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Credit, Consumption, and Images of Women’s Desires: Selling the Sewing Machine in Late Nineteenth-Century France

Judith G. Coffin

“It is doubtful if the history of the entire world can furnish an instance in which any single house . . . has had a growth so stupendous within an equal amount of time,” declared a pamphlet published in 1880 by the Singer sewing machine company.1 Singer could boast an empire, and it did, making its international success the centerpiece of the company’s unprecedented advertising campaign. In France, as in other European countries, the company printed pamphlets to be distributed at world’s fairs, given out in department stores, and carried by traveling salesmen or dry-goods merchants into the countryside. Imitating the style of popular broadsheets and almanacs, brochures like Les Merveilles de l’industrie exulted in the “miracles” of technology and tried to conjure them up for their readers.2 Advertisements plas-

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1 John Scott, La Génie recompensée, ou l’histoire de la machine à coudre, (n.p., 1880), 40. The pamphlet was a translation of the original English Genius Rewarded, or the History of the Sewing Machine (New York, 1880).


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tered on city walls incorporated imperial imagery and played to self-congratulatory fantasies about the European mission to civilize the hearts of darkness throughout the world. One such advertisement showed two African men carrying a white sewing machine salesman into the jungle above the caption: “Singer, harbinger of civilization.” Singer, and all sewing machine manufacturers, attributed the extraordinary success of their product to what they saw as a simple and unassailable fact: “In every corner of the inhabitable world” sewing was women’s work. As the manufacturers saw it, the sewing machine was destined to become “the gentle and docile companion of any working woman—whether her skin be white, red, black, or yellow.” It could stitch together a far-flung empire where the common and “civilizing” bonds were the universality of women’s essential roles and an admiration for modern technology.

The imperial self-assurance, sentimentality, and conviction about a universal sexual division of labor that such advertisements projected were characteristic for the nineteenth century. The very strength of those convictions, however, begs all the interesting questions about the history of this machine, one of the first mass-marketed consumer durables as well as an industrial tool. Advertisers may have promoted the image of sewing machines as “gentle companions,” but use of them in the home contravened deeply rooted ideas about machinery and craft. The machine’s anticipated effects on the gender division of labor in the garment industry and, later, on the organization of households and women’s work therein, paid or unpaid, were subjects of debate, anxiety, and speculation. Claims like Singer’s also evade important questions about how the markets for such unprecedented products were structured and what obstacles—material and ideological—were confronted and negotiated in the process of developing them.

In this article I present a study of the relationship between production, consumption, and gender in the nineteenth-century history of the sewing machine. Labor historians have noted the way in which sewing machines were linked to the shaping of a new labor market for the garment industry; here I consider the way in which they were linked to the creation of a feminine buying public. Manufacturers

4 Les Merveilles de l’industrie.
6 The social history of women’s sewing work is deliberately sidelined here, but it is the subject of my book, The Battle Over Women’s Work, under contract to Princeton University Press. On sewing machines and production, see Michelle Perrot, "Machine à coudre et travail à domi-
and advertisers who sought to conquer the world with the sewing machine not only had to redesign their product continually in order to adapt it to various workplaces, they also had to create their market by engaging and interpreting women's needs and desires. A study of that process reveals how goods were marketed and given meaning during the beginnings of a revolution in consumption.7

The article is divided into three sections. I deliberately bring together subjects that are usually treated separately: family incomes and credit payment, constructions of femininity and methods of marketing, and advertising, sexology, and models of the female body. The sewing machine was inextricably bound up with a late nineteenth-century revolution in consumption, and, as several observers noted, the “fuels” of that revolution were credit and advertising.8 The first section of the article thus tracks the reorganization of the credit industry and the changes in working-class life and patterns of consumption. The second section turns to the “revolution” in advertising, experiments in advertising imagery from the 1850s to World War I,
and the changing representations of female needs and desires during this period. The last section concerns a furious controversy in medical circles about women, their erotic energies and their relationship to the sewing machine. Although medical discourse and advertising imagery had different purposes and publics, juxtaposing them sheds light on concerns that ran through late nineteenth-century culture in general. Taken together, these very different sources teach us much about how the people of that period reckoned with the possibilities and perils of early consumer culture.

"Clients of Humble Fortune:"

Credit Payment Plans

The greatest obstacle facing sewing machine manufacturers was the poverty of their customers. Virtually no working woman or man was in a position to purchase such an expensive device outright. In the late 1870s an ordinary family model cost around 225 francs, which amounted to one fifth to one half of a seamstress’s yearly earnings. The Singer Company proclaimed that it had a democratic as well as a civilizing mission: to provide technology to clients “of humble fortune.” Sewing machine advertisements from other manufacturers, likewise, promised “easy payment.” All manufacturers dropped prices, reduced down payments, and provided credit. The expansion of credit was crucial to developing a working-class market for the machine.

Installment payment plans pioneered by the sewing machine industry hardly entailed a new attitude toward money; it would have been a far greater novelty to persuade working people to pay for even small items with cash. Yet these plans were part of a significant change in how working people borrowed money and bought goods. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the credit industry expanded beyond the boundaries and control of neighborhood grocers or wine bars; credit transactions became more formal. Credit became increasingly pivotal to the future of large-scale Parisian commerce. Over the course of a few decades, new credit institutions began to transform the relationship between manufacturers of consumer goods and the people of France.

The leader among these new institutions, significant in the marketing history of the sewing machine, in particular, and in the financing history of working-class consumption, in general, was the “grands magasins Dufayel.” The enterprise was launched in 1856 by a Monsieur Crépin, who sold photographic portraits and allowed customers to pay for them over several months. Crépin's success with this method encouraged him to start selling other merchandise and to expand his credit operations by selling credit in the form of coupons (bons d'abonnement), which his clients could use at designated merchants' stores. For a down payment of 20 francs, a customer could purchase a Crépin coupon worth 100 francs of merchandise, and in return for being supplied with customers, those merchants then discounted their bills to Crépin 10 to 20 percent from the retail price.

Crépin's successor, Georges Dufayel, added on new operations, including a store on the Boulevard Barbès in working-class Paris. The plebeian counterpart of such grands magasins as the Bon Mar-

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10 By the mid-nineteenth century, state officials, working-class leaders, and novelists were all calling attention to French (and especially Parisian) workers' "inveterate" habit of spending beyond their means and buying everything on credit. Workers who replied to questions on the subject in 1872 complained about the absence of any regular credit establishments. Enquête... 1872, Questionnaire A No. XII, 13–14. On the history of credit, see Daniel Roche, Le Peuple de Paris: Essai sur la culture populaire au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1981), 85; Michael Sonnenscher, Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics, and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades (Cambridge, 1989); Guy Thuillier, Pour une histoire de la vie quotidienne au 19e siècle en Nivernais (Paris, 1977), 382, 386; Eugen Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France (Stanford, 1976), 38–40; Charles Couture, Des différentes combinaisons de ventes à crédit (Paris, 1904); Avenel, Le Mécénisme, 4:364, 365, 373; Henri Leyret, En Plein Faubourg (Paris, 1895), 49–50; Williams, Dream Worlds, 92–94.

