



Review: Notes on the History of Victorian Prostitution

Reviewed Work(s):

Prostitution by William Acton; Peter Fryer

The Anti-Society: An Account of the Victorian Underworld by Kellow Chesney

London Labour and the London Poor, Vol. 4 by Henry Mayhew

The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality by Ronald Pearsall

Judith R. Walkowitz

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REVIEW ARTICLE

NOTES ON THE HISTORY
OF VICTORIAN PROSTITUTION

by Judith R. Walkowitz

Prostitution

by William Acton,
edited by Peter Fryer.
Praeger, 251 pp., \$6.95

The Anti-Society: An Account of the Victorian Underworld

by Kellow Chesney.
Gambit, 398 pp., \$8.95

London Labour and the London Poor, Vol. 4

by Henry Mayhew.
(with a new introduction by John D. Rosenberg.)
Dover, 504 pp., \$4.00

The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality

by Ronald Pearsall.
Macmillan, 560 pp., \$10.00

Lower-class prostitution has received little serious attention from contemporary historians. This largely reflects the traditional elitist assumption that only those who have wielded power, who have "shaped the course of events," are the legitimate subjects of history. As such social historians as E. P. Thompson have pointed out, this prejudice has resulted in the systematic neglect of most aspects of lower-class behavior. Hence, as a poor woman engaged in socially inappropriate (deviant) behavior, the prostitute is historically insignificant by conventional standards. Yet, beyond this tendency to consign all members of the lower class to historical oblivion, scholars are particularly reluctant to treat prostitution as more than a social anecdote. Modern works on the social aspects of prostitution manifest a singular lack of intellectual engagement; perhaps this is because contemporary authors view prostitution as a superannuated legacy of the past and fundamentally unrelated to the moral and social concerns of contemporary society. Kellow Chesney's remark that in "the present day world it is arguable how far prostitution springs from economic rather than psychological roots"¹ is a case in point. This shift in emphasis places the onus on the individual's failure to accommodate herself to the predominant culture and exonerates society from primary responsibility. "Antisocial" behavior becomes a function of neurosis rather than a symptom of socio-sexual oppression.

This smug complacency contrasts sharply with the immense interest and literature that coalesced around the figure of the poor prostitute in the nineteenth century. Prostitution was treated seriously then because its pervasive existence challenged the sanctified public truths and values of respectable society. As an object of fascination and disgust, the prostitute was ingrained in the public consciousness, a highly visible symbol of the estrangement, of the social dislocation that marked the industrial era. "The Great Social Evil" was seen as *the* social problem, not simply an affront to morality but as a vital aspect of the social economy as well. Apologists and critics of the social system alike acknowledged prostitution's functional relationship to the basic institutions of respectable society, in particular, the family. The social historian, W. E. H. Lecky, defended prostitution as a necessary safety valve, the social price to pay to ensure the purity of the home. But to critics concerned with social justice, prostitution took on great emblematic significance as the most blatant form of exploitation. American feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who did not share the conventional sentiments of their English counterparts, recognized prostitution as essentially the female condition. It established the archetypal relationship between men and women, repeated in perhaps a more veiled and subtle manner within the confines of genteel society. Prostitution furnished Marx and Engels with the paradigm of *all* social relations in the industrial capitalist era. In a society that valued property above persons, it was the most explicit reduction of human relationships to the nexus of "callous cash payment."

Henry Mayhew² and William Acton³ wrote their pioneering studies of Victorian prostitution with the same compelling sense of immediacy and vital concern that distinguished the writings of Marx and Engels on working-class life. They were self-conscious propagandists for social reform who, in the best Victorian tradition, interspersed hospital statistics and police records with sensational Gothic prose. Their works were highly effective in generating a climate of concern for the poor woman driven into prostitution out of economic necessity. Mayhew and Acton treated prostitution within the context of the social and economic problems that plagued industrial urban England in the 1840's and 1850's. While Mayhew examined prostitution as part of his extensive social investigation of the poor, Acton focused on unregulated prostitution as an extreme threat to public health.

