

SEX FOR SALE: PROSTITUTION AND VISUAL CULTURE 1850-1910

by

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BORROWER'S PAGE

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ABSTRACT

Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Visual Culture 1850-1910

Master of Arts 2004

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Joint Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture

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“Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Visual Culture 1850-1910” is a Master’s thesis that takes a historical approach to the visual in order to better understand the construction of the prostitute in Victorian culture. Recent scholars have noted ways in which the prostitute was routinely depicted as a threat and victim in nineteenth-century institutional discourse. This thesis complicates these readings by examining the construction of the fallen woman in commercial imagery. Far from depicting the streetwalker as a source of pity and disease, commercial culture redefined the image of the prostitute as a source of ambiguous visual pleasure. This allowed the signifiers of prostitution to extend through pornographic representation, entertainment advertisements, actress pin-ups and fashion magazines. Making illicit female sexuality a readily consumable pleasure, however, ultimately fostered greater efforts on the part of authorities to push prostitutes back into invisibility.

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INTRODUCTION

Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Visual Culture 1850-1910

“Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Visual Culture 1850-1910” explores the ways in which the female prostitute was socially and visually constructed during the latter half of the nineteenth century. By comparing and contrasting institutional texts with the mass-produced visual representations of the prostitute, this project explores the connection between mass visualizations of the prostitute and the emergence of commercial culture. The aim of the research is to illuminate the role prostitution played in Victorian commercial culture and to trace the incorporation of the image of the prostitute into mass media. Using historical interpretation, visual culture theory, gender theory, and image analysis, I demonstrate that the visual ambiguity embedded in images of the prostitute blurred the boundaries between respectable and non-respectable conceptions of femininity and commerce. What resulted was an interesting blend between the image of the prostitute and that of the female as a figure of consumerism in mainstream culture. This allowed the signifiers of prostitution to extend through pornographic representation, entertainment advertisements, actress pin-ups and fashion magazines. A consequence of making the sexual woman visible and purchasable was the repression of the sexual image and a greater marginalization of the prostitute at the end of the century. Efforts to restore order in Victorian visual and commercial culture required pushing the prostitute back into invisibility.

The term “prostitute” is a difficult word to define within a Victorian context. Reasons for this are manifold but center around the fact that prostitution was considered a broad and malleable category. Most often, official texts on the subject characterize it as an occupation in which sex acts are exchanged for money or material rewards. Although men, women, and

children all worked in the sex trade, the term was associated primarily with women selling sex to men. The types of women that engaged in prostitution were also varied. Often prostitutes were defined hierarchically according to their class. In *London Labour and the London Poor* (1856), Bracebridge Hemyng describes three classes of London prostitutes: 1) women who are kept by men independently [upper- to middle-class women]; 2) women who maintain themselves and live in their own apartments [referring to *prima donnas* and mistresses]; and 3) women who live in brothels [working-class prostitutes] (213). He goes on to divide women further into categories such as sailors' women, clandestine prostitutes, and cohabitant prostitutes (unmarried women living with men), to name a few. In looking at Hemyng's categorization as representative of a cross-section of official texts on prostitution, it is evident that female prostitution was defined broadly in Victorian institutional discourse. The category ranged from women living with men outside of wedlock to women selling their sexual services publicly. As such, the term extends beyond a purely occupational description and into the realm of female sexual morality.

Lynda Nead has addressed the link between definitions of prostitution and female morality in her book *Myths of Sexuality*. She claims that definitions of prostitution in the Victorian era had much to do with broader bourgeois definitions of "abnormal" female sexuality and morality. Prostitution was regularly defined in opposition to bourgeois concepts of ideal femininity, which saw the purpose of female sexuality as reproductive and within the confines of marriage. Female sexuality outside of reproduction, marriage, and the domestic sphere was considered illicit and much of it was labelled by the middle-class as prostitution (99). In the words of Hemyng, "Literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue is a prostitute" (215).

The malleability in the conception of the prostitute links the meaning of the category to broader concepts and visualizations of Victorian femininity. This does not mean, however, that all definitions of prostitution held the same significance. The prostitute who later became known as a social problem or “the great social evil” was not the woman who confined herself to one man outside of marriage. It was, as Hemyng states, “those who live by promiscuous discourse” (215). As a result, the prostitute as criminal, social danger, and victim became largely associated with the visible prostitute—one who solicits sex in public. The term “prostitution” must remain flexible for a Victorian context but, in this paper, it will be used to denote primarily the public prostitute (women selling sex publicly for money) while fluctuating, with indication, to other forms of female sexuality.

One of the aims of this project is to compare institutional representations of prostitution to those outside of that sphere. Although Nead has compared official discourse to the image of the prostitute in high art, my intention is to examine a realm of visibility that is, in theory, much closer to the institution of prostitution: commercial representation. Like prostitution, mass-produced imagery blends female sexuality, visibility, and commerce. What is missing in the contemporary literature on Victorian prostitution is an expansion of analysis beyond the institutional discourse and into the commercial and mass produced images of the prostitute. Scholars such as Nead and Mary Spongberg have acknowledged the importance of examining the construction of the prostitute as it tells us much about the gender dynamics and power structures that were operating at the time. The prostitute represents contentious ideas about female sexuality and its place in society. By widening the critical lens beyond the image of the vilified or pitied prostitute in bourgeois discourse to look at her role within the realm of

commercial culture, I will complicate the existing literature by opening up discussion around the intricacies of commercial culture, images of female sexuality, and commerce.

The aim of this project, therefore, is not to establish the validity or veracity of either the institutional or populist constructions of the prostitute. Rather, I wish to argue that the difference between the representation of the prostitute within institutional discourses and the images of the sexual woman in objects such as postcards, entertainment advertisements, and actress pin-ups has much to do with the rise of consumerism and mass visual culture in Victorian England. Sex was being sold not only literally, via prostitution, but also through the images being distributed in London through a growing range of populist media. The images of the prostitute in mass culture were distinctly different from those offered by institutions. To portray prostitutes and female sexuality as fun and pleasurable is to contradict the dreary image of the prostitute as social evil and victim. Moreover, to then distribute and sell images of sexualized women to the public makes the once amorphous prostitute visually pleasurable *and* purchasable.

Selling sex had much to do with making female sexuality visible. It therefore comes as no surprise that the repression of mass-produced sexual images through obscenity legislation at the end of the century came at a time when legislation was also being developed to suppress the visual signifiers of prostitution. The range of anxieties that resulted when female sexuality, visuality, and commerce were brought together within the context of a newly consumerist culture redefined images of Victorian femininity and consumerism. But ultimately the desire to repress the popular image of the sexual woman went alongside the aim of repressing the visuality of prostitutes themselves. To understand the marginalization of prostitutes by the end of the century, therefore, one must examine the process in tandem with a consideration of the extreme popularization of their image.

Theoretical Framework

As a sexual social figure, the Victorian prostitute balanced between visibility and invisibility, knowledge and the unknown, and acceptability and exile. This ambiguity was routinely expressed in institutional discourses on prostitution and became manifest in prostitution policies and visual images of the time. But while official discourses treated the amorphousness as potentially dangerous, commercial culture co-opted the prostitute's malleable image for financial gain.

Visual culture theory examines the ways in which vision and its meanings are culturally constructed. Since the enlightenment, scientific and philosophical discourses in the west have privileged vision as a transparent means of accessing "truth" and "reality" (Rogoff, 21). The idea that vision is a pure sense that gives individuals access to the "real" is a notion that is still pervasive in contemporary culture. In contrast, the term 'visuality' is used in visual culture theory to refer to vision as a construction. In the words of Norman Bryson, "Vision is socialized... When I learn to see socially, that is when I begin to articulate by retinal experience with the codes of recognition that come to me from my social milieu(s). I am inserted into systems of visual discourse that saw the world before I did, and will go on seeing after I see no longer" (91-92). Bryson's words emphasize the way in which vision is attributed meaning socially as opposed to subjectively or innately. This approach helps emphasize the link of visualizations of prostitution, on one hand, to both history and culture, on the other.

Visual culture theory aids in complicating the notion of a "natural" viscosity of the prostitute and places her images within broader conceptualizations of the social. As raised by Michel Foucault, the viscosity of Victorian culture had much to do with the way in which vision was associated with power, knowledge and privilege. Those who had the authority to make the

prostitute visible played a large role in constructing her image, sexuality, and reality. Visual culture theory allows us to question who had the desire to make the prostitute visible, who was privileged as a result, for what purposes her image circulated, and what end this ultimately served. Visuality, in this sense, is political as well as historical.

Although we can speak of the visibility of prostitution as being about the history and powers associated with vision, representation, and the image, this topic cannot be adequately investigated without a theoretical perspective on gender and difference. With regard to prostitution, it is the female form that is depicted as pleasurable purchasable and/or infectious and abhorrent, traits that have been historically embedded in social constructions of femininity. The female body and its visualization is thus an imperative site of theorization.

The bodies of women have been traditionally theorized in visual culture through feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey's classic essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," for example, argues that classical Hollywood narrative has been structured around particular pleasures in looking. These pleasures have structured traditional film form and are the result of the unconscious desires of the patriarchal system in which it was constructed. What Mulvey makes clear is that much of the pleasure in viewing is grounded in sexual difference. Using psychoanalytic theory, she describes the way in which women in classical cinema have been structured to be passive objects for the active male gaze. In this model, visual pleasure is a male pleasure. Mulvey concludes that the pleasures in looking must be disrupted in order to draw attention to the oppressive role of the female image in Hollywood film.

Although Mulvey's ideas are grounded in gendered and heterosexual assumptions of identification and desire, as well as ill-critiqued selections of psychoanalytic theory, her essay opened the door to a flood of interest and criticism regarding whether our pleasures in looking

are gendered.¹ Linda Williams, for instance, looks at the way in which the female gaze is punished in the horror genre. She argues that, “in the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire” (15). The horror film permits the woman to look, and therefore to desire, but only in proportion to the degree in which the woman is later punished for her transgression. In this sense, feminist film theory, like that of Williams and Mulvey, has been willing to consider vision as a reflection of gendered notions of spectatorship. Vision and the way in which media ask us to see is considered a reflection of the (patriarchal) world in which we live.

The psychoanalytic explanations of gendered visuality sometimes delve into problematic notions of biological and psychological determinism. My own interest is primarily in scholarship that addresses ways in which visions of women are given social meaning. A good example of this is the work of Andreas Huyssen. In his essay “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” Huyssen uses discourse analysis to argue that, in Victorian newspaper and academic writings, mass culture was routinely associated with femininity. In contrast to high culture, which was steeped in masculine metaphors, mass culture was devalued as feminine. Huyssen retrieves a sense of the bourgeois anxieties that circulated around newly forming mass culture and women at the time. Griselda Pollack’s essay, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” does something similar by incorporating historical concepts of vision within the politics of gender in the Victorian era. She asks why modern masculinity was so often articulated across the sign of the female body (the nude, brothels, bars). Pollack examines Charles Baudelaire’s concept of the *flâneur* and critiques the way in which the public realm is constructed as a space wherein males freely view the bodies of women, but where women’s vision is restricted, often, to sights of respectability. The idea that Victorian women were not

public spectators has been critiqued by Nead and others. Pollack, however, shows the way in which social concepts of vision may have differed for men and women.

It may be evident from the cross-section of interdisciplinary material noted above, that there is not one body of work that is distinctly noted as visual culture. Rather it is, in the words of Nicholas Mirzoeff, “a fluid interpretive structure, centred on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups in everyday life. Its definition comes from the questions it asks and the issues it seeks to raise” (11). My aim is to contribute to the historical interpretation of prostitution using visual culture and gender theory. While visual culture theory problematizes the notion of vision as “pure” and “truthful,” gender theory foregrounds the female body as a purchasable visualization in Victorian society.

Literature Review

Prostitution has been the subject of continuous debate in public policy, law, and feminist theory. The reason for much of the debate is that prostitution is regarded primarily as a social issue. As such, academic literature engages in discussions about the social, moral and legal problems of prostitution and regularly strives to provide solutions. In *Sex, Morality and the Law* (1997), editors Lori Gruen and George E. Panchias refer to an American tradition of legal moralism involved in matters of sex and law, making prostitution a regular source of conflict. The aim in the legal system, they claim, is to balance free economic exchange between consenting adults with larger notions of the public good and conventional morality (78). However, theorists such as Lars Ericsson rebel against legal concepts of sexual morality. In his essay “Charges Against Prostitution,” Ericsson calls for the decriminalization and legal support of prostitution as a means of breaking down what he terms “irrational” attitudes towards sexuality. Conversely, there are other discourses in law that argue for the complete prohibition

of prostitution as a way of protecting public health, safety, and the interests of the public good. Such beliefs were upheld in the Appellate Court of Illinois in the 1978 case, *People V. Johnson*. In this case, a prostitute's right to privacy and free speech was overturned in favour of "the greater good" of public health and safety.

Feminist theory has also contributed to the debate on prostitution. Here prostitution is looked at primarily from the viewpoint of gender and power. At a structural level, socialist feminists like Christine Overall stress the gendered power dynamics of prostitution and the oppressive ways in which sex work differs from other types of work. She argues that what makes prostitution oppressive to women is the fact that economic exchange becomes dependent upon unequal and dangerous stereotypes. In contrast, some liberal feminist perspectives open up the debate as to whether prostitution can serve the empowerment of women. Rosemarie Tong outlines this perspective in "Prostitution." Citing classic feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir and the prostitution union COYOTE (Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics), Tong outlines a perspective that sees power for women in prostitution and defends a woman's right to choose sex work as a result. The majority of feminist theorists, however, claim that prostitution is another example of the systematic sexual and economic exploitation of women. Vednita Carter, for example, equates prostitution with slavery, emphasizing the purchase of marginalized bodies for the benefit of male satisfaction. Meanwhile theorists like Laurie Shrage stress the need to look at prostitution through the lens of the oppressive patriarchal and capitalist society in which it operates. Like policy and law literature, there is no consensus on prostitution in feminist theory. Furthermore, like policy and law, feminist theory engages in the search for solutions to the "problems." In many cases, the problems involve how to protect working prostitutes; how to

deal with prostitution at a structural level; and figuring out how prostitution fits into the canons of feminist thought.

Despite the ample amount of literature on contemporary prostitution and the efforts to articulate a systemic socio-economic cause to its existence, few scholars have taken the time to examine prostitution from a historical perspective. Historians of sexuality have helped open the doors to further study but, in many of these cases, prostitution is not the central focus of the work. Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) has been hugely influential in redefining notions of sexuality, power, and discourse in the Victorian era. The prostitute, however, functions only minutely in the text as an example of categorized sexuality. In *Sexuality* (1997), Joseph Bristow similarly works to place sexuality within a historical context, but the prostitute only surfaces in reference to the works of George Bataille and Otto Weininger. Bataille situates the prostitute within a presumptuous theoretical mode of thought that conflates prostitution with male drives toward eroticism and death, while Weininger speaks of the prostitute as part of a mother/prostitute continuum of female sexuality. Neither text aims to study the prostitute beyond her symbolic function.

Some research does work to create a historical inquiry of the prostitute. Many of these texts describe the context of prostitution and refer to the place of the prostitute as a transgressor of the Victorian public/private divide.² William Cohen, for example, describes the way in which the prostitute was thought to taint the feminine character of the British public with her sexual impropriety (107). Sexual solicitation broke down the boundaries between private sexual relations and public commerce. Other theorists such as Lynn Hunt direct our attention to the prostitute's definitive place in the history of pornography. Walter Kendrick similarly articulates the way in which the term "pornography" originally meant the description of the lives of

prostitutes. Despite these small mentions, the prostitute continues to remain a marginalized field of study. She is treated as an aside and, as such, is mentioned in a rhetoric that assumes general knowledge of the prostitute.

Exceptions to this generalizing and marginalizing tendency can be found in the work of Judith R. Walkowitz, Mary Spongberg, and Lynda Nead. These theorists have devoted specific historical study to the prostitute. Walkowitz's *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980) has been cited as a primary resource on the history of prostitution in England. Her book examines the place of prostitution at the time of the Contagious Diseases Acts and follows the history leading up to the acts, the repression of the women under this legislation, and the movement to have the acts abolished by reformers. She gives a comprehensive view into the lives of prostitutes from mid-century to the end of the era and introduces us to the legislation that was passed in order to identify prostitutes and restrict their sexual activity as a means of controlling venereal disease. Walkowitz argues that, by forcing prostitution into institutional and public scrutiny, the C.D. Acts actually served to ghettoize prostitution and make working conditions worse for prostitutes. While an excellent historical resource, Walkowitz's work does not address the potential connection that prostitution had to the realm of sex as commodity. Although she engages with and challenges institutional discourse, she does not address the significance of the contradictory images of prostitutes circulating in the mainstream at the time.

Focusing more on the social construction of prostitution, Mary Spongberg looks at the history of the prostitute within the field of medicine. In *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse* (1997), Spongberg illustrates the way in which medical discourse routinely grounded sexually transmitted diseases within female sexuality and the female body. She traces the extent to which the prostitute's body was

pathologized in medical discourse, culminating in the Contagious Disease Acts of the 1860s.

Spongberg argues that medical knowledge is rarely separated from cultural knowledge. As such, gendered stereotypes make their way into official knowledge with potentially dangerous results.

Spongberg's work is insightful in its tracing of prostitution's social construction in medicine, specifically, an insight that supports one of my key contentions regarding the mutual influence of institutional and commercial discourse.

Finally, Lynda Nead has focused on comparing institutional discourse to the representation of prostitution in high art. Her book *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (1988) argues that the depictions of prostitution in high art often catered to bourgeois ideals of female sexual morality and, similar to official discourse, perpetuated and contributed to the representation of prostitutes as victims and social threats. Nead examines the way in which images of female sexuality adhered to the hegemonic values of the middle class. By contrasting the image of the ideal Victorian woman to representations of the prostitute in official discourse and high art, for example, she demonstrates that the prostitute is regularly portrayed as deviant. She is a reduced and degraded form of femininity that is categorized as a social victim or a social danger. Nead's research has masterfully established the prostitute as a central subject of Victorian visual culture. Her work, however, is specific to a mid-nineteenth-century timeframe and the middle-class forms of representation defined by academia and painting.

