

***Gaudeamus Igitur*. Late Nineteenth-Century French Taverns as a Portal to the Medieval**

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On but sérieusement, on chanta à démolir les murailles, et l'aube nous vit sortir de cette inauguration, nobles et hautains, devenus enfin gentilshommes du moyen âge.
[We drank seriously, singing to bring down the walls and at dawn we emerged from this inauguration noble and haughty, transformed at last into medieval gentlemen.]

—Emile Goudeau, 1888¹

The Latin song known as *Gaudeamus igitur* —“Let us rejoice while we are young”—may be associated with university graduation ceremonies today, but it also has a long association with medieval drinking songs. The earliest textual variant dates from the thirteenth century, but the text and music known today developed extensively after the late eighteenth century as they were included in student song books.² *Gaudeamus* was taken to a new level in nineteenth-century France where, as in poet Emile Goudeau's epigraph above, the concept of drinking, singing, and camaraderie became a kind of rite of passage (an “inauguration”) that transformed wayward student poets into “medieval gentleman,” “noble and haughty” in their inebriation. Goudeau describes an evening at the Chat Noir cabaret, founded in 1881 in Montmartre and well-known today through the much-reproduced 1896 publicity poster created by Théophile Steinlen (Fig. 1) to promote a national tour of its performers; the artist had frequented the Chat Noir from 1884 and contributed to its affiliated publication (*Le Chat Noir*). Figure 2, an oil painting, prefigures the famous 1896 poster while stressing the cabaret's links to the *gaudeamus* tradition: the scrappy black cat sings at the top of his voice as he unfurls his banner from Montmartre's butte, as if challenging Paris to make merry. This early variant of the black cat as rebel differs markedly from the later poster, in which he has become the undisputed king of Montmartre, celebrated for the “joy” inscribed on his halo. Both images explicitly link the cabaret to the *gaudeamus* tradition.

Harold Segel, Phillip Dennis Cate, Mary Shaw, and Gabriel Weisberg, among many others, have examined the importance of the Montmartre bohemian culture of the 1880s and 1890s for the production of avant-garde poetry, music, and art, while others, such as Elizabeth Emery and Laura Morowitz, have studied the frequent use of medieval decorative elements in Parisian cafés and taverns of this time.³ In this essay I will analyze the ways in which the singing and drinking of the

¹ *Dix ans de bohème* (Paris: La Librairie illustrée, 1888), 254. Research for this essay was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

² James Fuld dates the oldest known variation of the lyrics to 1287 in a Latin manuscript at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF Notre-Dame 273bis, feuillet 120 recto; côte française 25408). See *The Book of World-Famous Music* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1966), 241. For a history of the song in the early twentieth-century university context see Charles B. Randolph, “Three Latin Students' Songs,” *The Classical Journal* 7.7 (April 1912): 291-305.

³ Harold B. Segel, *Turn-of-the-century Cabaret: Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Cracow, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Zurich* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905*, ed. Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw (New Brunswick, NJ: The Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1996); Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Elizabeth

gaudeamus tradition was said to bring about the kind of “transformations” evident in the epigraph to this essay. Entering the Chat Noir cabaret to share song and drink was perceived as a passage to the Middle Ages, a period understood as capable of temporarily suspending the political, religious, and class disputes that plagued late nineteenth-century French society and would erupt in the Dreyfus Affair. Much like the *gaudeamus* lyrics—cheerful yet solemn in their reminder to seize the day (“*Vita nostra brevis est/Brevi finietur*”)—the Chat Noir’s trademark humor evoked contemporary concerns while making light of them. The cabaret thus served as a simulacrum of the Middle Ages to which visitors flocked in order to escape from the harsh realities of the outside world.

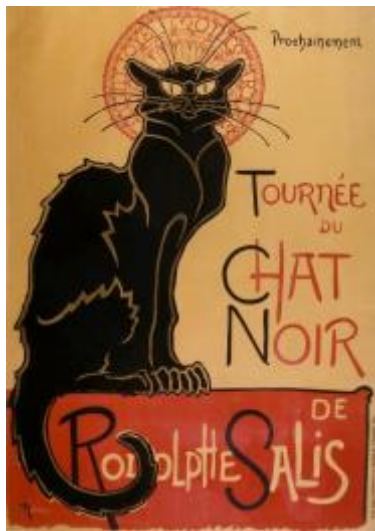


Fig. 1. Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, *Tournée du Chat Noir*. 1896 poster. 959 x 1359 mm. Public Domain. Photo: E. Emery