It was in the spirit of social reconciliation that Mayhew and Acton presented their case. Their first plea was for "recognition," a visual and conceptual reckoning with the prostitute as part of the general urban scene. Acton asked,

Who are those fair creatures, neither chaperons nor chaperoned: those "somebodies whom nobody knows," who elbow our wives and daughters in the parks and promenades and rendez-vous of fashion? Who are those painted, dressy women flaunting along

the streets and boldly accosting the passersby? Who those miserable creatures, ill-fed, ill-clothed, uncared for, from whose misery the eye recoil, cowering under dark arches and among bye-lanes?⁴

Recognition entailed a social identification of the prostitute: who she was, how she lived, and how she felt about herself. The interviews that Mayhew and his collaborator, Bracebridge Hemyngs, conducted with prostitutes were early ventures into oral history that successfully captured the language and perceptions of these women. From these interviews, the prostitute emerged as a person with her own history and a definite set of feelings and aspirations. Mayhew and Acton tried to place her within her own environment; they sought to dispel the "foolish idea" . . . "that the harlot's progress is short and rapid, and that there is no possible advance moral and physical and that once abandoned she must always be profligate."⁵ Women grew "grey" in prostitution, and, according to Acton, who was a practicing physician, they were more likely to enjoy good health than their respectable counterparts slaving in the factory fourteen hours a day and bearing innumerable children. And both men indicated that there was no rigid demarcation between respectable society and the depraved social underground. The vast numbers of women engaged in occasional and part-time prostitution were able to merge inconspicuously with the respectable poor. Prostitution might constitute a stage in a woman's life or a part-time activity to supplement her meager salary as shop girl, factory worker, or needlewoman. It was debatable whether that woman was irrevocably scarred by the experience or stigmatized as an outcast. When Acton called for state recognition and regulation of prostitution, he justified his program as a means of enabling the prostitute "to pass through this stage of her existence with as little permanent injury to herself and as little mischief to society as possible."⁶

Mayhew and Acton⁷ were committed to the kind of "realism" that acknowledged prostitution as a necessary and persistent social evil. However, their works on prostitution were more than an apology for the double standard. They tried to name causes and to establish the relationship between commercial sex and prevailing social, economic, and legal structures. "Poverty, evil training and seduction"⁸ drove women into prostitution, as well as forcing them to resort to infanticide, baby-farming,⁹ and abortion. From Acton and Mayhew's perspective, there had been a general breakdown of lower-class family life and a falling away from traditional morality. This established an anomic social condition that opened the way to promiscuous behavior. Yet they reserved their indignation for a society that unmercifully condemned these "fallen" women without providing any legal safeguards against youthful "corruption" (the age of consent being twelve, well below the average age of puberty at that time) and without providing any means for women to support themselves and their families through "honest work." The

liberal reforms they advocated in education and the law—an industrial education for working-class women, more stringent laws against seduction, enforcement of paternal financial responsibility for illegitimate children—later were taken up by the English feminists. While these measures affected women working outside the home and tried to come to terms with the sexual exploitation of working-class women, they only skimmed the surface of the problem. They reflected the middle-class fixation on respectable behavior and a Protestant work-ethic that made it impossible for Victorian reformers to relate directly to lower-class life.

Although they were earnest social investigators, Mayhew and Acton also were eminent Victorians whose works reflect the selective intelligence of their middle-class culture. They were fascinated by the “exotic” world of the lower depths. Mayhew and his collaborators tried to render this strange, uncharted territory comprehensible to their middle-class readers through a systematic cataloguing of the social hierarchy, customs and habitat of the Victorian underworld. This inventory of low life was a distancing technique, an effort to be objective and to tame the unruly anarchy of the social underground. However, these abstract models proved an incomplete protection against the vivid reality of the prostitutes themselves. In a number of interviews, Mayhew’s collaborator, Bracebridge Hemyngs, clearly lost control over the interviewing process. He appeared most disoriented in the case of a woman printsetter who was distressingly unrepentant. She was not driven to prostitution out of extreme want but by a desire for the modest luxuries that she could not afford on her working-class salary. In a monologue worthy of George Bernard Shaw, she cut through the moral sloppiness of Victorian sentimentality and presented a utilitarian appraisal of her situation:

Birth is the result of accident. It is the merest chance in the world whether you’re born a countess or a washerwoman. I’m neither one nor t’other. I’m only a not who does a little typographing by way of variety. Those who have had good nursing, and all that, and the advantages of a sound education, who have a position to lose, prospects to blight, and relations to dishonour, may be blamed for going on the loose, but I’ll be hanged if I think that priest or moralist is to come down on me with the sledge-hammer of their denunciation. You look rather surprised at my talking so well. I know I talk well, but you must remember what a lot has passed through my hands for the last seven years, and what a lot of copy I’ve set up. There is very little I don’t know, I can tell you. It’s what old Robert Owen could call the spread of education.¹⁰

Her argument was unsettling: she saw nothing peculiarly degrading about her

activity. She was simply acting on the possibilities open to a woman of her class, selling her most valuable commodity. Hemyngs was stunned by her style. A prostitute was not supposed to demonstrate such extraordinary common sense; worse still, her special skills and advantages only confirmed her in the path of unrighteousness. Said Hemyngs, "And her arguments though based upon fallacy, were exceedingly well put. So much for the spread of education amongst the masses. Who knows to what it will lead."¹¹

One would hope that contemporary studies of Victorian sexuality and submerged social groups would amplify our understanding of the connection between sexual exploitation, social structure and prevailing cultural values. Such investigations could furnish a provocative intellectual framework for the study of women in history. Two recent books, Kellow Chesney's *The Anti-Society; An Account of the Victorian Underworld* and Ronald Pearsall's *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, have attempted to explore the "other" side of Victorian life. The social underground they describe was merely the distorted mirror image of respectable society, sharing its aggressive competitive ethos and providing an outlet for libidinal and pathological needs. Both respectable society and the "anti-society" were a man's world, where women were subordinated, insulted and silenced. Chesney and Pearsall follow this Victorian tradition. On the question of female sexuality, both authors draw a blank; women are objects to be acted upon, passive victims without voices.

Pearsall's book is a classic example of history as pornography. He gleefully catalogues the hypocrisy, the contradictions, the self-deceptions that were the symptoms of Victorian social schizophrenia. He has utter contempt for his subjects: "Scratch a Victorian personage, be it ever so lightly," he tells us, "and we are sure to find something nasty under the facade."¹² Yet, he does not recognize himself in the portrait: for the sneering contemporary of the Sexual Revolution exposes himself as a voyeuristic late Victorian. His tourist guide approach to perversions and petticoats is as exploitative of his subjects, particularly women, as those historical personages he so scornfully mocks.

Pearsall has no control over his material. He has set out to expose the discrepancy between Victorian myth and lurid reality, collecting his evidence from an assortment of literary artifacts—novels, memoirs, medical treatises, advertisements in provincial newspapers. But the details of sordid social existence have overwhelmed him. He includes everything from aristocratic perversions to menstrual cycles, from the latent lesbianism of Queen Victoria's ladies-in-waiting to sensational sex murders and divorce trials. He has not structured his subject in a meaningful way: he outlines the symptoms of social pathology, but he offers no social diagnosis. He has no sense of how that society operated, or how its sexual mores reflected attitudes toward fundamental human needs and values. He fails to compare Victorian sexuality to the sexuality of past cultures or to present sexual habits.

