

## Toulouse-Lautrec and anti-Semitism in *fin-de-siècle* Paris

Essay by Louis Dzialo

In 1892, a salacious dime-novel hit the shelves in Paris. Victor Joze's *Reine de joie, moeurs du demi-monde* (*Queen of Joy, The World of Easy Virtue*) tells the story of Alice Lamy, an enterprising Parisian courtesan, and her depraved relationship with a fictitious Jewish financier, Baron de Rozenfeld. Toulouse-Lautrec's poster that advertised the novel depicts the novel's moment of high-comedy. Prior to this scene, Baron de Rozenfeld has struck a deal to engage in an illicit relationship with Alice for a tremendous sum of money, plus a fully furnished townhouse in the fashionable Bois du Boulogne. Upon realizing what the Baron has offered her "[Alice] rises suddenly, embraces the Baron with her bare arms, and as her lips slide towards the old man's mouth, she encounters an obstacle in the form of his large hooked Semitic nose and there she plants her kiss."<sup>1</sup>

Though Toulouse-Lautrec's poster advertising *Reine de Joie* (Figure 1) remains true to elements of this scene, it is not without the artist's own creative embellishments. Joze describes Rozenfeld as "an aging Semitic type...an impassive figure of a man who knows his power."<sup>2</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec alters the Baron, depicting a "a short, overweight, sunken figure of a man who indulges in what money can buy and whose own passive body language does not suggest a consciousness of his own power."<sup>3</sup> His Baron is a grotesque blob of a man, his sordid character reiterated in Lautrec's (ambiguous) suggestion that he gropes Alice's breast with his right hand.

The fame of Toulouse-Lautrec's advertisement soon outgrew that of the book itself. The critics working in 19th-century Paris flocked to write their reviews of Toulouse-Lautrec's poster for a public that was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic. After banking scandals involving Jewish financiers in the 1880s and widespread accusations of Jewish corruption in the upper echelons of government, anti-Semitic rhetoric took hold in the French press. Both leftist and conservative papers grew increasingly alarmist about supposed Jewish control of French markets and government. In response to his poster, critics lauded Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic vision while heaping derision on Baron Rozenfeld, and the Jewish financiers he represented. One critic commented that Rozenfeld symbolized a "typical sad-looking Jewish stockbroker, an old lecher who is shown in in a state of ruin caused by his debauchery...[The poster] conveys the stultifying, moronic effects of a life of pleasure, the stupidity and vulgarity of it all, and the lassitude of the instantaneous partners."<sup>4</sup> Audiences were scandalized, not so much by Alice Lamy's free-wheeling courtesan, but by the implication that a corrupt, Jewish financier could pay women like her to enact immoral sexual fantasies.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Joze, *La Ménagerie sociale: Reine de joie, moeurs du demi monde*, (Paris: Julien, 1892), 159. Translation from Ruth E. Iskin, "Identity and Interpretation: Receptions of Toulouse-Lautrec's *Reine de joie* Poster in the 1890s" in *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring 2009).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>3</sup> Iskin, "Identity and Interpretation," 2.

<sup>4</sup> Octave Uzanne, *Let Maîtres de l'estampe et l'affiche* (Paris 1896), 819-826, translation adapted from Gale B. Murray ed., *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Retrospective* (New York: Hugh Lautner Levin Associates, 1992), 235-245.

*Reine de Joie* graced the walls of Paris at a fractious time in the history of the French Third Republic (1870-1940). Formed after a humiliating defeat during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the Republic was financially prosperous but morally and socially tense. During the 1880s and 1890s, segments of an emergent populist press charged that the Jews were the root of France's problems dating to the defeat in 1870 and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine to the German Empire. In 1892-1893, Edouard Drumont's *La Libre Parole* (*The Free Word*) dedicated to nothing more than publishing the most virulently anti-Jewish conspiracy theories, was Paris' largest and most influential paper, with 400,000 daily subscribers (Figure 2). Anti-Semitism in France reached its ugly climax in the Dreyfus Affair of 1894-1906, when the military court-marshalled Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish-Alsatian officer, accusing him of passing military secrets to Germany. In fact, the evidence was crudely fabricated and Dreyfus was completely blameless, but the French Military orchestrated a massive cover-up to keep the innocent man in prison. In effect, Dreyfus had been convicted of the imaginary crime of Jewishness, synonymous with treason in the eyes of many anti-Semitic Frenchmen. The press exploded with anti-Semitic characters and conspiracy theories as "*L'affaire Dreyfus*" threatened to rip the fabric of the nation in half.

Toulouse-Lautrec was likely the only one of his contemporaries to refrain from expressing his political opinions during "the Affair," most other artists staked out their political stances. Moreover, his 1893 cover for the journal, *L'estampe originale* (Figure 3), shows his intimate relationships with some Parisian Jews. The cover portrays Jewish master printmaker Père Cotelle (identified as Jewish by his kippah) running Toulouse-Lautrec's lithographs through the press at Édouard Ancourt's printshop. Though aristocratic by birth, Toulouse-Lautrec would have worked alongside Cotelle and other Parisian Jews throughout his career.