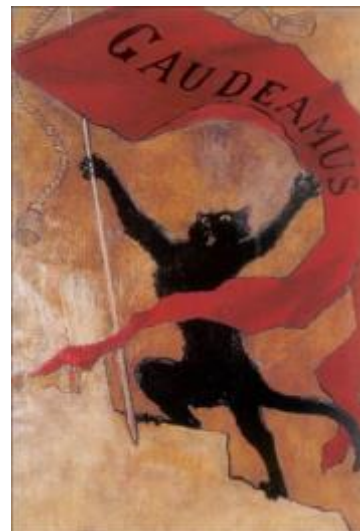


Fig. 2. Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, *Gaudeamus*. Oil on canvas 172 x 84 cm. Petit Palais, Musée d'art moderne, Geneva. Public Domain. Photo: E. Emery

The Chat Noir is the best-known of a number of thematically decorated taverns, brasseries, and cabarets operating in fin-de-siècle Paris, and it will serve as the center of my study because of its cultural prominence and the many memoirs recording experiences there. John Grand Carteret’s liberally illustrated *Raphaël et Gambrinus ou L’Art dans la Brasserie* documented these “eccentrically” themed bars, from the Dead Rat to The Cabaret of Hell, thus allowing armchair travelers (especially, as he notes, the bourgeois young women who were forbidden from going there) to explore them.⁴ Most of these featured eclectic decor and costumes, but the most popular motif by far was “medieval,” as indicated by the book’s cover (Fig. 3), where scenes of the past float about the heads of nineteenth-century drinkers. The Chat Noir was described by American Theodore Child as a

Emery and Laura Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in Fin-de-siècle France* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003).

⁴ John Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus ou L’Art dans la Brasserie* (Paris: Louis Westhausser, 1886), xiii. The book has been digitized by a number of associations and libraries including Google, Gallica, and archives.org.

“prototype and beau ideal of the fantastic neomedieval tavern” when he visited in 1889.⁵ This was a prescient use of the word “neomedieval,” given that today’s definition also stresses an intentionally ahistorical and irreverent treatment of a medieval subject as a means to achieving a particular aesthetic.⁶

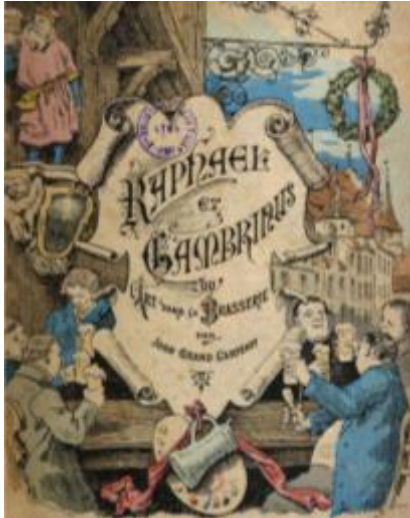


Fig. 3. Henri Pille, book cover to John Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*. Digitized by Google. Public Domain.



Fig. 4. Illustrated title page from Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Paris: Perrotin Garnier frères, 1844. Public Domain. Photo: E. Emery

Other venues, such as the Cabaret du Lyon d’Or, with its careful imitation of items exhibited at the Musée de Cluny, or La Taverne Montmartre, which Grand Carteret considered the most artistic of the group because its Louis XIII lantern, its stained glass windows, and its carved wooden sign with gilded Gothic letters reminded him of an old missal.⁷ Such images tied into a long-standing French tradition of evoking the Middle Ages with reference to flamboyant Gothic architectural elements and costumes borrowed from illustrated children’s history books and novels such as Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* [*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*] set in 1482 (Fig. 4). Grand Carteret notes that 1878 saw the construction of La Grande Pinte in Montmartre and the Brasserie flamande on the boulevard de Sébastopol, both of which attempted to represent—with varying degrees of accuracy—existing structures from fifteenth- or sixteenth-century Bruges or Paris (Fig. 5). Grand Carteret noted that their colorful and eclectic “old new” look would appeal to the escapist

⁵ Theodore Child, “Characteristic Parisian Cafés,” *Harper’s New Monthly* 78 (April 1889): 687-703.

⁶ Neomedievalism is defined and exemplified in the 2009 and 2010 numbers of *Studies in Medievalism* dedicated to *Defining Neomedievalism(s)* and in the essays published in Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, ed. *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games* (Lewiston: Mellen, 2012).

⁷ Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*, 46.

tendencies of “contemporaries tormented by their own lack of style and decor.”⁸ It was like stepping into the Middle Ages.