The dominant sources of information on Victorian prostitution have been institutional discourses of the time. From a medical perspective, William Acton's *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects* (1857) is, by far, the most referenced in contemporary scholarship. Acton describes the state of prostitution in England, the dangers the prostitute holds

for society in terms of disease, and suggestions for the regulation of prostitution. As such, this text is known to have been influential in garnering support for the Contagious Disease Acts. Other dominant discourses worked to categorize the prostitute and describe her life for readers. Henry Mayhew and Bracebridge Hemming's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861) is one such text, wherein the causes (economic and moral) and classification of London's prostitutes are expressed in great detail. As the century progressed, however, institutional discourse began defining the causes of prostitution less as social and more as biological. Texts like Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) defined the prostitute according to her biological deviancies, while Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero's *Female Offender* (1909) strove to identify the innate criminality of the prostitute in terms of her physical characteristics and heredity.

The official discourse on Victorian prostitution has been examined and challenged by the work of contemporary historians. The work of Spongberg, Nead and Walkowitz all engage with institutional discourse in order to extract specific cultural impressions of prostitution. These impressions generally construct the prostitute as at once a social threat and a victim. These texts are important for gaining a deeper understanding of prostitution, but what is missing in current criticism is a recognition and detailed examination of the visual ambiguity that surrounds the prostitute in these texts and elsewhere. We need to expand our understanding of the construction of the prostitute beyond the confines of official discourse and into the terrain of mainstream visual representation. As I aim to demonstrate, the real life conditions of these women manoeuvred amongst the commercial and the institutional circulation of their images, contributing to a rich and contested culture of female sexuality.

Chapter Outline

The remains of this paper are divided into four chapters. The first, "Visual Ambiguity: The Dangers of Prostitution in Official Discourse," introduces the official discourse on prostitution. Many contemporary theorists have noted the way in which the prostitute was constructed in these texts as a fallen woman, a degenerate, a social danger and a victim. The aim of this chapter is to draw attention to the ambiguous visual construction of the prostitute. As such, I show the ways in which researchers aimed to make the prostitute visible (hence knowable) to their readers, but at the same time struggled with her visual elusiveness. While the unstable visibility of the prostitute appeared to be problematic for researchers, however, it was this very quality that gave the image of the prostitute a viable role in commercial culture.

The next chapter, "Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Advertising," illustrates the intricate connection of women and prostitution to commercial culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It does this by connecting prostitution to the larger economy and tracing the way in which the prostitute was used in advertising images at the time. By examining entertainment and domestic advertisements, I aim to show not only the viability of the image of the prostitute in commercial culture, but also the dangers of making the image of the prostitute explicit. Thus this chapter exposes a counter-discourse to the institutional image of the prostitute as social threat and victim by showing that the image of the prostitute was a viable part of mainstream commercial culture.

Although the ambiguous image of the prostitute served the needs of advertising in the Victorian era, my third chapter, "Pin-Ups and Postcards: Purchasing the Photographic Prostitute," examines the image of the prostitute as a product in and of itself. By focusing on the history of the nude postcard and the actress pin-up near the end of the century, I view the image

of the prostitute as purchasable and possessable in the realm of pornographic and sexualized photographic representation. The role of the sexualized female image in Victorian society exemplifies the way in which the image of the prostitute as commodity was popularized in mass culture. These images, moreover, range from the pornographic to the respectable mainstream, demonstrating the extent to which visualizations of the sexualized woman played a part in Victorian commercial culture and, in turn, blurred the lines between respectability and obscenity.

Despite the popularity of the commodified image of the prostitute, the conclusion of this project focuses on the consequences of visualizing the fallen woman. Images of the prostitute were vigilantly repressed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. At the same time, legal reforms urged the closing down of brothels, which pushed prostitution to the margins of city life. Although the visibility of prostitution raised deep opposition from moral reformers and British officials, the image of the prostitute was still deeply ingrained in Victorian popular culture. The drive to make the prostitute both visible and undetectable leads me to consider the relevance of the image at the *fin-de-siècle* and the complexities of visualizing the sexual woman in Victorian consumer culture.

¹ See Barbara Creed; Teresa de Lauretis; Gaylan Studlar; Jacqueline Rose.

² See Mason; Showalter; Weeks.

CHAPTER ONE

Visual Ambiguity: The Dangers of Prostitution in Institutional Discourse

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the negative construction of the prostitute in institutional discourse and, at the same time, demonstrate the ways in which images of the prostitute were fraught with ambiguity. The attempt to make the prostitute distinctly visible in institutional texts, while insisting that she could be any woman, made images of the fallen woman extremely malleable. The significance of this insight is that it highlights the importance of the prostitute's visibility for institutions and makes obvious the ideologies that were imbedded in visibility and female sexuality at the time.

In an attempt to understand Victorian prostitution, contemporary theorists often turn to institutional discourse. This includes key sociological, sexological, criminological, and medical texts of the nineteenth century that focused on the subject of prostitution. In this canon of work, the writings of William Acton, William Logan, Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet, Henry Mayhew, Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero, and Richard von Kraft-Ebing are regularly referenced. Kellow Chesney's book, *The Victorian Underworld: A Fascinating Re-creation*, for example, relies heavily on Acton and Mayhew's texts in order to construct a depiction of the Victorian prostitute. Likewise, Hilary Evans' account of the Victorian streetwalker in *The Oldest Profession: An Illustrated History of Prostitution* uncritically reproduces institutional depictions of fallen women from these texts. In this way, institutional discourse has been influential in establishing normative assumptions about the lives of Victorian prostitutes.

Arguably, the most influential work in this respect has been that of William Acton, whose medical writings on the state of prostitution in Britain in 1857 helped inform policy changes that resulted in real-life consequences for prostitutes. Acton's work was influential, for example, in

the drafting of the Contagious Disease Acts of 1864, 1867, and 1869, in which mandatory registration and often confinement of prostitutes was put forth as a means of combating syphilis in garrison towns. Following the influence of Parent-Duchatelet, who stressed prostitution as a public health hazard, it was Acton's position that the control of syphilis meant the control of prostitution. His work outlined the state of prostitution in England and the social dangers it posed in terms of disease, and suggested remedies for the situation. Unlike the writings that came before it, however, Acton's work is acknowledged for formulating prostitution as a transitory state in the lives of women as opposed to a quick means to death and destitution.

In the realm of social investigation, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* was a key text that worked to describe the life of the city's poor in the nineteenth century. Prostitution is included in the fourth volume entitled: "Those That Will Not Work, comprising Prostitutes, Thieves, Swindlers and Beggars." The section on London prostitution, written by Bracebridge Hemyng, works to categorize prostitutes according to their class and living environments while describing their everyday lives to readers. The text includes physical descriptions of prostitutes, their haunts, and their behaviours, as well as illustrations and interviews.

As the century progressed, sociological texts like Mayhew's were complimented by writings in the newly forming field of sexology. Richard von Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), for example, was a founding work in modern sexual pathology. In it, Kraft-Ebing sees sexual degeneracy and abnormalities as results of heredity and modernity. Prostitution is spoken about as an end result of female sexual pathologies like nymphomania and hysteria. A mixture of narrative case studies and psychological evaluation constructs female sexual excess as a pathological problem. At the end of the book, Kraft-Ebing calls for the need

of medico-legal examination in law in order to recognize psychiatric sexual deficiencies, which may otherwise be deemed as purely criminal acts.

Following Kraft-Ebing's biological determinism was the medico-scientific text *Female Offender* written by Lombroso and Ferrero. Originally published in 1909, this highly influential book served as an example of criminal biology. In it, Lombroso and Ferrero examine the female criminal according to physical characteristics with the idea that degeneration is visible but difficult to detect in women. They conclude that women are not often criminals but, when they are, they are often more vicious than men. Prostitutes are key figures in this book and are linked to primitive heredity. A series of physical criminal characteristics of the prostitute are laid out alongside discourse on her physical abnormalities.

As several critics confirm, these and other institutional texts written during the second half of the nineteenth century worked to construct the prostitute as a social threat and victim. The common prostitute was depicted as a woman of substandard moral character, often working class, who threatened society with her unrestrained sexuality. At the same time, the prostitute was depicted as a victim, turning to prostitution because of economic need, seduction, poor upbringing, or psychological deficiencies. These depictions of the prostitute have been acknowledged, historicized, and critiqued in the work of Mary Spongberg, Lynda Nead and Judith R. Walkowitz. All three theorists note the negative constructions of the prostitute, but Nead is the one who neatly articulates the social threat/victim construct. According to Nead, these seemingly contradictory images of the prostitute in fact reinforce one another, working to separate the streetwalker from the realm of respectable society: "Indeed, both images could be invoked within a single text, thus activating simultaneously complex associations of pity/redemption and fear/threat" (*Myths* 106).

The central critique by these theorists is that these “official” depictions of the dangerous and victimized prostitute were heavily influenced by ideologies as opposed to scientific evidence. Spongberg, for example, considers the influence of sexist ideology in constructions of prostitutes in medical discourse. She points out that, throughout history, female sexuality has been stigmatized through the female body’s imaginary association with disease. This concept, she argues, has its basis in fictional constructions of femininity, yet it was regularly incorporated into medical knowledge. In this respect, Spongberg critiques the work of French sociologist Parent-Duchatelet, claiming that his construction of prostitutes as dangerous health problems relied upon selective evidence and fictional cultural associations of the prostitute’s body as a vessel of filth (37-38). In Parent-Duchatelet’s words, “Prostitutes are as inevitable in an agglomeration of men as sewers, cesspits, and garbage dumps; civil authority should conduct itself in the same manner in regard to one as to the other” (qtd. in Spongberg, 38). In this respect, the central aim of critique among contemporary theorists is the idea that harmful ideologies (of women, class, and so on) played a heavy hand in the construction of the prostitute in institutional discourse.

Although the construction of the prostitute as threat and victim is well noted in contemporary theory, what is often under-examined is the visual ambiguity of the prostitute in institutional texts. By visual ambiguity, I mean the series of contradictions and unclear specifications that rendered the prostitute visually evasive. “The prostitute,” considered to be a broad category capable of visual deception, often avoided clear visual articulation in institutional discourse. The reason for this ambiguity is that the image of the prostitute was caught between contradictory drives in institutional texts. The first drive was to clearly and visually differentiate the prostitute from respectable femininity, as mentioned by Nead, while the second drive was to

insist that she could, in fact, be *any* woman. The result is a construction of the prostitute that is positioned between visibility and invisibility, or ubiquity and erasure, giving her a particularly malleable and, some would argue, dangerous position in society. No matter how hard researchers attempt to visualize and categorize the prostitute, her identity could always slip into contradiction and doubt.

This idea of visual ambiguity becomes relevant when we consider the lengths to which researchers went in order to make the prostitute visible. From Acton in 1857 to Lombroso in 1909, researchers worked hard to illustrate the prostitute and her life for their readers. This included vivid textual description of her physical appearance, life, and work, alongside photos and illustrations. Hemyng offered especially long and languid prose descriptions. In one passage, he portrays prostitutes as follows:

They are seen to be reclining on the benches placed under the trees, originally intended, no doubt, for a different purpose, occasionally with the head of a drunken man reposing in their lap... They are old, unsound, and by their appearance utterly incapacitated from practising their profession where the gas-lamps would expose the defects in their personal appearance, and the shabbiness of their ancient and dilapidated attire. I was told that an old woman, whose front teeth were absolutely wanting, was known to obtain a precarious livelihood by haunting the by-walks of Hyde Park, near Park Lane. (243)

The prostitute is visualized for the reader here through the use of detailed prose that highlights her behaviour, locale and appearance. Such descriptions are used alongside illustrations in the text that show men and women interacting in well-known spaces of prostitution. The image and text work together in order to create broad visual images of the prostitute. Thirty years later, Lombroso and Ferrero would use over thirty photographic portraits of international prostitutes to assist in their textual descriptions.

This desire to make the prostitute visible within institutional discourse reflects a larger desire to construct the prostitute as a site of knowledge. In the first volume of *The History of*

Sexuality, Michel Foucault makes the argument that, far from repressing sexualities in the Victorian era, institutional discourse actively worked to create sexualities. He insists that those who had the power and authority to speak about sex also had the power to construct and manage it. The Victorian era, known for its sexual prudery, was actually a time in which a proliferation of discourses emerged about sexuality, of which the subject of prostitution was only a part. Foucault works to interpret how sexualities were spoken about within the context of institutions of authority, knowledge and power. He concludes that “deviant” sexualities found their origin in the discourse of institutions: “The machinery of power that focused on this whole alien strain [of sexualities] did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath codes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d’être* and a natural order of disorder” (44). Aberrant sexualities like prostitution were not suppressed in this discourse, but created, solidified and made visible as a means of control. To make the prostitute visible was to reinforce her objective existence and make her identifiable as a deviant sexual body.

A key aspect of Foucault’s theory is the way in which institutional discourse solidifies knowledge through vision and clearly constructed categorizations. The category of the homosexual, for instance, is concretized through strict boundaries and meticulous classification that distinguishes him from heterosexual men. Nead likewise argues that the construction of the prostitute depended upon making her visually and morally distinct from respectable femininity. Victorian institutional practice had a drive to make things “visible, exposed and therefore available for interpretation” (Flint, 8). Since the Enlightenment, vision has been linked to notions of objectivity and truth and was validated within the context of official discourse.¹ The institutional gaze became a special gaze imbued with power, knowledge and clarity. It had the

ability to pull the invisible into view and to reveal what was hidden through trained vision. The problem with prostitution, however, was that the visual and categorical boundaries were never clearly drawn. By definition, prostitution could range from a sexual profession to the actions of any woman who was thought to have fallen from sexual respectability. On one hand, this broad categorization could be an effective means of controlling female sexuality. To define all sexuality outside of marriage as deviant and that within marriage as purely reproductive requires all women to subject themselves to a level of surveillance. On the other hand, the prostitute herself became a difficult category to visualize and control. This ambiguity was less a part of the realities of prostitution and more a reflection of contradictory perceptions circulating within institutional discourse at the time. Ideas of the prostitute both as a visually distinct social character (eg. a social threat and poor victim) and as potentially any woman aided in the construction of her visual uncertainty.

The notion that the prostitute could be any woman is one that had an ideological space in Victorian society. Historians on the era generally refer to this as the construction of a rigid virgin/whore dichotomy.² However, Otto Weininger wrote a piece on female sexuality that spoke about the prostitute/mother continuum. In it he states that in all women there exists both the desire to be a mother and the desire to be a prostitute. One represents a desire to have children while the other represents a desire to have sexual relations. All women have both sides within them and, as such, “the disposition for and inclination to prostitution is as organic in a woman as is the capacity for motherhood” (217). Weininger thus locates the prostitute in every woman, from the “base” sex-trade worker to the respected bourgeois mother. Although Weininger’s work is problematic in its logic and lax assumptions, it confirms that the idea of the prostitute as potentially any woman had a place in Victorian ideology. The purpose of this

formulation could, again, be read as a means of sexual self-regulation for women—the need to monitor one’s sexuality and visibility in order to ensure that it remains on the respectable side of the continuum.

The assumed ubiquity of the prostitute becomes increasingly evident in institutional discourse through the broad categorization of women in these texts. In *London Labour and the London Poor* prostitutes are shown to exist in every class. Hemyng at once describes the high-class courtesans living in suburban villas, with carriages, horses, aristocratic friends, and boxes at the opera (213). Meanwhile, prima donnas could be seen “in almost every accessible place where fashionable people congregate” (217). He then goes on to describe working-class women, claiming that,

A large number of milliners, dress-makers, furriers, hat-binders, silk-binders, tambour-makers, shoe-binders, slop-women, or those who work for cheap tailors, those in pastry-cooks, fancy and cigar shops, bazaars, servants to a great extent, frequenters of fairs, theatres, and dancing-rooms, are more or less prostitutes and patronesses of the numerous brothels London can boast of possessing. (217)

According to Hemyng, the prostitute existed in high and low classes and everywhere in between. The “fallen woman” had, in other words, the potential to reside in any sphere of British society.

As a member of all classes, the visible tropes of Victorian prostitution became difficult to determine. In institutional discourse the more visible form of public solicitation was targeted. Having the status of public individuals, these women were detected according to the places they frequented, the clothing they wore, and the behaviour they displayed. Locations regularly associated with public prostitution were places of leisure and entertainment like casinos, dancing-rooms, low theatres, and pleasure gardens; city areas such as the Haymarket; and accommodation houses like brothels.³ Throughout institutional discourse, these women were typically characterized for their distinction from respectable femininity, highlighting their fancy

dress and heavy cosmetics and their location in disreputable spaces, as well as their sexual behaviour and drinking. However, these same tropes were frequently revised and contradicted throughout official texts. This is indicated in Acton's description of women at a popular casino: "The women are of course all prostitutes. They are for the most part pretty, and quietly, though expensively dressed... Their behaviour is usually quiet, little solicitation is observable, and all the outward proprieties of demeanour and gesture are strictly observed" (19). In this depiction the prostitute is seemingly respectable. When compared to the above stereotypes and Hemyng's earlier description of the aging park prostitute, one can see the way in which visual signifiers of prostitution became fluid and contradictory: reserved sexual solicitation is contrasted with public indecency; beauty is contrasted with aging and decay. The idea is that the extensive cataloguing, which included almost any woman, made concrete visual signifiers difficult, if not impossible, to detect in institutional discourse.

The broad categorization of prostitutes is further reflected in the number of streetwalkers reported in London during the nineteenth century. Hemyng reports that in 1857 there were 8,600 prostitutes known to police. However, he dismisses that number as insufficient and predicts an estimated 80,000 working in London (213). This gross exaggeration of numbers is a reflection of one of the most problematic categories of prostitution: clandestine workers. Although upper-class women were known to work secretly, clandestine prostitutes were classified as working-class women who used sex to supplement their wages. As a result, their discretion posed a problem for both police and researchers who described it as "the most serious side of prostitution" (Hemyng, 255). Invisibility meant that police had trouble detecting these workers and researchers had difficulty studying them. Working-class women, seen as naturally closer to

indecent and disease, were all suspect and, as a result, police estimated overwhelming numbers of prostitutes in the city.