11 These portraits were also important indexes of an emerging middle-class consumerism. Those who bought these photographs had some discretionary income, but not enough to afford painted portraits. Crépin's photo portraits offered self-commemoration and a distinctive identity for a reasonable price.

ché or the Magasins du Louvre, which accepted only cash, Dufayel's was the first department store to offer all its wares on credit. By 1904, Dufayel had outlets in all the principal cities of France. "Les plus vastes magasins du monde; et les meilleurs marchés de tout Paris," claimed the company's catalogue. The main store sprawled across several blocks from the rue de Clignancourt to the Boulevard Barbès, and its credit networks extended into nearly all the popular quarters of Paris, which were divided into tournées of two streets and assigned to a Dufayel abonneur. The abonneur carried a booklet that recorded information on the clients in his tournée, including the initial deposit, how many payments had been made, and the reliability of the customer. The company, in turn, used the information these salesmen gathered to strike out in new commercial directions. Dufayel became one of the first French advertising agencies that published surveys and compiled mailing lists. Dufayel, therefore, did more than simply peddle credit to the working class; it was actively creating, shaping, and scrutinizing a new buying public.

The sewing machine was Dufayel's most widely advertised item: it took pride of place in displays and brochures and it defined the store's promise. In part, that promise was practical: Dufayel offered working-class families credit to buy expensive necessities, and the catalogue offered a range of industrial and "home" machines. It was also cultural. Brochures for the Barbès store showed working-class families ogling sewing machines in elegant cases alongside decorated mirrors, clocks, and pianos, all of which were cast as furnishings to upgrade a household. One economist-critic remarked that "the whole [credit] industry gives the appearance of luxury for cheap." What Dufayel offered and promoted, however, was a more specific cultural ideal: the working-class version of a middle-class foyer, or home. Such a place was more than a shelter, it was a center of leisure and self-expression—a sign of status that had to be created through careful purchases. Credit enabled working-class women to

13 See Couture, Les Combinaisons, 79, and Dufayel brochures in the Service Recueil at the Bibliothèque Nationale.
14 Couture, Les Combinaisons, 73. By 1907 three of every seven working-class families in Paris had taken out subscriptions to Dufayel. Maurice Halbwachs, cited in Michelle Perrot, Les Ouvriers en grève: France 1871–1890 (Paris, 1974), 211, n. 36. The histories of credit and popular notions of thrift and economy still need to be investigated.
15 For example, in 1893 Dufayel's trade journal, L'Affichage national, offered lists of 600,000 Parisians classified by profession, milieux, or situation, p. 26.
16 For reasons discussed here, the displays showed the home model; however, customers could order nearly any specialized machine from the catalogue, which suggests a more industrial market and male buyers.
17 Couture, Les Combinaisons, 3–4.
furnish their homes in the same way as their middle-class counterparts had done for decades. These cultural innovations and messages were intimately linked to the enterprise's economic and social significance. Dufayel was a celebration of modernity, consumption, and the "home," and it offered all of these to the popular classes via credit.

Dufayel provided one model of credit payment. Sewing machine manufacturers developed another, extending credit directly to their customers or working through local merchants and clothing manufacturers. The practice multiplied opportunities for swindle. Workers in the garment industry figured that sewing machines were sold at over twice their value, and surprisingly, manufacturers agreed with that estimate. Moreover, Dufayel and other retailers sold sewing machines à tempérament, which meant they waived the down payment, offered free delivery, and required no payment for the first month. This offer was considered a rental, which meant that when customers could not make payments they lost their machine, and none of their money was reimbursed. Even enthusiastic proponents of the expansion of credit considered this system scandalous.

The many government studies of work in the garment trades offer some access to workers' experiences with the credit payment system. Sewing machine manufacturers tried to reach the public directly by sending their own abonneurs into the streets—or into the countryside. In some regions, abonneurs also helped clothing manufacturers recruit workers by traveling from house to house in search of families needing extra income. In areas where clothing manufacturers had large networks of handworkers, they "tried with all their power" to make women use machines and raise their productivity. Employers lent machines out to women, but discovered to their irritation that doing so increased their workers' independence

19 Ministère du travail et de la prévoyance sociale, Office du travail, Enquête sur le travail à domicile dans l'industrie de la lingerie (Paris, 1911), 5:68.
22 Enquête . . . lingerie, 5:66.
and bargaining power: temporarily equipped with their own machines, seamstresses could secure work from other manufacturers who offered better or steadier pay. For the same reason, workers purchased their own machines whenever possible, believing that ownership allowed them to work for whom they pleased.23

The price of independence, though, was indebtedness. Working seamstresses faced a dilemma. On the one hand, not having a sewing machine doomed one to the cheapest kind of handwork. Persuaded that the problem with women's wages lay in the technological backwardness of the female trades, charitable and religious societies set up programs teaching poor women how to machine stitch and helping them to buy or rent cheap machines.24 On the other hand, low wages and very high seasonal unemployment made embarking on a credit payment plan a risky venture. In some regions and trades, workers calculated that a machine simply did not justify the risk, and they refused to abandon handwork, no matter how poorly it was paid.25 In almost every case, debt added to the burden of overwork, long days, and low wages, exacerbating the sense of démesure among garment trade workers.26

The provisioning of credit shaped not only the market for sewing machines, but also the history of the garment industry and that of household labor. The abundance and cheapness of labor in the garment industry had long created powerful disincentives to mechanization and accounted for garment manufacturers' relative indifference to new sewing technologies. Women's unwaged labor was similarly cheap or undervalued. Thus mechanization only happened when widespread credit enabled workers, whether as wage earners or housekeepers, to finance the transition themselves.

The relationship between the mechanization of production and the extension of consumer markets was multifaceted, and credit supplied one of the links in this relationship. By century's end some observers reported that sewing machines were appearing even in households of poor and remote regions, a development only pos-

23 Ibid., 101.
24 Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, Le Travail des femmes au XIX siècle (Paris, 1873), 405. Political economy's diagnosis worked its way into sentimental fiction, creating the image of a sewing machine as a new lease on life, a symbol of rehabilitation or modernity. See the brochure from the "Association pour faciliter aux ouvrières l'achat d'une machine à coudre," in Bibliotheque Marguerite Durand: dossier "Machine à coudre", and Dr. A. Espagne, De l'industrie des machines à coudre (Paris, 1869), 22.
26 The démesure is documented in the various enquêtes of the Office du travail, see Du Maroussem, Le Vêtement à Paris; and most eloquently in J. Barbaret, Le Travail en France: Monographies professionnelles (Paris, 1886–1890).
sible because of the newly organized credit industry. That industry built on longstanding popular institutions and on popular needs as well as industrialists' imperatives and ambitions. As we have seen, its emergence can be traced to various contradictory forces, ranging from dire necessity and laborers' battles for autonomy vis-à-vis their employers to rising expectations and new cultural ideals. Although it was not simply foisted on a hapless working class, large-scale credit did pry open working-class households, forging new links between those households and the national economy, the labor force, and consumer culture.

Gendering the Machine: Advertising and Design

The obstacles to creating a market for sewing machines were cultural as well as material and were derived from a nexus of ideas about the home, machinery, and femininity. Some of these ideas were of long standing. Medieval and early modern guild regulations had specifically banned the use of machines in the home and prohibited women from operating them in order to combat "clandestine," non-guild home production and to guard trade secrets and craft hierarchies. Nineteenth-century taboos were different, more concerned with preserving the tranquility of the foyer and with separating the home, which was seen as a sphere of privacy and family life, from a more intrusive industrial economy. But older and newer ideas overlapped and reinforced each other. Wildly contradictory views of women's work so strongly voiced during the nineteenth century—indignation about industrial toil, for instance, and the sentimentalization of


28 As feminist historians have recently pointed out, industrialization did not destroy these hierarchies: apprenticeship, technical training, and access to skilled machine work remained, in large measure, male monopolies. Workplace roles and job definitions were redefined in ways that more often than not preserved gender hierarchies and male privileges. Relevant examples of this work include, for France: Nicole Pellegrin, "Femmes et machine à coudre"; and Helen Harden-Chenut, "La Formation d'une culture ouvrière féminine: Les Bonnetières troyennes 1880–1939" (Thèse de troisième cycle, Paris 7, 1988). See also Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor, "Sex and Skill: Notes towards a Feminist Economics," Feminist Review 6 (1980); Cynthia Cockburn, Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change (London, 1983); and, for an excellent summary of the issues, Sonya O. Rose, Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England (Berkeley, 1992), 24–30.

