman who loses her daughter to a Protestant religious cult. There is a scene in the novel that depicts morphine use in a reportedly all-female "morphine club" or "morphine salon," whose members are all women who have suffered physically and psychologically, or who experience overwhelming *ennui*:

> When they get together, each one of those ladies brings her little silver case, with its needle, and the poison… and then, crack! In the arm, in the leg… it doesn't send you to sleep, but you feel fine… Unfortunately the effect wears off each time, and you have to increase the dose. (A. Daudet 225)

These women, like the menopausal failures and hypochondriacs depicted by Labruyère, need morphine to take them away from life's disappointments in order to "feel fine."

In decadent fiction, the *morphinée* tends to appear as a wallpaper figure in the Parisian *demi-monde*. As Liedekerke notes: "It is not rare to see a *morphinée* emerge, to see a syringe crop up here and there, in many *fin-de-siècle* novels, simply because the drug and the character at this time formed part of the Parisian décor." (Liedekerke 118). Morphine, it seems, was an accepted fashion in certain circles: "Morphine, in a certain way, was a key accessory in the *femme fatale* package." (119). We also find examples of rebellious and emancipated female characters who shamelessly use morphine for pleasure, excitement and stimulation. For example, in decadent writer Catulle Mendès's novel, *Méphistophéla*, the protagonist Sophor d'Hermelinge is both a lesbian and an unrepentant morphine addict: Liedekerke notes that d'Hermelinge: "outrageously flaunts her vices and rules supreme, with sadistic refinement, over a

den of women bloated with opium and morphine." (119-20). Numerous metaphors of living death are evoked to describe her character by the end of the book: she is "cancerous," "buried alive," zombie-like and yet unrepentant in terms of both her drug use and her deviant lifestyle: "Imperturbable, haughty, formal, one might say, the baroness Sophor d'Hermelinge, with her sinister fixedness, with the pallor of an ill-resuscitated corpse, seems to be the deathly pale Empress of some macabre Lesbos." (Mendès 552-54). She is perverse, depraved, liberated from the constraints of tradition and above all proud of her status as an invert. Liedekerke notes that "After Baudelaire, drugs would no longer be so much an expansive experience in terms of the ego than an outlet for weariness, impotence and despair. More than a promise, people would seek [in drugs] consolation or annihilation." (78). Where opium served a positive function for the Romantics, in a counterdiscursive turn morphine's purpose in decadent representations was to achieve "oblivion and death." It was inscribed in a "bizarre cult of the artificial and the morbid" (78) that would, as we shall see with the cases of Artaud and Gilbert-Lecomte in the final section, continue well into the twentieth century.

Literature and visual culture shows that morphine became a key factor in the representation of the *femme fatale*, at once an appealing and repulsive imaginary figure. In certain sections of society, according to these representations, the drug had become a part of everyday life, and taking oneself off to inject was equally as routine an event as powdering one's nose. Resolutely modern and emancipated, the *morphinée* appears to be, in some representations, the very definition of the *garçonne* or the New Woman of the later nineteenth century. She was a woman in control of her pain and self-medication, at the avant-garde of her era, and who sought in the drug a means of affirming her status or distinguishing herself. But this was also, if we judge

by the press reaction to and literary depiction of the *morphinée*, an alarming development. Although women were supposedly emancipated by morphine, they were also denatured by it: it stopped them from being good wives and mothers and robbed them of their youth and beauty. These documents reveal that beliefs about morphine were firmly shaped by contemporary ideas about masculinity and femininity, both negative and positive, and that morphine was linked to common anxieties about human weakness, normative gender roles and the strength of the French nation.

Prohibition and its discontents

If the prohibition of morphine in France was facilitated by shifting attitudes towards the substance and its association with the medical concept of the "toxicomane," it was inevitable that voices of dissent would rise up to challenge received ideas about opiates. In this final section I consider two examples of such counter-cultural voices: the avant-garde poets and defenders of heroin use, Antonin Artaud and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte. Artaud was a revolutionary artist known for his experimental theatre and poetry; Gilbert-Lecomte was a minor poet, and both were loosely associated with the Surrealists. Artaud was a complex figure who suffered immensely with both physical and mental illness and who wrote with piercing insight about his distress.[18] Both men thought they would die young, and true to their own expectations, Gilbert-Lecomte died in 1943 at the age of 36 from an infection caused by contaminated needles; and Artaud, in an asylum aged 51 in 1948. They took issue with the French legislation of 1916. As apologists for rather than celebrators of morphine use, they differ from the nineteenth-century Romantic celebration of intoxication and offer a vision of the human condition that is at once visionary and despairing. Artaud and Gilbert-Lecomte

also share similarities with both the medical and decadent accounts of morphine use, considered earlier in this article, by framing morphine use both in terms of the masculine virtues of personal responsibility and self-control and also in terms of the positive functions of death, destruction and oblivion.

