

Emily Tragert
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Comps Proposal

Prostitutes in early modern England were polluted, amoral women who seduced men, sullied the military with venereal disease and cheated society of their reproductive powers. They were also poverty-stricken, sexually disempowered victims who needed only the prayers of good Christians, the nurturing environment of a hospital or the economic empowerment of new job training in order to rise from their dishonorable profession. These dichotomous images existed side-by-side throughout the eighteenth century and interacted in a myriad of ways to express the attitudes toward and responses to prostitution in this period. The language used to express visions of prostitution—in popular culture, in the legal arena, in sermons and treatises, and by prostitutes themselves—will be the focus of my integrative exercise. What does it mean that a prostitute is “the prey of the bawd and debauchee”¹ or that she is “dangerous because she infects the men she captures”²? To whom did the terms ‘whore’, ‘harlot’, ‘strumpet’, ‘lewd woman’ or ‘bawd’ apply and what were their connotations? What language was used to discuss prostitutes, their work and the ways in which they interacted with the broader society?

What I find most important about this discourse is the ways in which it relates to and expresses nascent ideas about women, health, the economy and—most interestingly—the nation. In order to address these questions of vocabulary and discourse, I will examine medical and social treatises, works of literature, sermons, laws and court cases and propaganda. I will interest myself in the vocabulary surrounding sexually transgressive women, most often prostitutes.

¹ Bridget Hill, *Eighteenth-Century Women: An Anthology*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), 40.

² Kathryn Norberg, “From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802,” in *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, edited by Linda E. Merians (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 39.

This paper is related to my work from History 395. In that paper, I addressed the question of changing attitudes toward and responses to prostitution in Britain and France in the eighteenth century. I concluded that these attitudes and responses were related to women's changing roles in society, as well as the rise of the nation and nationalism. Although the attitudes and responses changed in unique ways throughout the century in these two countries, the effect of nationalism on these changes was shared. By the end of the eighteenth century, the prevailing attitude toward prostitution was one which envisioned it to be more than simply a crime against morality or individuals, as it had been earlier. There was a trend in both Britain and France toward increased social control and a redefinition of prostitution from a fairly straightforward crime of vice to a more complex web of financial, medical and social deviance and misfortune. The English focus on socioeconomic rehabilitation and the French preoccupation with prevention, treatment and control of venereal disease were both intended to strengthen the nation in addition to rehabilitating and reforming prostitutes themselves.

Although my comps work will spring from the conclusions I drew in this paper about prostitution in eighteenth-century Britain, it will differ significantly both in its central question—which concerns itself not so much with change as with the language used to express, defend or refute that change—and in its approach to primary sources, which will focus less on the reality of response to prostitution and more on the language these sources use to talk about prostitutes and their trade.

The majority of the secondary literature that concerns itself with prostitution in eighteenth-century England does not address in depth the question of the vocabulary of prostitution. Rather, it discusses more generally the attitudes towards and the responses to

prostitution in this period. Scholars approach this topic in a variety of ways. The lenses through which it is viewed include those of medicine, gender, law, economics, and morality.

The language of medicine, pollution and the body was often used to express ideas about prostitution. A discussion of this vocabulary can be found in *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*,³ a collection of essays which concerns itself with the historical and medical contexts of venereal disease as well as its cultural representations. Kathryn Norberg, in her essay “From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease” from *The Secret Malady*, claims that during the eighteenth century, “important changes in attitudes toward mercenary sex and venereal disease occurred that drew together the whore and ‘her’ disease, syphilis.”⁴ Norberg gives examples of the language used to describe these women, a language of pollution, plague and the loss of femininity.

A later essay in *Secret Malady*, however, disagrees with Norberg’s assertions about the language used to discuss prostitutes. This essay is concerned with London’s Lock Hospital—an institution intended to help those afflicted with venereal disease—and the attitudes of the hospital authorities toward patients. It notes with some surprise that “the language in the Lock Hospital accounts does not aggressively mark women for condemnation...the language used in explicit and implicit references to prostitutes is also compassionate and generous.”⁵ The Lock Hospital, like other reformatory institutions such as the Magdalen Hospital for repentant prostitutes, chose to forgo the language of pollution and danger which marked other medical accounts of prostitution in favor of a more sympathetic language.