Others, however, used antiques and modern pieces to cobble together a setting called “medieval.” This was the case at the Chat Noir. What Salis advertised as both “medieval” and the “purest Louis XIII style” was really a hodgepodge of tapestries, old furniture, skulls, antique tools or weapons, rusty nails, and lids of antique trunks that mixed old and new much as the ballads published in the pages of the *Chat Noir* combined medieval poetic forms with modern themes.⁹ While the decor of taverns like the Grande Pinte evoked a historically coherent if vague notion of the olden days, and tended to be frequented by a specific clientele (painters, in the case of the Grande Pinte),¹⁰ Salis’s goal was less decorative than performative. He sought to foster collaboration among different kinds of artists in order to stimulate creativity and to produce new and exciting performances in the two tiny rooms of his cabaret.¹¹ It is to this kind of intense intimate experience that Goudeau refers in the epigraph to this essay.



Fig. 5. Coll-Toc, “Grande Pinte.” From John Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*. Digitized by Google. Public Domain.



Fig. 6. Henri Pille, “Cabaret Moyen Age.” From John Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*. Digitized by Google. Public Domain.

Goudeau himself is credited with having founded the precursor of the Chat Noir cabaret, a group he named the Société des Hydropathes (“hydropaths” combines several levels of word play including a pun on his name, similar in pronunciation to “goût d’eau” [a taste for water], thus ironically

⁸ Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*, 43.

⁹ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 256.

¹⁰ See Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 254. The title played on the homophonic associations between “pint” (pinte) and “painted” (peinte).

¹¹ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 254.

referencing his group's fondness for drink). He founded the group in October 1878 at a Latin Quarter café to allow groups of college students, poets, musicians, and actors to recite poetry or perform music on two evenings a week; he may well be the father of today's "open mic" format. Poetry readings, musical performances, and the singing of popular songs (particularly drinking songs) were all common fare at the events, which often lasted until daybreak. The Hydropathes brought together what Goudeau called a "bouillabaisse" and a "microcosm" of people, primarily young, but from remarkably "diverse" political and professional backgrounds.¹² The group moved locations frequently to accommodate a growing membership, and spawned a remarkable number of avant-garde student-run magazines and journals.¹³ As of 1881, Goudeau began editing *Le Chat Noir*, the official publication of the cabaret newly founded by Rodolphe Salis. Goudeau described the Chat Noir as "une seconde salle d'hydropathes" [a second performance space for Hydropathes], noting a shift from a largely student audience in the Latin Quarter to a Montmartre crowd comprised of musicians, painters, and amateurs. Both shared the same "mélange de gaieté et de sérieux" [mix of good cheer and seriousness].¹⁴

Salis adopted the name cabaret instead of tavern, bar, or brasserie specifically in reference to received ideas of cabarets as "artistic" and sociable, as profoundly different from bars and brasseries where drinking was the primary focus.¹⁵ Using the word "cabaret" also played to literary and visual references to the joyous and socially productive drinking of the French past, rather than to what was often presented as the glum and solitary drunkenness of the 1880s. Albert Robida spelled out this distinction clearly in a book of Parisian history, pitting the "joyous red-faced drinker" of the Middle Ages happily imbibing beer and wine and conversing with neighbors in "old-fashioned cabarets" (see Figures 3, 5, and 6) to the solitary "violence-prone alcoholic" of the modern day, grimly belled up to the "zinc bar drinking green and yellow poisons."¹⁶ In cabarets, alcohol was not seen as an end in itself; it facilitated "joyous debaucheries of the mind," as Robida put it, and called up references to medieval and Renaissance practices of inviting wandering entertainers to perform or having patrons improvise activities.¹⁷ The French cabaret, commemorated in the poems of Villon, Rutebeuf, Rabelais, Viau, and many subsequent writers and historians, was thus idealized in the 1880s as a

¹² Goudeau reminisces extensively about the society's foundation, members, and format in *Dix ans*, 151-200.

¹³ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 210-40.

¹⁴ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 260-61.

¹⁵ In *Paris qui consomme*, Goudeau identifies the sociable wine-serving café as the traditional French venue. As a result of the phylloxera epidemic, which began in the 1860s and would destroy more than 75% of French vines by the 1890s, other national traditions and libations became popular: German *brasseries* served beer and English bars featured gin and absinthe. Goudeau laments the fact that brasseries and bars encouraged the copious consumption of alcohol, in contradistinction to the reputed moderation and sociability of French cafés (Paris: Henri Beraldi, 1893), 21-30.