29 On nineteenth-century domestic ideology, see the important discussion in Bonnie Smith, Ladies of the Leisure Class: The Bourgeoisie of Northern France in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton, 1981). See also Adrien Forty, Objects of Desire, 118–19, and chap. 5 in general.
household labor—created obstacles that manufacturers and retailers had to negotiate.

Depictions of women in the workplace that intended to capture distinctively "female" ways of working reveal some of these common conceptions and the accumulation of a cultural imagery. Several conventions seemed to govern those images. Engravings of women workers in the clothing trades were often a pretext for pornographic or erotic fantasies and merged the commerce in fabrics and clothing with a traffic in women. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century engravings of *lingères*, for instance, showed women flirting with their male clients and provided voyeuristic peeks at groups of women together behind closed doors. Seamstresses' fantasies (romantic, materialistic, or both) were also favorite themes, and likewise can be read as projections of the viewers' desires. Unlike representations of male labor, which focused on the worker and the work process, those of female labor centered instead on commerce and sales and on women as vendors or beautiful objects. The "artistry" of working "girls" was the closest any of these engravings came to acknowledging skill. Intimate conversations, gossip and rumors, and flaunting of the workshop rules and discipline were represented as the core of seamstresses' "work culture." Representations of femininity endowed women with such qualities as dexterity, taste, intuition, and artistry, but these qualities were sharply distinguished from craft, skill, and technological mastery, which according to common conceptions, were acquired and maintained in the masculine world of the shop. Artisan elites worked with machines, operating and repairing them; it was difficult to imagine "Jenny l'ouvrière," gazing dreamily out her garret window, doing anything of the sort. The iconographic storehouse from which advertisers and designers drew did not associate women with machinery.

In principle, the sewing machine had many possible destinations, or markets, because the garment industry had a male as well as a female labor force and a mix of home and shop trades. In its infancy, then, the sewing machine was polymorphous. But in advertising, at any rate, polymorphous tendencies were quickly repressed in favor of a more gendered identity. Manufacturers almost immediately began to differentiate between markets and to multiply the number of models available to reach different publics. Special-

30 The visual material on *lingères* and *couturières* is enormous and scattered through various archives. The largest collections are at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes, collection "métiers" Md 43 and "moeurs" Qa22, and at the Bibliothèque des arts décoratifs, collection Maciet, series 330 "métiers," vol. 35 "boutiques et magasins."
ized machines were advertised as intended for the male, all-purpose or "family" models as intended for the female worker. These categories hardly meshed with the actual division of labor in the garment trades, but they did comport with the culture's gendered notions of skill: men were trained to become specialists, to acquire expertise so that they could handle complicated technologies, while women were expected to do "all purpose" work. From the beginning, the "Singer girl" who appeared in the company's advertisements became the trademark of Singer's aggressive effort to associate itself with the home model and to win the female market.

A pamphlet distributed by one of the first French manufacturers had been illustrated with a soldier sewing at a machine, but within a few decades references to men who sewed vanished almost entirely. The exceptions are revealing. A poster, issued around 1900 for the Compagnie française de la machine à coudre depicts a tailor sewing a Prussian flag. "Women of France, take notice!!!" the caption reads, "No more foreign competition! Victory!" (see fig. 1). The "competition" was ostensibly the German sewing machine industry, represented by the Prussian tailor, but the advertisement also drew on reservoirs of hostility toward men (especially Jewish men) for competing in "women's trades," mixing anti-Semitic and nationalist commonplaces in an effort to rouse potential customers. The other advertisements depicting men—the colonialist "civilizing mission" images cited in the introduction and an advertisement for Singer's outlet in Tunis—portrayed "picturesque" or "exotic" scenes. By the late nineteenth century, a man at a sewing machine became a kind of anthropological flash card; instantly recognizable as foreign.

This process of gendering also shaped industrial design, which was a crucial part of marketing. The first generation of sewing machines were operated standing up, and they were clumsy devices, with thick legs and large, exposed gears. Very quickly, though, designers graced even the tables of shop machines with curved iron

31 An early LeBlond advertisement set out this differentiation visually: a woman sat at a family model at the center of the page, while specially adapted, male-operated machines circled the edge. "Machines à coudre françaises" (1855) Journaux-LeBlond, BN, Cabinet des Estampes.


33 The reference to prospectus is in Espagne, De l'industrie des machines à coudre, 4. The collection of post cards at the bibliothèque Forney is full of "folklorique" scenes: "the old tailors of Finistère," "Egyptians and Arabs (sic) knitting" and so on. See the "couture" section of the collection.
Figure 1. “Compagnie française des machines à coudre,” c. 1900. Courtesy of Musée de la Chemiserie et de l’élégance masculine, Argenton-sur-Creuse.
legs, rounded the machine's body, polished the finish, and added artistic touches. Ornate wrought-iron stands, removable decorative "bonnets" or, in the most expensive models, rosewood or mahogany cabinets turned the sewing machine into a piece of furniture. In some cases, the cabinets cost 300 to 400 francs, which was double the price of the machinery and underscored that the product's value was not simply utilitarian.34

The Victorianism of the mid-nineteenth century, in its intense preoccupation with home and femininity, produced some very strange efforts in ornamentation. Manufacturers offered sewing machines that incorporated elaborate sculptures into the simple machinery: a squirrel (suggesting frugality and prudence), a cupid with a drawn bow, and a pair of golden scissors.35 Machines began to crop up in fashion plates issued during the Second Empire, where they seem particularly out of place perched delicately on table tops, resting under the gloved hands of elaborately dressed ladies. Their femininity is exaggerated, as if they were trying on a gender for the first time. The fussiness of these models, and the pictures of them, are reminders of how strange such a machine seemed in a home, and how forced the connection was between a sewing machine and femininity.36

Most advertisements from this early period (1850s–1870s), though, seem less contrived. To the contrary, they contributed to creating and disseminating the now familiar tropes of nineteenth-century domesticity: the contrast of public and private, industry and home, male and female. They juxtaposed portraits of sewing machine factories, blast furnaces, smokestacks, and brawny men carrying rods of pig iron with the world of women, needlework, family chores, and the home. In so doing they acclaimed the excitement of progress, industry, and technology and strove to wed that excitement to the reassuring imagery of separate spheres.37 Engravings showed

34 Visual materials and advertising archives offer the best evidence for the evolution of design. See the collections in the Musée des arts décoratifs and the Bibliothèque Forney. On the history of design and marketing, see Forty, Objects of Desire; Penny Sharpe, An Introduction to Design and Culture in the Twentieth Century (New York, 1986); and Susan Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed.


36 Advertisement for "Le Follet," 9 rue de Richelieu (1860). Bibliothèque Forney, Folio Réserve 5536 1 icon, 18. See, in the same series, an unusual combination of products in the same advertisement: "Robes et Foulards de la compagnie des Indes, essences et parfums de Violet, et machine à coudre de la Maison Callebaut."

