

Victorian Prostitution: A Historiographic Analysis

by Melissa Queen

When scholarly works emerged on the Victorian era the discussion rested on the middle and working classes, unintentionally ignoring the lower class and “underworld.” Studies developing in the 1970s tackled the darker parts of England’s history, like prostitution. Most historians agreed that prostitution was a major problem throughout the Victorian period, especially in growing cities and port towns like London, York, and Kent. The historiography of Victorian prostitution focuses predominantly on the reasons behind women’s entrance into these positions. The historians analyzed are divided into three themes, economic, cultural and social, methods. Frances Finnegan, E.M. Sigsworth, and T.J. Wykes blame prostitution on “the great extent of poverty in the area,” leading to an economic analysis.¹ Judith Walkowitz, Arthur J. Engel, Trevor Fisher, Paula Bartley, Philip Howell, and Catherine Lee take social approaches. Some seeking to explain the responses to prostitution through the regulations enacted; others attempt to illuminate the responses and variations to the regulations. Amanda Anderson and Nina Attwood both provide a cultural analysis. Aiming to convey the experiences of prostitutes and their personal reactions to the regulations. Following important cultural historians like Michel Foucault, they bring a voice to the undocumented. The examination of the various methods and sources employed by historians of Victorian prostitution assists in the understanding of prostitution’s causes and regulations over time.

On the cusp of women’s historians in the 1970s, Martha Vicinus’ *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, is a collection of essays regarding Victorian women. Each assists in creating a narrative on English women’s lives in the Victorian era. Included is a piece by E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wykes, “A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease.” The authors discuss how poverty, urbanization, and poor sanitation created immorality at young ages, by building off of William Acton’s *Prostitution, Considered*. Utilizing an immense amount of primary sources and data from court discussions, they broaden the causes of prostitution previously considered.

Poverty remains a central cause throughout the essay, arguing that working women were made “particularly vulnerable,” due to their proximity to immoral

¹ Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 29.

actions.² Positions “such as domestic service,” were seen as particularly seductive.³ Often deflowered and deserted by men promising love, but truly seeking lustful evenings, women turned to prostitution as a result of social destruction. In this case, Sigsworth and Wykes claim married women tolerated solicited sex so they would not have to deal with their husband’s perversions themselves. They argue that the lack of literature regarding prostitution was largely because of its acceptance by middle class wives. When the armed forces saw a rapid increase in venereal disease, the documentation on prostitution skyrocketed. Only as venereal disease made its way down the line from sailor, to prostitute, and eventually housewife, did it become a Parliamentary problem.

Briefly, Sigsworth and Wykes discuss cause for regulation, venereal disease. Maintaining that as early as 1850, prostitutes were required to verify their cleanliness, those without a clear record were sent to a refuge or hospital.⁴ Asserting, regulations were only sanctioned as a response to the shocking increase in venereal disease. Widening the circumstances that brought women into prostitution, Sigsworth and Wykes offer a respected piece of literature. Court documents are used to show the influx of venereal disease, and the rise of the Contagious Diseases Acts. While short in length, they provide an historical analysis highly respected by their peers.

Criticizing early historian William Acton, and elaborating arguments made by E.M. Sigsworth and T.J. Wykes, Frances Finnegan’s *Poverty and Prostitution*, analyzes the lives of prostitutes through newspapers, York refuge documents, and minute books of the Female Penitentiary Society. Finnegan examines the personal backgrounds of prostitutes and madams to expand what brought women into “street-walking” and their ensuing lives. One of the clearest statements, is Finnegan’s distaste for Acton’s claim that prostitutes “sooner or later returned to a regular course of life”.⁵ *Poverty and Prostitution*, thus questions the contributing factors to prostitution and states desertion, widowhood, and bad parental examples, made prostitution difficult to escape out of.