The two authors make similar yet subtly different cases against prohibition. Gilbert-Lecomte's acerbic, allegorical essay, *Monsieur Morphée*, published around 1929, aimed not to change minds -- a goal he dismisses as futile -- but to take down rhetorically the (as he saw it) impoverished thinking behind the prohibition of intoxicating substances.[19] He says that drug use will always be a minority pursuit, but a necessary one for individuals seeking a state he describes as "death-in-life." For Gilbert-Lecomte, drugs make life bearable for acutely sensitive people with self-destructive urges. He also urges his reader to consider "the inoffensive reality" of drug use rather than the crude caricature of the *toxicomane* which is peddled by a cynical, morally conservative press, and which had been spawned by the nineteenth-century image of the "morphinomane" (35). If we did so, we would see that, "their lives are carefully regulated […] that they have the same preoccupations as other mortals, and that their "vice" does not play a greater, more devastating or more damaging role in their existence than any other less bizarre vice, such as masturbation." (37). Gilbert-Lecomte emphasizes that drug users are not seeking "volupté," or sensual pleasure, but simply "a change of state, a new climate in which their consciousness of being would be less painful." (45). The emphasis is firmly phenomenological, on the lived experience of drug users, and Gilbert-Lecomte argues that legislators fundamentally misunderstand these experiences. This account of the appeal of morphine has parallels with the analyses of doctor addicts, which offer similarly thoughtful and sympathetic explanations for doctors' addiction based

on the ideas of intellectual stimulation and the urge to reach a state of oblivion.

Artaud published two essays on the drug question in 1925: an open letter to French legislators, and an essay originally published in the periodical, *La Révolution surréaliste*.[20] Artaud echoes Gilbert-Lecomte's arguments on the futility of prohibition and on drug use as a minority pursuit. He argues that a person has the right to be the judge of his own pain and to self-medicate as he sees fit. Artaud calls this "a matter of conscience," and claims that legislators have no "right to dispose of the pain of men" (Artaud 2004 114). The final section of Artaud's open letter explores the idea of "angoisse," which in French means both anguish and anxiety, in its various manifestations. Like Gilbert-Lecomte, Artaud's piece has a phenomenological focus on the perception and lived experience of pain. Morphine is legally sanctioned as a medicine, but doctors have no right to monopolize it: it should belong to everybody. Artaud re-claims access to opiates from the medical profession, which has invented the *toxicomane* and brought about prohibition and, to his mind, impoverished the lives of drug users.

Ultimately, Gilbert-Lecomte and Artaud's narratives are valuable because they speak from the heart and are informed by personal experiences. They offer a radical vision of the purpose of human existence that contrasts with orthodox views on drug use. They do not, however, celebrate the positive effects of morphine use in the tradition of the nineteenth-century Romantics. Its function as an intellectual stimulant is defended, but the prohibition of 1916 and the enduring strength of the idea of "toxicomanie" seems to have forced these commentators into a defensive position in which they needed to argue for the necessity of access to drugs rather than the pleasures they bring. For those who defended the choice to use morphine, the drug was a necessary evil, or a crutch for the weak, rather than a truly expansive

experience. Their sensitivities bring them close to the positions of doctor-addicts Chambard and Pichon, and this analysis has shown that clear parallels can be drawn between medical commentators who tried to understand doctors with addiction to morphine and avant-garde writers seeking to demystify the experiences of pleasure-seeking addicts. Both highlighted the importance of personal choice and self-control, but also admitted the frailty of masculinity. Paradoxically, Artaud and Gilbert-Lecomte draw on discourses of masculinity, specifically the ideas of autonomy and control, in their defense of the right to take morphine, an enfeebling and "emasculating" substance.

Morphine use, refracted through a range of cultural discourses, and imagined in different ways, could be either culturally sanctioned or framed as deviant. The examples examined in this article show that morphine was negatively imagined for reasons linked to gender norms, and concerns about morphine linked closely to broader anxieties relating to the modern condition, urban life, and changing gender roles. Morphine was seen as a paradoxical substance which could both bolster and undermine masculinity; it could be attached to beliefs about woman's naturally deviant nature, and yet also be seen as a substance that fatally undermined traditional roles. Restrictions on morphine arose in 1916 because of international pressures, but also due to factors that were unique to France and related directly to models of ideal masculinity, femininity, Republican citizenship and the cult of the will. The context of war and the mass mobilization of the population gave these ambient concerns focus and legislative urgency. Ultimately, the late nineteenth-century French medical opioid crisis was resolved by strictly limiting the prescription of morphine. However, this also pushed drug use into the realm of illegality, as observed by Artaud and Gilbert-Lecomte. In this sense, the nineteenth-century *morphinomane* was a similar figure to

today's prescription painkiller addict, who inspires fascination but also sympathy due to this medical overexposure. Yet, the *morphinomane* was constructed as a cultural type in an era before "addiction" was conceptualized as a "disease" in modern medical discourse, and was therefore judged harshly as a symptom of weakness in a society that was perceived to be rapidly changing for the worse.