37 See, for example, the description in John Scott, La Génie recompensée, or the advertisements for the "Compagnie française de la machine à coudre" in the Musée nationale des techniques.
Figure 2. “Le Follet,” 1860.Courtesy of Bibliothèque Forney.
a whole family going into a machine showroom or a woman alone at
her machine framed by a window looking out onto the world out-
side. Most advertisements also sought to attract a broader clientèle
than was possible with the fashion plates and the golden-scissors ma-
chine, whose appeal was so unabashedly to middle-class sensibility.
The “sewing machine girl” who popped up in advertisements from
Singer, LeBlond, Gigaroff, and other French manufacturers was
simply dressed, with a small lace collar, long dark skirt, and neatly
fastened hair. She could easily have been a working woman, but not
surprisingly, the advertisements cast her as a paragon of domestic
industry and womanly virtue who transcended social class.38

The advertisements glossed over the main use to which the new
machine would be put in the purchaser’s home—domestic chores or
industrial labor. Given the culture’s tendency to exalt the former and
deplore the latter, this vagueness was doubtless intentional. The his-
torian cannot entirely resolve the question of how women used their
sewing machines. The difficulty is conceptual as well as empirical,
for women’s labor cannot be neatly divided between work for the
family or work for the market.39 Only a family with a middle-class
income could have afforded the machine solely for family use, for
display as a parlor symbol of modern femininity. Outside this stra-
tum, women with sufficient skills to sew for their families most often
turned those skills to putting out work for the market. By the same
token, laboring women who were not seamstresses rarely did more
than mending for their families.40 Wage earning weighed heavily
in a working-class family’s decision to invest in a sewing machine,

38 The portrait was especially popular in the 1870s when, in the aftermath of the Franco-
Prussian war, French women’s magazines called on their readers to work hard and eschew
frivolity. Echoing the government of moral order, they warned that France’s redressement re-
quired “une génération plus forte et moins efféminée”: Journal des Demoiselles (1872): 27. This
theme recurs, for while sewing was cast as a craft embodying domestic virtue, fashion as
self-expression was frequently condemned as narcissistic.

39 The problem is especially marked with sewing work, but nearly all historians of female
labor confront it. Karin Hausen puts it very well: it is “impossible to draw any clear dividing
line between the domestic and the commercial economy. . . . This female labor ran through
the whole gamut of different types, from private to organised labour,” in “Technical Progress
and Women’s Labor,” in Iggers, The Social History of Politics, 260. The relationship between
paid and unpaid labour long remained what Hausen called “a theoretical and factual no-man’s
land,” ibid. See, however, Jean Boydston’s excellent “To Earn Her Daily Bread: Housework
and Antebellum Working-Class Subsistence,” Radical History Review 35 (1986), 7–25; Eliza-
beth Blackmar, Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850 (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), chap. 4, esp. 114–26; and
Jean Quataert, “The Shaping of Women’s Work in Manufacturing: Guilds, Households and
discuss these issues in chap. 3 of my book.

40 See Jeanne Bouvier, Mes Mémoires: Une Syndicaliste féministe, 1876–1935 (reprint
Paris, 1985); and Nicole Pellegrin, “Femmes et machine à coudre.” The number of lower
middle-class women who did travail à domicic is quite striking.
a decision that spoke not only to the machine's appeal as an ideal of femininity, but also to the family's hard-nosed calculations about income.

In the history of advertising, as in the history of credit, the 1880s and 1890s marked a turning point. Fin de siècle Paris stood at the center of this transformation, for the increasingly aggressive presence of department stores and a series of world's fairs made the city the largest advertising market in the world.41 "Advertising is the soul of commerce," explained a brochure mailed out by Dufayel, capturing the new thinking on the subject, and it went on to list the various venues in Paris where merchants could hang their posters for a fee. In addition to street walls (listed by arrondissement), railroad stations, and kiosks, Dufayel offered space in urinals and, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Bastille, in the "chalets lumineux de l'exposition universelle," or on the "rideau allégorique" at the Folies Bergères.42 Dufayel played a key role in developing advertising as well as credit, for both were important strategies in creating and attracting a new buying public.

The end of the century also witnessed advertising's first efforts to become "scientific" and to connect its techniques to studies of potential consumers. Dufayel's pioneering market surveys classified thousands of Parisians by the level of rent they paid and sold those rolls to merchants. Trade journals emerged that critically reviewed advertisements and articulated the "basic laws of advertising." Those "laws" were increasingly based on psychological principles, although few experts could agree on what these principles entailed. Articles discussed the importance of repetition and clarity, debated the question whether "harmony" or "intensity" would imprint a message more effectively, reviewed the use of symbols, and counseled adver-


isers on how to use associations and images to link their product to their target audience among a new group of consumers.43

Trade journals such as La Publicité moderne were particularly interested in women, toward whom advertisements were increasingly directed. One writer claimed to have found that 80 percent of all purchases in magasins had been made by women.44 The journal editors considered the conclusion definitive: the buying public was female. Accordingly, they paid considerable attention to the female temperament and to women’s needs. Many of these examinations were remarkably straightforward, eschewing flights of fancy about feminine desires or weaknesses and clearly operating on the assumption that women consumers should be won over with forthright, persuasive texts. Articles explained that women liked “coquetterie” and sales and that they carefully compared prices and models. Indeed, one article claimed that women could work through much more detail—both visual and written—than men.45 In these journal articles women were considered—often incorrectly—to be the key to household spending. In one article on women and advertising the author’s findings were summarized in an unusual and interesting way by the statement that the “home” (in English) was “the umbilical cord of our economic and social world.”46 How, exactly, the author envisioned this anatomy and the relationship it represented is not clear, but the metaphor is revealing about gender and the economy in the era’s developing social thought. Money spent on or channeled through the home (newly adorned as a well-appointed interior) was the emergent economy’s lifeblood, and it flowed through an unmistakably gendered vessel.

These developments helped refashion images in advertising in the 1890s. The home as a center of display and consumption, modernity, and the “new woman” who embodied all of these, supplied an extraordinary variety of new themes to manufacturers, industrial designers, department stores, and poster artists.47 Even the most practi-

43 As one of these new trade journals put it, “L affiche est sortie de l’empiricisme et est devenue une véritable science dont il importe de préciser les lois.” La Publicité moderne (March 1908). See also, in the same journal, “Six Principes de la psychologie” (Nov. 1907); “Les Bases scientifiques de la publicité” (Oct.–Nov. 1908). Writers were at pains to point out “ce qu’il faut dire, ce qu’il faut taire.” A full discussion of the development of psychology and its relationship to advertising is beyond the scope of this article. See, however, Silverman, Art Nouveau, chap. 5.
44 “Conquerez les femmes,” La Publicité moderne (May 1908).
45 Ibid.
47 The new woman was “modern” in that she was unconstrained by traditional prescriptions about domesticity and virtue; her ties to the home were as a consumer who embellished that home.
cal consumer good could signify something about its owner's class or status, and neither designers nor advertisers spared any effort to enhance this aspect of the sewing machine's appeal. As late nineteenth-century brochures show, displays of sewing machines in department stores were remarkably lavish. So was their design. Set in decorated wood cases, machines could metamorphose into "meubles" akin to other furniture, mirrors, and clocks, items that stores like Dufayel were selling to the working class to create a sense of the "interior." Catalogues advertised sewing machines' "belle ébénisterie" and "mahogany wood" and elevated their class standing by describing them as "meubles" "riches," and "de grand luxe" that could grace "bourgeois interiors" and be suitable "dans tous les milieux." Almost all advertisements underscored the machine's dual purpose as a gagne pain and beau décors. One particularly emphatic line of catalogue copy read: "On l'apprécie aussi bien comme moyen d'existence que comme ustensile si utile à tout propos dans les ménages" (emphasis mine). Thus packaged, the machine's dual meaning was explicit. It suggested a means of existence and a way of being, as well as a means of production.48

The catalogues were explicit about this "moyen d'existence." By the 1890s sewing machine advertisements beckoned to the working as well as the middle classes. Many of them showed cozy, well-furnished parlors in which these instruments of toil were prominently and lavishly displayed; they were images that represented the ways in which the working-class household had become a home. Increasingly, the sewing machine was sold as a vehicle and symbol of an emerging working-class consumerism rather than simply of laborious production; it was presented to the woman as a consumer, not as a household worker.