Beginning with a detailed look at housing, Finnegan zooms in on areas like the notorious Water Lanes. Situated within the walls of the old city, and housing “York’s poorest and most degraded inhabitants”, the area was plagued by pubs, brothels, and poverty.⁶ The Water Lanes were a common area for debauchery of the middle class and homes for prostitutes. By exploring the locations of known prostitute homes, Finnegan is able to examine a few personal experiences. To further his inquiry,

² E.M. Sigsworth, T.J. Wykes, “A Study of Victorian Prostitution and Venereal Disease,” in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 84.

³ *Ibid*

⁴ Sigsworth and Wykes, 92.

⁵ Frances Finnegan, *Poverty and Prostitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

⁶ Finnegan, 35.

Finnegan examines the Quarter Sessions, the Poor Law Application Books, and the York Penitentiary Society, identifying over 1400 prostitutes and brothel-keepers operating in York alone between 1837 and 1887; creating substantial statistical data about their lives. Proving the majority of prostitutes came from the lower working class, and were single women with unfortunate economic circumstances. Alcohol was few women's initial trigger into prostitution, more often, it was a response to their meager lives and painful illnesses.⁷ Yet for most, alcoholism, venereal disease, and oppressive reforms, kept them in poverty and from climbing the social ladder.

Many Victorian prostitution historians concur that venereal disease carried a lot of weight in the reform movements. *Poverty and Prostitution*, discusses these reforms, explaining that in large numbers women turned up at refuge houses, anxious to escape their illness and social positions. That being said, as one of the earlier interpretations, Finnegan focused on explaining the circumstances of the women, not the politics surrounding the reform, like later historians. Overall, Frances Finnegan analyzes the documentation provided by housing centers and legal cases to explore the reality of the Victorian prostitute's story. His solidification of poverty's devastating effect on women is an undisputed claim, while some argue additional causes, nearly all agree economic standing was crucial.

Judith Walkowitz' *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* agrees that poverty was a driving force behind prostitution, but her primary focus are the effects of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Walkowitz channels Michael Foucault, who believes institutions exist to maintain social control, and claims the CDAs were a power struggle to protect the purity of upper and middle classes. For the first time since the birth of Victorian women's studies, Walkowitz detailed analysis delivers "a framework for examining some connections between ideology, public policy, and social change" created by the Contagious Diseases Acts.⁸

Sigsworth and Wykes, and France Finnegan, mention the CDAs were result of the rapid influx in venereal disease among military personnel. Walkowitz however, questions the late enactment of the laws were for protection. For the majority of the nineteenth century, the upper classes had been sheltered from disease, but it increasingly crept its way into beds of elites. As result, the CDAs were passed. To summarize, Walkowitz states the CDAs were written to protect the purity of the upper class, changing only as necessary for the elites' own well beings. She differs from earlier historians as her argument develops by analyzing the responses and resistance to the "technology of power" of the CDAs.⁹ The resistance movement operated as a feminist

⁷ Finnegan, 144.

⁸ Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

⁹ Walkowitz, 5.

mechanism, but eventually formed an unstable alliance between middle class women, working class men, and the women of the underworld. Using two cases studies, Plymouth and Southampton, Judith Walkowitz aspires to understand how “many registered prostitutes in Plymouth and Southampton forcibly resisted” with middle-class support.¹⁰ She claims resistance is due to class depletion fears, and explains legislation utilized the Contagious Diseases Acts to employ reforms for personal gain, giving rise to alliances and resistance.

Judith Walkowitz continues to be a widely used source for Victorian studies. Her breakout book reveals a class related force behind the Contagious Diseases Acts and the persistent reforms. She offers a new perspective of the feminist movement’s response to prostitution: Was it related to their true disgust by the treatment of prostitutes, or was it an easy ploy for the fight for equal rights? Walkowitz builds on the doors left open by earlier works, reviewing the Contagious Diseases Acts and the court cases that followed to get an in depth look at the resistance movements and the impact of the CDAs.

