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978-0-521-03337-4 - Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York
Frances Finnegan

Excerpt

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Introduction

Much has been written about prostitution in the Victorian age, both in the period itself, when an abundance of literature on the subject was stimulated during the years surrounding the enforcement and eventual repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, and when hundreds of local societies were formed for the rescue and reform of ‘fallen women’; and, more recently, when the problem has been examined historically. Most influential amongst the former seems to have been the work of Dr William Acton, whose books *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in their Physiological Relations* and *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, In London and Other Large Cities: with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention*; both first published in 1857, have attracted a considerable amount of attention in recent studies, and have been instrumental in determining modern attitudes both to Victorian sexual behaviour in general and to prostitution in particular. Many of Acton’s notions, particularly in the former work, are now generally regarded as having been rooted in ignorance or even fantasy, and his attitude to the sexuality of women, whom, as Steven Marcus observes, he rarely mentions in that book, have been quoted in recent work largely to illustrate the prejudices, fears and misconceptions of the man and his time. Thus his curiously contradictory statement, based on ‘abundant evidence’ that:

the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind . . . As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions. No nervous or feeble young man

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need, therefore, be deterred from marriage by the exaggerated notion of the duties required from him. The married woman has no wish to be treated on the footing of a mistress.¹

has been much ridiculed, and dismissed together with one of his equally misguided and mischievous notions, on the grounds that Acton was 'the prisoner of the fictions of his age'.² Indeed, one suspects, in common with the town surveyor at Brighton who was infuriated at Acton's accusation that the whole of that resort's drains were insanitary because those in his own lodgings were bad, that Acton was 'basing a general charge on his domestic experiences'.³

Yet in spite of what has been variously described as the fiction, fear and ignorance contained in much of Acton's work, particularly with regard to women, it remains a fact that since 1964, when he was rescued from the obscurity into which he (perhaps deservedly) sank in the eighteen-seventies, William Acton has been regarded as the great authority and shatterer of illusions concerning Victorian prostitution. Steven Marcus, who first introduced Acton's work to modern readers generally, is much concerned with the fantasy, contradictions and confusions contained in his writing, and is aware of what he calls a 'dimmed consciousness' in *Prostitution*. Nevertheless, he describes the work as a very good book, which, he claims, not only explodes the popular myth of the prostitute's downward progress (which Acton maintained was the rare exception), but demonstrates, on the contrary, that most prostitutes sooner or later returned to a 'regular course of life', and that even when actively engaged in the activity, being endowed with 'iron bodies', they were freer from general disease than all other classes of females.⁴ Similarly Peter Fryer in his introduction to the new edition of *Prostitution* published in 1968 states that Acton was the first to challenge the

conventional parable that prostitutes necessarily rotted in ditches, died miserable deaths in workhouses, or perished in hospitals. Such a fate was exceptional, he insisted. Most prostitutes were transients, who re-entered the ranks of 'respectable' society within a very few years: and an increasing number did so by getting married, sometimes 'above their class'. Giving evidence before the House of Lords' Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Act in 1868, he was questioned on this point and took the opportunity of disabusing those of their Lordships who supposed that whores, when they 'lost [their] good looks' and retired, became brothel-keepers.⁵

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In the same vein, in the introduction to the 1969 edition of *London's Underworld*, Peter Quennell states that Acton, like Mayhew, managed successfully to keep his survey 'matter of fact' and 'banish contemporary phobias'.⁶ Finally, Keith Nield in his introduction to the 1973 edition of *Prostitution in the Victorian Age, Debates on the Issue from 19th Century Critical Journals*, shares the same unquestioning acceptance that Acton disposed of 'errors [which] were a litany of the conventional opinion about prostitutes'. He states that Acton 'showed' that

far from rapidly succumbing to disease and demoralisation . . . for many women, short periods of prostitution often culminated respectably in marriage or in business . . . The illusion was shattered that prostitutes sank more or less rapidly to the lowest grade of the profession where they soon died.⁷

It is a curious fact then that, while so much of Acton's work is regarded as questionable, his comments about prostitution are uncritically accepted; and opinions of other observers, some more experienced in the problem and apparently more balanced than he, dismissed as 'illusory', 'mythical', 'conventional belief' and 'vulgar errors'. It is true that, in recognising both that it was possible for a prostitute to redeem herself and begin a new way of life, and also that 'fallen women' such as unmarried mothers were not to be confused with professional street-walkers, Acton can be said to have displayed more sense and humanity than those of his contemporaries who regarded all 'unfortunates' in the same light, and all equally and permanently 'lost'. However, this was hardly a revolutionary doctrine – the hundreds of Rescue Societies, Homes for the Fallen, Female Missions and Guardian Societies operating up and down the country were a testimony to the fact that thousands of people already engaged in works of 'Rescue and Prevention' were aware of the distinctions between different classes of 'unfortunates', and were committed to the rescue and reform even of hardened prostitutes, well before 1857. Further, it is doubtful whether some of Acton's recommendations for the treatment of prostitutes were, as both Marcus and Fryer assert, 'in the direction of humanizing and rehabilitating them'. As one of the chief instigators of the Contagious Diseases Acts – whose infamous provisions he wished to see extended to the female population outside the garrison towns – his recommendations were, on the contrary, regarded by the Abolitionists as dehumanising, and of having the effect of both hardening and

