

Sparing the “Angel of the House”: Why Victorian Men Used Prostitutes to Avoid Sin

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Not many Victorians graced an Anglican pew with their presence on the average Sabbath. The census of 1851 estimated that a mere seventeen percent of the English population regularly attended services conducted by the Church of England.¹ Still, it is evident that the influence of Anglicanism stretched across the population. To Victorians, the teachings of the Church provided a moral compass to follow. In *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, Jeffery Cox states: “Society would fall apart without morality, morality was impossible without religion, and religion would disappear without the churches.”² Morality, based on the teachings of the Church, was central in Victorian society. The importance of religious morality had effects on the sphere of marriage. The Church of England taught that marital relations were only for reproduction and that recreational and fulfilling sex with one’s wife was sinful. For this reason, Victorian men often used prostitutes to fulfill their carnal desires. To understand this phenomenon, I will focus my research on the newly-emerged working class, primarily in London. By looking at expectations of sexual morality, the institution of marriage, and the rise in levels of

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¹ Census of Great Britain, 1851. Quoted in 1851 Religious Census, “General Information,” Frances Coakley. http://www.isle-of-man.com/manxnotebook/methdism/rc1851/rc_gb.htm (accessed November 22, 2013).

² Jeffery Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.

prostitution in this era, the use of prostitutes by married men can be explained.

The Bible and the Book of Common Prayer were the primary sources of religious literary authority for Anglicans. The Bible contains the Christian principles about sin, salvation, and moral guidance, while the Prayer-Book is a manual containing public devotions, prayers, and creeds. Additionally, the Book of Common Prayer connected daily conduct with spirituality.³ These works created guidelines by which the Church of England based their views on religious morality.

There are multiple excerpts from the Bible that define sexual morality. For example, chapter four of Thessalonians states: “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God.”⁴ Also, in chapter three of Colossians, the Bible reads: “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”⁵ From these verses, and multiple others, we can see that characteristics like passion, desire, and lust were considered “earthly”—things not from God. In the Book of Common Prayer, vows to be used during a baptism are recorded. One of these vows is to abstain from “sinful lusts” and sins of the flesh.⁶ To be moral, God’s people should practice self-control and not participate in actions that are rooted in passion. Based on these passages, it is reasonable to assume that prostitution was also considered a sin. Proverbs chapter five says:

Drink waters out of thine own cistern, and running
waters out of thine own well. Let thy fountains be
dispersed abroad, and rivers of waters in the streets.

³ Book of Common Prayer, 1854, quoted in Evan Daniel, *The Prayer Book: Its History, Language, and Contents* (Redhill: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., LTD, 1948), xi.

⁴ Thes. 4:3-5 (King James Version).

⁵ Colo. 3:5 (King James Version).

⁶ Book of Common Prayer, 1854, quoted in Daniel, *The Prayer Book*, 416.

Let them be only thine own, and not strangers' with thee. Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth. Let her be as the loving hind and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times; and be thou ravished always with her love. And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger?⁷

It may seem illogical to participate in one sin to avoid another, but to Victorians, using a prostitute to fulfill their less than holy desires was a lesser evil than despoiling one's wife.⁸ This can be explained by looking at the institution of Victorian marriage.

Marriage in the Victorian era revolved around religion, proper roles of men and women, and reproduction. Religion caused men to view their wives as "angel[s] in the house" because of their central role in spiritual life and lack of immoral urges.⁹ Some Victorians argued that a "virtuous" woman had little or no feelings of desire.¹⁰ In the Prayer-Book, one appeal to the heavens during a marriage ceremony is that a wife will be "amiable to her husband as Rachel, wise as Rebecca, faithful and obedient as Sara."¹¹ Wives were likened to biblical figures because of their supposed sexual morality. Wedding ceremonies described in the Book of Common Prayer also show how women were placed on a moral pedestal in marriage. When placing the wedding band on the finger of their bride, men would say: "With this rynge I the wed, and this gold and

⁷ Prov. 5:15-20 (King James Version).

⁸ Another immorality described in the Bible was masturbation. In Corinthians 6:18, it states: "Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body." While brazen anonymous poetic statements like "...some in corners could make themselves a heaven" were made, masturbation was seen as religiously immoral and men often considered prostitution a more acceptable choice than masturbation. Cor 6:18 (King James Version).

⁹ Erna Olafson Hellerstein, *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 288.

¹⁰ Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History* (Briarcliff Manor: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), 356.

¹¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, 1854, quoted in Daniel, *The Prayer-Book*, 496.

siluer I the geue, and with my body I the worshipec, and with all my wordely cathel I the endowe.¹² By marrying, a man vows to worship his wife with his body. This can be interpreted as a man respecting his wife while participating in his husbandly duties.