Continuing with a sociological examination of regulation, Arthur J. Engel’s article “Immoral Intentions,” provides a basis for future historians like Catherine Lee and Philip Howell. Engel analyzes a multitude of regulatory practices through the case of Oxford University, stating the “problem of prostitution was an important one for Victorian society in general; however, it was especially pressing in Oxford.”¹¹ Young boys, off on their own for the first time with “warm passions”, caused the university to worry about seductive, devilish, women of the night and believed they were dangerous to students’ virtue. In 1824 the law changed and imprisonment would only be for “riotous or indecent behavior,” limiting the arrests on prostitutes. Oxford petitioned to keep the law in its originality to protect the students. After much deliberation and a financial promise from the University the law was kept in the county of Oxford; demonstrating the flexibility of prostitution regulation.¹² Through close review, Engel asserts that Oxford “served as an important magnet for English prostitutes,” often visiting the city for just a few days because of the “opportunities which this city offered.”¹³ The analysis of a smaller region does a couple of things: it can further explain the complexity of the regulations of prostitution, and provides new evidence on the lives of prostitutes. The detailed statistics and charts Engel utilizes delivers vital data on the regulatory effects and differentiations per region that later historians expand on.

Writing in a style accessible to the greater public, Fisher attempts to take major arguments made by previous historians, and reorganize them into new themes of social development. Formerly, the rampant prostitution problem had been divided into:

¹⁰ Walkowitz, 192.

¹¹ Arthur J. Engel, “Immoral Intentions,” *Victorian Studies* 23, no. 1 (1982): 80.

¹² Engel, 81.

¹³ Engel, 86.

causes, regulation, and regulation reforms for example. Conversely, Fisher's *Prostitution and the Victorians* examines the "long nineteenth century" and categorizes into three sequential phases of debate: the suppression phase, the regulation phase, and the "straight-laced" phase.¹⁴ Fisher asserts "so much material exists that no single volume can claim to be exhaustive," yet by selecting certain aspects from prior works, he determines the political transitions over time and the social effects of prostitution.

Fisher argues, the first phase from 1790-1849 is the moral purity campaign associated with English puritans. Wanting "strict police action against brothels and street-walkers," acts were passed as early as the 1820s to suppress and abolish prostitution.¹⁵ Puritans were a strong force in the early nineteenth century, and while their earliest efforts failed, they influenced society in a way the government could not ignore. As seen with Frances Finnegan, and later Paula Bartley, this campaign would run out of steam with little desired result. The second phase emerging in 1850, attempts to regulate prostitution. With limited knowledge on the dangers of venereal disease the Contagious Diseases Acts were enacted to provide safer and cleaner locations for solicited sex. Also failing, the third phase was the "straight laced view" of prostitution, the demand "simply driven underground," brought silence to both the act of prostitution and venereal disease.¹⁶ As upper class men found themselves diseased, passing it on to their unsuspecting partners, greater concern emerged in the early 1900s, eventually creating a compromising solution.

Trevor Fisher in no way claims that prostitution disappeared after the nineteenth century, and argues the problems are prevalent today. Throughout the book he focuses on the voice of puritans, which have long been an ignored force of regulation. Similarly, Fisher believes his fellow historians have bypassed upper class men's sexual deviancies. Fisher fashions a comprehensive understanding of the changes in regulation based on cultural instances. His analysis of the upper class and puritans sets his book apart from prior works and provides a base for historians to study the clients of prostitutes, a topic merely skimmed by most.

As seen with Fisher, the earliest aspects of prostitution reform aimed at purifying young women and deterring them from the streets with fears of social outcast. Similarly, Paula Bartley discusses preventative methods, adding an interesting new perspective to England's prostitution efforts. It has been made clear, that purity was of utmost importance in Victorian society. Yet, there is little mention on fallen women and their attempt to return to respectable society, as William Acton argued was relatively easy. *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* discusses the rehabilitation centers, religious institutions, and other organizations that assisted in

¹⁴ Trevor Fisher, *Prostitution and the Victorians* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), x-xii.

¹⁵ Fisher, x.