The images of virtuous domesticity and labor that had filled the advertisements of the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s did not suddenly vanish. Graphic artists continued to mine the rich iconographic tradition that depicted women engaged in spinning and sewing.49 Advertise-

48 Brochure from Pfaff, 1901. Catalogue illustrations as well as text lavished attention on decorative and representational aspects of the sewing machine. Catalogues from Erda and Griga, Howe, Hurtu, Panneton frères, A. Petit, Pfaff, Singer, Stoewer, and Wallut in the collections at the Bibliothèque Forney.

ments showed mothers sitting at sewing machines while their daughters gazed up admiringly, learning important skills in a familial setting: the commercial progeny of more exalted artistic lineage—like Millet's humble seamstresses.50 By the 1890s, however, sentimental domestic scenes had begun to seem hackneyed and had to share the stage with more “modern” images of femininity. More and more, advertising produced new icons like the woman now emblematic of belle époque art: “half fairy princess,” as a late nineteenth-century writer described her, “half ‘gigolette,’ lips parted, eyes promising, ... enticing passers-by with sewing machines, chicory drink, petrol lamps, and sulphur waters.”51 This siren/prostitute, with her drinks and soaps, bodily luxuries, material comforts, and labor-saving devices combined to project a euphoric vision of abundance, eroticism, and freedom that the belle époque defined as “modernity.” Many sewing machine advertisements from this period featured the “new woman:” self-confident, showing her ankles, and wearing skirts in light and billowing fabrics. Visions of fashion, freedom, and self-expression eclipsed any representations of work. As advertising followed a trajectory from images of domestic duties and toil to images of the “home,” and, in the late 1890s, to images of freedom and self-expression, it became increasingly open-ended and evocative, and the infusion of erotic fantasies and dreams of liberation loosened the literalness of older conventions.

Other advertisements relied on different “modern” allusions. Sewing machines were frequently paired with bicycles in displays. The two emerged as mass-produced goods at the same time, required similar production techniques, and were often produced by the same firms. Sewing machines were frequently designed so that the treadle on the side of the machine suggested the wheel of a bicycle, or car.52 Advertising drawings placed women at whirring sewing machines as if they were driving a locomotive or riding a bicycle; sometimes their children were shown helping to pull the fabric through. The analogy was tenuous, for the bicycle's wheels rolled, whereas the sewing machine's rotated; the bicycle carried the rider somewhere, whereas the

50 See, for instance, Millet, “Les Couturières” and “La Leçon de tricot;” H. Salmson, “Chez grand'mère”, or any of the other examples in Bibliothèque des arts décoratifs, series 330.23, which sentimentalize women's roles as guardians of family traditions.

51 Avenel, Le Mecanisme, 4:176. “Il faut que l'image fasse corps avec la réclame,” Avenel continued. But this was hardly the case, at least not in any simple sense. Many of these belle époque advertisements were surprisingly undifferentiated by product. On pictorial representations of femininity and artistic traditions, the best discussion is Silverman, Art Nouveau, chap. 4.

52 See advertisements for Vigneron, Bibliothèque Forney.
sewing machine rooted its operator in place, consigned to repetitive tasks. Yet the juxtaposition banished images of stasis, confinement, and necessity, replacing them with those of movement and freedom and making work look like leisure or recreation. Whatever happened at this machine was sharply differentiated from sweated labor.

Advertisements strove hard to summon up images of modernity, freedom, and technological advance. One Singer advertisement showed a winged sewing machine flying over the Eiffel Tower, a rainbow spanning the horizon. "Marianne" figures (then deployed as symbols of the modernizing Third Republic) flew or danced with machines in their arms. New Home's boast that their machine was "léger et rapide" had a similar purpose: by century's end, the exhilaration of speed and the ideal of freedom from industrial or domestic drudgery had become more compelling sales pitches than the virtues of needlework and the duties of domesticity. In this fashion advertising revealed its flair for more ambiguous, erotic, and anarchic fantasies.

Yet the exhilaration of speed—and the image of the "new woman" that accompanied it—also produced currents of anxiety, which run through many of these images. Magician figures cropped up in sewing machine advertisements promising to conjure away endless domestic toil, but they could also summon up stories of the sorcerer's apprentice and of magic and machinery out of control. In a widely reproduced "New Home" advertisement, a woman is sewing up a boy's pants, while he, still in them, is dangling head first off the table and pumping the machine's pedal with his arms! The picture refers to a story by the very popular Comtesse de Ségur, *Le Bon Petit Diable*, in which a wicked Madame MacMiche takes revenge on her mischievous orphan nephew Charles, and the machine assumes some of the playful, or diabolical, aspects of the characters.53 The advertisement could be interpreted as a spoof on maternal tenderness or as a comic vision of folk characters hurtling into the modern world. In any event, it seems (unintentionally, no doubt) menacing as well as whimsical.

Other advertisements used caricature, which, likewise, turned on elements of the grotesque or worrisome. The machinery was so simple, advertisements proclaimed, that an elephant or monkey (a popular symbol of imitation, mimicry, or automated labor) could use it. Advertisements showed elephants clambering onto sewing

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53 Musée de la publicité, No. 16269. New Home, with medaille d'or 1889. My thanks to Nicole Pellegrin for telling me about *Le Bon Petit Diable*. 
Figure 3. “Neva, Les meilleures pour familles et ateliers,” 1880s. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Forney.
Figure 4. “New Home,” 1889. Courtesy of Musée de la Chemiserie et de l’élégance masculine, Argenton-sur-Creuse.
Figure 5. “Machines à coudre Elias Howe,” 1906. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Forney.
machine chairs as they would onto circus pedestals and operating the sewing machine with their trunks, or monkeys, balanced atop the machines, hurtling down "loop de loops" or rollercoasters. These images offered a fantastical vision of machine labor as a spectacle of dexterity, something akin to a circus performance. Yet just as the circus featured performances that were at once marvelous and freakish, so these advertisements could quickly become hostile and demeaning, belittling women's skills or domestic routines. The possibility did not escape notice at the time. In 1903, La Publicité moderne anxiously identified caricature as a growing trend and chided commercial artists for their tendency to ridicule their subjects and for their use of what the journal perceived as a rash of "bad" mothers and ugly, frightening, or "devouring" women in advertisements. The New Home sewing machine advertisement was singled out for criticism, and so were the circus images. The journal's editors may have objected to the irreverent portrait of domesticity; they may also have sensed that commercial artists were satirizing rather than celebrating and encouraging the new consumerism and turn-of-the-century materialism.