Pearsall treats women and members of the lower class analogously; he employs all the demeaning social and sexual caricatures that have been traditionally applied to submerged social groups. Pearsall sees both women and the "masses" as social primitives driven by atavistic urges and emotions over which they have no control. Two examples demonstrate the intellectual muddle-headedness and social prejudices that pervade Pearsall's work. He details the ideology of "the Submissive Woman" as embodied in the writings of Tennyson and Patmore. But he has been seduced by the image he has ventured to expose. He ascribes the Victorian woman's submissive behavior not only to social conditioning, but also to instinctive predelection. When speaking of the "New Woman" (a new species whose identity is assumed to be self-evident), he dresses up his strong antipathy for assertive female behavior with a shoddy Freudian analysis: "Their reason told them that they were the equals of men, their instincts forced them into an attitude of sexual submission, both physically and mentally."¹³

In his treatment of the urban lower class, Pearsall reveals to us the language of depersonalization that made the Victorian capacity for self-deception and cant possible. Just as the Victorian woman was a born masochist, so the "working classes" were happy savages, inarticulate masses wallowing in their own filth and ignorance: ". . . the working classes did not get so steamed up about sex as the middle or especially as the upper. Part of this was due to a lack of imagination, to a prosaic concern with essentials, the headline mentality. Part was due to a comparative absence of repression and inhibition, the hallmark of any sophisticated society."¹⁴ While clearly abused, they remained indifferent to the degradations Pearsall so lasciviously presents for the reader's delectation. This is particularly evident in his reference to lower-class prostitutes: "It took a considerable effort of will for outsiders to realize that prostitutes *liked* their trade . . . that the joy in which they manipulated their limbs was not stimulated, that their longings for sexual intercourse was often insatiable."¹⁵ His attempt to identify and differentiate members of the lower class does not extend beyond the traditional stereotypes of "those who wanted to better themselves" and "those who were content to stay as they were."¹⁶ For Pearsall, the "working classes" remain an abstraction, and the notion of working-class culture a contradiction in terms. As such, he is incapable of discussing poor women who turn to prostitution in any way that would relate their behavior to the values of their community.

Chesney's *The Anti-Society* begins to examine the social mechanisms by which the depersonalization of socially "deviant" groups was effected. The work is basically descriptive, a colorful topography of the Victorian underworld. Relying heavily on Mayhew, Chesney studies the "dangerous classes," of Victorian England, the unruly, residual of the preindustrial era, which, he claims, was tamed into sober respectability by the end of the century. And while he offers no adequate explanation for this

metamorphosis, he does document the legal structures and institutions that channeled social dissidence.

The underworld, a source of cheap thrills and illicit pleasures for the middle-class Victorian, was also the focus for deepseated social fears and insecurities. Chesney describes the growing estrangement between classes in the mid-Victorian period. He notes an increasing intolerance for the "sordid and 'impure' habits of life" of "the great unwashed," who were identified as a vicious source of moral and physical contamination.¹⁷ "Pollution" became the governing metaphor for the perils of social intercourse between the "Two Nations." It assumed heightened scatological significance in a society where "the Drains" were a common topic of conversation and where the first programmatic attempt to deal with urban social problems was in the realm of sanitary engineering.¹⁸ Chesney does not elaborate on this theme of sexual displacement. He remarks that nothing "formed so close a bond between the underworld and respectable society as prostitution."¹⁹ Both literally and figuratively, the prostitute was the connecting avenue of infection to the general society. Although prostitution is critical to his argument, he does not include it in his remarks on the institutions that developed in response to this fear of social contamination.

The legal and institutional reforms of the Victorian period were informed by a fear of contagion, and they dealt symptomatically with social problems. In the Poor Law Act of 1834, "that fundamental document of Victorianism," one may observe the guiding spirit of repressive humanitarianism, segregating and rationalizing the treatment of the "socially deviant." In the workhouse wards the indigent poor were interned. Unwed mothers, the insane, the young, the old and infirm were all subjected to a grim regime of silence, isolation and unremitting work. The prison reforms followed the same direction of change: "In place of the filth, jail-fever, and corruption, came the treadmill, the crank and strict regimentation."²⁰