¹⁶ Fisher, xii.

turning “former prostitutes into morally virtuous women.”¹⁷ Depicted through the records of preventative organizations like the Ladies’ Association for the care of Friendless Girls, Bartley discusses preventative measures and the creation of a “moral climate.”¹⁸

Bartley divides her book into four parts, reform, prevention, mental health, and the creation of a climate non-receptive to prostitution. Beginning with the reform movement, she looks at the various institutions “ranging from large penitentiaries and asylums to smaller homes.”¹⁹ Bartley first argues, institutions existed to rehabilitate women. Prior works claim there was limited chance of moving back into society due to the circumstances of their conditions. Second, she discusses the lives of women within the institutions and the process of regaining purity. Again, diverging from predecessors by moving beyond the penitentiary system, and centering on smaller homes. Bartley agrees that the reform movement was not entirely successful, and turns her focus on prevention and purity in this section. Organizations like the Ladies Associations for the Care of Friendless Girls, and the Metropolitan Association for the Befriending of Young Servants were predominantly created by the Church of England. Over 106 ladies organizations like these had risen up by 1885 to “promote social purity by focusing on respectable working-class young women.”²⁰ Claiming, the organizations are considered part of the middle class women’s fight for equal rights and aimed to solidify class models through cultural education programs.

Bartley’s analysis on the “psychiatric revolution” of the nineteenth century, furthers Amanda Andersons ideas that the fallen woman is not inherently a prostitute. Bartley adds a new group to Anderson’s class of the fallen, the “feeble minded women” who were seen “to be at a moral risk.”²¹ As such, these women were taken into homes for the feeble-minded and fallen, given salvation from a complete downfall of their social standing. The final section regards the creation of a pure society. By examining the “immorality and underlying causes” such as men’s chastity and morality, the idea was to prevent a society receptive to prostitution.²² The four parts of Paula Bartley’s analysis provide an outlook on the prostitution problem previously untouched. She uses the systems outside of government penitentiaries to explain other means of regulating prostitution. Her examples regarding purity and prevention assist authors like Amanda Anderson and nineteenth century historian William Acton, who both claim fallenness and prostitution was not definitive. However, both Anderson and

¹⁷ Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1924* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Bartley, 25.

²⁰ Bartley, 73.

²¹ Bartley, 119.

²² Bartley, 155.

Acton look at Victorian prostitution from a cultural perspective, while Bartley takes a sociological approach.

Similar in methodology, Phillip Howell is one of few authors to discuss the full scope of regulations resulting from the Contagious Diseases Acts. Fellow historians like Nina Attwood and Catherine Lee will follow his illustration, stating local opinions on prostitution varied thus, regulation policies changed by region. Where most focused on the motherland of Britain, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century Britain and the Empire*, examines the entire British Empire through an advanced look at census records and visualizations of detailed maps. Observing both domestic and colonial instances, Howell maintains the CDAs “were not in force everywhere or at the same time, and characteristically appeared in different forms in different places, to different degrees of stringency.”²³

The first section predominantly concerns the Contagious Diseases Acts’ domestic regulations. Howell largely agrees with the origins of prostitution and the acts laid forth by his predecessors, but suggests that even in mainland England “policing that was instituted varied widely from station to station” and was “imperial, in that the Acts drew heavily upon colonial experience.”²⁴ It’s this imperial mentality of the British people and government, that enables Howell to analyze the acts as a symbol of “sexual management.” Howell provides two case studies to explain the adaptations of “regulationism”: Liverpool and Cambridge. Liverpool, uses a “municipal autonomy” to contain prostitution. Cambridge, is observed similarly to Arthur Engel’s review of Oxford in “Immoral Intentions”. Howell criticizes the “proctorial” system at Oxford, a private regulatory administration to protect the sexual health of students. Claiming the obvious gender and class bias made the acts vulnerable, helping lead to the reform movement. Despite his critique of Oxford’s regulations, the style presented by Engle proved valuable to Howell’s review of the University city of Cambridge.