¹⁶ "De ces cabarets à enseignes pittoresques, bien peu ont survécu. De même que l'ivrogne d'autrefois, ce joyeux buveur à rouge trogne, a été remplacé par le sombre alcoolique facilement tourné en furieux, le cabaret d'antan a pour successeurs l'assommoir à comptoir de zinc et l'officine du distillateur, où flamboient les cuivres des alambics distribuant les poisons verts et jaunes. Bien des cabarets de jadis, fréquentés non par des ivrognes mais par d'honnêtes gens, heureux de causer et de rire les coudes sur la table, ont laissé des souvenirs joyeux dans la chronique des rues de Paris, ou même dans l'histoire littéraire." *Paris de siècle en siècle* (Paris: La Librairie illustrée, 1895), 290. Images of the solitary ravages of absinthe drinking are legion, from Degas's and Rafaelli's *Absinthe Drinkers* to Albert Maignan's *Green Muse*.

¹⁷ Lisa Appignanesi, *The Cabaret* (London: Studio Vista, 1975), 9.

privileged place of intellectual exchange and equality and it served as a model for the Chat Noir: its earliest activities included the poetry reading, singing, and drinking mentioned by Goudeau, as well as impromptu composition of poetry, discussion of books and art, performance of musical compositions, skits, political diatribes, and parodies.¹⁸ Singer-songwriters such as Jehan Rictus and Aristide Bruant were evoked as modern-day Villons because they recited poems and songs in the slang of the streets, drawing attention to the plight of prostitutes, pimps, and the destitute (Fig. 7).¹⁹ Especially popular were drinking songs (especially those about turning wine into water) and sexual innuendo.

One has only to open an issue of *Le Chat Noir*, the journal dedicated to the cabaret, to see the spoofs, eclecticism, and word play that categorized the Chat Noir's productions.²⁰ In an issue from 1893, for example, well-known politicians have been attributed archaic roles in the Chat Noir's organization corresponding to their real-life positions: these include tetrarch (former President of France, Jules Grévy), flute player (former Prime Minister, Charles Floquet), chief archer (former Police Prefect Félix-Alexandre Gragnon). Such humor leveled class and political differences. The journal was also full of references to the literary and musical Middle Ages: from the choice of fixed poetic forms such as the ballade and the rondeau (see Fig. 7) to the use of archaic spelling and syntax, to retelling of medieval fabliaux and homages rendered to Villon and Rabelais as master drinkers. Such intellectual association with the goliardic tradition, associated in the 1880s with wandering students who poked fun at authority, frequented taverns, and sang about earthly concerns, contributed to making the public interpret the experience of visiting the cabaret as "medieval" when the decor was nothing of the sort.²¹

Furthermore, Salis who spoke a modern variant of Old French in the cabaret (and published his *Contes du Chat Noir* in the same dialect), actively publicized the medieval reputation of the Chat Noir, linking his cabaret to satirical traditions associated with Villon, Rabelais, and the goliardic poets. In 1882, for example, *Le Chat Noir* claimed that the mayor of Paris had made the Chat Noir a historical monument and that visitors should flock to examine the drinking vessels used by a host of medieval and modern celebrities from Charlemagne, Villon, Rabelais, and the cardinal of Richelieu to Emile Goudeau.²² Yet another proclaimed the cabaret (in Rabelaisian terms): "the most Astonishing,

¹⁸ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 174-93; Phillip Dennis Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre," in *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor, and the Avant-Garde, 1875-1905*, ed., Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw (New Brunswick, NJ: The Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, 1996), 32-33; Armond Fields, *Le Chat Noir: A Montmartre Cabaret and its Artists in Turn-of-the-Century Paris* (Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1993), 13-16.

¹⁹ Yvette Guilbert, herself an amateur medievalist and a staple of the cabaret circuit, identified Rictus as Villon's "younger brother" in an article for the *New York Bookman* 46 (January 1918): 537-38.

²⁰ The Bibliothèque nationale de France has digitized the entire print run of *Le Chat noir* (1882-1891); it can be consulted at gallica.bnf.fr. For an analysis of the humor in Chat Noir publications see Janet Whitmore, "Absurdist Humor in Bohemia," in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 205-22.

²¹ John Addington Symonds captures the 1880s European imaginary of the Goliardic poets in *Wine, Women, and Song: Mediaeval Latin Students' Songs* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1884), 16-23.

²² Child notes these "displays" in his article, noting also Salis's clever and often overbearing marketing techniques. See

Amazing, Bizarre, Grandiose, Stupefying, Vibrant creation made since the beginning of time, founded by Julius Caesar.”²³ Salis himself mixed historical periods, advertising it as “A Louis XIII cabaret founded by a *fumiste* [slacker] in 1114.”²⁴ Such intentional anachronisms were silly and joyous, intended to poke fun at the inaccuracy of theme taverns and at publicity itself. The cabaret offered equal-opportunity satire inspired by the medieval tradition while presenting itself as eminently modern (“Passant, sois moderne” read its sign). Its participants’ activities quickly extended beyond the Chat Noir’s walls to art exhibits, dinners, pranks, and balls throughout Paris.²⁵ This “neomedieval” nature was dubbed the “spirit of the Chat Noir,” also called *esprit gaulois* [Gallic spirit] or *fumisterie* [obfuscation]. Goudeau dubbed the cabaret “La Sainte Chapelle de la fumisterie” [The Sainte Chapelle of obfuscation].²⁶

