



Darkness in the Parlor: Prostitution and Narratives of Urban Exploration in London's West End

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Abstract:

Prostitution in London's West End came to constitute a multidimensional transgression for middle-class observers during the late-Victorian period, contesting traditional distinctions between West and East, middle-class and working-class, and public and private life. First, through the use of Late Victorian urban exploration narratives, I will show that urban explorers applied a rigid conceptual framework to identify the working-class prostitutes occupying London's affluent West-End. Rooted in class-based hierarchies, these systems of identification presumed that working-class prostitutes were categorically distinct, visible, and undisguisable in London's West End. Moreover, I argue that this conceptual framework reveals the authors' binary understandings of prostitutes' public and private life, which assigned middle-class prostitutes to the domestic and private realms and relegated working-class prostitutes to the observable public. Additionally, I will show that working-class prostitutes contested the urban explorer's system of identification by adopting middle-class modes of fashion, dress, and expression. Ultimately, I hope to show that these transgressive activities subverted urban spectators' systems of knowledge on multiple levels. First, they challenged bourgeois understandings of the working-class as an object of empirical study and a source

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of male pleasure, rendering the activities of working-class prostitutes effectively “unreadable.” Second, they confused traditional middle-class conceptualizations of public life, as groups traditionally relegated to marginalized sectors of London unobtrusively entered middle-class social spaces. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these activities conflicted with the middle-class observer’s traditional understanding of the West End as a familiar location in the urban environment, decreasing their ability to reliably monitor this affluent sector of the London metropolis.

During a temperate July evening in 1869, the crowds at the Cremorne Gardens of Chelsea gradually dispersed, the Gardens’ various attendants retiring to their homes in London’s affluent West End. By ten o’clock, however, the Gardens were once again teeming with visitors, arriving at Cremorne after sundown to join seven hundred others dancing and promenading upon the venue’s raised platforms. Among these visitors could be seen three hundred prostitutes, “more or less *prononcées*.”¹ These revelers would continue dancing, promenading, and enjoying other amusements long into the night. However, wrote Dr. William Acton, “I do not imagine for a moment they could have been aware that a self-appointed inspector was among them.”² Acton, a British medical doctor and adjunct to the Female Venereal Hospital in Paris, listed himself among the partygoers at Cremorne, though

1 William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns* (London: Churchill and Sons, 1870), 17.

2 *Ibid.*, 17.

did not enter into the throng of waltzing bodies exchanging partners without embarrassment or inhibition. Instead, he remained at a distance, “circulated listlessly about the garden, and enjoyed in a grim kind of way the ‘selection’ from some favourite opera and the cool night-breeze from the river.”³ Acton did not visit Cremorne to socialize with the various partygoers and prostitutes in attendance. Instead, he imagined himself a detached observer present only to bear witness to the night’s events; a self-appointed inspector carefully assessing and documenting the movements of sex workers in the West End. In this way, Acton became one of the many “urban spectators” or “social explorers” of London’s Victorian middle class; men who discretely entered into the city streets, imbedding themselves in London’s metropolitan scene with the intent of studying its variegated social conditions and developing a coherent, totalizing, and moralizing vision of the urban space.

In addition to its focus on London’s sex industry, Acton’s narrative is significant because of its particular regional focus. While scholars have developed detailed analyses of urban exploration narratives in the nineteenth century and their author’s conceptualizations of prostitution, these analyses have predominantly focused on narratives centered in London’s indigent East End. At this time, historians have developed profound and insightful studies of London’s social explorers, detailing the social and cultural semiotics governing their narratives. However, without a greater exploration of narratives centered in the West End, these historical understandings will be incomplete.

3 *Ibid.*, 17.

These narratives are particularly important to our understandings of Victorian middle-class culture, as the West End was a primary cultural space in which bourgeois male observers consolidated their cultural knowledge of the London metropolis, a regional cornerstone upholding their traditional understandings of regional identity, social class, and female respectability.