Marriage was an institution of the Church, and Anglicans believed that a holy marriage should follow the teachings of religious morality. Men however, were expected to display feelings of lust and passion, all thanks to original sin. When Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, feelings of the flesh entered the world—feelings that a common man could not resist without risk to his health.¹³ Still, husbands knew that lust went against religious morality, and to inflict religious immorality on a holy wife was sinful. In a young man's letter to his fiancé, he described how he felt "criminal" when he confessed his love for her, because he could not bear to think of a respectable women in such a lustful way.¹⁴ To fulfill their carnal urges without despoiling their wives, men turned to prostitutes.

Roles of men and women in a Christian marriage also impacted how men viewed their wives. In Ephesians 5:22-23, the biblical role of the man is described: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body."¹⁵ Religious morality stated that wives were inferior to their husbands. In Alfred Tennyson's *The Princess*, we see how natural this was for society:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey:
All else confusion.¹⁶

¹² *Book of Common Prayer*, 1854, quoted in Daniel, *The Prayer Book*, 494.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Emilio and Freeman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 127-29, quoted in Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 189-90.

¹⁵ Eph. 5:22-23 (English Standard Version).

¹⁶ Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess: A Medley* (London, Edward Moxton, 1849), part V, lines 427-31, quoted in Hellerstein, *Victorian Women*, 118.

The understanding that men were to be one way and women another was so engrained in society, that everything else seemed to be confusing when compared to it. In a book titled *Domestic Habits of the Women of England*, published in 1846, author Sarah Stickney Ellis asserts that “In her intercourse with a man, it is impossible but that woman should feel her own inferiority, and it is right that it should be so...she does not meet him on equal terms.”¹⁷

Due to this separation of spheres, married couples found it difficult to share their deepest feelings and aspirations with each other.¹⁸ In fact, the idea of a marriage formed around loving tenderness or equality in conversation was ridiculous.¹⁹ This inequality in marriage would sometimes cause couples to fail to connect. In *When Passion Reigned*, author Patricia Anderson describes how wives would refuse or avoid relations with a husband, “as a way of control in a relationship in which she felt otherwise powerless.”²⁰ Men who were denied by their wives could experience symptoms of sexual frustration: irritability, chronic pain, and depression.²¹ Gender roles prescribed by the Church created a failure to bond and a power struggle that could cause men to seek other avenues of pleasurable fulfillment, like prostitution.

Marriage also centered on the purpose of reproduction. For Victorians who adhered to the teaching of the Church of England, reproduction was the only reason to engage in the practice of intercourse.²² Some more radical Victorians thought that any husband who participated in relations with his wife not for purposes of reproduction was making his wife his own private prostitute.²³ Even some doctors believed that women did not enjoy

¹⁷ Sarah Stickney Ellis, *Domestic Habits of the Women of England* (London, Fisher, Son and Co., 1846), quoted in Micheal Brander, *The Victorian Gentleman* (London: Gordon Cremonesi Publishers, 1975), 117.

¹⁸ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 188.

¹⁹ Dagmar Hertzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53.

²⁰ Patricia Anderson, *When Passion Reigned: Sex and the Victorians* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 129.

²¹ Anderson, *When Passion Reigned*, 129

²² Tannahill, *Sex in History*, 355.

²³ *Ibid.*

being subjected to sex. William Acton, British gynecologist, wrote that a “Victorian woman submits to her husband’s embraces, but principally to gratify him, and were it not for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions.”²⁴ Also, religious authority banned sex during menstruation and also during pregnancy and sometime thereafter.²⁵ Considering that the average middle class family had six children in 1871, married men had to remain celibate for around six of the first twelve years of marriage.²⁶ Prostitution offered an outlet to which a sexually frustrated husband could turn. An 1888 issue of *The Times* describes the judicial response to a restaurant acting as an undercover brothel. In the article, relations with a prostitute were repeatedly referred to as “refreshment.”²⁷ Engaging in sexual activity with a fallen woman was seen as a rejuvenating experience. Using prostitutes was seen as a positive practice because it prevented men from indulging in sexual sins with their wives.

Religious morality was the cause of men using “fallen women,” which by extension caused an increase in prostitutes as an effect. Levels of prostitution were rising due to the demand of prostitutes, which partially stemmed from men needing a religiously moral way to fulfill their sexual needs.

Due to the nature of the profession, information about the exact number of prostitutes in the Victorian age varies. Two years after the crowning of Queen Victoria, the chief of the London Metropolitan police reported that only 7,000 prostitutes resided

²⁴William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life. Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations* (London: John Churchill, 1857), quoted in Pearson, *The Worm in the Bud*, 358.

²⁵ Menstruation was seen as a mental condition as well as a physical condition in the Victorian era. In an interesting side note, as late as 1878, the *British Medical Journal* ran a six month correspondence on whether a menstruating woman could turn a ham rancid with a touch.

²⁶ Tannahill, *Sex in History*, 355.

²⁷ At Marlborough Street, *The Times [London]*, March 31, 1888. http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/980/568/17983859w16/purl=rc1_TTDA_0_CS52051585&dyn=3!xrn_2_0_CS52051585&chst_2?sw_aep=uiuc_eiu2.