The catalyst for achieving such gaiety was universally recognized as alcohol. Montmartre drinking holes such as Le Chat Noir and La Grande Pinte (itself named for alcohol—a pint glass) served all kinds of beverages from beer and wine to lemonade,²⁷ but it was absinthe that reigned supreme, the nineteenth-century drink known for its hallucinogenic properties, its quasi-magical capacity to transport drinkers out of themselves and into other realms of possibility, hence the nickname “la fée verte” [green fairy]. What we might call “happy hour” today was known as “l’heure verte” [green hour], a time of relaxation and fantasy, in which consumers lost their inhibitions through drink, imagining themselves in other times and places. For Alfred Delvau, a historian of Parisian drinking establishments, absinthe was unlike any other drink, transporting one “beyond borders or horizon [...] it is like moving toward infinity.”²⁸ Raoul Ponchon captured this sense of travel in time and space in a sonnet entitled, “Absinthe”:

Absinthe, je t’adore, certes!

Il me semble, quand je te bois,

Humer l’âme des jeunes bois,

Pendant la belle saison verte!

[Absinthe, of course I adore you! When I drink you it is like breathing the soul of fresh woods in the green season!]

Ton frais parfum me déconcerte.

Et dans ton opale je vois

Des cieux habités autrefois,

“Characteristic Parisian Cafés,” 702.

²³ *Le Chat Noir* (27 May 1882): 4.

²⁴ This often-repeated advertisement first appeared in the inaugural issue of *Le Chat Noir* (14 January 1882): 4.

²⁵ Cate, “The Spirit of Montmartre,” 32-33; Fields, *Le Chat Noir*, 13-16.

²⁶ Goudeau, *Paris*, 259.

²⁷ Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*, 86.

²⁸ “Vous partez pour un pays sans frontière et sans horizon [...] vous croyez aller vers l’infini.” See Alfred Delvau, *Histoire anecdotique des cafés et cabarets de Paris* (Paris: E. Dentu, 1862), 251.

Comme par une porte ouverte.

[Your fresh perfume troubles me. And in your opal I see, as if through an opened door, skies long ago inhabited.]

Qu'importe, ô recours des maudits!

Que tu sois un vain paradis,

Si tu contentes mon envie;

[What matter if you are a vain paradise, the last hope of the damned, if you satisfy my desire!]

Et si, devant que j'entre au port,

Tu me fais supporter la Vie,

En m'habituant à la Mort.

[And if you help me tolerate Life before I enter the port, accustoming me to Death.]²⁹

Ponchon's poem presents the absinthe, with its murky green color, as a portal to the past: "In your opal I see, as if through an opened door, skies long ago inhabited" (43). The stanzas that follow place emphasis on the willingness with which Ponchon's narrator accepts this illusion in order to tolerate life. He, like visitors to the Chat Noir, willingly suspends disbelief, ignoring the "vain paradise" he perceives in order to satisfy his "desire" for escapism. Referring to the abundance of medieval-inspired taverns and cabarets in Paris, Goudeau notes in *Paris qui consomme* that the Middle Ages itself was like absinthe or a drug for his contemporaries: they kept coming back for more.³⁰

Drug and alcohol consumption has always served as a privileged means of escapism, as Ponchon's poem suggests, and it is not surprising that the rise of joyous artistic taverns took place during a difficult period of French history. The Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) brought an end to the Second Empire, thus creating a power vacuum in which various social factions (Republicans, Catholics, nobles, bourgeois, working class) vied to gain dominance. For Goudeau, the social mixing that took place in the early Chat Noir (like the "bouillabaisse" or "microcosm" of the Société des Hydropathes) was a marvelous and surprising thing, a kind of "democratic consumption."³¹ News of the drinking, singing, and social leveling that took place among artists, writers, and musicians working in different media began to attract bourgeois patrons, who lined up to witness what was understood as a revival of medieval collectivity.³² They would come to Montmartre to go

²⁹ Raoul Ponchon, *Les Poètes du Chat Noir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 413. Published in *Le Courrier Français* (24 October 1886): 8.

³⁰ "Quand on prend du moyen âge, il paraît que c'est comme l'absinthe ou la morphine: on en reprend" [When one partakes of the Middle Ages it is like absinthe or morphine: one takes more of it].