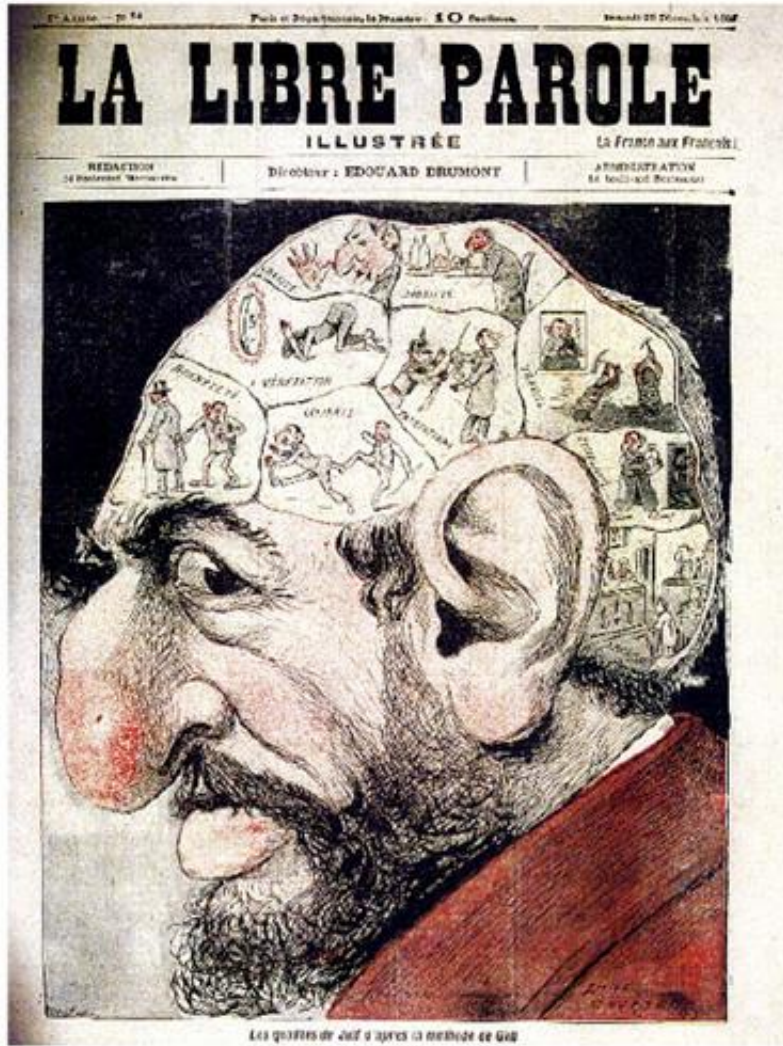
Still, the *Reine de Joie* is remarkable for its negative portrayal of Jews and supposed degenerate Jewish morality, especially when compared to another Toulouse-Lautrec print. In *Debauchery* (Figure 4), produced in 1896, Lautrec presents the image of a man greedily groping a prostitute's breast. Unlike *Reine de Joie*, this image was likely created for a circle of Toulouse-Lautrec's intimate friends and colleagues, as the cover for a catalogue of artistic posters. The man portrayed in the print is one of Toulouse-Lautrec's best friends, the painter Maxime Dethomas, a six-and-a-half-foot giant who the four-and-a-half-foot Lautrec affectionately followed throughout Paris. Toulouse-Lautrec claimed the image was "taken from nature" and gave Dethomas a copy signed *Au gros n'abre* ("to the big tree," Toulouse-Lautrec's playful nickname for his friend).<sup>5</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec frames this scene of lust as a lighthearted inside joke for his artist comrades. In *Debauchery*, Toulouse-Lautrec revels in the sexual promiscuity that one might think he moralizes against in the *Reine de Joie*. The outrage of the *Reine de Joie* poster, therefore, is not the crime of prostitution or covetousness, but the Baron de Rozenfeld's crime of Jewish identity. Even if Toulouse-Lautrec was not an outright anti-Semite, his reliance on established Jewish tropes and stereotypes opened the door for his contemporaries to perpetuate anti-Semitic rhetoric and behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> Mayi, Milhou. *Du Moulin Rouge à l'Opéra : vie et œuvre de Maxime Dethomas, 1867-1929*. Bordeaux, 1991, 74.



(Figure 1) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec *Reine de Joie* (*Queen of Joy*), 1892, Color lithograph on tan wove paper, 1,362 × 930 mm (image), The Art Institute of Chicago, (1927.6114)



*Les qualités du Juif d'après la méthode de Gall*  
*Qualities of the Jew after the method of Gall (the inventor of phrenology)*  
Front cover of the illustrated magazine *La Libre Parole* – *Free Word*, 'France for the French' December 1893

(Figure 2) Front cover of Edouard Drumont's *La Libre Parole* (*The Free Word*), December 1893. Courtesy of the University of Indiana at Bloomington.





(Figure 3) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Couverture de "l'Estampe originale,"* 1893, six-color-lithograph, image 56.3 x 64.2 cm, The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., (1952.8.321).



(Figure 4) Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Débauche* (Debauchery), 1896, lithograph, 9 9/16 x 12 3/4 in., The Minneapolis Institute of Art, (2001.94.2).