³ Linda E. Merians, ed., *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

⁴ Norberg, “From Courtesan to Prostitute”, 35.

⁵ Linda E. Merians, “The London Lock Hospital and the Lock Asylum for Women,” in *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, edited by Linda E. Merians (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 130.

Tony Henderson's *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis* addresses the relationship between these two types of language, that of pollution and that of pity. This monograph focuses on the lives of prostitutes themselves and uses legal and economic lenses to examine their trade and the changing roles they played in society. Henderson explores the dichotomous portrayal of prostitutes as both 'agents of destruction' and 'victims', but asserts that these "two prevalent representation of prostitutes...were only rarely in direct conflict with each other".⁶ Henderson touches briefly on the idea of the role of language in reactions to prostitution, noting that the language of pity "became the most acceptable means of expression—even for those who supported more ruthless reformatory methods."⁷ However, he does not discuss this and other instances of the vocabulary of prostitution in depth.

In her article "'Industry in Distress': Reconfiguring Femininity and Labor in the Magdalen House", Jennie Batchelor looks at attitudes about prostitution in somewhat different terms. This article considers the Magdalen House, an institution founded in 1758 to rehabilitate repentant prostitutes. Batchelor discusses how the Magdalen House's "strategic recasting of labor worked to redefine conceptions of gender and sexuality"⁸. Labor and femininity were linked as the Magdalen authorities sought to cast the return to gender-appropriate work as the main component of a woman's 'recovery' from prostitution. The use of language, both inside and outside of the hospital walls, was important in this recasting and redefinition of labor.

In addition to these and other secondary sources which directly address prostitution, I hope to use in my study a collection of foundational literature which will allow me to consider broader questions of medicine, gender and nationalism. This literature includes Michel

⁶ Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis, 1730-1830*, (London and New York: Pearson Education Ltd., 1999), 190.

⁷ Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London*, 191.

⁸ Jennie Batchelor, "'Industry in Distress': Reconfiguring Femininity and Labor in the Magdalen House," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28, no. 1 (2004): 2.

Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, which introduces ideas of the body, power and the dehumanizing 'medical gaze'; Randolph Trumbach's *Sex and the Gender Revolution*, which explores prostitution in Enlightenment London within the broader questions of gender, sexuality and sexual relationships; and *Birthing the Nation*, Lisa Forman Cody's study of reproduction in eighteenth-century Britain which draws important connections between reproduction and politics, government and nationalism.

The primary sources I hope to engage are varied and will include legal, medical, social, literary and religious documents. I will use these sources to explore the contradictory and complimentary vocabularies that contributed to discussion about prostitution and believe that approaching the sources within the context of genre will help to elucidate both the kind of language used to discuss prostitutes and how that language changes depending on the author, audience and purpose of a work. Do different genres use language differently? Do the sources speak to each other across lines of genre, or is language inherently tied up in genre?

I will use several legal codes from throughout the century, including Joseph Shaw's 1763 *Parish law* and Michael Dalton's earlier *The country justice*. In addition, I will use legal records from the Old Bailey. I hope that these two approaches to the legal situation surrounding prostitution will help me elucidate use of certain types of language to characterize prostitution and to justify or challenge legal responses to it. Literature, such as Julie Peakman's *Whore Biographies, 1700-1825*, which is a collection of biographies of prostitutes and courtesans, will provide a different, perhaps more sentimentalized, view of the vocabulary of prostitution. In addition, I hope to use treatises about venereal disease and hospitals, as well as some of the wealth of documents surrounding the Magdalen Hospital for repentant prostitutes. I have found that a great deal of the proposals, sermons and propaganda that preceded and emerged from

the Magdalen frame the fall and redemption of prostitutes in intriguing language and hope to explore this language further.

Through my engagement with both secondary literature on eighteenth-century British prostitution and with the language of primary sources which concern themselves in some way with the punishment, reform or rescue of prostitutes, I hope to contribute to the scholarly conversation about the social and institutional atmosphere in eighteenth-century Britain. More broadly, this study seeks connections between the vocabulary surrounding prostitution and its wider gendered, nationalistic and medical connotations.

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