As for colonial regulation, Howell examines Gibraltar and Hong Kong, claiming Hong Kong as the only colonial region where full inquiries on prostitution regulation exists. Focusing on the racialization of prostitution, European desire for “exotic” women rose. Howell argues regulation of commercial sex was subjective, and brothels had a severe discretion towards the Chinese. Medical inspections were given only to Chinese prostitutes whose clients were European and the women feared “their incarceration if found to be in a contagious state.”²⁵ Where in mainland England the regulations were presented for all women in an unfit position, regulations abroad only protected Europeans. Philip Howell’s quantitative analysis incorporates a new range of

²³ Philip Howell, *Geographies of Regulation: Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-century Britain and the Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁴ Howell, 23.

²⁵ Howell, 189.

resources in an attempt to expand on the geographical evidence that the Contagious Diseases Acts fluctuated based on region.

The most recent study presented is Catherine Lee's *Policing Prostitution, 1856-1886: Deviance, Surveillance and Morality*. One of few to follow in Philip Howell and Arthur Engle's footsteps, Lee focuses on the town, Kent. She argues its proximity to ports led to greater impacts of the Contagious Diseases Acts and resulted in vastly different regulation practices. Through police and arrest records, army records, medical records, and Kent court cases, Catherine Lee delivers a social analysis of lost characters in history: the prostitutes. Hidden by contradictory perceptions through local reports, the acts dominated history with a "regulatory approach" so that the "control of prostitution has attracted the majority of the comment and attention."²⁶ Rather than observe the causes for the CDAs or the regulations themselves, she explores the direct effect on prostitutes and their personal responses.

The first four chapters reflect prior works: poverty, lifestyle, representation of prostitutes, and the geographical variations of regulation; the final two chapters present a new argument. Lee argues the complexity "of surveillance and policing measures applied to women publicly identified as prostitutes" was result of society's defined roles of morality.²⁷ Editorials often defined these roles and inevitably constructed the devices used to determine deviancy by police. The mere demeanor of a woman could land her in cuffs, prostitute or not she would be treated and recorded as such. As arrest rates grew, so does Lee's resources. Court reports display individual reactions, from cooperation, public defiance, to intimidation. By placing emphasis on the lost voices victims, Lee broadens her argument. Through these women's accounts, she gathers the reactions of the locale. Relying heavily on Wybrow, and the experiences of Southampton and Plymouth, Catherine Lee suggests women's motives for prostituting, their responses to arrest, and acceptance of punishment, present the range of variation in the Acts.²⁸ *Policing Prostitution* builds on the style of Judith Walkowitz, searching for social ties in dense documentation. Similar to Philip Howell, she argues there were various responses and results to the CDAs regulations. Lee tries to review the prostitute's life through their arrest experience, making a significant social discovery in the historiography of Victorian prostitution. Comparable to Frances Finnegan's study on York, Catherine Lee's focus on Kent attempts to widen the argument that effects of the CDAs varied.

Applauding works by Judith Walkowitz, Amanda Anderson brings a new analytical methodology to her discussion on the cultural perceptions of the prostitute

²⁶ Catherine Lee, *Policing Prostitution, 1856-1886: Deviance, Surveillance and Morality* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012), 9.

²⁷ Lee, 14.

²⁸ Lee, 160.

and fallen woman in *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*. While Walkowitz uses a social analysis, Anderson employs a literary critique of Charles Dickens, D.G. Rossetti's "Jenny", Gaskell's *Mary Barton and Ruth*, and Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, to examine the cultural trends of the era. Through these works, she suggests the Victorian concept of fallenness was more complex than previously recognized. Agreeing with historians like Walkowitz, Lynda Nead, and Linda Mahood that prostitutes "lacked agency," she diverges on the fallen woman. Anderson claims fallenness is not a guarantee into prostitution, rather prostitution is one of many variations of fallenness. Ultimately concluding that literature depicts the fallen woman as someone on a "downward path."²⁹ Prior research and records, show women as previously lost, or fallen. Selecting works over a span of forty years, Anderson peers into the cultural drifts of fallenness and how they changed over time. Anderson makes a compelling argument that fallen women included prostitutes, "unmarried women who engaged in sexual relations with men, victims of seduction, adulteresses, as well as various delinquent lower class women."³⁰ Evaluating the cultural tendencies prevalent throughout Victorian literary works, she deconstructs preceding definitions of fallen women.