In these various ways, the advertising art of the fin de siècle registered a sharp rebellion against older models of domestic virtue and against older certainties about what constituted "the feminine." The rebellion was a product of intersecting social forces. At a historical moment, when public health officials and social reformers were denouncing deteriorating conditions and "sweating" in the needle trades and a growing number of feminists were voicing their impatience with the sentimentalization of needlework and domestic crafts, manufacturers, designers, and advertisers were forced to contend with what they considered "women's" new needs and discontents. Sewing machine manufacturers cast the machine as the great emancipator or as the bearer of women's fantasies; advertising artists tried to visualize and "package" those fantasies. If some of these

54 The elephant advertisement may have been a satire on manufacturers' claims that "anyone" could sew with a machine and that their product would make women's skills obsolete. The artist may have wanted to play on the design of the machine and the elephant's trunk, making the former look like a dainty version of the latter.

55 La Publicité moderne (15 Sept. 1903). They were also critical of earlier advertisements that had used violence, strange and jarring images, and depictions of products doing odd things in order simply to call attention to themselves. See ibid., May 1907.

56 See Anne Martin-Fugier's interesting discussion of "les arts de la femme" and the simultaneous glorification of and disdain for women's handicrafts in La Bourgeoise: Femme au temps de Paul Bourget (Paris, 1983), 162–68; Madeleine Pelletier, L'Éducation féministe des filles (n.p., 1914), Marie Guillot's columns in L'Ecole émancipée, 24 May 1915 and Tribune féministe (7 June 1913), 444; and Jeanne Bouvier, Mes Mémories.
images were playful and exhilarating, the real gender antagonisms of the period inevitably made other depictions of women’s desires seem frightening or ugly. Those fears took on a characteristically belle époque cast: that femininity on wheels might careen out of control, escaping domesticity altogether. Finally, as the next section of my article will show, one can find sexual or erotic imagery in these advertisements—release, weightlessness, and being transported with pleasure—imagery that was at once exciting and troublesome.

The anxieties represented and provoked by these images help explain the surprising success of the more soothing advertisements created by Jules Chéret for the Singer company. Today we might find them dull, especially when we compare them with Chéret’s more famous work, but La Publicité moderne commended these advertisements for their “verve” and legibility. Their message was straightforward and clearly aimed at working women: the text promised 3 francs a week, no down payment, and free lessons at home. Chéret’s design cleverly negotiated some of the ideological shoals created by the appearance of the “new woman,” most notably, that the promise of emancipation and the lure of new consumer goods aroused fears of female flight, of materialism, and of a weakening of the nation. A page-sized Singer “S” created an image of movement and ease (like the roller coaster), but it also wrapped itself reassuringly around the woman sitting at the sewing machine—connecting her to her table and to the solid ground of the task before her.

Sex and the Sewing Machine

The fin de siècle, then, witnessed the very rapid expansion of visual advertising, especially in France. If there was a “science” of this advertising, it was only just emerging, still inchoate and, as the casting about for female images shows, very tentative. Reading advertising history alongside other contemporary sources will bring some of its distinctive features into sharper focus. One of the striking aspects of this history, for example, is the medical profession’s discourse about women, their erotic energies, and their relationship to the machine, a discourse as elaborate and freighted as the representations produced by commercial artists whose business lay in selling the machine. The language and approaches of advertising and medicine

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57 Singer spared no expense: Chéret was the most celebrated, innovative, and expensive graphic artist in France. He did eight posters for Singer. See Lucy Broido, The Posters of Jules Chéret (New York, 1980).
58 La Publicité moderne, (1906–7), no page number.
were, in some respects, strikingly different, produced in different circles, and addressed to different publics—learned medical men, on the one hand, and potential consumers, on the other. Juxtaposing them, nonetheless, illuminates common cultural problems, tensions between different views of womanhood, and the pressures being put on gender at the end of the century.

Doctors had long disagreed about the kind of changes mechanization might bring to women's sewing work. One enthusiast, writing in the 1860s, sounded the "great emancipator" theme that ran through so many of the Singer advertisements. The sewing machine, he proclaimed, would "end the white slave trade" and abolish the poverty that drove needleworkers to prostitution.\(^{59}\) Such promises, whether issued by manufacturers or doctors, were vigorously contested. In 1869 Dr. A. Espagne devoted an entire book to doing so. Espagne argued that the treadle caused leg and abdominal cramps and that the machinery shook the operator's arms, chest, and abdomen. In an unusual acknowledgement that sewing was not simply "unskilled," Espagne went on to explain that sewing machine work required "pas seulement un notable déploiement de forces, mais encore une grande attention et un certain degré d'intelligence."\(^{60}\)

Espagne believed that the mental challenge of sewing was therapeutic.\(^{61}\) Many of his colleagues, however, clearly believed that such work exceeded women's capacities. French physicians linked sewing machine work to excitability, tension, and "menstrual problems." The list of symptoms is typical; nineteenth-century medicine viewed nervous and gynecological problems as being of a piece. This view encouraged doctors to label the maladies they discovered in sewing workshops characteristically "female," to ignore "ungendered" forms of stress and overwork, and to move swiftly from treating sewing machine operators' aches and exhaustion to studying their reproductive organs.\(^{62}\)


60 Espagne, _De l'industrie des machines à coudre_, 11–13.

61 Ibid., 13. The argument about the "disciplinary" value of such work carried forward an older view of the virtues of sewing, work, and discipline.

62 This medical literature, produced by reform-minded doctors, was crucial to the history of protective (or gender-specific) labor legislation of the late nineteenth century. Because the health problems physicians flagged in industry were all related to reproduction, factory legislation did not need to protect men.
For the same reasons, physicians riveted their attention on female sexuality. A study of industrial health hazards claimed that “when women were involved,” working at the sewing machine resulted in “the development of venereal excitement (satyriasis).” An astonishing number of doctors seem to have believed that the action of rubbing the legs together while pedaling the machine was sexually arousing—though not surprisingly, the doctors hastened to add that only women were thus aroused. A Dr. Eugène Gibout, writing for a Parisian hospital bulletin in 1866, described in vivid detail how this happened:

As you know, these machines are propelled by two pedals, one for each foot. They are driven by the rapid up and down motion of the lower limbs, in particular the thighs. Sometimes the movement is simultaneous and isochronic for the two limbs, which rise and fall together, thereby giving the entire body a continual and regular rocking motion. Sometimes, however, with differently-constructed machines the driving motion of the two limbs alternates, that is, when one thigh rises, the other descends. In this latter case the body doesn’t bear this regular rocking motion easily, but experiences a jolt, a general agitation, ceaselessly repeated, resulting from this rapid friction of the thighs against one another.

For this young woman, these different movements produced a considerable genital excitement that sometimes forced her to suspend work, and it is to the frequency of this excitement and to the fatigue it produced, that she attributed her leucorrhrea, weight loss, and increasing weakness.

Gibout presented such evidence as the testimony of women workers themselves; yet, his article documents how this testimony was constructed, how authoritative professionals received and diagnosed women’s complaints about vaginal discharges or menstrual aches. One of Gibout’s patients “complained of having her period much too often, twice per month, and each time flowing abundantly during at least five or six days.” “Positive proof,” Gibout asserted,


64 In the medical literature, as in the sewing machine advertisements, men rapidly disappeared from the discussion. See Paul LeRoy Beaulieu, Le Travail des femmes, 407–9. Karen Offen has presented some of these writings in “Powered by a Woman’s Foot: A Documentary Introduction to the Sexual Politics of the Sewing Machine in Nineteenth-Century France,” Women’s Studies International Forum 11 (1988): 93–101. I have used her excellent translations. I agree with Offen that the debate is about women working outside the home, but it is also about eroticism, consumption, and changing models of the female body.