³¹ He describes "la consommation démocratique" as taking place in crowds. Goudeau, *Paris*, 56.

³² Wolfgang Schivelbusch posits that drinking in collective environments such as the pub harks back to the frequent and communal consumption of alcohol in the European Middle Ages, thus "stimulating the proletarian virtues of collectivity and solidarity." See *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 166.

“slumming,” relishing the dangers of rubbing shoulders with the working class in a sketchy neighborhood while reveling in the curious humor of the Chat Noir.³³

As this cabaret with room for thirty began attracting more than 100 people at a time, the inclusive spirit gave way to claustrophobia and resentment. Salis had to begin what Goudeau termed the “expulsion” of violent locals who started fights.³⁴ Such scenes would multiply as the cabaret became more popular with wealthy visitors who craved a whiff of danger without being truly threatened. Salis moved the cabaret to a safer neighborhood (12, rue Victor Massé) in 1885 and expanded his space in order to accommodate more patrons.

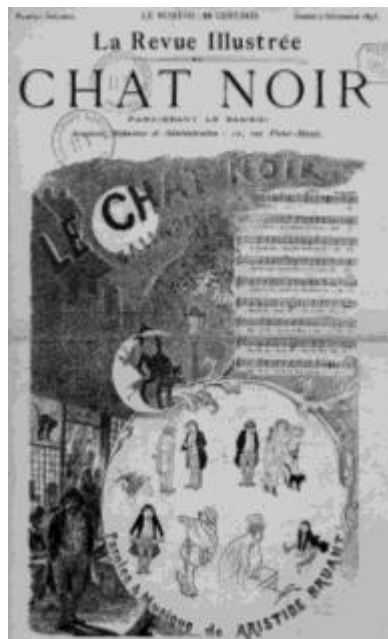


Fig. 7. Cover of *Le Chat Noir*, 2 Sept. 1893. Digitized by Gallica. Public Domain.



Fig. 8. “Théâtre des ombres parisiennes.” *La Vie parisienne*, 1 Jan. 1898, p. 12. Digitized by Gallica. Public Domain.

What had begun as a joyous and medieval-inspired collaboration among young artists thus quickly morphed into a thriving commercial enterprise in which artistic activities—paid for with drinks—became theatrical stunts for the affluent public. This was no longer equal-opportunity collaboration among students; the scrappy *gaudeamus* spirit was lost, much to the chagrin of many former participants who, as in Figure 8, satirized Montmartre's commercialization. Poems about the destitute and the suicidal were still punctuated with musical numbers, and a tremendously popular shadow puppet theater produced medieval-inspired plays based on the lives of Sainte Geneviève and Saint Julien, among other topics, but such activities had become scripted performances largely aimed

³³ Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds. Histoire d'un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

³⁴ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 262.

at external audiences.³⁵ As the entertainment became less rowdy, members of the upper crust, including the Prince of Wales (future Edward VII), members of the Rothschild family, and women came to enjoy this illusion of democracy, rubbing shoulders with artists and poets who gave voice to the poor.

The cabaret's international fame was such that American magazine *Harper's Illustrated* ran a long piece on it in 1889. For the wealthy, "medieval" had come to signify quirky anti-bourgeois behavior that conformed to the *gaudeamus* tradition, reinforced by literary representations such as those found in Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* when schoolboy Jehan Frolo resisted authority by drinking, fighting, and frequenting loose women ("Eh bien, cria-t-il, au diable! vive la joie! Je m'entavernerai, je me battraï, je casserai les pots et j'irai voir les filles" [Well then, he cried, the devil with it! Long live joy! I will entavern myself, fight, break pots, and visit wenches]).³⁶ The Chat Noir provided a fanciful Middle Ages fueled by nostalgia for a vague "good old days." Like the narrator of Ponchon's absinthe poem, the public suspended disbelief, seeing what it wished to believe.

Salis advertised the "medieval" nature of his cabaret, but such references were resolutely tongue-in-cheek, as suggested by Goudeau's reminiscence with which I started this essay. After remembering a session of singing and drinking that transformed his friends into "medieval gentlemen," Goudeau corrects himself "ah! non, pas du moyen âge—mais style Louis XIII, le plus pur, comme disait Rodolphe" [ah! no, not the Middle Ages—but the purest Louis XIII style, as Rodolphe would put it].³⁷ In mocking the pretension of attempting to capture a past they know to be gone, Salis and Goudeau not only play with those visitors who seek an "authentic" medieval experience, but they also parody the seriousness with which Romantic writers such as Hugo treated the Middle Ages. Grand Carteret remarks that performances at the Chat Noir often focused on spoofing the greatest hits of Romantic medievalism, starting with an overly liberal application of the epithet "gentlemen."³⁸