Part of the danger imbued in clandestine prostitution, according to institutional texts, was its invisibility and consequent reliance on visual deception. Although a woman could look like a common dancer or maidservant, the assumed reality was that the exterior was hiding something more dangerous. This association of visual deception and prostitution is reflective of a common stereotype. Notions that women are visually beautiful and unsuspecting, but secretly something other than they appear, has been a popular claim in fiction, art and official discourse for centuries. Bram Dijkstra asserts that, in artwork of women in the Victorian era, vanity and mirrors played signifying roles reflecting the vacant minds and lack of morality in women (178). Women were also portrayed as evil seductresses, luring men with their unassuming beauty only to destroy their manly virtue (252). Despite the realities of women during this time, Dijkstra emphasizes that female external appearances were subject to fear and suspicion.

Clandestine prostitution, as a reflection of this suspicion, was seen to undermine many of the visual tropes attributed to the public prostitute. In the words of Acton, they are “the unnumbered prostitutes, whose appearance in the streets as such never takes place—who are not seen abroad at unseemly hours—who are reserved in manners, quiet and unobtrusive in their houses or lodgings, and whose general conduct is such that the most vigilant of constables could have no pretence for claiming to be officially aware of their existence or pursuits” (5). The clandestine worker’s invisibility, therefore, was understood to be problematic for authorities and potentially threatening for larger society. Clandestine workers were ubiquitous with the working class but could also extend beyond their cultural sphere. Hemyng describes maid-servants “in good families,” for example, who copy the dress of their mistresses in order to make themselves

attractive enough to be seduced by high-class men (258). Not only does the clandestine prostitute have the potential to defy the boundaries of her own class, but she also taints the sanctity of the domestic sphere by situating “the great social evil” in the bourgeois home. In these ways, such prostitution defied proper classification, threatened boundaries of respectability, and, at the same time, evaded concrete visual depiction. As such, institutional definition and control of prostitution remained extremely difficult.

The consequences and perceived dangers of the visually ambiguous prostitute are well reflected in the implementation of the Contagious Disease Acts in 1864, 1867 and 1869. The C.D. Acts were originally designed as sanitary measures to stop the spread of syphilis among soldiers and sailors in garrison towns. As the years went on, however, the acts became increasingly restrictive, seeking to become far-reaching pieces of legislation that would extend into the civilian population. The general idea of the acts was to sanitize prostitution, which was thought to be the primary source of venereal disease. Prostitutes were forced to register with authorities and subject themselves to periodic internal examinations that would check for visible signs of infection. If infection was detected, women would be placed in a lock hospital for a maximum of six months, treated for infection and trained in domestic skills, preparing them for re-entry into respectable society.

Through the C.D. Acts, the prostitute was redefined as a dangerous source of contagion. Such concepts of danger are most evident in the work of Acton, who believed that prostitutes, far from ending their life in decay, often worked their way back into respectable society. As such, they not only threatened “thousands of men every year” (83) with contagion but “they for the most part become, with tarnished bodies and polluted minds, wives and mothers” (73). Thus,

according to dominant medical discourse, prostitutes threatened all areas of society with the potential for disease, death and decay.

The C.D. Acts worked to remedy the situation by making prostitutes visible and therefore knowable and traceable as potential sources of danger and disease. In registering all known prostitutes and submitting them to medical and police examination, dangerous women could finally be identified, monitored and controlled. But many prostitutes were not willing to identify themselves to police and were, in the words of Acton, then “free to invite all comers to the enjoyment of her person, and to spread among them deadly contagion” (83). As such, it was the primary job of police investigators to seek out women thought to be prostitutes, register them, and have them submit to medical examination. Police sought women who had proof of previous offences and depended upon public notoriety of their promiscuity (Acton, 210). There was no guarantee, however, that these women worked as prostitutes. The medical examination was therefore used to detect that which women sought to keep hidden. Acton claims, for instance, that many women would outright deny being prostitutes, only to be found upon inspection to be syphilitic (92). The power and knowledge of the medical gaze thus often overrode the claims of female suspects. Captain Harris, a police constable interviewed by Acton, asserted that the C.D. Acts would help prevent clandestine prostitution as a result of the threat of being examined: “Women being subjected to medical examination would, in a great measure, prevent their entering into that course of life” (211). The medical gaze was therefore used as a means of monitoring and correction, but also intimidation and prevention. One way to control the prostitute was to threaten her with visibility.

This threat leads to a point raised by Mary Ann Doane, who argues that the institutional eye is often a heterosexual male eye. The desire to forcibly see the prostitute and examine her

body must be considered in this respect. From a male point of view, steeped in the power of institutional looking, women's bodies can often be viewed according to a patriarchal gaze—one that seeks to discover the mysteries of the deceptive female body, creating a link between the invisible and the visible. Doane argues that women's bodies are frequently visualized and often eroticised in institutional discourse according to cultural standards of desirable femininity. For instance, "health" is often determined by how rigidly one adheres to acceptable female appearances (41). As Lombroso says, "in female criminal lunatics we find to a more marked degree that which we had already noted in the ordinary female criminal, namely, an inversion of all the qualities which specially distinguish the normal woman; namely, reserve, docility and sexual apathy" (297). The desire to make the prostitute visible thus caters to a male desire to view and control female sexuality, see the realities of prostitution, and construct the prostitute as a deviant category in Victorian culture. Female appearances were often thought to be deceiving but, in these instances, the institutional gaze would determine feminine fiction from reality.

The drive to detect the prostitute and then to detect the disease was complicated by the perceived "deception" of her body. A popular idea in these sciences was that women would hide their illness through cosmetics. Acton describes the faces of some London prostitutes as having "delicate complexions, unaccompanied by the pallor of ill-health.... The appearance is doubtless due in many cases to the artistic manner of the make-up by powder and cosmetics, on the employment of which extreme care is bestowed" (19). Once again, it was up to the institutional gaze to render these ploys transparent.

There was also the idea that syphilis was less detectable in women than it was in men. In this sense, the use of the speculum was applied in order to see what could not be detected through common observation. The speculum revealed to the medical eye the hidden nature of

the prostitute's body. In this sense, vaginal discharge and visible lesions or markings were assumed to be symptoms of contagion. These symptoms were later found to be incorrect. Any sores that were detected on the woman's genitalia were removed through a burning process as a first step toward recovery. According to Spongberg, eliminating the visible signs of disease was an important means of regulating prostitution: "This meant not only removing the prostitute from the streets as the most visible purveyor of disease, but removing from the prostitute's body all signs of the disease" (70). This included reformation attempts that relied heavily on cleaning up the dress and appearance of prostitutes and training the prostitute in the ways of respectable femininity.

The institutional investment in making the prostitute, once again, visible and at the same time invisible through the C.D. Acts was ultimately a failure. The Acts did nothing to curb the spread of venereal disease and breakthroughs in medical diagnosis revealed that syphilis was frequently being misdiagnosed in hospitals. Repeal efforts by women's groups and others also worked against the double standard of the acts, forcing the acts to be repealed in 1886. Rather than solidify the vision of the prostitute, the acts further constructed her as visually evasive. The role of the prostitute in the C.D. Acts reveals the way in which the visual ambiguity of the prostitute presented itself as a problem in need of a solution. As such, the power invested in institutional concepts of prostitution and the desire to make her visible had real-life consequences for women at the time. To be seen as a prostitute was to make one susceptible to forced observation and examination.

As the century progressed an increasing interest in eugenics and physiognomy aimed to solidify the prostitute as a distinct type of woman once and for all. Kraft-Ebing and Lombroso and Ferrero reflected a change in the approach to prostitution that differed from that of Acton

and Mayhew. Instead of focusing on descriptions of a myriad of different sex-workers throughout society, Kraft-Ebing, Lombroso and Ferrero worked to construct the prostitute as a distinct pathological and biological “type” in contrast to the respectable woman. The prostitute was thought to be more a product of heredity, breeding and mental defectiveness, than a woman of poor social circumstance. Even though the categories were more tightly defined in this discourse and visual clarity was eagerly sought, the problem of the ambiguous prostitute remains.

In the sexual psychology of Kraft-Ebing, for instance, the prostitute was closely tied to the sexual deficiencies and abnormalities described in women. Nymphomania and hysteria are the most prominent in this respect. For Kraft-Ebing, nymphomania gives women an obsession for sexual satisfaction which eventually culminates in a life of prostitution “where satisfaction and relief is found with one man after another” (404). Prostitution is therefore seen to be a grim finale in the stages of psychosexual illness in women.

Here the desire to make the prostitute visible is less about physical description and more about behavioural traits. Organized into brief narratives of sexual dysfunction, Kraft-Ebing uses case studies alongside analysis in order to make visible the deplorable characteristics of those studied. In the section on hysteria, the story of Marianne L. is portrayed as follows:

At night, while the household was asleep under the influence of narcotics that she had administered, she gave the children of the house to her lover for sexual enjoyment, and also made them witness immoral acts. It was found that L was hysterical (hemianesthesia and convulsive attacks), although before her illness she had been a moral, trustworthy person. Since her illness she had become a shameless prostitute and had lost all moral sense. (411)

The improper sexual behaviour of L is juxtaposed against the original depiction of her as “a moral, trustworthy person.” Her illness forced her character into disrespectful actions and behaviours that are then traced to the prostitute. Prostitution, therefore, is defined as the result of

sexual illness that can cause the ultimate fall from appropriate to vile behaviour. According to Kraft-Ebing, with hysteria, “shameless prostitution, even in married women, may result” (411). The prostitute is characterized through illness and unacceptable sexual behaviour that goes against ideals of female respectability but, once again, the prostitute can surface in any woman. Here visual reliability remains unstable.

With Lombroso and Ferrero, the desire to bring the evasive prostitute into clear focus is stronger than ever before. As such, the examination of the prostitute is centred on her physical attributes, the assumption being that the prostitute’s criminality could be detected through specific physical traits. This line of thinking is related to the popular study of physiognomy—the view that external appearances reveal the inner morality of a subject. In examining the criminality of the prostitute, Lombroso and Ferrero strove to identify key visual signifiers. First and foremost were her masculine characteristics. Relating the prostitute to primitive women who were thought to have large jaws and cheekbones and excessive sexual instincts, the prostitute was described as having increasingly masculine attributes. Additional signifiers included tattoos, “fatness,” poor vision, and a diminished sense of pain. The validity of these characteristics was reinforced by the use of thirty-four photographic portraits of German, French and Russian prostitutes.

According to Lombroso and Ferrero, the central problem was that the images of the prostitute were always potentially deceptive. The prostitute’s physical type was, for example, often disguised by her youth and beauty. Her lack of wrinkles and plump skin could hide her distinctive jaw and cheekbones such that, the authors say, “we can overlook her degenerate type, and even regard her as beautiful; the sexual instinct misleading us here as it does in making us attribute to women more of sensitiveness and passion than they really possess” (97). The

prostitute's visual deception is therefore a large part of her criminality. Although they are degenerate types, the symbols of their degeneration are often invisible to common observers. Some of the deception is maintained by prostitutes through make-up, which "disguises or hides many characteristic features which criminals exhibit openly" (101). This deception of the prostitute is also considered to be part of her danger, something to be feared. Although the prostitute is identified as a distinct type, her nature is to defy visual containment and appear as any woman.

Even though visual categorization of the prostitute increased at the end of the nineteenth century, the prostitute continued to defy proper visualization. More so, she was a character that was shown to balance between the visible and the invisible, the seemingly respectable and the morally debase, never quite able to be fully visualized, categorized and controlled. The result was a panic over the prostitute that centred on the threat of her malleable image. This flexibility of the image, however, would work to the advantage of commercial culture.

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- ¹ For more on the link between vision and truth, see Mirzoeff.
- ² For more on the virgin/whore dichotomy, see Bristow (pg. 42).
- ³ See Acton; Mayhew.

CHAPTER TWO

Sex for Sale: Prostitution and Advertising

In the previous chapter I demonstrated the ways in which institutional discourse constructed the prostitute negatively and, at the same time, struggled with the ambiguity of her image. Building on this insight, I will now turn attention to commercial advertising in order to establish the significance of consumer culture in the construction of fallen women. While official discourse depicted the prostitute's ambiguity as problematic, commercial imagery co-opted and capitalized upon these visual uncertainties and put forth an image of the prostitute that stressed pleasure and consumption. The contrast between institutional discourse and commercial imagery reveals that the image of the prostitute in Victorian culture was more nuanced and complex than currently noted in academia. By extending analysis beyond official discourse, this chapter uncovers the prevalence and pleasures of the ambiguous prostitute as she existed in commercial representation.

The desire to make the prostitute visible was not held solely by legitimized institutions. Although their discourses played a central role in constructing the prostitute as a knowable identity, "official" depictions of the prostitute as social threat and victim worked among other discourses circulating at the time. Myths of fallen women articulated in religious, social, and institutional texts were also actively produced in bourgeois artworks. While institutional discourses struggled to overcome the prostitute's conceptual ambiguity, bourgeois portraiture helped establish her visual stereotype for middle-class audiences.

According to Lynda Nead, the stereotype of the prostitute in art hinged upon making the prostitute recognizably distinct from the ideal woman. In bourgeois art, respectable femininity was depicted in terms of gentle motherhood, fragility, modesty and domesticity. In contrast, the

physical stereotype of the prostitute exaggerated the absence of these qualities. The epitome of this distinction was the figure of the streetwalker whose divergence from ideals of Victorian femininity “worked to sharpen the ideological boundaries between the pure and the fallen” (Myths 173). “The prostitute” in bourgeois art was cast in public urban settings, as opposed to domestic environments; her clothing emphasized “showy detail” rather than “natural” feminine simplicity; and her fate was sealed with signs of her physical and moral deterioration as she moved toward her own demise. Nead states that, “it was possible to believe that non-respectable women could be recognized and set apart from the respectable, and visual representations played an important role in the production of these beliefs” (99). Unlike institutional discourse, which fluctuated between depictions of visual clarity and claims of visual uncertainty, stereotypes of the prostitute in bourgeois portraiture worked towards easy recognition and distinction.¹

Commercial culture, in contrast, offered images of the prostitute that conflicted with the image of destitution presented in art and institutional texts. While moral narratives worked for a culture seeking to distinguish threatening sexuality from proper ladies, the sexualized bodies of women in commercial culture were portrayed as pleasurable indulgences free of moral consequence. Imagery of the prostitute, as a symbol of pleasure, found a central function in the world of commodity culture. The pervasiveness of unofficial representations in the still inchoate consumer culture served to undermine official images of the prostitute and the history of her construction in Britain.

The expansion of mass print culture in the nineteenth century opened up the possibility for larger numbers of people to gain access to writing and imagery. The growth of the capitalist economy ensured that the visual culture of urban centres was rapidly redefined. With the advent of photography and the illustrated press and the indispensable place of advertising in the British

economy, people gained access to a new and sustained source of visual products and information. Part of what defined this culture was the growth in commodity capitalism. During the nineteenth century, people in general had more money to spend on a greater variety of goods and services, including luxuries like leisure and entertainment (Judd, 1). In addition, urban centres were rapidly growing, resulting in larger audiences and economic opportunities. Industry responded by creating new products for consumption and mass advertising to stimulate desire. By mid-century, advertising and other visual artefacts had become a mainstay of the urban landscape. Bill-stickers plastered city walls with posters, shop windows displayed products for visual and monetary consumption, boys handed out flyers to passer-bys, and “sandwich men” strolled the streets wearing billboards.

The omnipresence of advertising in Victorian culture was a regular subject of criticism. In his 1853 book, *Saunterings In and About London*, Max Schlesinger describes advertisements as inescapable:

It is in the skies and on the ground: it swells as the flag in the breeze, and it sets its seal on the pavement; it is on water, on the steamboat wharf, and under the water in the Thames tunnel; it roosts in the highest chimneys; it sparkles in coloured letters on streetlamps... There is no escaping from the advertisement, for it travels with you in the omnibuses, in the railway carriages, and on the paddle-boxes of steamers. (23)

The pervasive character of advertising in urban culture appeared even greater thirty-five years later, as noted in a comic in *Punch* magazine. The illustration depicts humble citizens dwarfed below a towering wall of sensational poster images, the caption reading: “How We Advertise Now.” The wall is shown to be chaotic and dangerous as overlapping posters of horrific spectacles (hangmen, theatres of horror, fighting criminals) and wild animals (bears, lions, horses) appear to jump out to frighten onlookers. One girl on the street cowers close to her mother in response while horses recoil and jump at an advertiser dressed as an elephant. The

cartoon blurs the boundary between fictive poster images and vulnerable citizens to create a scene of chaos where advertising is to blame. It is a representational world out of control and authorities, evidenced by an oblivious policeman resting on his heels, are unwilling to put a stop to it. Unlike bourgeois artwork, the commercial image, to the dismay of some, was public and intrusive.

According to Anne McClintock, the advertising image became fundamental not only for selling products, but also for constructing cultural ideology: “the new economy created an uproar not only of things but of signs” (305). In her study of racism in Victorian soap advertisements, McClintock shows how such imagery brought notions of racism, already articulated in institutional and fictional texts, to a wider audience. With advertising, the image, or “consumer spectacle” as she terms it, “could package, market, and distribute evolutionary racism on a hitherto unimagined scale. No pre-existing form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace” (307). Advertising circulated ideologies in a way that was accessible to large numbers of people, thereby positioning itself as a dominant cultural discourse.

In the context of this new commercial culture, prostitution and the position of sex as a commodity was prevalent. A key characteristic of nineteenth-century culture was the increase of leisure and entertainment as a commodity form. As a result, new spaces of entertainment opened up. Public houses were transformed into entertainment music halls, while variety theatres, dance halls, casinos and pleasure gardens became part of the urban scenery. According to T.J. Clark, the influx in public entertainment culture became part of a mythic representation of modernity marked by “leisure, consumption, the spectacle, and money” (qtd. in Pollack, 75). As evidenced by Griselda Pollack, however, these signs of modernity were also linked to constructions of male

sexuality. Myths of male sexuality (involving leisure, consumption, the spectacle and money) were regularly articulated over and across signs of the female body. Consequently, the territories that defined male heterosexuality were spaces where women's bodies were sexualized and put on display, such as nude artwork, the brothel, and the bar. Thus the connection between male leisure as a definition of masculine sexuality and the consumption of female bodies for entertainment became a defining characteristic of the consumer landscape.

