

Venal Bodies: Prostitutes and Prostitution in Eighteenth Century Culture

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The conference held in London at the centre of Germanic studies at the beginning of April took mainly a literary approach to the subject of prostitution. Even though the organizers wished to encourage approaches from different disciplines of research, they chose to concentrate on papers which took a literary text (memoirs, novels) as the basis of analysis. Unfortunately it can be difficult to link historical reality with an abstract literary creation. Papers referring to an actual example of writing from a procuress or a prostitute sometimes lacked an in-depth analysis of the pragmatic meaning of certain expressions and descriptions. Besides a procuress's report or some courtesan's memoirs are both a reflection of what the life of a prostitute could be if she was moving in a higher social sphere and was enjoying more social power. Given that every piece of writing is a form of lie, we should not consider the report of a procuress as an objective depiction of a common prostitute's life without underlining the reason why this procuress was writing about a prostitute and therefore which point of view she chose. Some papers also fell into the mistake of generalizing from a case which was too precise in terms of location or characters involved to be considered as a paradigm of prostitution in the eighteenth century.

We could also regret the lack of primary sources being used from countries other than France and England or cities other than Paris and London. We had a glimpse of Christiania's prostitution at the end of the eighteenth century and Johanne Bergvist from Oslo University enthused us by a statistically detailed analysis of her subject. Christiania being rather a small city at that time, the primary sources used by Johanne Bergvist had the merit of focusing on the down-to-earth reality of streetwalkers' life.

The Persian account of prostitution introduced by Dr Katherine MacDonald from UCL also offered an "exotic" point of view. Marie Petit's story gave an insight into prostitution in the Middle-East which was defined by its differences from Europe. Rarely mentioned by the European early-modernists, Persian prostitution has been explored by Dr MacDonald in an original way, using a French woman's judgment and testimonies to depict its specificities.

I wish to mention three talks by Dr Mary Peace, Dr Megan Hiatt and Dr Jennie Batchelor which all relied on the Magdalene stories. Each accorded importance to a different aspect of what these women felt or what the author wished them to feel (about reformation, pregnancy and marriage). Their interrelation elevated the debate on sources about prostitution and demonstrated how scholars can use these sources in many ways.

Ultimately a comparative aspect either geographically or socially (streetwalkers or common prostitutes in a brothel versus "first-rate whore") could have been introduced into the debate. Moreover the gender issues raised by a subject like prostitution were often eluded in the papers presented. In general, relationships with men were not mentioned in depth - nor was there sufficient attention given to the authors' or artists' gender in explaining the point of view chosen to describe or talk about prostitution. Finally the silence of streetwalker's voices should have been underlined from the beginning of the conference.

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