Salis's contemporaries had never been to the Middle Ages. For them, the fictitious Middle Ages of Victor Hugo, with its armies of beggars and its dark dirty streets, or illustrations from history books featuring jolly drinkers in medieval and Renaissance costume were authentically "medieval" (See Figs. 3–6). Such received images are what Jan Assmann has called "cultural memories," figures and stories so regularly associated with a time or place that they become accepted as real.³⁹ Le Chat Noir itself, although couched satirically as a "medieval" tavern, became, through the experience it conveyed, a simulacrum of the medieval that replaced whatever the historical Middle Ages may have been. Entering the Chat Noir cabaret was like acceding to a special realm where the performances,

³⁵ See the many examples and illustrations in Cate and Shaw, *The Spirit of Montmartre*.

³⁶ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Paris: J. Hetzel et A. Lacroix, 1865), 144.

³⁷ Goudeau, *Dix ans*, 255.

³⁸ "Tandis que nous autres, modernes, nous en faisons, sciemment, la parodie." See Grand Cartaret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*, 97.

³⁹ See *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen* (Munich: Beck, 1997).

in conjunction with the consumption of alcohol, seemed to transport audiences to another time, even if the space itself constituted a neomedieval mockery of such received ideas. In teasing out Jean Baudrillard's definition of "simulacrum" as "a copy without an original," Lauryn Mayer has noted that the neomedieval calls into question the possibility of representing the past through its playful repurposing of "fragments" that signify the medieval.⁴⁰ This is exactly the technique employed by Salis.

Memoirs and newspapers make it clear that the Chat Noir was considered particularly medieval because of its humor, an irreverence referred to as *esprit gaulois* or "Gallic spirit." Medievalist Joseph Bédier defined the term in 1893 as taking its power from a "scoffing, slightly outrageous vision of the real,"⁴¹ precisely the kind of antic favored by Salis and his team when, for example, they transformed politicians into flute players. Yet why pinpoint such humor as particularly French or as particularly medieval, as did Bédier? People have frequented taverns from time immemorial and humor is unique neither to France nor to the Middle Ages (Martial and Petronius are cases in point).

In the years after the Franco-Prussian war the French attempted to bring attention to secular and non-aristocratic traditions that might help the new French Republic recover from humiliating defeat; the Middle Ages was often invoked as the "birthplace" of modern France in support of this new history.⁴² Unlike the goliardic tradition, which was pan-European (students traveled from one country to another), *l'esprit gaulois* could be claimed as an inherently national trait passed on from medieval *escholiers* at the Sorbonne to Villon, Rabelais, Molière, and nineteenth-century *chansonniers*, all of whom mixed poetry, drinking, word play, and scatology.⁴³ According to such definitions, the Middle Ages was the birthplace of modern France and its special spirit had never disappeared: *l'esprit gaulois* was an attitude and way of life in France, the precursor to 1890s tropes about "gay Paris."

Associating the Chat Noir's humor with the formerly colonized Gauls, the original freedom fighters of French historical narrative, gives such seemingly timeless humor a decidedly military and nationalistic (and thus exclusive) character, particularly in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. While I have traced equal-opportunity satire in the cabaret, it was also a bastion of anti-German and later, in the 1890s, anti-Semitic sentiment.⁴⁴ The clearest visual example of this link between Gauls, Middle Ages, and exclusion came from Willette, a painter closely affiliated with the group. He ran for local elections in 1889 on the anti-Semitic ticket, advertising his beliefs with an image of a Gaul (the original white Frenchman), who has stricken down the Talmud and beheaded the golden calf

⁴⁰ Lauryn S. Mayer, "Simulacrum," in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 223-30.

⁴¹ "Il ne cherche pas les éléments du comique dans la fantastique exagération des choses, dans le grotesque; mais dans la vision railleuse, légèrement outrée, du réel." *Les Fabliaux* (Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 1969; first published 1893), 313-19.

⁴² See Emery and Morowitz, *Consuming the Past*.

⁴³ David Trotter has discussed *esprit gaulois* as a nationalist touchstone in the fin de siècle. See "L'Esprit Gaulois: Humour and National Mythology," in *Humour and History*, ed. Keith Cameron (Oxford: Intellect, 1993), 70-83.

⁴⁴ See Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre," 38-39.