As symbols of masculine pleasure and consumption, prostitutes and their availability were rapidly incorporated into the London leisure and entertainment economies. The haunts of prostitutes were known to be casinos, dance halls, and theatre districts. Other places of prostitution included bars, brothels and pleasure gardens.² As facets of male sexual definition and pleasure, prostitution became integral to the economic well being of certain entertainment establishments. As stated by Kellow Chesney, "There was a large and lucrative entertainment industry whose whole prosperity depended upon prostitution" (368). A common perception in institutional discourse was that casinos, burlesque theatres and dancing halls had a strict female clientele of purchasable women. William Acton, for example, describes all of the female patrons at the Argyll Rooms and the Holborn Casino in London to be prostitutes (19). James Greenwood, in *The Seven Curses of London*, describes the female patrons of music halls likewise (232-233).

Prostitution was not just an independent economic pursuit of women. The sex trade was a profitable financial investment for broad sections of the London economy. Greenwood describes an intimate economic relationship that prostitutes had, for example, with music halls and cabbies:

I should not for a moment wish to impute without substantial proof so dastardly a feature of "business" to any spirited music-hall proprietor in particular; but I am

positively assured by those who should know, that on certain recognised nights loose women are admitted to these places without payment. I know as a fact, too, that it is no uncommon thing for these female music-hall frequenters to enlist the services of cabmen on "spec," the latter conveying their "fare" to the Alhambra or the Philharmonic without present payment, on the chance that she will in the course of the evening "pick up a flat," who will with the lady require his services to drive them to the Haymarket or elsewhere.³ (233)

Although there is no means of verifying Greenwood's statements, the idea that prostitutes were given free admission to entertainment venues and had economic arrangements with cabmen indicates a clear business investment in having these women present. Chesney also describes prostitutes working in cafés "where gloves and cheap trinkets were displayed at five times the regular price for women to wheedle admirers into buying" (365). Not only ensuring purchasable bodies for male consumers, the prostitute's visual display also attracted other forms of business. Her body was an advertisement intended to conjure up desire not only for sexual consumption, but also for commodities in the entertainment venues.

The visibility of the prostitute was therefore structured in part according to her association with pleasure and commerce. Comparing images of women in Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," Pollack shows the different ways men felt invited to consume women depending upon female associations with commerce and amusement. She claims that respectable women walking in parks with their husbands were often decorporealized in the imagery. In contrast, images that depicted places intended for visual and sexual consumption (bars, brothels, theatres) showed women's bodies opened up for public view, their clothing eager to reveal sexualized figures (78). Part of what defined entertainment and leisure was the availability of female bodies for visual consumption. In this sense, it was not only the prostitute but also the female entertainer who was sexualized as a source of visual pleasure. The bodies of female performers were often open to display and expression. As a result, female entertainers

and prostitutes were regularly conflated in both institutional discourse and social discussion. For instance, Hemyng includes “ballet-girls” as a category of prostitute, stating that their poor wages and need to purchase material things often made them resort to prostitution (257). The display of these working women in commercial culture and their unclear position with regard to selling sexual services and displaying their bodies for money created a porous boundary between sex trade workers and female entertainers.

The position of the prostitute as image was also dependent upon her visual engagement with pleasure. In bourgeois artwork part of what signified the fallen woman’s deviancy was her open display of desire and indulgence. The prostitute was a consumer of pleasure and, at the same time, an object of desire. This positioned her as a subject of condemnation, on the one hand, and a source of visual pleasure, on the other (Nead, Myths 179). The difference within commercial imagery was, of course, that women were rarely condemned for their display. The association of the sexual female image with male sexuality, commodity consumption, and pleasure made it a complimentary partner to a commercial culture whose aim was to incite desires in order to sell products.

The producers of popular entertainment made the most use of image advertising in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Popular entertainment “adorned their playbills with exciting images” (Hail, 5) and “inspired the most colourful and lavish posters” (8). It may not be surprising then that visual depictions of women were pervasive in advertisements promoting spaces of leisure and entertainment. Illustrated covers of sheet music promoting pleasure gardens show women gleefully dancing with men, while theatre posters present images of high-kicking women in revealing skirts. Unlike the images of prostitutes in bourgeois art that stressed streetwalkers as distinct and morally removed from respectable femininity, commercial culture,

and entertainment advertising in particular, relied upon the ambiguities of prostitution to sell sexual consumption in modern London.

By relying upon the visual uncertainties of women's sexual identities, advertisers mixed signifiers of prostitution with respectable femininity as a means of promoting business. The advertising for London's Gaiety Theatre, for instance, was infamous for its depictions of pleasurable women. At the National Archives in London, an advertisement for the production "Carmen Up to Data" at the Gaiety Theatre (Fig. 1) depicts a famous burlesque actress as Carmen, a seductive working-class woman who refuses to marry her admirer. She is shown wearing a Spanish dress that reveals her cleavage and ankles while she stands, smiling, hand on hip, exhaling a stream of smoke from her cigarette. Her bold pose suggests an affront to the demure disposition characterized by Victorian ladies and, instead, offers an image of female sexuality that is both active and daring. The imagery uses signifiers of prostitution—such as smoking for pleasure, bodily display, fancy dress, and Carmen as a contentious character—as a seductive advertisement for the performance. The use of a blank backdrop, as opposed to a stage setting, further isolates the body of the actress as a key source of visual pleasure and promotion. Hail claims that advertising played a large role in promoting "Carmen Up to Data" and, after seeing the performance, "reviewers agreed that the [chorus] girls had never looked more alluring" (4).

The sexuality of Gaiety female performers, or "the Gaiety Girls," as they were called, was a defining means of promotion for the theatre. Posters promoting the theatre regularly depicted women in elaborate dress and showy make-up, standing in poses that revealed their legs. The infamy of the Gaiety girls, however, was key to reading the images. According to Alan Hyman, a historian of the theatre, the Gaiety Theatre was characterized by burlesque



FIGURE 1. "Carmen Gaiety Theatre", 1891. Printed by The National Lithograph and Printing Co. Ltd. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/93 f.110.

performances whose main attractions were the chorus girls (6). As such, men were the primary audience for these shows and this aspect functioned largely in the promotion of the theatre. In the words of Gaiety Theatre owner, John Hollingstead: "A manager should never forget that there are in London many gentlemen, old and young, who will go to the theatre to admire the female actress" (qtd. in Hyman, 6). The Gaiety Girls were chosen based upon their physical appearance, which emphasized full breasts and round thighs. The physical desirability of the women consequently led to stories of the Gaiety stage door, which was often depicted in illustrations at the time. "A Gaiety Girl" (Fig. 2), found in the collections at the National Archives, shows a group of well-dressed gentlemen carrying gifts and waiting in an alleyway outside the Gaiety stage door. The fur trim on one man's jacket, combined with the top hats and white gloves worn by all the men, signify their position as wealthy consumers. The type of consumption the men are pursuing, however, is deemed sexual by the secrecy of the back alleyway where one man, smoking a phallic cigar, rests on his heels in anticipation while another holds a bouquet of flowers. Beside the stage door a bright red Gaiety Girl poster displays an extravagantly dressed woman posing boldly with her hands on her hips. The image acts as an alluring advertisement for the risky, yet pleasurable women residing on the other side of the door. The mixture of signs of male pleasurable consumption (smoking, fine clothing, the Gaiety Girl poster) and courting (flowers) suggests the Gaiety Girls to be another source of male pleasure and purchase. Although Hollingstead claimed that no man was ever permitted in the girls' dressing rooms and that no Gaiety girl accepted money, the women would often be taken out to dinner, given gifts, and be seen accompanying their admirers to entertainment venues (96-97). The reputation of these women, and other female performers in London, hinged on their association with the world of prostitution. Entertainment advertising like Gaiety used the



FIGURE 2. Dudley Hardy. "A Gaiety Girl: Prince of Wales Theatre", 1894. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/111 f.274.

ambiguity of their performers to promote theatres as spaces of visual pleasure and sexual consumption.

This blurring of images of entertainers and prostitutes extended into other entertainment spaces as well. The advertisements of female circus performers, for example, were popular in Victorian commercial culture, with circus posters representing some of the most sensational image advertising of the day. In a poster for “The Beautiful Mdlle Nadji” (Fig. 3), a French contortionist who toured England, the performer’s leotard-clad body is shown in a series of bends and flips emphasizing open legs and provocative displays. Like the attributes promoted by the Gaiety Girls, the contortions displayed by Nadji highlight her rounded thighs, full breasts, and expressive physicality. The vignette in the right-hand corner, for example, goes so far as to hide Nadji’s face drawing the viewer’s attention to her thighs and breasts. This implicit sexual content, however, is countered by small vignettes at the top and bottom of the image showing the performer in respectable dress and bonnet and as a demure female spectator of the show. This mixture of extensive physical display by a French performer (who was often seen by the British as prone to impropriety) and juxtaposed signs of respectability was typical of commercial images that aimed to titillate their audiences, on one hand, while maintaining claims that their institution was respectable, on the other.

This balance between sexual solicitation and apparent respectability was a characteristic of the visually ambiguous prostitute. The visual uncertainty of her image was still a pervasive narrative in Victorian culture. “Scene in Regent Street,” a cartoon in *Punch* magazine, for example, derives a comedic effect by showing a moral reformer mistaking a respectable woman for a prostitute. Similarly, an 1857 cartoon titled “The Great Social Evil” shows an alleyway bearing a poster for “La Triviata,” an opera about a French courtesan who succumbs to love and

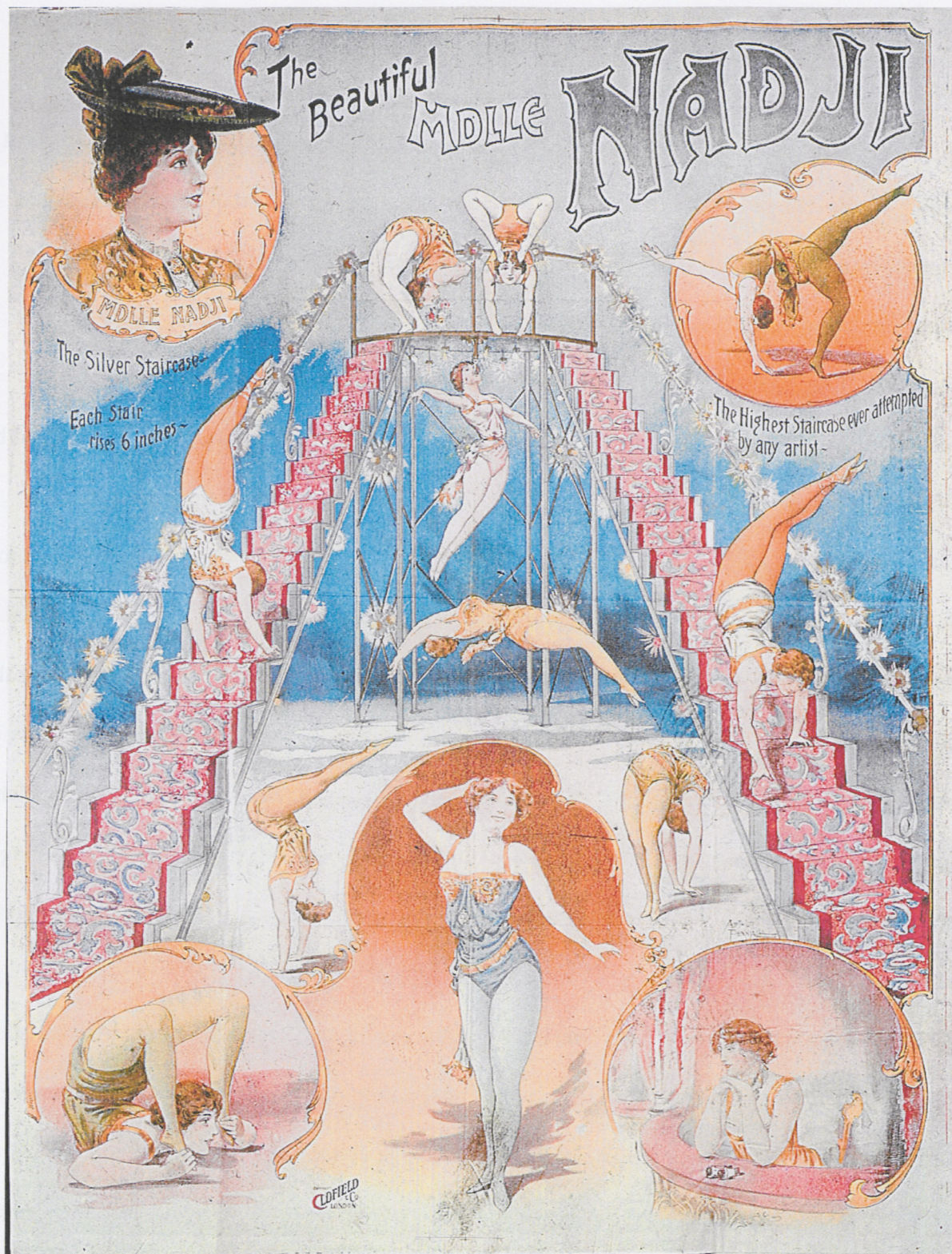


FIGURE 3. Arthur Penniall. "The Beautiful Mdlle Nadji", 1904. Printed by Oldfield & Co. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/222 f.144.

eventually disease. In front of the poster, one woman confronts another with surprise, claiming she did not know her to be a prostitute. Both comics reflect a lack of visual certainty when it came to the streetwalker.

An example of the use of indistinct imagery and the limits to explicit representation can be found in the history of the Cremorne Pleasure Gardens. As one of the most popular and commercially viable pleasure gardens in London in the 1860s, Cremorne was an outdoor resort where, for the price of one shilling, a broad spectrum of the population could congregate for leisure and recreation. The gardens offered everything from beautifully landscaped spaces to restaurants, theatres and dancing. In *Victorian Babylon*, Nead reads the Cremorne Gardens as a space that tested the balance between business and pleasure. One of the aspects that made Cremorne so financially successful was its appeal to a range of the London populace; it was “imagined equally as a place for families and loungers, clerks and swells, respectable women and screeching prostitutes” (177). This resulted in a division in public perception between the polite, proper recreation of the day and the infamous immorality of the nights. As such, Cremorne was considered to be a place of both respectable and illicit pleasures.

One of the ways that Cremorne was advertised was through the sale of illustrated sheet music whose covers were displayed openly in shop windows. In turn, these images became part of the scenery of the city. Due to the popularity of music and dancing at Cremorne, much of the illustrated sheet music depicted the nightlife of the gardens. These images were “made to be arresting, to stand out and to command attention. Like the managers of Cremorne, therefore, the covers sought novelty; images that would advertise themselves and sell” (Nead, 122). Many of the cover illustrations that Nead examines depict men and women on the dancing platform at the gardens. Although Nead reads the imagery to be a reflection of modern street culture and gender

relations of the time, one cover, titled “Cremorne Quadrilles,” also shows how Cremorne advertising promoted both respectable and illicit pleasures. The cover shows men and women performing the quadrille, a dance that involved changing partners. The image is frozen with a male and female passing each other on the dance floor looking over their shoulders at one another as if flirting. The picture at once suggests an erotic encounter of strangers, the identity of the woman’s respectability unclear, while also communicating that it is a dance and not solicitation that is being performed. Such imagery worked to advertise the sexual possibilities of Cremorne while remaining an acceptable image for middle-class consumption.

Cremorne’s reputation as a haunt for prostitutes and other improper behaviour became problematic for certain members of society. There were groups of moralists, magistrates and portions of the general public that objected to the type of leisure provided at Cremorne and who would organize campaigns to challenge the garden’s licence renewals (Nead, 135). To protect itself against these campaigns, management had to be careful about its image while still assuring that the gardens provided pleasurable consumption. Visual representations were considered to be particularly influential to public opinion. *The Days’ Doings*, for instance, was a middle-class magazine that ventured into controversial issues. The cover illustration of one issue portrays Derby Night at the Cremorne with an image of fancily dressed women drinking with men and standing on tables. Men surround the boisterous women and one gentleman is shown to be passed out, drink in hand, perched against the leg of a female companion. An article in the magazine notes that the garden owner, John Baum, had approved the image for publication but noted that men of extreme intoxication would not be permitted on the premises (Nead, 138). The interesting thing about Baum’s protective comment against liquor infractions is that the sexual visibility of the women was deemed unnecessary for comment. The presence of prostitution

remained a marketable visuality amidst accusations of impropriety as long as it was adequately implicit.

Just as places like Cremorne were policed and monitored as entertainment venues, advertisements were also subject to suspicions of impropriety. In 1889 the Indecent Advertisements Act was passed as a means of controlling the content of posters. One of the first images prosecuted under this act was a circus poster depicting a female acrobat performer wearing skin-coloured tights (Judd, 2). The prosecution resulted in a censorship committee within the Billposters' Association that would self-regulate and monitor advertisements for unfit imagery. This form of censorship was not entirely successful, as advertisers were still "using sexually titillating illustrations to sell their products" (2). While businesses had to remain sensitive to the prosecution of explicit expressions of impropriety, the ambiguity invested in images of women carefully served to promote male pleasures.

Entertainment venues that sought to distance themselves from accusations of impropriety did so clearly in their advertisements. A collection at The Museum of London has a playbill for the Gattis Palace of Varieties, for example, wherein the front of the bill shows a distant view of Westminster Bridge Road where the Gattis theatre is situated along an open thoroughfare. Above the image of the theatre appear the words "The Family Resort." Open up the bill and there is no visual imagery. Instead there is a program list running alongside text advertisements for domestic products like clothing, medicine, banks, furniture and restaurants. At the bottom of the program, a warning is printed: "SPECIAL NOTICE: All possible care is exercised to ensure perfect propriety in the Entertainment. The Manager will, however, be greatly obliged to members of the audience who will report to him anything in the slightest degree objectionable."

Part of what defined the Gattis as “a family resort,” aside from its textual claims, was the absence of women in the imagery.