Chesney does not include Acton's description of the lock hospitals (military hospitals) in which diseased prostitutes were interned, but they were a further extension of this repressive humanitarian spirit. The hospitals themselves provided the same order of experience as the workhouse, subjecting the inmates to a rule of isolation, silence, and constant observation. Entering the hospital, the patient was "fumigated" and had all her belongings removed. She was then molded into a standardized harmless nonentity: ". . . appearing to great advantage in the hospital uniform . . . [the] demeanor of these women, as we passed along, was most respectful; there was no noise, no bad language, no sullenness, no levity."²¹ In this patriarchal community of Mary Magdalenes, the women were taught ordinary domestic duties so that they might become needlewomen and washerwomen. (Is this the kind of "industrial education" Mayhew and Acton advocated?) And it appeared that the older inmates had learned the lesson of the respectable poor: "I understand that perfect order is maintained among

older residents without much interference on the part of the surgeon, who has unbounded authority, though it requires great tact on his part to reduce newcomers to a proper state of submission and obedience."²²

In the public debate over the regulation of prostitution, one may observe the same techniques of dehumanization in operation. Concern over the spread of venereal disease among the military led to the passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), pieces of legislation that registered prostitutes in nineteen garrison towns in England and subjected these women to periodic medical examination. The Contagious Diseases Acts were blatant manifestations of the double standard: only women, not family men whose innocent wives and children were supposedly being protected by the acts, nor the promiscuous soldiers and sailors, were subject to examination and arrest. A poor woman could be arrested by a special morals officer "who had due cause to believe" she was a common prostitute. The definition of a common prostitute was entirely vague and consequently these plainclothes policemen had large discretionary powers. No warrant was needed, and women were effectively deprived of due process of law. When confronted by the morals officer, a woman was forced to sign a voluntary submission that authorized her examination, and, if found diseased, her incarceration in a hospital for a maximum of nine months. If the woman refused, she would be brought before a magistrate, where the burden of proof was on her to prove she was virtuous, that she did not "go" with men, whether for money or not. Even if she were not imprisoned, she had been publicly degraded and stigmatized for life. An effort to extend these acts to the entire civilian population led in 1870 to a "revolt of women," a middle-class feminist campaign headed by Josephine Butler, to repeal these acts, a campaign which broke the "conspiracy of silence" on the sexual exploitation of lower-class women.

Chesney interprets these acts as historical anomalies, temporary setbacks in the general trend toward a growing independence for prostitutes. According to Chesney, prostitutes tended to act more and more as free agents, having liberated themselves from the tyrannical control of the brothel keepers. As streetwalkers, they were now able to sell their "free labor" on the open market. He cites the Common Lodging House Act of 1851 as having accelerated the process. This act brought the wretched lodging houses where criminals and disorderly persons resided under police control. But here Chesney reveals an insensitivity to the contradictory forces in Victorian culture. It is precisely because Chesney does not see prostitution in the general context of Victorian society that he is unable to explain why the Contagious Diseases Acts came when they did. They embodied the imperialist compulsions of a society obsessed with colonizing the abyss. By stripping the prostitute of her constitutional rights, by objectifying her as a germ that had to be detoxified, these laws reveal the basic habits of mind that facilitated the oppression of women and other submerged groups.

In sum, Chesney offers no new perceptions on prostitution in the

nineteenth century. He is content to set the scene, to outline the “specialised character of Babylon.” Relying heavily on the observations of Henry Mayhew and his collaborator Hemyng, he often assumes the same pose of the popular journalist venturing into strange exotic territory. He catalogues the accommodation houses, the music halls, the dress lodgers,²³ the child prostitutes, the sailors’ and soldiers’ women, the low lodging house women, and the degraded park women who were willing to engage in what Mayhew called “disgusting practices.” But while Mayhew and Hemyngs had attempted in their interviews to give an oral history of lower-class perceptions, *The Anti-Society* presents a hollow condensation, an abstract of that effort. It lacks the curious tension that characterized the original dialogue between the citizens of the “Two Nations.” In particular, Chesney gives us no sense of Hemyngs’ confusion and bewilderment at the “bilingual” powers of the women he had interviewed—they knew how to talk to him, they knew how to use middle-class rhetoric to present their argument. As in the case of the printsetter, they often turned the tables on him, presenting *him* with a sociological analysis of their situation.