Nina Attwood's *The Prostitute's Body: Rewriting Prostitution in Victorian Britain*, revisits common primary texts to further discuss the Victorian's opinion on prostitution. She praises historians like Judith Walkowitz and Amanda Anderson for their social and cultural analyses and intends to magnify the notion of fluctuating responses to prostitution. Attwood suggests the "representational schema from which representations of prostitutes were constructed in the Victorian period was multi-faceted and many layered," buried in "myth and fabrication."³¹ *The Prostitutes Body* analyzes five different influential study on prostitutes, aiming to uncover hidden "truths" she claims are covered by unchanged historical interpretations.

Attwood suggests, William Acton's *Prostitution*, helped create the stereotype of the morbid prostitute. As a medical professional his focus was venereal disease, but his work was so frequently referred to it created the representation of sickly prostitutes. Moving forward, the Report of Royal Commission on the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, are employed for their political discourse. Witness testimonies alone were "characterized by variety, opposition, dissonance, contradiction and heterogeneity," in short, they demonstrate the array of responses.³² Josephine Butler's texts on the Ladies National Association brings to light the feminist

²⁹ Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 9.

³⁰ Anderson, 2.

³¹ Nina Attwood, *The Prostitute's Body: Rewriting Prostitution in Victorian Britain* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 17.

³² *Ibid.*

response. Most unique is the fictional study, *The New Magdalen* by Wilkie Collins, which offers an example on the phases of prostitution. Finally, pornography is examined through an erotic memoir *My Secret Life*, that follows “Walter” and the view of a gentleman caller.³³ As Nina Attwood moves through each piece, she follows a similar diagnostic style as Amanda Anderson by probing canonical texts looking for cultural responses to prostitution. Attwood maintains that academia has hidden the multi-faced views of prostitution and suggests historians have accepted representations set forth; leading to the continuous perpetuation of “mythical” accounts. Accordingly, she aims to reconstruct the complexities of Victorian society, shedding light on the various representations of prostitution.

By dividing the historical works on Victorian prostitution into themes of economic, cultural, and sociological approaches the changes in research methods are visible as arguments transition from causes, to regulation, response, and their variations. However, the connections to American prostitution has gone untouched. The British culture of the Victorian era is habitually witnessed throughout America in the nineteenth century, regulations to lewd acts would likely have some interesting similarities. Yet, according to Finnegan, regulation varied by region. America, newly independent and in the aftermath of Civil War would have a few drastically different regulations. A comparison of American and British prostitution regulations could offer historians a unique perspective into current concerns over prostitution, and the worldwide issue of sex trafficking, possibly bringing vital information into political discourse.

The earliest works on Victorian prostitution were limited to economic causes and subjective primary sources. Soon after, with the arrival of the Contagious Diseases Acts, the historiography turns social, analyzing the responses of regulation and subsequent variations. By the 1990s cultural examples arise, but the majority predominantly focused on the regulatory responses. Sociological approaches like those of Frances Finnegan and Judith Walkowitz have dominated the field, but more recently historians have shown interest in cultural analyses like those of Nina Attwood, Amanda Anderson, and Walkowitz’ more recent publication, *City of Dreadful Delight*. By reviewing the documentation surrounding prostitution, historians strive to provide a voice to those muted in society. However, many aspects of Victorian prostitute’s lives continue to go untold. Prostitution remains a problem in metropolises today and historians continue to further their understanding and reach for deeper explanations of the forces bringing women in to prostitution. A greater comprehension of prostitution’s struggle with regulation can assist in offering a successful solution to an ongoing problem.

³³ Attwood, 151.