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and worked in London.²⁸ The same year, however, the Society for the Suppression of the Vice claimed that the actual number of prostitutes in London was upwards of 80,000.²⁹ Historians understand that the different agendas of these two organizations greatly influence their numbers, and estimate the actual number of prostitutes in London somewhere around 50,000.³⁰ There is no doubt that prostitution was fully engrained in Victorian society.

Although the inexact figures make it unclear whether levels of prostitution were definitely rising or falling, it is evident that citizens thought that there were more prostitutes than ever before.³¹ Multiple articles were published in *The Times* that condemned or commented on the rise in prostitution and venereal disease spread by prostitutes.³² At a 1858 meeting concerning the issue of prostitution in London, the following statement was made:

That this meeting views with the upmost concern the condition of Haymarket, Coventry-street, Begent-street, and other adjoining streets, in which prostitution is carried on to an extent and with a degree of publicity and shamelessness unparalleled in any capitol of Europe, and, it is believed, of the civilized world.³³

Additionally, *The Times* published a letter to the editor in 1862, which talked about the ease of participating in prostitution in a garrison town, and how heightened levels of prostitution caused outbreaks of venereal disease among soldiers.³⁴

²⁸ Ibid., 352

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 357

³¹ Martha Vinicius, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 82.

³² Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 14.

³³ "Prostitution in the Metropolis" *The Times [London]*, January 4, 1898, http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/207/16/16210622w16/purl=rc1_TTDA_0_CS67932708&dyn=3!xrn_5_0_CS67932708&hst_1?sw_aep=uiuc_eiu2.

³⁴ "Vice and Disease in Garrison Town" *The Times [London]*, April 11, 1862, http://infotrac.galegroup.com/itw/infomark/546/7/16236706w16/purl=rc1_T

Today, prostitution has the connotation of an institution of sex slavery. Besides a few anomalies, this was not the case in Victorian London. Most of the time, a woman's transition into prostitution was due to circumstance, rather than coercion. Struggling women knew that there was a demand for prostitutes, and that they could be financially successful in cities like London. In a memoir, a London prostitute called Sal recalls her entry into the business:

I was a servant gal away in Birmingham. I got tired of workin' and slavin' to make a living, and getting a...bad one at that; what o' five pun' a year and yer grub, I'd sooner starve, I would. After a bit I went to Coventry, cut brummagem, as we calls in in those parts, and took up with soldiers, as was quartered there. I soon got tired of them. Soldiers is good—soldiers is—to walk with and that, but they don't pay; cos why they ain't got no money; so I says to myself, I'll go to Lunnon and I did. I soon found my level there.³⁵

Sal displays the mindset of many women in the era. Employment opportunities for disadvantaged women were scarce and paid poorly. Although the rise of industrialism created factory jobs, women found that they could have better pay with fewer hours by offering sex for money.³⁶

Women becoming prostitutes can be attributed to the need for better income, but supply does not dictate demand. The demand was created as men sought to follow the religiously moral principles of the Church. Married men, who needed an outlet for their less than holy desires, frequented prostitutes as not to despoil

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³⁵ "Swindling Sal," quoted in Bracebridge Hemyng, "Prostitution in London," in *London Labour and the London Poor*, ed. Henry Mayhew (rpt., New York, 1968), IV, 223, quoted in Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 13.

³⁶ Erna Olafson Hellerstein *Victorian Women: A Documentary Account of Women's Lives in Nineteenth Century England, France, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1981), 288.

their wives. The increasing number of prostitutes in Victorian cities can be attributed to the demand for less sinful relations by men who practiced the guidelines of religious morality.

In a society where the Church of England determined morality, it does not seem logical to use prostitutes in order to remain religiously moral. However, the teachings of Christianity and the institution of marriage created the need for men to use prostitutes in the Victorian era. The Bible and the Book of Common Prayer contain clear scripture prohibiting sexual appetite. Still, men were expected to have carnal desires. Wives were placed on a pedestal of sexual morality. Rather than subjecting a wife to sexual sin, men satisfied their fleshly yearnings by engaging in relations with prostitutes. The religious institution of marriage only exacerbated the use of prostitutes. While women were placed high on the scale of sexual morality, they were below men in all other aspects of society. The Bible placed the man at the head of the household, superior to a wife. This sometimes created marriages where men and women failed to connect. An estranged marriage could further prohibit enjoyable relations with a wife, causing a man to turn to prostitution. Additionally, the Church of England placed chastity requirements around menstruation and pregnancy. For extended periods of time, men had no other sexual outlet except prostitutes. Citizens of Victorian London were in an uproar about the increase of fallen women and the supposed heightening levels of venereal diseases. Many women became prostitutes out of circumstance, but sexual morality based on religious teachings created the demand for illicit sex. By examining sexual expectations of the Church of England, the holy institution of marriage, and the resulting rise in levels of prostitution, we can begin to understand that sexual morality based on religion caused married men to use prostitutes for carnal fulfillment in the Victorian era.