Compare the Gattis playbill to a playbill for the Middlesex Music Hall, where revealing images of female performers consume three front panels of the bill amidst advertisements and price lists for liquor and cigars. Inside, the bill boasts text advertisements for restaurants, alcohol, food, and tobacco, items associated with pleasurable indulgence and leisure. Although men are represented extensively as performers in the written programme, the imagery emphasizes women. Men are shown in the images in dance positions that support the women and the physical appearances of the men are feminized through pointed dance gestures and costume. The feminization of the male performers in the imagery reassures a heterosexual male consumer that the female performers are still available for visual and perhaps even sexual consumption. The playbills, more pointedly, reveal a marked difference in the entertainment spaces advertised. The distinction is based, firstly, upon promises of female visual consumption signified by images of women and, secondly, upon the types of products that the theatre chooses to promote. The “clean” domestic products of the Gattis contrast with the more illicit products of public leisure and indulgence promoted by Middlesex. The spheres of entertainment consumption are distinctly different.

Prostitution and Products

The association of images of female sexuality with products, as opposed to spaces, redefined the way in which images of the prostitute were used and even what they symbolized. Before, the images could represent the availability of female bodies for visual and physical consumption in the spaces of advertised entertainment. Later, the association of the visually ambiguous prostitute with products signified both the consumption of the image as pure visual

pleasure and the association of that pleasure with the purchase of products. The image of the prostitute that had been used to solicit the desire for sexual consumption displaced that desire onto commodities.

Because female sexuality in entertainment culture represented modern masculine sexuality and leisure, images of prostitutes were often associated with products arguably aimed at heterosexual men's consumption, like cigars and liquor as shown in the Middlesex playbill. The image of the prostitute, however, was also worked into other less gender-specific products. The campaign for Apollinaris table waters offers one of the more obvious indications of the way in which the iconography of prostitution worked itself into product advertisements. "Apollinaris"(Fig. 4) shows an image of an extravagantly decorated woman holding a black lace shawl above her head. As she peers out from under the material, the woman reveals herself to the audience suggesting an erotic playfulness between herself and the viewer. Her bright red bodice sexualizes her figure drawing attention to her breasts, waist, and hips while the black jewelled detailing forms a leading line to the woman's genitals. Defying the natural simplicity of feminine respectability and emphasizing showy detail and a sexualized body, the woman could be read as a prostitute. Yet the text in the advertisement complicates this reading, suggesting that Apollinaris is "The Queen of Table Waters," which connects the risky display of the female in the image with respectable notions of royalty and high-class femininity. Apollinaris menu cards again show fancily dressed women exposing their cleavage, ankles, and crinolines as they wrap themselves around menus and dangle bottles of Apollinaris between their fingers as if they were bottles of champagne. The women depicted assure us that Apollinaris is a table water associated with risky pleasures and sensual indulgence, although the product itself is actually not.

Apollinaris

"THE QUEEN
OF
TABLE
WATERS"



FIGURE 4. "Apollinaris", 1892. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO
Reference: Copy 1/103 f.203.

Compare this imagery to the character portrayed in a Carruthers Mineral Water advertisement (Fig. 5), a product that promotes “absolute purity.” Here, the image of an Ancient Greek woman situated in a natural setting is used to indicate the purity of the product. According to Alison Smith, images of antique female bodies were often used to invoke notions of natural reproduction and femininity (120). The women in Figures 4 and 5 show a striking similarity in terms of pleasurable facial features and in both being presented as objects for visual pleasure. It is their contrasting dress and environments— pitting natural femininity against modern artifice— that communicates the different kinds of indulgences associated with the two waters. Apollinaris, employing iconography of prostitution, represents potentially illicit enjoyment while Carruthers is a product of pure gratification. And yet, either way, the product becomes imbued with pleasures emitted from the visual representation of women.

Women’s Advertising and the Prostitute

It might seem that the image of the prostitute in commercial culture has functioned with the male consumer in mind, but this was not entirely the case. As shown in Cremorne and other entertainment venues, Victorian women were also consumers of leisure and entertainment. Women of course circulated in urban spaces and consumed many of the same visual advertising men did. Theorists such as Pollack, however, have claimed that the respectability of Victorian women depended upon their exclusion from the culture of the public sphere and their submission as objects of the male gaze as opposed to active viewers. She states that women “were never positioned as the normal occupants of the public realm. They did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch” (77). The gaze of “proper” women was permitted in certain places of respectability, but there was a limit to that space, what Pollack refers to as “a frontier of the spaces of femininity” that divided the illicit women from the proper (82). The idea that

Carruthers' Mineral Waters,

MADE FROM
Artesian Well Water.

ABSOLUTE PURITY ASSURED.

Soda,
Potash.
Lemonade,
Ginger
Ale,
Seltzer
Water,
Lithia,

Crystal
Ginger
Beer,
Stone
Ginger
Beer,
Kola,
Champagne
Ginger.



SILVER MEDAL AND DIPLOMA
INTERNATIONAL BREWERS EXHIBITION, LONDON, 1898.

Robert Carruthers,
OLD BREWERY, *Dumfries.*

FIGURE 5. "Carruthers' Mineral Waters", 1899. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/152 f.93.

respectable women were restricted to spaces of respectable consumption while other women were distinguished by their place in spheres of masculine consumption is a common perception. Nead, however, takes issue with these claims, critiquing the way middle-class women have been regularly removed from the public sphere in historical accounts of the era. She counters that the public sphere was a diverse and multifaceted space wherein many types of women circulated for a number of different reasons (Victorian Babylon 70). This is supported by Mary P. Ryan, who claims that “the city streets offered [women] new attractions, new freedoms, and a veil of anonymity under which to pursue them”(63). As shown in the Cremorne pleasure gardens, women from various facets of society mixed and mingled in public places as active viewers and consumers of leisure.

Women had several entries into the public realm. Moreover, the second half of the nineteenth century saw a boom in commercial advertising targeting them as commodity culture strove to create a desire for consumption in both males and females. According to Sharon Marcus, this is evidenced in the printing of fashion plates in popular women’s magazines, the aim being to create a longing for new clothing (10). Shopping as leisure and the introduction of the department store in London in the 1860s also created spaces for middle-class women as consumers. In response, advertisements for domestic products and female fashions became pervasive. Part of what made Victorian advertising potentially subversive, however, was its incorporation of domestic iconography into the public sphere: “Advertising took the intimate signs of domesticity (children bathing, men shaving, women laced into corsets, maids delivering nightcaps) into the public realm, plastering scenes of domesticity on walls, buses, shopfronts, and billboards... By trafficking promiscuity across the threshold of private and public, advert

began to subvert one of the fundamental distinctions of commodity capital, even as it was coming into being” (McClintock, 305).

This blend between the public and private, however, was not simply about including domestic imagery in public space, which could be enjoyed by male viewers as much as females; it was also about bringing the public into the private. Charles Manby Smith’s 1853 book *Curiosities of London Life, or Phases, Physiological and Social of the Great Metropolis* shows the extent to which advertisers went to communicate to women. In the section “Puff and Push,” Smith describes vendors sending letters addressed to “the lady of the house” while the women’s husbands were at work. Inside the letters were advertisements that informed the women of tempting bargains for domestic products and female fashions: “Embroidered satin shawls (magnificent), value 20 guineas each, to be sold for 3 guineas” (285). For Smith, these advertisements were manipulative, inciting a desire for commodities in women who were unable to decipher the lies that advertisers relied upon to sell their products. Therefore, “the greatest rogues are enabled to practise upon the simplicity of our better-halves, while we think them secure in the guardianship of home” (286). The threat of commerce and advertising permeating the home and inciting desire in respectable women was seen as a danger of London’s persistent advertising.

The double standard surrounding the consumption of advertising by men and women is reflective of an ideal of bourgeois femininity that emphasized passionless women. The reality of London as a consumer society, however, was that visual pleasure and the desire for products and entertainment was quickly becoming a dominant characteristic of urban modernity. One of the things that served to complicate the visual clarity of women in London during the 1860s, for example, was the emergence of a new kind of femininity. According to Alison Smith, the 1860s

saw the introduction of “The Girl of the Period,” a term used to describe “the racy social and sartorial habits of the modern liberated young woman, who in her pursuit of artifice and pleasure was seen as transgressing the boundaries of class and respectability” (120). The emergence of a respectable woman that consumed pleasure and fashionable commodities threw into question distinctions between proper femininity and the prostitute.

According to sociological and scientific theorists of the time, one of the things that set the prostitute apart from respectable women, aside from her indulgence in pleasure, was her vanity. In the works of Acton, Hemyng, Lombroso and Ferrero, a primary cause of prostitution was said to be a women’s love of dress and artifice. Hemyng describes one prostitute as “fonder of dress than anything. On an average she had a new bonnet once a week, dresses not so often” (220). Acton and Lombroso also emphasized the prostitute’s indulgence in cosmetics, which were assumedly used to hide her illness and criminality. The association of the prostitute with the world of commodity consumption and pleasure was one of the things that institutional discourse used to distinguish her from respectable women. As a woman of consumer culture, however, the Girl of the Period discouraged clear visual recognition by indulging in the very pleasures that were typically associated with fallen women.

Middle-class publications drew upon this slippery association and often condemned the “fast” women of London in their publications. An illustration in *Fun* magazine titled “Oh, Stay! Or Graces Versus Laces,” shows nude figures of Venus and the Graces looking down from the heavens upon two extravagantly dressed women whose waists are tightly bound. The women are looking in a shop window at the display of corsets and crinolines. Venus says to the Graces: “My stars, what *can* that thing be under a glass case? How *do* they wear it?”, to which the Graces respond, “It’s no use asking us: *we* have nothing to do with it!” The visual distinctions

between the natural reproductive figures symbolized by Venus and the Graces and the bound waists of the consumers aims to make the modern women look foolish. Natural feminine respectability, perpetuated by bourgeois ideals that promoted feminine simplicity over artifice, is favoured over the image of women as vain consumers. Commercial advertising and commodity culture were thus considered by some to be potentially dangerous. Consuming women disrupted the boundaries between bourgeois notions of natural femininity (a vision of domesticity) and the prostitute, who was actively engaged in commerce and the accumulation of commodities to suit her vanity.

Although middle-class discourse critiqued the place of women in commodity culture, advertisements of the time far from condemned the ambiguities that existed between women's consumption and prostitution. Advertising strove to include a mixture of female identities in their imagery, ranging from feminine modesty to "fast" women. This often resulted in hybrid images of female sexuality that strove to balance the iconography of respectability with signs of pleasure and sexuality. The ambiguity of female identities is evident in advertisements for domestic products where respectable women are shown engaged in the pleasure of commodities. An advertisement for "Calvert's Carbolic Prickly Heat and Bath Soap," for example, shows a beautiful woman washing her hands in a bowl of water. She gazes directly at the viewer and her slight smile suggests an enjoyment in washing that, in turn, conjures up sexual connotations. Her apparent domestic purity, signified by modest dress, fair features, and cleanliness, is mixed with a display of pleasure that complicates the image and the identity of the woman washing. Similarly, an advertisement for Pears' soap (Fig. 6) shows a white woman in an ancient wrap, lounging amidst flowers and mountains while a topless woman, with dark skin and "exotic" jewellery, fans her. The advertisement states that the soap is used for the complexion, making



FIGURE 6. "Pears' Soap", 1887. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/78 f.377.

use of a racist distinction between the pale skin of the woman and the dark skin of her servant. Like the Calvert's advertisement, this image slips into visual uncertainty. The seemingly respectable woman's pleasurable association with the questionable status of the other woman (who displays her breasts and is adorned with bold jewellery) connotes sexual associations commonly portrayed in pornographic scenarios of the time.⁴ The fact that advertisements directed at women made use of similar sexual ambiguities as advertisements primarily directed at men demands that one recognizes the image of the prostitute as a symbol of more than just male leisure and consumption. Moreover, the representation of women did not only serve as a site for pleasurable male consumption, but provided pleasure for women as well.

Commercial imagery directed at women in the nineteenth century hinged upon notions of visual pleasure in the female body. A common misconception of fashion plates, for example, was that they worked to make women objects for the male gaze. Marcus contends that, in fact, women in these images were part of a homoerotic structure of looking between women. Female bodies portrayed in women's magazines were intended for female pleasure. Within this dynamic of looking, "we find a female world of love and ritual notable for its lack of difference from the voyeuristic, fetishizing promiscuity that has been ascribed to masculinity and heterosexuality" (8). The similarity between depictions of women intended for female pleasure and those intended for men comes out of conventions in female consumerism. Female fashion in the Victorian era, for instance, was typically meant to accentuate a woman's waist, hips, breasts and buttocks. In examining female fashion, women were therefore "forced to be fetishists who perceived women as erotic objects" (8).

The sexual nature of fashion plates is reinforced as Marcus illustrates the similarities between fashion plate scenarios of looking and conventions in pornographic imagery. A fashion

plate of women playing blind man's bluff, for example, exemplifies a popular convention of pornographic imagery by showing a blindfolded woman being touched or tagged by another woman while a third woman peeks at the interaction from behind a statue. Marcus identifies this type of indulgence as a purely lesbian pleasure; however, she does not explore the ways in which these images of female indulgence were also associated with fallen women. In female fashion plates, the image of respectable femininity was equally infused with the illicit sexuality of the prostitute, a dominant figure in pornographic representation.⁵

As a figure of female pleasure, the courtesan or high-class prostitute is further evidenced in the structure of fantasy in fashion plates. Marcus claims, for instance, that "Fashion plates' idealized style, their lack of narrative, and their formal emphasis on women about to complete a motion all promote a structure of endless yearning suggestive of desires for wealth and beauty that are fantasmatic in the sense that they can never be fully realized" (24). I would argue that such reveries of wealth and beauty, combined with sexual fantasies and desires, created a space for the prostitute as a subject of female desire and mimicry. As the emergence of the Girl of the Period can attest, some Victorian women adopted the styles and pursuits of pleasure that were traditionally attributed to "loose women." The image of the prostitute had extended beyond the disreputable dance hall advertisement and into mainstream middle-class commercial imagery.

There were other commercial images directed at women that had a much broader circulation and which also mixed illicit sexual signifiers of the prostitute with images of mainstream respectability—corset and undergarment advertising. Due to the standardized nature of these garments, advertisers could use large-scale advertising campaigns to promote their products. As a result, advertising for underclothes was much more prominent than advertising for outer clothing.⁶ The advertising collections at the National Archives in London

include several advertisements for corsets and female undergarments, the majority of which reflected the sexually ambiguous imagery described by Marcus. An advertisement for “The Boltonian Elastic Ribbed Under-Vest” (Fig. 7), for example, shows two young women wearing under-vests and standing against a shadowy wallpapered wall. The shadowed domestic setting establishes a seedy atmosphere where the women’s physical interaction can be read as sexual. The image shows one woman gazing pleasurably at the other as her hand rests upon the other woman’s shoulder, pulling her closer. Her free hand, meanwhile, pulls at the ribbon on her vest, as if undoing it. The other woman gazes at the woman’s bust while sliding her fingers inside the vest opening. The mixture of female smiles, gazes and touches creates a sexual association - exacerbated by the hidden ring fingers. The women become sexualized in their underclothes, their purity unclear as they mimic pornographic iconography.

With regard to female respectability, meanings of the corset fluctuated throughout the nineteenth century. Originally, the corset was considered to be a signifier of self-discipline for upper and middle-class women. As the garment became more popular in the 1860s, however, prostitutes and working-class women made the garment “scandalous” by tightly lacing the garment to exaggerate the breasts. This resulted in the corset being redefined as a signifier of improper desire.⁷ Corset advertisements at the end of the century, however, countered this association, showing images of respectable women in corsets while maintaining the ambiguity of their sexuality. An advertisement for Oktis Corset Shields, for instance, shows an angelic-faced woman who has opened up her corset to expose, not only the corset shield, but also her body in a revealing white undergarment. Her fingers show a wedding ring, while her wrists carry ornate gold bracelets. The youthful and attractive appearance of the woman suggests a natural sexual vitality that is magnified by her inviting smile. By combining iconography that mixes

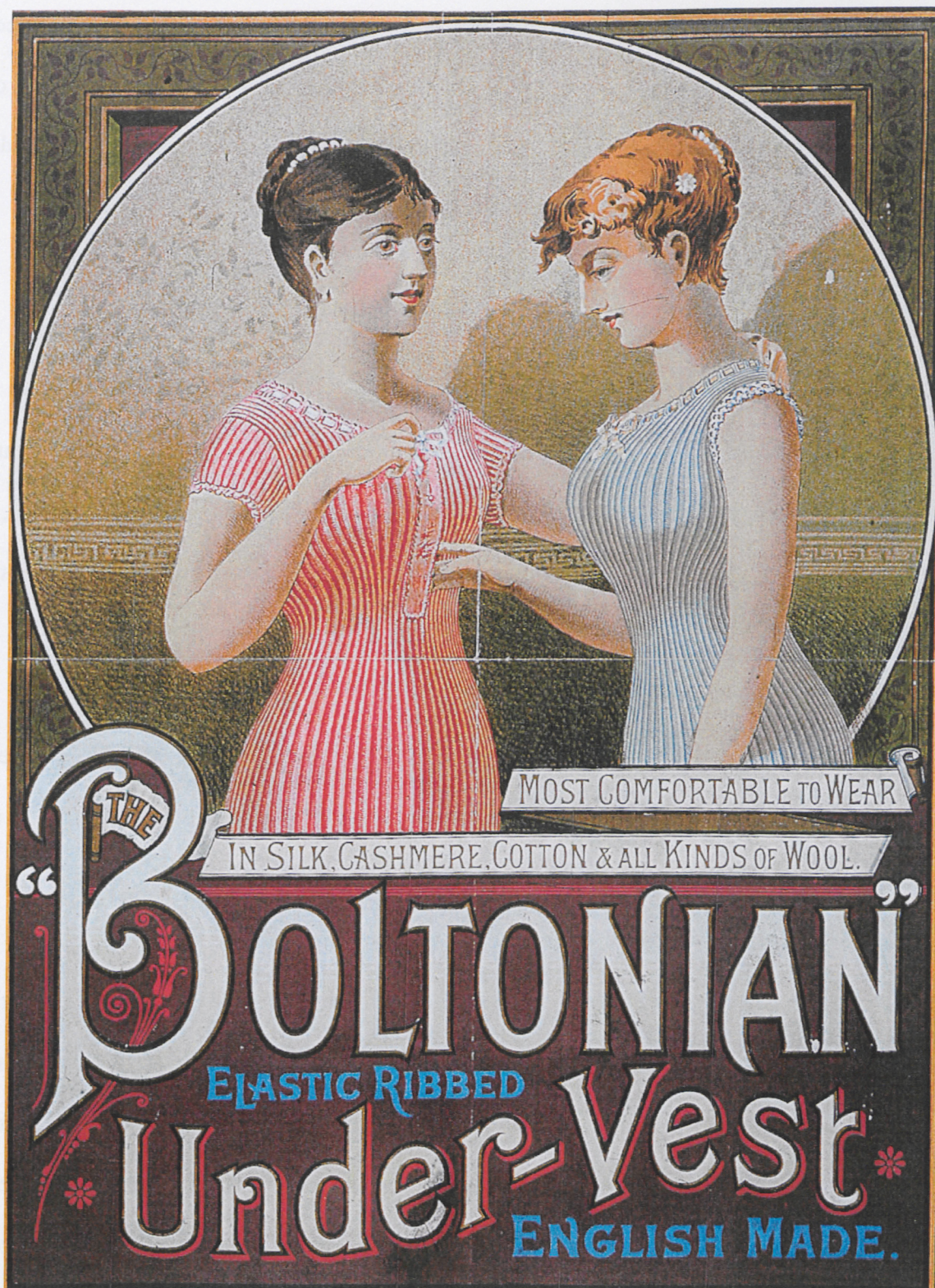


FIGURE 7. "The Boltonian Under-Vest", 1888. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/81 f.343.

respectable femininity (simplicity, the wedding ring, etc.) with uncertain signs of extravagance and pleasure (extra jewellery, the opening up of the body for public display) the signification of the image is suspended. An advertisement for “Izod’s Corsets”(Fig. 8) likewise shows a maid doing up her mistress’ corset, which suggests sexual connotations, while the images that surround this scene show women, unaccompanied by male suitors, in displays of various recreation. The women in the six vignettes are shown engaged in a life of sport recreation, physicality, and independence where the signifiers of children and marital domesticity are absent. Ring fingers are routinely obscured while pleasure is defined by solitary excursions and self-indulgence. Here the high-class depictions of recreation and dress suggest respectability, yet the main character’s solitary status and indulgence in her own image via the mirror connotes the courtesan.