All these works fail to give us a precise social portrait of prostitutes. What exactly was their social background, to what part of the lower classes did they belong? Acton and Mayhew depended on very unreliable police records for their quantitative data, and so we still do not know how many prostitutes there really were in a city like London. Nor do they tell us what impact prostitution had on the lives of these women. If, as Chesney, Mayhew and Acton have suggested, women left prostitution and later assumed other social roles, what exactly happened to them? Without romanticizing prostitution, one should consider whether it was an avenue of social mobility for women, the best and most lucrative social alternative for women who had very few appealing alternatives from which to chose. One must examine whether the life of the respectable poor was less exploitative than prostitution.

These questions must be raised in terms of the perceptions and feelings of the prostitute herself.²⁴ However, writers like Chesney and Pearsall cannot even conceptualize this as a vital area of research. A penetrating social inquiry into prostitution would not merely portray the prostitute as a passive victim of social injustice, but would seek to recapture her voice and to dramatize the way she articulated her situation. As a member of a subculture, she may well have viewed herself and have been viewed by her community in a manner different from the jaundiced perspective of respectable society.

FOOTNOTES

1. Chesney, ANTI-SOCIETY, p. 313.
2. Mayhew's fourth volume of LONDON LABOUR AND THE LONDON POOR was first published in 1861.
3. Acton's PROSTITUTION, CONSIDERED IN ITS MORAL, SOCIAL, AND SANITARY ASPECTS, IN LONDON AND OTHER LARGE CITIES: WITH PROPOSALS FOR THE MITIGATION AND PREVENTION OF ITS ATTENDANT EVILS was first published in 1857. Peter Fryer presents selections from the 1870 edition.
4. Acton, PROSTITUTION, p. 24.
5. Mayhew, LONDON LABOUR.
6. Acton, PROSTITUTION, p. 26.
7. As Steven Marcus has demonstrated, Acton's treatise on sexuality, FUNCTIONS AND DISFUNCTIONS OF THE REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS (1857) was clearly an ideological defense of the double standard. In it, Acton depicts women as content eunuchs "who are not troubled with sexual feelings of any kind." See Steven Marcus, THE OTHER VICTORIANS (New York: Basic Books, 1966).
8. Ibid., p. 198.
9. Baby-farming was the practice of "farming" out illegitimate children to "nurses" and foster mothers who were notoriously incompetent and neglectful of their charges. Acton ascribed the enormous mortality rate among illegitimate children to this practice.
10. Quoted in Mayhew, LONDON LABOUR, p. 256.
11. Ibid.
12. Pearsall, THE WORM IN THE BUD, p. 430.
13. Ibid., p. 72.
14. Ibid., p. 52.
15. Ibid., p. 268.
16. Ibid., p. 47.
17. Chesney, ANTI-SOCIETY, p. 20.
18. Further discussions of the "Sanitary Idea" of the 1840's and its impact on social thought and reform may be found in Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Mayhew's Poor: A Question of Identity," VICTORIAN STUDIES, 14 (March, 1971): 307-20, and Asa Briggs, "The Victorian City: Quantity and Quality," VICTORIAN STUDIES, 11 (suppl., Summer, 1968): 711-31.
19. Chesney, ANTI-SOCIETY.
20. Ibid., p. 28.
21. Acton, PROSTITUTION, p. 95.
22. Ibid., p. 96.
23. Dress lodgers were prostitutes who were loaned their working costumes by the brothel keepers. When they went on to the streets, they were usually accompanied by a worn-out, retired prostitute who would keep them under observation.
24. Questions concerning self-perception and the relative character of "exploitation" were raised at a recent conference between feminists and prostitutes in New York City. See Robin Reisig, "Sisterhood and Prostitution," VILLAGE VOICE, December 16, 1971, pp. 1ff., and the debate that followed in subsequent issues of the VOICE.