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brutalising the prostitute and endangering the personal liberty and reputation of any female even suspected of being one. Also it may be doubted whether his scheme for the ‘redemption’ of unmarried mothers, who might otherwise be forced to resort to prostitution, was in fact particularly ‘humanizing’, or really designed for the welfare of the unmarried mother herself. In an attempt to promote the employment of such women as wet nurses, forced because they were poor to breast feed the offspring of women of superior classes (many of whom could perfectly well have fed their own infants), he betrays both his class interests and a lack of concern not only for the possible inclinations and emotions of the ‘unfortunate’ herself – whose function is reduced almost to that of an animal – but also for the fate of her own child, from whom she was frequently forced to be parted. In re-assuring his readers that:

It is not street-walkers nor professional prostitutes we are speaking of. We are speaking of the young housemaid or pretty parlour-maid in the same street in which the sickly lady has given birth to a sickly child, to whom healthy milk is life, and anything else death. With shame and horror the girl bears a child to the butler, or the policeman or her master’s son. Of course she is discharged . . . and of course, when her savings are spent, she will have to take, with shame and loathing, to a life of prostitution. Now, she is healthy and strong, and there is a little life six doors off, crying out for what she can give, and wasting away for want of it, and in the nursing of that baby is a chance, humanly speaking, of her salvation from the pit of harlotry.⁸

he assumes that the unmarried mother would automatically prefer to breast feed another woman’s infant – often at the expense of her own baby – to a period of prostitution, even though such ‘salvation’ might last only as long as the continuance of her supply of milk. It seems likely that Acton’s ignorance and phobias regarding the functions and disorders of the reproductive organs – expressed in a book which, as Marcus observes, is in reality almost totally concerned with male sexuality – extended to a similar lack of understanding regarding women’s attitudes to their own bodies and babies. In the light of his statements made two years earlier, of course, Acton’s assumptions regarding the attitude of women of the poor to prostitution (and especially those who, as unmarried mothers, were already ‘fallen’) are somewhat surprising. He had, after all, previously stated:

I have every reason to believe, that by far the larger number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later

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to a more or less regular course of life . . . Incumbrances rarely attend the prostitute who flies from the horrors of her position. We must recollect that she has a healthy frame, an excellent constitution, and is in the vigour of life. During her career, she has obtained a knowledge of the world most probably above the station she was born in. Her return to the hearth of her infancy is for obvious reasons a very rare occurrence. Is it surprising, then, that she should look to the chance of amalgamating with society at large, and make a dash at respectability by a marriage? Thus, to a most surprising, and year by year increasing extent, the better inclined class of prostitutes become the wedded wives of men in every grade of society, from the peerage to the stable.⁹

Others of their number, he claimed, by laying aside sums of money, became successful milliners, shop-keepers and lodging-house keepers. Thus in a few sentences Acton is alleged to have disposed of the errors in conventional opinion regarding the fate of prostitutes (though few in reality belonged to the ‘better inclined’ of their class) and, had his observations been based on fact, then prostitution might be regarded as a means of Victorian self-help and social improvement.

Prostitution, however, contains glaring contradictions. In describing the houses in which prostitutes lodge (and in which they all must speedily fall to the common level) Acton refers to the kitchens in which the women are to be found in the day – ‘dishevelled, dirty, slipshod and dressing-gowned . . . Stupid from beer, or fractious from gin, they swear and chatter brainless stuff all day . . . as a heap of rubbish will ferment, so surely will a number of women thus collected deteriorate . . . to the dead level of harlotry’ – and affirms at another point, in contrast to the statement above, that whores have no thought of saving their earnings against an evil day. Further, he later states that, far from being healthy, at least one out of every four prostitutes in London is known to be diseased, ‘spreading abroad a loathsome poison’, with ‘broken constitutions, sickly bodies, and feeble minds’ being the result of their trade.