(symbol of paganism and wealth). The image (Fig. 9), presents a joyous song in characteristic Gallic spirit: “Gay, gay, gay/Forward Gauls and France,” before explicitly accusing Jews—an “enemy race”—of profiting from French workers. Such alienating discourse was not just the work of a single person; Salis gave him a canvas in commissioning works for the Chat Noir, such as the stained glass *Golden Calf* (Te Deum Laudamus/In God we praise) that hung in the second cabaret as of 1885 (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. “Elections législatives du 22 septembre 1889.” Poster. 138 x 100 cm. Digitized by Gallica. Public Domain.



Fig. 10. F. Fau drawing based on Willette’s “Vitrail du ‘Chat Noir.’” John Grand Carteret, *Raphaël et Gambrinus*. Digitized by Google. Public Domain.

This window served partially as a critique of Salis’s capitalism, and partially as an early variation of his 1889 election poster: the orchestra conductor (Death) at bottom right watches placidly the social injustices that take place: a mother slaughters her newborn child for money, a Virgin and black cat are identified as “Virginitas,” and French workers (Gauls?) run in anger to overturn the Golden Calf, identified by the caption as “Israel.” Joan of Arc (labeled “Poesis”), defender of all that is good and pure, resists temptation, while at right a Jewish banker (labeled “Potentia”) grasps a dancer carrying the head of Pierrot (a frequent stand-in for Willette as for the artist in general) on a platter.⁴⁵ This discourse mirrors that of known anti-Semite Edouard Drumont, whose 1888 *La France juive* [*Jewish France*] was a scandalous success and whose 1879 *Ma Vieille Paris* [*My Old Paris*] lovingly celebrated his exclusive Christian fantasy of old France. Such claims about the “pure” race of the Gauls would explode in the 1895 Dreyfus Affair and xenophobic tensions continue to simmer today. The far right French National Front movement still claims Joan of Arc as its heroine.

⁴⁵ For a closer reading of the ways the individual images create an allegory to signify that Salis “sold out” the Chat Noir for greed, see Cate, “The Spirit of Montmartre,” 38-39. It is Cate who identifies the “Potentia” figure as a Jewish banker.

Despite the talk of “mixing” and “diversity,” the Chat Noir thus transmitted complex and conflicting political messages united by the motif of nostalgia for a past untainted by commercialization. Like Goudeau’s wistful memories of the social “bouillabaisse” of the first Chat Noir, with seats for thirty like-minded artists and musicians, Willette and the artist in Fig. 8 express longing for an idealized medieval past thought to be free from commercial constraints and social tensions, a past accessible once more through the release of inhibitions facilitated by alcohol. Fraternizing in small, dark, closed places where drink takes the edge off serves, as Raoul Ponchon noted in his ode to absinthe, as a doorway to other worlds. If Jules Caesar, Charlemagne, Richelieu, and Napoleon were all claimed as having frequented the “medieval” Chat Noir cabaret in the 1880s it is because past and present, dreams and reality could co-exist in the smoky ambience. The decor may have served as an inspiration, but it was the state of mind opened by alcohol’s portal that truly transported visitors away from 1890s life. The complex scene of drinking, singing, and dreaming that goes on in Figure 11, a caricature of “Les Bohèmes” [Bohemias] by Heidbrinck, acknowledged the temporary nature of this transport.



Fig. 11. Heidbrinck, “Les Bohèmes.” Republished in Arsène Alexandre, *L’art du rire et de la caricature* (Paris: Quantin, 1892), p. 334. Public Domain. Photo: E. Emery.

Drinking and singing may give the fantasy of time travel and social equality, but when their effects wear off hungover patrons are unceremoniously dumped back into the daylight and the unpleasant realities they never left. At center we see the shattered glass and decapitated heads of the former dreamers. Like Salis, Heidbrinck mocks the naivety of thinking that one can suspend reality by losing oneself in singing and drinking. Kevin and Brent Moberly have noted that what often seems like

“play” or escapism can also be a good deal of work: “Play is one of the primary means through which the inequalities of late capitalism are constructed as inevitable and unassailable.”⁴⁶ Cabaret going, like the *gaudeamus* tradition sung by university students, created a joy that temporarily suspended external realities. The Chat Noir poets sang so much about drinking and death because they were extending the work of the goliardic poets, reminding their public of the importance of enjoying life to the maximum while holding at bay the sober realities that awaited them on the outside: *Gaudeamus igitur*.

Gwendolyn Morgan’s retirement, celebrated by this volume of essays, is a solemn occasion. Yet it is also, as the neogoliardic poets of the Chat Noir would surely agree, a reason to celebrate the freedom from authority (the “university administration”) it represents. Let us raise a virtual glass to her future adventures! What joy to discover new horizons and to take pleasure in new discoveries! Vivat academia! Vivat professore Morgan! Semper sint in flores.

⁴⁶ Kevin and Brent Moberly, “Play,” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed., Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 175.