The image of the corseted woman enjoying her own reflection was common in corset advertisements. Women in these advertisements do not only indulge in other women’s images, they indulge in their own bodies as sources of pleasure. An advertisement for “W.F. Corsets and Underclothing” shows a corseted woman with a slight smile standing in an extravagantly decorated room. Hand on her hip, she stares at herself in a full-length mirror as she holds another smaller mirror in her hand. The association of women and mirrors, according to Bram Dijkstra, often served to signify female vanity (178) and vanity, as earlier noted, was commonly associated with prostitutes. Women were encouraged to take pleasure in their sexualized image. The ambiguous visuality of the prostitute served a commercial culture that sought to incite desire in its audiences for consumption and indulgence. The conjuring up of fantasy and desire through images of the sexual female body was a part of commercial advertising. It permitted a space for men and women’s desires while reinforcing the view of commodity consumption as a source of

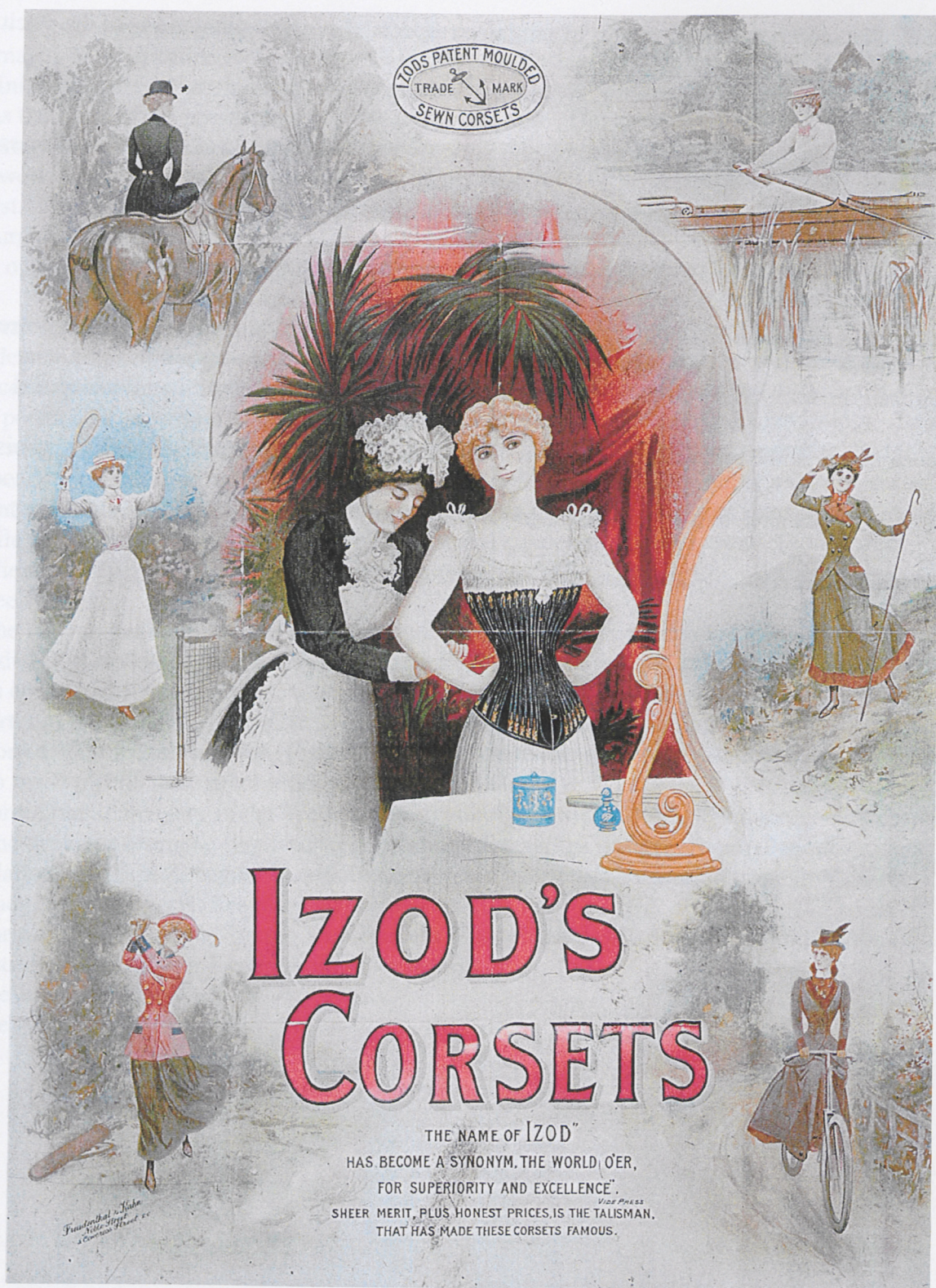


FIGURE 8. "Izod's Corsets", 1899. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/154 f.268.

pleasure. The incorporation of visions of feminine respectability and connotations of the illicit sexuality of prostitutes was useful for an industry wishing to hit a broad demographic.

Sex was being sold in Victorian Britain not only via prostitution, but also through mass-produced images. The most striking aspect of this visuality was commercial culture's dependence upon the visual ambiguity of the prostitute. Although the stereotype of the streetwalker, emphasized in high art, was available for clear identification, commercial culture perpetuated the uncertainty of female sexualities. It did not depict the destitute, diseased and depraved image of the prostitute that was put forward in institutional discourses and bourgeois art. Rather, it challenged institutional images of the prostitute as social victim and threat by portraying female sexuality as pleasurable and purchasable.

¹ Images of prostitution were acceptable in bourgeois art, as long as the pictures exuded a moral opinion on the subject matter. As a result, a regular narrative that was circulated in this work was the story of the prostitute's downward progression. The myth of a prostitute's gradual journey into death held a strong place in Victorian culture and was pervasive in bourgeois artwork of the time. Nead contends that this myth worked well for bourgeois art for two reasons. First, it served to moralize against unacceptable forms of female sexuality, keeping in line with bourgeois values and notions of respectability. Second, portraying the streetwalker as a victim (as opposed to a threat) allowed her to remain a site of visual pleasure for audiences.

The combination of visual clarity reinforced by the respectability of high art and the moral warnings consistent with institutional discourse worked to produce "official" understandings of the prostitute in Victorian culture. Specifically, the intersection of these discourses circulated myths of female sexuality that served the needs of the bourgeois hegemony. To portray the prostitute as deviant was to reinforce the values of bourgeois femininity. To *see* the streetwalker in high art was to recognize her. As such, "the category 'prostitute' had to appear comprehensive and watertight and there could be no ambiguity about social or sexual identity" (Nead, 179). Bourgeois art served to clarify visual uncertainties about female sexuality while keeping the prostitute a source of both moral condemnation and visual pleasure for audiences.

² See Hemyng.

³ The Haymarket was known as a primary place of prostitution accommodation houses and brothels in London. As such, Greenwood highlights yet another industry in which prostitution was economically connected. According to police reports of brothel prosecutions in the last quarter of the century, there were over 1200 brothel prosecutions in England. Manchester alone reported 402 brothels in 1886 (Fisher, 142). The prostitute was clearly not the only individual who made profits from prostitution at the time.

⁴ Pornographic imagery in the Victorian era regularly eroticised foreign women. Nude postcards of the time, for example, depicted topless foreign females as figures of sexual exoticism and titillation. See Lisa Z. Segal. In addition, lesbian imagery was a common trope in Victorian pornographic imagery. See Sharon Marcus.

⁵ The term "pornography" in the Victorian era was defined as the description of the lives of prostitutes. See Walter Kendrick for more information.

⁶ See Judd, pg. 5.

⁷ See Alison Smith, pg. 120.

CHAPTER THREE

Pin-Ups and Postcards: Purchasing the Photographic Prostitute

In the previous chapter I illustrated the extent to which images of the prostitute were incorporated into commercial advertising and, at the same time, revealed the intricate relationship that prostitution had to commerce and advertising imagery. This chapter will build upon those insights by highlighting the significance of the photographic image in the construction of the prostitute and the popularity of her image at the fin-de-siècle. As the nineteenth century progressed, the image of the prostitute became a viable commodity in and of itself. The introduction of photography in the 1830s and its increased capabilities for mass reproduction and distribution throughout the remainder of the century created new means of consuming the sexual woman. Actress pin-ups and nude postcards, for example, were cheap and popular artefacts that created accessible ways of viewing “illicit” women for a broad spectrum of the population. These images ranged from actress photos imbued in implicit sexuality to pornography and the explicit representation of prostitution and the naked female body. Unlike advertising illustrations, which used the iconography of prostitution to promote products, postcards and pin-ups made the image of the prostitute a highly popular and profitable commodity in and of itself. The photographic image, in contrast to the illustration, capitalized upon the “realities” of the sex trade and made the once evasive prostitute newly visible to the public.

The introduction of photography in the early-nineteenth century transformed the relationship audiences had to visual representation and reality.¹ While illustrations and paintings served as resemblances of the outside world, the photograph presented viewers with what was understood to be reality itself. The photographic image resembled its referent to such a degree

that it was assumed by many to present a “truthful” reflection of reality. In some cases, the reality presented in photographs even seemed to portray superior truths. As stated by Émile Zola in 1901, “You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed it” (qtd. in Sontag, On Photography 87). Part of this understanding of photography was due to the perception of the photograph as an image without an artist. The fact that the camera was a mechanical instrument whose operator was not recognized in the final product made photography the “medium with the least obvious human involvement” (Green-Lewis, 110). The narratives that circulated in Victorian discourse, in turn, spoke of photographic images as creations of nature. John Tagg, for instance, discusses the high value placed upon the camera by scientific and correctional institutions precisely because of its cultural perception as the producer of “natural” images. More specifically, light flowed in through the lens, embedded itself in the silver halide and resulted in a direct impression of the outside world. Indeed, according to an 1859 essay by H.L. Keens, photography did not simply record nature: “Nay, it *is* Nature, Nature itself” (79).

The perception of the photograph as reality was exacerbated by the way in which Victorian culture made use of the medium. Academic institutions and police forces, for instance, were some of the first institutions to incorporate the photograph into their work. Tom Gunning traces the way in which the photograph was used in the latter half of the nineteenth century in police procedures and the court system as a means of criminal surveillance and control. Meanwhile, institutional discourse on prostitution used the photograph as scientific proof intended to expose the visible depravity of the prostitute. The application of photography in institutions of authority, knowledge and power thus legitimized the cultural definition of the photograph as a conveyor of truth and reality.

At the same time, the photographic image played a large part in the fantasies of consumer and leisure culture. The last quarter of the century saw the invention of faster photographic dry plates, flexible film, and the introduction of simple camera equipment into the commercial market. In addition, cheap and multiple photographic reproductions could be made from negatives. These technological advances made photography more accessible to a broad spectrum of the public. The 1880s and 1890s witnessed a flood of cheap photographic reproductions, which not only enabled the purchase of photographic imagery by people previously unable to afford them, but which, in the words of John Tagg, gave the “untrained masses the means to picture themselves” (247). As a result, vendors peddled cheap photo representations, while hobbyists and photography clubs produced images for personal leisure.

The combination of images being sold for pleasurable viewing and images produced as a form of leisure created the space for illicit women as photographic subjects. As part of a male leisure culture, nude photography was a popular hobby. The Camera Club, for instance, was a photography club founded in 1887 as a part of London’s club district. According to Alison Smith, it was “a place for men to gather and socialise without women, with the added amenity of a photography studio” (173). Female models, however, were permitted entry. The well-known *Punch* cartoonist Edward Linley Sambourne produced a number of nude photographs of women while associated with the Camera Club. His photographic subjects included women lounging in gypsy costumes with their breasts exposed to the camera and fragmented imagery of nude women photographed from the waist down.² As Sambourne’s images attest, the sexualized female body and the process of recording its image on film had become a pleasurable facet of male leisure.

The nude representation of women was a contentious issue in Britain at the time. Such images had become a staple of classical art and study but, at the same time, images of female nudity could connote immoral associations. According to Smith, suppressing the sexual explicitness of nude women in painting often involved removing them from any indications of modernity. Modernity was often signified through iconography of urban sexualized women, which were also linked to the prostitute: “The women who performed in theatrical entertainments or who posed naked in life-classes were associated with prostitutes and were deemed meretricious and a corrupting influence” (14). The solution, therefore, was to paint these nude women as classical figures in pastoral or mythological settings, which served to remove the nudity from modern associations of sexuality and prostitution.

Photographic representation was troublesome in its depiction of the female nude precisely because it reinstated the modernity that many paintings aimed to erase. Perceived as a direct impression of contemporary reality, the photograph presented viewers not with the classical female figure as in art, but with an image of the model in a photographer’s studio. The realistic perception of the model threatened to conjure up the associations of nude models and prostitutes, placing the photograph in a precarious position in terms of acceptable art. Although photographers often worked to include classical iconography in their photographs, the realism associated with the image overrode the intended purification of these signifiers. “Posing Nude” (Fig. 9) is a photograph in the National Archives in London. Here, a young nude female is depicted wearing a classic crown of flowers while a thin veil covers her lower half. These classical signifiers are intended to connote purity, but the model’s virtue is rendered unstable by the conflicting realism of the studio environment. The studio is present in the image via the old wooden box the model is sitting on, the photographer’s backdrop, and the smile the model aims



FIGURE 9. "Posing Nude," 1905. Photograph. Public Record Office Image Library, London. PRO Reference: Copy 1/490.

toward an unidentified photographer. The result is an image that reveals the model's body as a modern reality, bringing the viewer in contact with the model, her nakedness, and—by implication—the possibility of sex.

Photography itself threatened further impropriety because of its reproducibility, wide circulation in the marketplace, and apparent absence of an author. Without an identifiable individual to take responsibility for the purity of the representation and with the circulation of multiple images to the public, the photographic nude was regularly seen as an illicit form of representation. It slipped out of the artistic realm by associating itself with the very things considered antithetical to art: mechanical reproducibility, mass culture, prostitution, and the marketplace. As a result, photographers of nudes and vendors of such imagery were regularly penalized as part of the 1857 Obscene Publications Act, which sought to eliminate literary and pictorial pornography from the market.

Definitions of pornography in the Victorian era revolved around depictions of the prostitute. According to Walter Kendrick, the term “pornography” originated in a medical dictionary in 1857, the definition being “a description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of hygiene” (1). As the years progressed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defined “pornography” as the: “Description of the life, manners, etc., of prostitutes and their patrons: hence, the expression or suggestion of obscene or unchaste subjects in literature or art” (qtd. in Kendrick, 1-2). The prostitute, as a site of sexual consumption and arousal, was assumed to be the starring figure in materials depicting sex and female sexuality. One of the ways that images of the prostitute circulated was through pornographic representation. For years prior to the definition of pornography in academic texts and dictionaries, pornography had been available but limited to upper and middle-class male audiences. In his book *The Secret Museum*, Kendrick outlines the

existence in early nineteenth-century Britain of locked rooms or uncatalogued holdings of materials that would have been considered pornographic. It was a place where men with privileged access could view and read pornography, while making sure access was denied to the working class and women. Pornography was, in other words, bound by cultural concepts of acceptable audiences. With advances in the press, however, pornographic texts became available to a wider audience. The majority of pornography prior to the 1880s consisted of literary texts that were generally expensive (Sigel, "Filth" 860). The main audience for pornographic literature was therefore a literate audience who could afford the expense. Visual images, however, offered new ways of consuming pornography that were accessible to more of the public. With the rise in consumer culture, illicit images became part of the growing urban landscape. In *Victorian Babylon* Lynda Nead devotes a chapter to examining the place of visual obscenity on the streets of London. She describes a realm in which obscene images like drawings, illustrated book covers, and pornographic photography were part of the urban culture during the mid-century. Images were displayed publicly in shop windows and sold in the open by street vendors. Imagery that was once restricted to upper and middle-class male viewing was now openly displayed for all people to view.