In a few words, then, prostitution consigns to a life of degradation thousands of our female population, ruining them utterly body and soul . . . it is the cause of disease, premature decay, ultimately death.¹⁰

The basic contradictions in the book are apparent, and understandable if we bear in mind the fact that Acton was faced with the problem of alerting and alarming the nation regarding the spread of venereal disease, while at the same time stressing the inevitability of

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prostitution and the need for its recognition and regulation by the State. If it was indeed inevitable that certain men would always resort to prostitutes, it followed that such women were performing a service to society. It was therefore necessary to outline as unharrowing a picture as possible of the lives and subsequent fate of the many women who took part in the activity, in order that public conscience might not be aroused. Unfortunately Acton's preoccupation with the economic effects of the spread of venereal disease amongst the armed forces and with the safety of men in general, and his consequent advocacy of the Contagious Diseases Acts were obviously incompatible with his optimism regarding the prostitute's health. For according to him, she, rather than her clients, spread her 'loathsome' disease; and thus it was she who was compulsorily detained in the prison-like hospital accommodation provided by the new legislation.* It is obvious that had prostitutes been as happily situated and as free from disease as Acton at times chose to claim, and as others, using him as an authority, have since represented, there would have been no need for the enforcement of the Acts, and still less for their extension.

Other contemporary observers were not as optimistic as he regarding the ultimate fate of 'public women' – most of whom, of course, were common street-walkers. William Logan, for example, author of *The Great Social Evil; its Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies* published in 1871, produced much evidence based on local research which was directly contradictory to that put forward by Acton. He quoted information received from the Chief Superintendent of Glasgow in the eighteen-forties, for example, which stated that:

The average age at which women became prostitutes is from fifteen to twenty. – The average duration of women continuing prostitutes is, I think, about five years. The most common termination of the career of prostitutes is by death, and this is to be accounted for by the extremely dissolute life they lead. For the most part they live in a state of great personal filthiness – they have most wretched homes – they are scarcely ever in bed till far in the morning – they get no wholesome diet – and they are constantly drinking the worst description of spirituous liquors. In addition to these evils they are exposed to disease in its worst forms; and from their dissolute habits, when disease overtakes them, a cure is scarcely possible.¹¹

* For a description of these wards and the frightening treatment received by prostitutes in them, see Acton, *Prostitution*, pp. 89–96.

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Similar conclusions were reached by William Tait in his study *Magdalenism. An Inquiry into the Extent, Causes, and Consequences of Prostitution in Edinburgh*, first published in 1841. Add to the above the frequent prison sentences to which the prostitute was subject, and it will be seen that this description of the street-walker's life is far more in keeping with the evidence obtained for this study of York in the period than that generally represented as put forward by Acton.

William Logan, in common with Josephine Butler and other leaders of the campaign for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, was aware that the initial causes of women resorting to prostitution were overwhelmingly poverty, overcrowding, and poor pay, working conditions and employment opportunities for women. Though Acton too condemned these as being partially responsible for women taking to the streets, his was a different emphasis. He saw the source of supply as being 'derived from the vice of women' occasioned in the following order:

Natural desire. Natural sinfulness. The preferment of indolent ease to labour. Vicious inclinations strengthened and ingrained by early neglect, or evil training, bad associates, and an indecent mode of life. Necessity, imbued by The inability to obtain a living by honest means consequent on a fall from virtue. Extreme poverty. To this black list may be added love of drink, love of dress, love of amusement.¹²

As we have seen, Acton was aware too that seduction and desertion were often instrumental in forcing an unmarried mother on to the streets, and he felt that the fathers of illegitimate children should be made answerable for their actions. However, it is apparent throughout *Prostitution* that Acton is primarily concerned with protecting men, and that it is women whom he really fears and sees in the role of seducers. Thus

the seduction of a female, properly proved, should involve the male in a heavy pecuniary fine, according to his position – not at all by way of punishment, but to strengthen, by the very firm abutment of the breeches-pocket, both him and his good resolutions against the temptations and force of designing woman.

Such money, he continues, 'this bounty upon sinfulness – this incentive to a seducer', should not be paid to the mother, but put into a fund, half of which should be retained for the bastard

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child and the other half made over to the woman, only should she emigrate or marry. 'Such a law as this would be found materially to harden men's hearts against female seductions.'¹³ Thus within a few sentences the guilt of the man is magically transferred to the woman.

In view of Acton's fundamental attitude to his own sex's part in prostitution – he seems to have regarded them as victims rather than seducers or even equal participants – together with his recommendations resulting in the enforcement and attempted extension of the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts, his reputation for displaying humanity towards both prostitutes and other 'fallen women' is, to say the least, undeserved.