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[1] The ‘Loi du 12 juillet 1916 concernant l’importation, le commerce, la détention et l’usage des substances vénéneuses notamment l’opium, la morphine et la cocaïne’ (reproduced in Yvorel 2012); on the detail of the international conventions, see Berridge 1999 239-42.

[2] On the 1845 poisons law, passed in the wake of the Marie Lafarge poisoning affair, see Yvorel 2016.

[3] All translations are by the author. It was a German doctor, Levinstein, who first drew the distinction between physical morphine dependency and pleasure-seekers in 1877 (Dormandy 170). Chambard (ix-x) dismisses the morphiniste/morphinomane distinction as meaningless, because the end result is the same. Regnard (313) uses the term ‘morphiniste’ in the title of his work but in the text he exclusively uses the term ‘morpinomane,’ distinguishing between those who become addicted in a ‘natural and honest manner’ and those who do so for reasons of ‘fashion.’ Pichon (22-23) distinguishes between ‘morphinisés’ (medical users) and ‘morpinomanes’ (luxurious users).

[4] Certainly by 1892, in his series of fictionalized case studies Talmeyr (2) was calling morphine ‘a scourge’ that should be considered ‘more diabolical’ than opium.

[5] Padwa (172-74) demonstrates that in both the late nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth, ‘nonmedical opiate use in France […] was seemingly more visible and potentially socially disruptive than in Britain.’ Berridge (1988) has also argued that there was no discernible drug subculture in the UK before the 1960s.

[6] Opium was linked to treason particularly through the Ullmo spy scandal that saw French official secrets shared with the enemy by an opium addict; this is discussed in chapter 5 of Datta.

[7] Specifically, concerns about widespread morphine addiction were outlined in *Mesures à prendre pour diminuer la morphinomanie*, a report authored by doctors Brouardel, Motet, Ballet and Vibert for the Garde des Sceaux (Minster of Justice). The report is reproduced in Brouardel (139-46). As early as

1883, alienists such as Motet raised concerns about 'the deplorable facility' with which users could acquire drugs such as morphine, leading them into addiction and crime: (Motet 33).

[8] Nye argues that male codes of honor in nineteenth-century France retained many features from the *ancien régime*.

[9] The treatise was awarded the 1896 Falret Prize by the French Academy of Medicine and published by Félix Alcan in 1897.

[10] The details of Chambard's death are noted in his obituary.

[11] Ripa in particular observes that the idea of woman at the heart of the bourgeois family represented the model of psychiatric normality for French women.

[12] Aron (8) notes that Bonaparte, when discussing the 'Code civil' at the Council of State, declared that 'if there is one thing that is definitely not French, it is that [women] can do as they please.'

[13] Berridge (1999 148-49), for example, argues that the emphasis on female morphine use in English medical writing was not supported by evidence, noting that the case histories studied were evenly divided between male and female cases.

[14] Known today as a Gaullist, right-wing newspaper, during the period of the Third Republic *Le Figaro* was more moderate. For example, it took a pro-Dreyfus line during the Affair and published articles by left-wing novelist Émile Zola.

[15] This reflects the observations of literary scholars (e.g. Pich) who have noted that when reading texts we cannot straightforwardly align antifeminism with social conservatism, and feminism with 'progressive' social movements.

[16] This emphasis on the fetishization by women of drug-taking equipment is also made forcefully in Zambaco (429).

[17] Albert Matignon, 'La Morphine,' (1905, Nemours, chateau-musée: image unavailable for reproduction). Matignon worked for the weekly illustrated newspaper, *L'Illustration*, which chronicled Parisian life in images, from 1905 to 1928.

[18] This is most evident in Artaud's letters from the Ville-Evrard asylum (Artaud 2015), in which he displays a veritable obsession with acquiring heroin.

[19] Claude Sernet's preface to the 1966 edition of the essay, which is reproduced at the end of the 1998 edition, says it was published around forty years previously in a periodical that has since been lost (56).

[20] See Artaud 2004. Artaud also later published an essay on his experimentation in Mexico with the

traditional hallucinogenic (see Artaud 1947).