The images Nead describes were still fairly expensive at the time and inaccessible for purchase by working-class consumers. Photographic technologies and printing became cheaper, however, and the last two decades of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a highly accessible form of pornographic imagery: the nude postcard. The cheap price of postcards (one penny) meant that consumers could now come from any class. The popularity of postcards at the end of the nineteenth century, with millions of postcards sold every year in Britain, testified to the vast audience that the medium could attract. Postcards were sold anywhere and everywhere

from corner shops and tobacconists to vending machines and street vendors. Furthermore, sexual cards were often sold alongside respectable cards so that, as Lisa Z. Sigel notes: “Postcards by the 1890s were ubiquitous and bawdy postcards formed an important part of that commodity culture” (“Filth” 873-874).

As a result of the affordability and pervasiveness of illicit postcards, the purchasers of these images varied. It is easy to assume that men of all classes purchased cards depicting female nudity; emphasis in obscenity reports, however, was often placed on the “new” consumers. In the report from the Joint Select Committee on Lotteries and Indecent Advertisements, witnesses claimed that the consumers of nude postcards included women, children, and members of the working class. One police officer in the report mentioned seeing children buying indecent cards from a vending machine before conducting themselves in “an indecent manner” (qtd. in Sigel, “Filth” 874). The democratization of the photographic prostitute via a cheap and accessible medium such as the postcard points not only to a cultural desire to consume imagery of the sexualized woman (although sexual images of men and children also circulated), but also to the influence of the nude postcard in the cultural construction of the prostitute. The range of nude and pornographic postcards from the Victorian era that I have collected, reveal the image of the prostitute to have been both pervasive and malleable.³ It permeated broad categories of photographic women from “foreign” to “domestic” and perpetuated ambiguities between respectable “ladies” and streetwalkers. Postcards, in this respect, served both as highly explicit images of the prostitute and as ambiguous visualizations of the prostitute as any woman.

A dominant image in British nude postcards is that of the “foreign woman”. The postcard was a correspondence medium that could be cheaply sent from various parts of the

world. Scholars such as Sigel and Malek Alloula have noted how the picture postcard regularly exploited foreign bodies by delivering sexualized images of foreign women to colonial consumers. One vendor, for example, promoted his cards as follows: “We wish to specially recommend our interesting post-card photos, representing naked, sunlit bodies of racy girls, and piquant types and scenes of the harem-life, photographed in most graceful, unconstrained positions” (qtd. in Sigel, Governing Pleasures 126). These images regularly highlighted the “exotic” sexuality of, for example, African and Algerian women in comparison to British women. Images emphasized the woman’s “natural” sexuality in the form of topless display in her everyday work or her close associations with other women. This purchasable exoticism is critiqued by Alloula in “From the Colonial Harem” where he articulates the postcard’s nude display of the regularly veiled Algerian woman as an extension of colonial power: “Its fixation upon the woman’s body leads the postcard to paint the body up, ready it, eroticize it in order to offer it up to any and all comers from a clientele moved by the unambiguous desire of possession” (319). In this way, the photographic image gives access to a private but possessable world for western viewers who redefine the image according to colonial ideology and power.

Nude postcards, however, did not rely solely upon bodily difference to sexualize foreign women. As evidenced by Alloula, they also made foreign women desirable to western audiences by placing the models in familiar scenarios of western sexual representation—many of which connoted the prostitute. “The Cigarette Girl” (Fig. 10) shows a topless African woman in a fringed skirt reclining on the studio floor with a cigarette in her hand. Her casual pose is sexualized by her nudity, reclined posture and phallic cigarette, mimicking the sexual signifiers seen in numerous poses of illicit western women at the time. “Reclining Nude” (Fig. 11), for example, shows a white woman reclining in a similar smoking pose, her arm casually holding a



FIGURE 10. "The Cigarette Girl." Postcard. Found in Sigel's Governing Pleasures. Pg. 129.

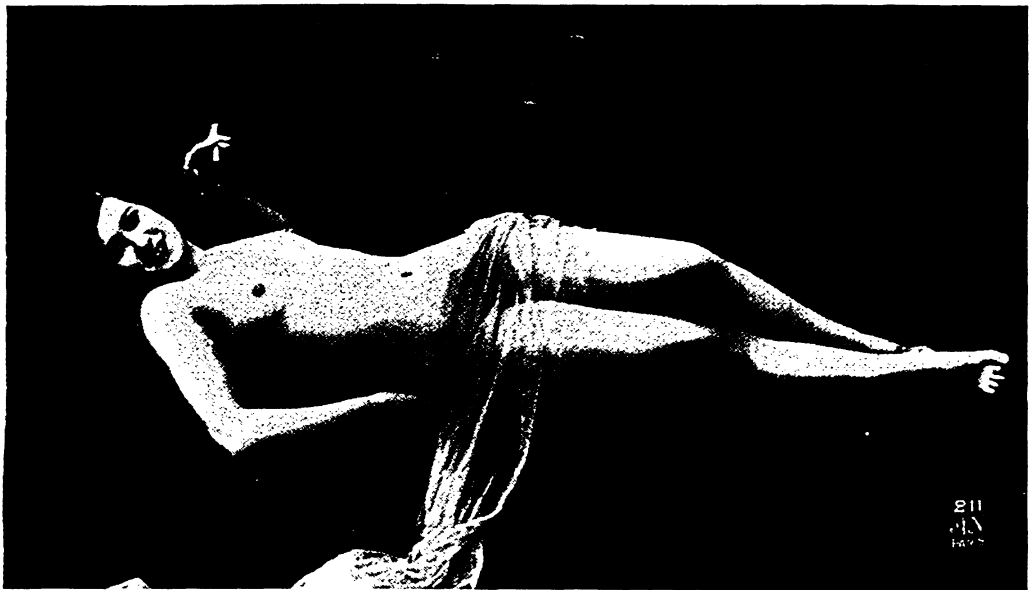


FIGURE 11. "Reclining Nude." Postcard.

cigarette while her nude body lounges before the camera. The excessive sexuality of the two women is signified through similar iconography that presents the nude female body for visual consumption. But while the white woman's pelvis is covered in delicate sheer fabric, signifying fine indulgence and civility, like that covering "Posing Nude" (Fig. 9), the black woman is covered in leather fringes, signifying her foreign culture and "innate" sexuality. This contrast is magnified by the black woman propping herself up in a slightly more aggressive position while the other woman is fully reclined. Although both women are shown to be figures of sexual excess, difference is imbued in the images through constructs of the "natural" sexuality of foreign women, compared to the indulgent sexuality of white women.

The racist idea that foreign women had a natural sexual availability is a claim that is also connected to the prostitute. As stated in the vendor's promotion of "racy girls" and "harem-life," foreign women were closely aligned with the excessive sexuality of the sex worker. In "Black Bodies, white bodies," Sander L. Gilman examines the historical affinity between black women and white prostitutes in nineteenth-century institutional discourse. Comparing the hyper-sexualized bodies of Black women in scientific discourse to the prostitute's "dysfunctional" connection to native ancestry in works like Lombroso and Ferrero's, Gilman argues that, "the perception of the prostitute in the late nineteenth century... merged with the perception of the black" (229). The foreign woman, as a "racy" individual engaged in "harem-life," was depicted in the postcard as an excessively sexual woman willing to bare her body for the camera. In this way, the nude postcard complicated images of the prostitute in Victorian visual culture by including the non-white woman as a source of consumable sexual titillation and pleasure.

While "foreign" postcards basked in the "natural" sexuality and exoticism of distant women, nude postcards also represented the white Western-European prostitute. The difference

was that illicit white women were often connoted in terms of their visual association with modernity. As stated by Smith, images of female nudes in modern contexts were often accused of impropriety as a result of their association with the prostitute. Smith comments upon a painting by Phillip Wilson Steer titled “Seated Nude: The Black Hat” (c.1900) which depicts a nude woman sitting on the edge of a bed wearing nothing but an elaborate hat. According to Steer: “when it was painted, years ago, friends told me it was spoiled by the hat; they thought it was indecent that a nude should be wearing a hat so it’s never been shown” (qtd. in Smith, 255). For Smith, the impropriety that the combination of clothing and nudity had in high art was that the two often came together to exaggerate a woman’s nakedness. Clothing created a stark contrast between the covered body and the nude body, thereby emphasizing women’s sexuality. In addition, I would argue, clothing acts as a signifier of modernity, reminding the viewer that the nude is a contemporary figure. A woman displaying her nudity in contemporary garments draws added associations of women as consumers, purchasing garments as a means of bodily decoration. Placed in the context of the bedroom, the sexualized semi-nude female can also easily connote the prostitute.

The partially dressed woman is a common visual trope in both nude and pornographic postcards from the Victorian era. In the images I myself have collected, a vast majority present women in some state of partial undress. “Woman on Chair” for instance, shows a woman sitting on a chair against a studio backdrop wearing nothing but a fancy hat, boots, stockings and jewellery. Her legs are crossed and her breasts are exposed as she rests her head in her hand— a pose of both sexual authority and presentation. Another image depicts a woman as she lounges nude on a bed while looking into a mirror as she adjusts her hat.⁴ Yet another wears stockings, heels, a hat, jewellery (although the ring finger is hidden) and a sheer nightgown with one strap

broken to reveal her breasts.⁵ In all of these images the combination of nudity and dress serves to modernize the female body, highlighting her nakedness, and conjuring up familiar depictions of the prostitute in Victorian culture. Through their consumption of fashionable commodities and their open sexual display these women are shown to be at once contemporary and sexual.

The partial dress of modern women worked to connote their sexual availability for audiences, but nude postcards also worked to sexualize the domestic woman. A series depicted in Sigel's *Governing Pleasures* draws upon the sexuality of married women. Four successive postcard images entitled "Wedding Night Embrace" show a newly married husband and wife in, what is evidently, a photographer's studio decorated as a bedroom set. The wife begins in full wedding dress alongside her husband but, as the images proceed, they show the woman in various states of undress while her husband watches and gropes her. The final image shows the smiling wife standing in a nightgown, her breasts exposed as her grinning husband stands in anticipation against her. This sequence, although deemed theatrical through the presence of the photographer's studio, works to complicate images of respectability by bringing nude representations of "the proper woman" into a public space. Similarly, Sigel shows a postcard entitled "Bride" which shows a woman draped in a white veil staring contemplatively outside the frame of the photo as her bare breasts peer out from the fabric. The mixture of bourgeois respectability (marriage) and illicit female nudity works to disrupt the supposed purity of domestic women and position them as figures of sexual fantasy and consumption. In this way, the nude postcard sexualized several different types of women, supporting a common ideology that the prostitute could exist in any woman.

Although postcards used theatricality to blend representations of feminine respectability and prostitution, the nature of this photographic medium made the prostitute an explicit reality

for Victorian audiences. Part of the influence of photographic representation was its presumed relationship to reality. Although numerous “types” of women were displayed in nude postcards— the bride, the “native”, the modern woman, and others— a constant presence in photographic representation, regardless of the characters displayed, was that of the model. Models of nude and pornographic imagery were associated with the world of prostitution, where selling nudity and performing sex acts in front of a camera brought women profit. Nude and pornographic postcards were therefore, sites in which the “reality” of prostitutes engaging in sex and posing nude for money circulated in the culture.

Part of the popularity of the nude postcard, in this respect, was its explicitness. Photographs captured the elusive prostitute. Unlike entertainment advertising, which used the ambiguous image of the prostitute to conjure up desire for sexual services and products, the nude postcard capitalized on the explicit image of the prostitute as a viable commodity in and of itself. The selling of sex by women in Victorian culture was an economic venture steeped in visual uncertainties. Prostitutes were malleable in their sexual solicitation and, furthermore, a customer’s access to these women was temporary. The photographic image, however, redefined the prostitute by making her visible, purchasable and possessable in a capitalist market economy.

According to Tom Gunning, the photograph is a medium that works well within a capitalist culture. Like money, the photograph has a mobility and mass circulation that its referent does not. As shown by the foreign postcard, the cheap and transportable photo eliminates spatial restrictions and changes bodies into what Gunning calls “transportable simulacra” (18). In this way, photographic images in the Victorian era became “fully adaptable to the systems of circulation and mobility modernity demanded” (18). Photographic representation, therefore, became complimentary to a capitalist society that depended upon mass

circulation and consumption. The nude postcard sold sexualized visual pleasure in a form that was cheap, mobile, and accessible. While the services of prostitutes were only temporarily purchasable, their photographic images were repeatedly consumable, creating a new kind of sexual consumption. In the words of Susan Sontag: "Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still... One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images" ("Image-World" 85). The visual display of prostitutes in photographic postcards defied the elusive visuality of the streetwalker and made her a newly possessable commodity for consumers. Contrary to institutional discourse and high art which stressed the prostitute as threat and victim, the nude postcard portrayed the "realities" of prostitution as pleasurable and exciting.

The consequence of making the prostitute explicit and available to mass audiences was that British authorities sought stricter forms of regulation and control. The 1857 Obscene Publications Act had created a system in which shops could be searched upon sworn information that obscene materials were being sold there. The task of providing evidence was taken up by plain-clothes police officers who searched for obscene materials which could then be confiscated and destroyed (Nead, Victorian Babylon 195). By the end of the century, the sheer popularity of the picture postcard made authorities uneasy. Institutions like the police, the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and women's social purity groups felt that "the masses" were being corrupted by pornography, and so they pushed for the eradication of nude postcards from vendor shops. By the early 1900s, police were ordered to "crack down on the trade of sexualized postcards," resulting in charges being laid against shop owners (Sigel, "Filth" 874).

In an examination of the discourse surrounding the prosecution on nude postcards, Sigel argues that it was the pervasiveness of mass-produced pornography and its cheap accessibility to

“vulnerable” audiences—women, children, and working-class people— that made authorities uncomfortable. She claims that giving the masses the power to consume sexual images (many of which depicted women, children, and the working class) re-defined and threatened the social boundaries traditionally associated with pornography and the male voyeuristic gaze. Taking into consideration the discourse around prostitution, however, I would add that the nude postcard also presented a dangerous image of the prostitute that contradicted depictions put forth by institutions. Unlike advertising, which drew safely upon the pleasurable uncertainties around the prostitute, the nude postcard created imagery that was both explicit and pleasurable. Furthermore, these were “realistic” visual pleasures that depicted the titillating world of sexual solicitation while neutralizing the precautionary depictions put forth by institutional discourse. For millions of consumers, the sexual woman was pleasurable and it was this representation that proved threatening to Victorian authorities.

In contrast, the actress postcard was an example of how implicit sexuality and the uncertainty of female identities continued to work well for a consumer culture that sought to avoid indecency charges. As a form of cheap, popular photographic imagery defined by mass reproduction, distribution, and consumption, the pin-up served as a means of self-promotion for actresses. The cards generally depicted a beautiful actress or performer and would be sold to the public through shops and vendors. While the collectors of “decent” postcards had largely been women, postcards of actresses and “posed beauties” became overwhelmingly popular near the turn of the century, with male collectors being their primary consumers (Carline, 66).

Like entertainment illustrations, the actress postcard drew upon the visual ambiguities of prostitution to promote entertainment. While images of the sexually ambiguous actress worked to promote careers, the postcard also allowed the visual uncertainty of her image to function as

an independent commodity. Pin-ups took the risky burlesque star's sexualized image and made it available for consumption outside the theatre. The images could be, in the words of Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "relatively deluxe or relatively crude" (131). But unlike the explicit sexual display of pornography, the actress postcard drew upon the visual uncertainties around prostitutes and actresses in order to create a safe yet desirable product for mass consumption. As stated by Maria-Elena Buszek, the pin-up is "a representation where explicitly contemporary femininity and implicit sexuality are both synthesized and intended for wide circulation and public display" (143).

In postcards, the sexuality of actresses is pronounced largely by their physical pose and costumes. A 1905 postcard, "Gabrielle Ray" (Fig. 12), depicts the smiling actress balancing on one leg as she pulls up her skirt, kicking her leg to reveal the layers under her dress. Her wrists and neck are decorated in jewellery and both her dress and her hair hold flowers. The actress' ornate bodily decoration and "showy" physical pose draws strong sexual associations with the prostitute. Likewise, an American actress who toured extensively in Britain, "Edna May" (Fig. 13) uses the title of the production, "The School Girl," to connote additional fantasy. Here, the actress' breasts are emphasized by a permissive neckline that clings to her body and dips down to reveal an abundance of skin. Her arms are bare as she wrests her fingers against her chin. The actress offers a sensual half-smile as she stares solidly at the viewer. Both of these images convey the actress as a sexual being whose open display of the body works to solicit admirers and consumers of the imagery.

Some of the most popular actress postcards of the time were images of the Dare sisters. Phyllis and Zena Dare were British vaudeville actresses at the fin-de-siècle who became known for their postcard popularity. An obituary in the *Daily Times* described Phyllis as a "picture



FIGURE 12. "Gabrielle Ray," 1905. Postcard.



FIGURE 13. "Edna May," 1905. Postcard.

postcard beauty” whose “appeal to her vast public was undoubtedly due to her particularly English good looks; and in the days of the postcard beauties popular acclaim was often secured by young women with little or no acting talent” (Darlington, no pg). This unflattering comment reflects that the actress postcard was more about providing images of beauty and sex for consumption than it was about promoting the theatre. In a 1961 interview titled “Picture Postcard Beauty” this idea is further supported when the retired Phyllis Dare describes the hours she and her sister spent sitting for photographers as a means of augmenting their income. She states:

Only rarely were we photographed in parts we happened to be playing on the stage. What the photographers wanted was a pretty face and they would supply costumes and miniature backcloths, so that we could appear as skaters in the snow, under a tree in blossom or as dairymaids in a meadow... There was a certain amount of risk attached to these sittings because some photographers were in the habit of superimposing an actress’ head upon the body of another sitter – a custom that did not always please the actress! (qtd. in Johns, 17)

The fact that it was the recognizable face and pleasurable body of the actress that was important to many photographers stresses the way in which actress postcards functioned as visual and sexual commodities. Although the images may have been popular for fans of the actress, they were also used as a source of basic photographic pleasure. Dare comments that the thousands of images circulating of her in London at the time made her recognizable on the street to many people who knew her from her postcards but had never seen her performances.