Before briefly outlining the purpose and nature of these Acts, the obsessive desire for the enforcement of which obviously affected Acton's judgement, we should ask why the popular image of the prostitute as a demoralised creature treading the downward path ending in drunkenness, destitution and disease, was one which was so widely held, if it was untrue. Why was there such a 'popular myth' and 'vulgar error' regarding the plight of the common prostitute both in contemporary fiction and in the reports of other writers and rescue workers in the period; and why the necessity for the hundreds of Refuges and Rescue Societies (which, as we shall see, were hopelessly inadequate) if the prostitute could so easily be re-absorbed into society? The facts of the matter seem to be that Acton, far from 'exploding myths' or 'shattering illusions', was as ignorant about and prejudiced against prostitutes as he was about sex in general and female sexuality in particular. For some reason, however, his misconceptions regarding the former have latterly been accepted at their face value, without reference either to his own motives and contradictory statements or to the wealth of other conflicting contemporary opinion on the subject. More important, the mass of detailed evidence available, concerning the lives and circumstances of the prostitutes themselves, has been ignored; and it is in an attempt to examine one city's prostitutes, both as individuals and as a class, that the present study has been made. The results of this work suggest that if these women are in any way representative of Victorian prostitutes in general then Acton's views on the subject, far from being uncritically accepted, should rather be regarded as an interesting example of a middle-class Victorian male's ignorance, fear, prejudice and guilt.

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The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 were intended to diminish the alarming incidence of venereal disease amongst the armed forces, and as such initially applied only to certain naval and garrison towns,* though their supporters (amongst whom Acton was prominent) hoped that eventually their provisions would extend over the entire country. The main features of the Acts were the registration and supervision (by a special police force) of prostitutes; and, if found to be diseased, the compulsory detention of such women in special hospitals until they were cured. Women resisting examination were imprisoned with hard labour. The Acts were given the minimum amount of publicity, but, once fully appreciated, outraged opposition to their spirit and provision stemmed largely from two societies formed in 1869 – the Ladies' National Association for their repeal (led by Josephine Butler) and the National Association.¹⁴ These enjoyed the strong support of Quakers, Wesleyan Methodists and Congregationalists, who emphasised the sexual discrimination explicit in punishing women but not men involved in illicit sex, which epitomised the 'Double Standard' of sexual morality; the class bias of the Acts, in so far as only lower-class prostitutes and street-walkers were likely to be detained; and the unprecedented powers of a police force able to arrest any woman on the mere suspicion of her being a prostitute and the obvious abuses implicit therein. Further, on moral grounds, they opposed the implied State recognition and sanction of a vice, and argued too that, far from rehabilitating her, the provisions of the Acts brutalised and degraded the prostitute still further. Finally, of course, and drawing on medical evidence contrary to that put forward by Acton, they demonstrated the obvious futility and injustice of attempting to control venereal disease by legislating only against street-walkers but not their clients, who remained free to spread infection, even to their wives. They were convinced too that prostitutes in danger of being detained for a period of up to six months (in conditions differing little from those in prisons) would be driven 'underground' and would no longer seek medication voluntarily as they had previously done. At the same time they feared (with justification) that the provisions of the Acts would become progressively more stringent and extend to an ever widening female population.

* York, though a garrison town, was not one of those dealt with by the Acts, though obviously, had their provisions been extended, it would have ultimately become so.

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In spite of what Josephine Butler described as a hostile and 'silent press' the Abolitionists attracted growing support, including that of thoughtful working men who were well aware of the class bias in the legislation.¹⁵ They mounted such a successful campaign that the Acts were suspended in 1883 and finally repealed in 1886. Though the campaign for repeal was given little publicity either in the national or local press (the National Convention held in York in 1874, for example, addressed by Josephine Butler and other prominent speakers and supported by leading York Quakers, was scarcely mentioned in the local press), the Abolitionists produced their own journal *The Shield* from 1870 to 1886.¹⁶ At the same time, the literature in support of the Acts was published fairly freely, with articles concerning prostitution appearing in such journals as the *Westminster Review* and the *Lancet* throughout the period. However, with the exception of that written by Logan, who as a 'missionary' entered brothels and houses of ill-fame in order to talk to and hopefully rescue 'fallen women', Hemyng's account of prostitutes and their associates which appeared in Volume IV of Mayhew's *London Labour and London Poor*, and Tait's earlier account of prostitution in Edinburgh, the literature of the period was concerned less with the prostitutes themselves than with a general account of the problem. Similarly, modern studies, relying heavily on these nineteenth-century authorities, have tended inevitably to reflect this emphasis, the only individual prostitutes or courtesans receiving attention being those who, like 'Skittles' or Nelly Fowler, acquired particular fame or notoriety. Further, recent studies have generally been concerned with Victorian and particularly male sexuality, and with the nature of a society collectively upholding what have been described as the double standards of public as opposed to private morality, and the different degrees of sexual freedom and appetites allowed and attributed to men as distinct from women.¹⁷ This of course applied only to the middle classes, however, since the prostitutes (who, as we have seen, were accorded more sexuality, even if less freedom, than their clients) were drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the poor. There has thus been a concentration on the institutional aspects of prostitution rather than on the prostitutes and street-walkers themselves, who tend to have been neglected in the post-Freudian fascination with the Victorian male's apparent and impossibly high moral standards and consequent sexual repression and guilt. However, whether this assumed and self-imposed so-