"with regard to the intensity of the aphrodisiac excitement and its frequency." His diagnosis followed from nineteenth-century preconceptions about the links between reproductive biology, menstrual cycles, and sexuality. The menstrual period was considered to be a woman's most fertile time and also the time when she was apt to be aroused sexually—like a female animal in heat. The key to women's overall health, the uterus was an organ at once reproductive and erotic. Anything involving menstrual discharge, then, had to be related to sexual desires or needs.

Such warnings moved from medical journals into the broader public discussion of women's work. While sewing machine advertisements promised an end to drudgery and banished images of labor in favor of those of handsome furniture, joyous consumption, and unfettered motion, medical discourse returned to themes of work, pain, and corruption. In the 1860s and '70s tailors repeatedly called their fellow workers' attention to the dangers of women's work at sewing machines. They advised women to use machines with only one pedal; otherwise, they warned, "the deplorable effects we are warning you about are inevitable." The Journal des demoiselles frequently commented on the ongoing debate and counseled those of its readers interested in purchasing a home model to choose "la pédaule magique," or single pedal model, which did not rub the legs together and was more "hygienic." The wide publicity given such worries

66 Gibout, "De l'influence," in Offen, "Powered," 97. To say that Gibout's diagnosis provides virtually a catalogue of the ideological aspects of nineteenth-century medicine is not to deny that women workers provided such testimony.

67 Thus, for instance, Gibout attributed stomach pain, poor digestion, weight loss, and other ailments of which workers complained to "the ravages produced by an involuntary masturbation." I have found two discussions of nineteenth-century medicine particularly helpful: Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Peter Gay, The Bourgeois Experience (New York, 1984), vol. 1, chap. 4. In 1870, a more skeptical doctor questioned 335 women workers on the subject of sexual arousal at the sewing machine. He reported that 141 of the women could not imagine what he was talking about, 126 of them believed that other women had such experiences, though they had not, 68 women reported "great excitement, though only during their menstrual periods." (It is impossible to tell whether he suggested the link between arousal and menstruation or whether women reported it that way.) Dr. Emile Decaisne, "La Machine à coudre et la sante des ouvrieres," Annales d'hygiene publique et de médecine légale (1870), cited in and translated by Offen. Unlike Gibout, this doctor did not see his subjects as "passionless" females battling unknown forces; instead they were knowledgeable and incorrigibly sexual persons. The debate indicates the range of opinion on female sexuality within the French medical profession. It also brings out the voyeuristic aspects of the profession, for such passages usually combined scientific talk with lasciviousness.

68 Exposition universelle de 1873 à Vienne: Rapports de la délégation ouvrière française (Paris, 1874), "Rapport de la délégation des tailleurs," 78–80. See also Exposition universelle de 1867: Rapports des délégations ouvrières (Paris, 1869), 21; the report from the Congrès ouvrier of 1867, cited in Barbaret, Le Travail en France, 297; and Bariquand, Exposition universelle de 1878, classe 58, 2. Workers hoped that a machine run by electricity would solve the problem.

69 Journal des demoiselles (1881), 23.
created a dual challenge for advertisers: on the one hand they could exploit the erotic imagery in such writings; on the other they needed to assuage the fears it awakened.

In the 1860s the issues thus raised were primarily moral and social. But as the end of the century approached, the concerns became less moral and more distinctly erotic; that is to say, they were less bound up with questions of industry, social order, and appropriate work for women, and more closely linked to the erotic experiences of all "modern" women. In this they both reflected and reacted to the pervasive eroticism of much belle époque culture, including, as we have seen, leisure, merchandising, and advertising.

It was characteristic of this change that the issue of sex and the sewing machine resurfaced, not in studies of women's work, but in discussions of female sexuality such as Pouillet's *De l'onanisme chez la femme*, which went through seven editions in the 1880s and '90s. Pouillet's observations, picked up by Havelock Ellis in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* and incorporated into Ellis's discussion of "auto-eroticism," were as follows:70

During a visit which I once paid to a manufactory of military clothing, I witnessed the following scene. In the midst of the uniform sound produced by some thirty sewing machines, I suddenly heard one of the machines working with much more velocity than the others. I looked at the person who was working it, a brunette of 18 or 20. While she was automatically occupied with the trousers she was making on the machine, her face became animated, her mouth opened slightly, her nostrils dilated, her feet moved the pedals with constantly increasing rapidity. Soon I saw a convulsive look in her eyes, her eyelids were lowered, her face turned pale and was thrown backward; hands and legs stopped and became extended; a suffocated cry, followed by a long sigh, was lost in the noise of the workroom. The girl remained motionless a few seconds, drew out her handkerchief to wipe away the pearls of sweat from her forehead, and, after casting a timid and ashamed glance at her companions, resumed her work.

... As I was leaving, I heard another machine at another part of the room in accelerated movement. The forewoman smiled at me, and remarked that that was so frequent that it attracted no notice.71

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71 Ellis summarizes these findings in the chapter on "Autoeroticism" of *Studies*, vol. 1. For a discussion of Pouillet, see Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience*, vol. 1, "Education of the Senses," 1:301.
Pouillet's account of the factory scene reads like contemporary descriptions of attacks of hysteria, and like the medical literature on hysteria, it is revealing about late nineteenth-century medicine's conceptualization of the female body and its characteristics.\(^2\) As these observations amply illustrate, a woman's body appeared to be in the thrall of biological and sexual rhythms that were only half understood by modern medicine—and quite beyond medicine's capacity to manage. Such writings demonstrate how medical experts projected their bafflement and inability to master the dynamics operating in the female body onto their female patients, presenting women as bewildered and "tyrannized" by their sexuality.\(^3\) They offer suggestive parallels to the contemporary "discovery" of the unconscious in French psychiatry and the metaphors that discipline used to describe the hidden and inexorable control the unconscious exerted over will and body.\(^4\)

The cultural preoccupations and medical models at work here are closely linked to advertisements that used images of sewing machines hurtling down tracks and caricatures of the "new woman" in constant and dizzying motion. The advertisements drew upon, and helped disseminate, these medical images of the female body as a delicate machine. Womanhood itself was often envisioned as a "biological roller coaster,"\(^5\) sporadically exhilarated or depressed by eruptions of nervous or erotic energy. It is not surprising, there-

\(^2\) Descriptions of hysteric had strongly erotic elements. See Mark Micale's excellent and comprehensive review: "Hysteria and Its Historiography: A Review of Past and Present Writings," *History of Science* 27 (Sept. and Dec. 1989). See also Michel Foucault's points on the "hysterization" of women's bodies that accompanied the emergence (or "mise en discours") of *scientia sexualis*. *The History of Sexuality* (New York, 1978), vol. 1. Worried male workers sometimes referred to these alleged health troubles as "délires hystériques." See Pellegrin, "Femmes et machine à coudre," 69.

\(^3\) On the uterus as a "hidden control center," see Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 214, 217 and 207–27. Again, I have found Peter Gay's perceptive analysis of the medical profession extremely helpful. *The Bourgeois Experience*, vol. 1 (New York, 1984), chap. 4. See references to similar literature in Yvonne Knibiehler, "Le Discours médical sur la femme: Constantes et ruptures," *Romantisme* (1976): 54, 55. Knibiehler argues that the turn of the century constituted a unique moment in the history of medical thinking about female sexuality: older certainties had collapsed, clearing the way for a variety of possible findings. By the end of the war, however, that moment had passed, washed away by the tide of natalism. Doctors were no longer interested in studying female sexuality; they were concerned with women only as mothers. The same argument could be made about women and advertising.


\(^5\) The phrase is Laqueur's, *Making Sex*, 221.
fore, that images of automated femininity (like women on bicycles or at sewing machines) carried strong sexual associations and that female sexuality seemed so utterly unpredictable and out of control. Advertisers and graphic designers, like the medical profession, lavishly—and sometimes haphazardly—mixed images of autonomy, emancipation, exhilaration, and autoeroticism.