The actress pin-up, like advertising, perpetuated the visual ambiguities between prostitution and the female performer; but like the nude postcard, the status of the image as a photograph presented viewers with the “realities” of sexual women in front of a camera. Postcards of actresses provided a new means of circulating imagery of the prostitute and provided people with a means of obtaining images of sexualized women for personal pleasure

and consumption. While the actress postcard established itself as a popular and acceptable source of pleasure and consumption, the nude postcard remained a dangerous form of representation. Part of what created this distinction was the explicit representation of the prostitute as a source of sexual pleasure. Pornographic imagery, in this regard, posed the biggest affront to Victorian discourses that sought to depict the sexual woman as an insolvent victim or a vessel of disease that lived her life hidden from public view due to illness or incarceration. The photographic “reality” of prostitution, expressed abundantly in the nude postcard and more subtly in the actress pin-up, was that prostitutes were consumable sources of sexualized visual pleasure. That pleasure could be purchased in person or consumed through the image. In consumer culture, the mass-produced photograph showed large audiences that sexual women were worth purchasing.

¹ See Tom Gunning; Anne Friedberg; and Jonathon Crary.

² See Smith's Exposed. Pgs. 170-172 and 174-175.

³ Like many sexual images of the past the nude postcard was not considered to be worthy of academic study at the time. As a result, examples of nude and pornographic postcards are rarely archived and are not overly accessible today. The samples I have collected come from a combination of published texts, British archival research and collector's ephemera shows in Toronto, Canada and London, England.

⁴ See "Untitled."

⁵ See "Intimate of the Boudoir."

CONCLUSION

Obscuring the Prostitute: The Consequences of Sexual Visibility

The image of the prostitute in Victorian culture has been imbued with a variety of meanings that have been dependent upon who constructed her image, for what purposes, and to what ends. In this sense, “the prostitute” had much to do with the cultural ideologies that were supported and perpetuated by creators of her image. Institutional discourse, for instance, attempted to make the prostitute a visible and, hence, knowable category of sexual deviance. She was defined as a defunct vessel of femininity and a source of contagion that threatened broad facets of the population. Fears and conflicting ideologies around female sexuality, however, resulted in an image of the dangerous and victimized prostitute as both visually distinct and hazardously undetectable. Although institutional discourse went to great lengths to make the prostitute visible and controllable, her image remained ambiguous.

The uncertainty around the prostitute in official discourse was rendered increasingly stable by the stereotype of the streetwalker in high art. Artistic representation created a visual image of the prostitute that sought to moralize against improper female sexuality while presenting the prostitute as a source of pleasure for audiences. The narrative of the destitute streetwalker proceeding toward her demise served to distinguish the prostitute from respectable bourgeois women. Visual contrasts between proper and illicit femininity reinforced the boundaries of sexual acceptability for women and aided in the construction of bourgeois feminine ideals. Both institutional discourse and high art strove to present images of the prostitute that portrayed her as sexually deviant and dangerous.

The majority of literature written on Victorian prostitution has relied upon institutional discourse and high art as sources of knowledge and critique. These authoritative sources worked

to construct the prostitute “officially,” inviting many contemporary scholars to turn to these texts as primary sources of information. Restricting constructions of the prostitute to institutional texts and art, although worthy of inquiry and critique, ignores the influence of “unofficial” and mass-produced constructions of prostitution. The rise of consumer capitalism in the nineteenth century, in addition to the advent of numerous imaging technologies, created a consumer culture wherein images were more pervasive. Most notably, the iconic function of prostitution in advertising and image commodities created mass-produced constructions of the illicit woman for Victorian audiences. Unlike institutional discourse and high art, though, commercial culture put forth pleasurable imagery of the prostitute that was available to broad sections of society. As a result, commercial imagery established itself as a populist and influential discourse in the historical construction of the prostitute.

As a social figure selling sex and pleasure, the streetwalker and her image became symbolic in a commercial culture that profited from desire, consumption and leisure. The moral lens evident in art and institutions was usurped by the projected profit of capitalist ventures. While institutional discourse struggled with the visual ambiguity of the prostitute, commercial culture perpetuated the uncertainty of her image, blurring the boundaries between female respectability and illicit sexuality. Entertainment advertising, for example, used the prostitute’s ambiguous sexual iconography to solicit attendance at theatres and music halls while product advertisements adopted her iconic body as a means of conjuring up desire for products. This construction of the visually malleable, yet pleasurable, prostitute served the needs of an industry where selling products had much to do with selling sex.

As affordable means of photographic reproduction increased toward the end of the century, the representation of the prostitute became even more profitable. The nude postcard and

the actress pin-up created a means of viewing the once elusive and undetectable prostitute and provided cheap and accessible means of sexual consumption. Her photographic image served as a popular and profitable commodity. As a visually diverse, pleasurable, and explicit depiction of sexual women, these images found a broad consumer market in Victorian culture. The more the image of the prostitute circulated as a source of explicit sexual pleasure, however, the more it came under attack by certain facets of society. The prostitute could be made visible in commercial culture, but only if she remained implicitly pleasurable, balancing on the line between visibility and erasure.

An examination of the streetwalker in both institutional discourse and commercial imagery reveals that the visibility of the prostitute had a malleable symbolic function. Whether it was reinforcing bourgeois ideology of respectful femininity or using sexual iconography to solicit desire for commercial consumption, the image of the prostitute was co-opted and put to use in the service of reinforcing ideologies. The problem, however, was that these symbolic constructions of the prostitute were often created with limited concern for the realities of the women represented. The visibility of prostitutes was tightly associated with their everyday lives. The streetwalker was not literally a “social evil”; nor was she a simple vessel of consumable indulgence. Yet both of these images contributed to the construction of her lived reality. Imagery of the prostitute, in this sense, cannot be fully considered without understanding the realities of sex workers in Victorian culture.

Judith Walkowitz’s acclaimed study of Victorian prostitution reveals the realities of prostitutes during the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s. She argues that the C.D. Acts worked to make the prostitute newly visible to audiences, a development, which, in turn, had serious consequences for working women. As a newly constructed “type” in medical and

sociological texts, the prostitute was redefined as a social threat and dangerous source of contagion. Prior to the C.D. Acts, prostitutes were largely tolerated and many existed as integrated members of the working class. The implementation of the acts and the public controversy of the repeal campaigns, however, made the visibility and deviant categorization of prostitutes public. For Walkowitz, “the acts forced prostitutes to adjust their self-images... forcing many ‘who may not have made up their mind to continue as prostitutes’ to acknowledge their outcast status” (203). The forced visibility of prostitutes and the construction of them as deviant and dangerous women led to the repressive legislation and treatment of prostitutes in garrison towns.

The depiction of prostitutes in commercial culture further revealed the consequences of making the prostitute visible. The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed a number of indecency campaigns against “obscene” material. The Obscene Publications Act was created in 1857 to combat the circulation of indecent texts and images. In addition, the 1850s and 1860s saw the formation of vice societies that made it their business, alongside legislators and police, to patrol shops and vendors to ensure that they were not selling lewd materials. The crackdown on sexual imagery during this time reflected new desires to “improve” London. Massive changes were occurring that sought to clean up urban spaces and modernize the city. This process reinforced cleanliness and order, resulting in the creation of underground sewage systems and the opening up of urban thoroughways to enable clear circulation. Obscenity posed a problem for modernisers as it went against the values and objectives of the new city (Nead, Victorian Babylon 150). As a result, obscenity was highlighted as a problem in need of eradication. The printing revolution had made obscene materials pervasive and it was therefore the aim of many authority figures to remove illicit imagery from the city. It was reported that the Lord Chief

Justice, John Campbell, who introduced the Obscene Publications Act, had “learned with horror and alarm that a sale of poison more deadly than prussic acid, strychnine, or arsenic – the sale of obscene publications and indecent books – was openly going on” (qtd. in Nead, Victorian Babylon 150). Rhetoric equating “obscene” materials with poison positioned sexual imagery and texts as corrupt and destructive commodities.

As a dominant figure in obscene imagery, the prostitute was considered a danger to the public that consumed it. Although bourgeois art openly displayed images of illicit women, commercial culture distinguished itself by portraying the prostitute as a source of arousal. Part of the consequence of making the pleasurable prostitute visible and consumable was that her image was in constant threat of being forced back into invisibility. Cleaning up the visual landscape of London meant pushing the iconic prostitute back into the shadows.

In a similar vein, the wish to eradicate obscene images was closely aligned with a desire to remove all signifiers of prostitution in London, including prostitutes themselves. At the same time that Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publication Act was passed, the Vice Society was campaigning heavily against prostitution in the city. According to Nead, “Obscenity and prostitution were closely linked, both in the Society’s literature and within public perceptions more generally; both were seen as products of the modern city and raised issues of public decency and order” (Victorian Babylon, 158). Part of the threat that commercial imagery of the prostitute posed was that it was a direct affront to morally infused institutional discourse, presenting the sexual prostitute as a mass-produced and easily accessible commodity. The image of the prostitute on paper and the image of the prostitute in reality, however, were not viewed as entirely separate by moral reformers.

For years, the Vice Society was unsuccessful in passing legislation to make prostitution illegal. Despite the growing influence of religious moralism in the mid-nineteenth century, a laissez-faire attitude remained. It was not until the 1880s that the puritans were able to make legislative strides against prostitution, pushing the prostitute slowly back into marginality. An infamous 1885 article by sensationalist newspaper editor W.T. Stead created a social uproar over the state of prostitution in London. "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" is a piece of investigative journalism that tells the story of under-aged girls being sold into prostitution. The result was a public outcry against the "white slave trade." The new social climate indicated that a change in prostitution legislation was needed and, as a result, the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was quickly passed. The act was divided into two parts: the first aimed to protect women and girls against trafficking against their will and the second made brothel owners and any other persons using their residences for prostitution liable for prosecution. According to Trevor Fisher, the Criminal Law Amendment Act paved the way for huge attitudinal shifts toward prostitution: "The victory of moral purity would shape attitudes toward prostitution for the rest of Victoria's reign and beyond" (136).

Part of the reason for the shift in attitudes was the growing influence of the National Vigilance Association, an anti-vice organization dedicated to enforcing the measures put forth in the act. The NVA set up a network of groups that worked to bring prosecutions to offenders. Fisher states that, in the first twelve months of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, "105 prosecutions were undertaken dealing with (a) disorderly houses (brothels), (b) men for offences against women, and (c) dealers in indecent books" (137). Furthermore, the NVA aimed to close down "immoral" casinos and music halls and prevent the sale of indecent literature, imagery and advertisements. The close association between the wish to eliminate obscene materials and the

need to shut down spaces of prostitution signified a larger desire to eliminate the visibility of the prostitute from public view.

The Criminal Amendment Act and the closing down of brothels did not eradicate prostitution. Instead, they forced prostitution underground, creating dangerous working conditions for women. Walkowitz argues that the Amendment Act, “like the C.D. Acts, ...helped to drive a wedge between prostitutes and their community. They were even more effective at destroying the brothel as a family industry, undermining the social and economic autonomy of prostitutes, and increasingly rendering them social outcasts” (211). Many prostitutes were uprooted and forced to find residences in the periphery of the cities. The marginalization of these women, in turn, increased the dangers of selling sex in London. Fisher even attributes the NVA and the closing of brothels to the infamous killings of prostitutes by Jack the Ripper. He claims that the murders are symptomatic of the dangers that arise when the poorest prostitutes are forced to take their clients to dangerous backyards and alleyways (145). The increasing stigma against prostitution also led to harsher police treatment of prostitutes, such that, according to Fisher, police “realized that where streetwalkers were concerned, respectable society was wholly indifferent to what they did” (145). Without the brothel, many women turned to pimps for protection, eroding much of the economic independence they once had. Making the prostitute “visible” in Victorian society also made them vulnerable to censorship and erasure.

Although the real life visibility of prostitutes became increasingly marginalized as the century progressed, the popularity and viability of her image remained strong in commodity culture. Despite the crackdown on obscenity, the nude postcard and actress pin-up flourished in the final two decades of the century and the prostitute’s iconic position in entertainment

advertising remained consistent for years to come. The streetwalker, as a symbol of illicit sexuality and taboo, became popularly ingrained in Victorian visual culture. Her image served as a source of consumable pleasure even as the realities of prostitution pushed illicit women into marginality.

The contradiction of a society eager to consume images of the pleasurable prostitute while at the same time stigmatizing actual sex workers says much about the ambiguities and conflicts present in constructions of the prostitute. In light of the degree to which prostitutes were reprimanded by British authorities in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the abundance of public discourse on sex solicitation kept prostitution a dominant source of public discussion and excitement. The 1885 “Maiden Tribute” sex scandal and the Criminal Amendment Act publicly illuminated prostitution as a vice that needed to be repressed. Consequently, the explicit details of prostitution and discourses around illicit sexuality became more prominent. According to William Cohen, public discourse around taboo sexualities and transgressions enabled knowledge about sex to circulate. In particular, sex scandals held popular space in Victorian culture by revealing the sins of private life in a public forum. According to Cohen, these stories worked both to terrify and provide pleasure for their audiences: “By dint of the reactions scandal arouses, and the terror and humiliation it instills, its audience members learn to feel what behaviour is normative, what is deviant, and who is privileged to adjudicate between them. While it may terrify, scandal is also—as its endless popularity testifies—an undeniable source of pleasure to its consumers” (16).

In the case of sex solicitation, the public discussion of the prostitute as a transgressor of proper femininity and a source of illicit sexual consumption made her both a source of social stigma and a site of sexual excitement. While authorities tackled the licentious visuality of

prostitution through repressive legislation, commercial culture capitalized upon the pleasures of female sex workers, commodifying the women as a safe source of sexual consumption. The visibility of the prostitute was therefore caught in contradiction as a signifier of vice in need of eradication and a symbol of consumption and pleasure.

The burden of having the once elusive prostitute made visible in Victorian culture regularly fell upon prostitutes themselves. Constructions of illicit sexuality, however, did not only affect prostitutes; they affected a broad range of women. Part of how the image of the streetwalker functioned in institutional discourse, for instance, was to distinguish respectable women from those deemed impure. This was an explicit goal that was put forth in institutional texts and police registration procedures. As a symbol of impropriety, the streetwalker represented that which proper Victorian women were taught to avoid; a woman's reputation could be tarnished if she was thought to be adopting the signifiers of prostitution. The prostitute therefore served as a visual boundary of sexual and feminine transgression against which "proper" women could be measured. Part of the problem was that visual slippages were pervasive in Victorian culture. The image of the prostitute, as perpetuated by institutional texts and commercial imagery, was unclear and, as a result, the boundary between illicit and respectable femininity was in constant question.

The aim of this study is to complicate the existing literature on nineteenth-century prostitution by illuminating the influential role of commercial imagery in the construction of the prostitute in Victorian visual culture. The abundance of prostitution iconography in advertisements and visual commodities in the latter half of the century projected an image of the streetwalker that contradicted the negative ones continually referenced in institutional discourse and even contemporary theory. As a result, the historical construction of the prostitute as threat

and victim is complicated by imagery that viewed the prostitute as a pleasurable commodity. Through historical analysis, visual culture theory, gender theory, and image analysis, I hope to have revealed how the visibility of the female prostitute played an influential role in the constructions of sexual women. The broad spectrum of commercial imagery studied ranges from mainstream advertisements to pornographic representation. This varied collection reveals the degree to which the iconography of the prostitute was incorporated into commercial representation and traces the profitable extension of her image from advertisements to image commodities. The transition from advertisements to photographic commodities, as discussed in my final chapter, revealed the popularity with which the image of the prostitute circulated in a mass-consumer society and the threat that extending explicit imagery of the prostitute to the masses held for Victorian authorities. Furthermore, this project sought to understand the image of the prostitute in tandem with the realities of Victorian sex workers. Far from supporting a direct causal connection, I argue that the mediated constructions of prostitutes must be considered in conjunction with the lived realities of prostitutes themselves. The visibility of the streetwalker, in reality and in her image, was viewed as a symbol of desire and taboo that drew excitement from audiences and was, consequently, also considered a danger in need of repression. The move to push the prostitute's image back into obscurity was connected to a desire to restore order to Victorian society.

The topic of prostitution and visual culture illuminates the influence and vested interests imbedded in constructing images of sexual women both in the past and now. Prostitutes in the Victorian era represented deviant forms of female sexuality in contrast to the hegemonic ideals of respectable femininity. At the same time, audiences witnessed the birth of many of the same visual technologies and commercial institutions that have now become ubiquitous in our society.

The historical deconstruction of images of female sexuality within a commodity culture can therefore act as a point of reference that allows us to better understand the relationship between sex, female imagery, and commerce. The prostitute functioned as a point of ideological departure in Victorian society—a boundary between the acceptable and the illicit spheres of female sexuality—that allowed women to monitor their own sexuality and to avoid and/or challenge the consequences that illicit sexuality threatened. At the same time, she functioned as a symbol of modern leisure and expenditure, signifying a commodity culture that profited from images of female sexuality.

The history of marginalized women is a story that often goes unwritten. As a result, the history of prostitution is regularly understood through limited institutional texts and a small number of contemporary historians. To extend study into commercial visual representations offers an additional obstacle, as much of this imagery was not considered worthy of archival collection or scholarly study at the time. In addition, current communications research is overwhelmingly concerned with aspects of the present and the future, and significantly less concerned with narratives of the past. As a result, texts on communications history are relatively sparse. As Robert Darnton observes, “Communication systems have a history, although historians have rarely studied it” (xvii). When communication history is conducted, however, researchers like Michael Schudson complain that the scope is too narrow. Technologies are studied historically in and of themselves but not often in relation to broader cultural contexts (177). This project has attempted to reconnect media with culture and understand women’s history in conjunction with the mediation of their images. It is limited to the study of institutional and commercial representations of prostitutes in British culture during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Further research on historical constructions of sexual women is

needed in order to better understand the contemporary constructions of women in a culture where “sex and money” are still considered to be ubiquitous. My hope is this thesis project will encourage further inquiry into historical constructions of prostitution and the influence of these constructions on sexuality.

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