The themes of the medical debate, then, overlapped with those of advertising. They were nonetheless handled differently. Advertising’s erotic references to desires, pleasures, and release (and association of those with market freedoms) seemed deeply disturbing to many doctors and sexologists, who dwelt obsessively on the mechanics of the erotic body and how they might go awry. In the advertisements, the female body was unconstrained, liberated from drudgery, a site for celebrating and marketing the pleasures of modernity and joyous consumption; in the medical literature it became a site of dangerous transgression and debilitation. Finally, where advertisers purposefully traveled as far as possible from the world of labor and production, medical professionals were obliged to visit it, if only in passing, to read the rapidly growing literature on sweated labor and to respond to some of their colleagues’ increasingly urgent pleas for the state to regulate women’s working conditions.

That a device like a sewing machine could command such attention from the medical profession underscores the depth of concerns that arose at the intersection of technological change and gender. Those concerns arose from the machine’s strong associations with consumption as well as production: with bare-armed women walking on the streets, women riding bicycles, or with fashion, self-expression, and narcissism. Technological fantasies, as Rosalind Williams observed, are deeply embedded in the “dream world of mass consumption.” In the medical literature, as in advertising posters and catalogues, it would have been hard for contemporaries to find a more striking image of the possibilities and perils of modernity than the woman at her sewing machine. Read alongside each other, the medical debate and the advertising history afford excellent examples of late nineteenth-century culture’s encounter with sexuality, modernity, and machinery, and of the models deployed and the conclusions reached regarding the female body.

Conclusion

A 1915 poster for the “journée du poilu,” painted by Adolphe Willette, shows a soldier on leave joyfully reunited with his fiancée. They embrace in the foreground, while a dog watches them curi-
ously. In the background, behind a chair kicked over in the delight and surprise of the moment, a sewing machine sits on a table. It has settled into a place alongside the dog, who is an emblem of faithfulness in the iconography of sentimental domesticity. The machine becomes an instantly recognizable icon of a twentieth-century Penelope, working patiently while her man is at war. The scene is clearly intended to suggest timelessness. Its very familiarity seems to evoke an equally seamless, harmonious, and predictable (non)history: men have always made war, women have always made clothes. The machine stands as a modern version of Penelope's loom or Saint Anne's distaff.

The histories of the sewing machine, the gender division of labor, and the imagery of feminine virtue, however, are considerably less seamless than the version implied in this poster. In an 1840s engraving, a soldier might have been sitting at the machine, and the clash between such a scene and the one depicted in Willette's poster highlights the changes undergone during those sixty-some years. The artist's poster of 1915 makes no suggestion that this modern Penelope has been sexually excited by the machine rather than by her male companion. The earlier medical controversy about the sewing machine's baneful effects and errant eroticism had suggested more discordant and jangling views of women's desires and of women's relationship to men, work, or technology—views smothered in this engraving by the conservative pieties of wartime. Willette's modern Penelope is not gasping for breath, doubled over with stomach cramps, dousing herself with water, or flying down a roller coaster with a monkey behind her. Those other images, however, which were characteristic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advertising and representations of women at work, capture better than Willette's poster the experiments and real uncertainties of the period.

The development of early consumer culture in France and women's participation therein was riddled with obstacles. Advertising campaigns that marked some machines for women, setting off a scramble for a new female market, confronted unprecedented problems. Women wage earners were too poor to buy machines. Women's labor, waged or unwaged, industrial or domestic, was undervalued. Women lacked systematic training or mechanical experience.76 In this

76 By the 1890s, women could learn sewing in short lessons from a sewing machine salesman. Women's magazines had published patterns since the 1850s, but only at the end of the century, encouraged by sewing machine manufacturers, did they provide the kind of detailed directions that a nonprofessional seamstress could decipher.
Figure 6. A. Willette—“Journée du Poilu.” Courtesy of Bibliothèque Forney.
context, technological and commercial innovations often served several purposes. Interchangeable parts, for instance, enabled *lingères* to adapt their machines to tasks from different manufacturers or subcontractors by changing a stitching foot or adding a buttonholer. They also permitted (usually female) customers with no knowledge of machines to get them repaired by mail. Manufacturers developed machines that were both inexpensive and sturdy; more important, they developed credit systems that would restructure the market for consumer goods and help create a female buying public.

Those who would tap the new female market were obliged to imagine, elicit, and appeal to women's needs, discontents, and desires. Manufacturers and advertisers did so through the grid of their culture's changing conceptions of women's needs, women's physiological and moral capacities, and women's relationship to the "home." Just as Doctor Gibout diagnosed his patients' complaints through the lens of a physician's understanding of the female body and its sexual economy, manufacturers, advertisers, and graphic artists deciphered and presented women's needs through the lenses available to them: the inherited iconography of women's work, political economy's diagnosis of the "problems" with women's work in industry, new models of the body and its dynamics, belle époque images of modernity, and commercial retailers' emerging ideas about the "home."

Conceptions of the home proved particularly crucial because they were so closely linked to the emergence of a mass consumer market. Earlier nineteenth-century ideas about the home had centered on its spiritual importance as the bastion of values, order, and discipline and its economic importance as a productive unit, reminiscent of a family farm. By the 1890s such ideals had been decisively reshaped by conceptions of the family as the "umbilical cord" (as *La Publicité moderne* put it) of a fledgling consumer culture, measured by standards of living and welfare. Earlier notions of la femme au foyer, illustrated in Singer advertisements from the 1860s and '70s, had emphasized virtue, modesty, and diligence. The *fin de siècle* witnessed a full-fledged rebellion against these values, a refashioning of beliefs about what women should be doing in the home, and a new emphasis on women as consumers who made credit purchases—the creators of the modern home. The sewing machine became a powerful sym-

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77 Early twentieth-century brochures describing interchangeable parts instructed customers to order by the part's number and *not* to write "comme la dernière fois." Brochure for the "Excelsior" from A. Petit, 1902. See Bibliothèque Forney, collection of catalogues. Later, electric motors would make the machine more useful to a range of female customers. See Monique Peyrière, "Un Moteur électrique pour la machine à coudre."
bol of working- and lower middle-class consumerism, of the working class "home," and of the status and modernity that could be achieved by credit.

The social practices of sewing at the machine merit a separate discussion. I have been concerned here with the years before World War I, and in this period, working-class women who went into debt to purchase a machine almost always used that machine for industrial labor, in travail à domicile. For these women, the sewing machine had a dual meaning; it was a mark of a modern household and of access to the "world of goods," but it also represented hard-nosed calculations about family incomes without which such access would be impossible. That advertisers tried to recast an instrument of production as an emblem of modern consumerism, of self-expression through commodities, and of domestic modernity illustrates the changing rules of gender in late nineteenth-century France; that women continued to earn wages at their machines, however, shows that not all of them could afford to play by these new rules.

78 By reinvigorating homework, the machine helped women from a range of social situations preserve their gender and class status while at work. I discuss travail à domicile, sewing, and the family economy in my book. The differences between the American and French markets for sewing machine are very revealing about the different mixes of women's paid and unpaid labor and family economies. On the weak mass market, see Robert Frost, "Machine Liberation: Inventing Housewives and Home Appliances in Interwar France," French Historical Studies 18 (Spring 1993), 124–29.

79 The sewing machine is a particularly striking instance of how goods make "visible and stable the categories of culture." Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, The World of Goods (New York, 1979), 59.