In this essay, I argue that prostitution in London's West End came to constitute a multidimensional transgression for middle-class observers, contesting traditional distinctions between West and East, middle-class and working-class, and public and private life. First, through the use of Late Victorian urban exploration narratives, I will show that the urban explorers applied a rigid conceptual framework to identify the working-class prostitutes occupying London's affluent West-End. Rooted in class-based hierarchies, these systems of identification presumed that working-class prostitutes were categorically distinct, visible, and undisguisable in London's West End. Additionally, I argue that this conceptual framework reveals the authors' dichotomous understandings of prostitutes' public and private life, which assigned middle-class prostitutes to the domestic and private realms and relegated working-class prostitutes to the observable public. Finally, I will show that working-class prostitutes contested the urban explorer's system of identification by adopting middle-class modes of fashion, dress, and expression. I aim to show that these transgressive activities subverted urban spectators' attempts to gain knowledge of London's West End through empirical methods of analysis.

In their analyses of social exploration narratives of nineteenth-century London, urban historians have developed detailed understandings

of the middle-class flaneur's various frameworks of social and cultural knowledge, as they emerged in their investigations of London's working classes.⁴ Specifically, historians have delineated how social explorers frequently relied upon a traditional regional opposition between West and East London as the primary organizing scheme in their examinations of the metropolis. Judith Walkowitz notes, for example, that "Mid-Victorian explorations into the terra incognita of the London poor increasingly relied on the East/West opposition to assess the connecting links between seemingly unrelated parts of society."⁵ In doing so, historians have noted that middle-class urban explorers regularly utilized imagery of darkness, disorder, unintelligibility and mystery in their renderings of East End London, conceiving of this territory as a world separate, distinct, and alien from their own.⁶

In addition to the binary opposition of West and East, historians have noted the convergence of various social discourses and epistemological categories at work in the urban explorer's narratives. For example, George Stocking notes the Post-Darwinist influence of "socio-cultural evolutionism" among Victorian middle-class social commentators, which resulted in the tendency to draw analogies between colonial

4 According to Estelle Murail, the archetype of the *flaneur*, or "man of leisure," emerged in the urban literature of nineteenth-century French writers Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). A specifically male figure, the *flaneur* traversed and observed the streets of Paris or London, insisting on the authority of sight in uncovering the essence of urban life.

5 Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 19-20.

6 *Ibid.*, 18; Peter Keating, "Introduction" in *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers*, ed. by Peter Keating (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 20.

subjects and the urban poor.⁷ Following this, Peter Keating, Deborah Epstein Nord, and Walkowitz have noted the urban spectator's tendency to adopt imperialist rhetoric in their reconstructions of the London cityscape, figuring East End inhabitants in terms of the uncivilized Other and transforming this East End into an unexplored geographic territory remaining to be discovered, traversed, and made visible to the enlightened public.⁸ Additionally, Walkowitz has uncovered the complex network of social and cultural knowledges in which the urban explorers were embedded during the late 1800s. In doing so, she demonstrates that Late-Victorian conceptions of the public urban space as a site of observation and surveillance in which the urban voyeur could immerse or disguise himself; an apparatus of bourgeois male pleasure by which to establish knowledge and control over marginalized groups and unfamiliar spaces.

Additionally, urban historians of the Late-Victorian period have noted the position of prostitution within the urban explorer's mental maps of London's urban scene. In particular, they have observed that the urban spectators figured the working-class prostitute as symbols of female public vice, an indication of the lower-class's severe state of indigence, and demonstrable proof of the need for urban reform.⁹

⁷ George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 159.

⁸ Keating, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913*, 14; Deborah Epstein Nord, "The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers Among the Urban Poor," in *Visions of the Modern City*, ed. Sharpe and Wallock (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), 122; Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 18.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21; Epstein Nord, "The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers among the Urban Poor," 132.

However, scholars have limited their attention to their analyses of urban exploration narratives situated in London's East End exclusively, neglecting middle-class explorers' investigations of prostitution in West London. Indeed, the East End presented an image of an abyss, a benighted sector of the city that the urban explorer wished to investigate and analyze. But how did the urban explorers adjust their vision to the bright, enlightened streets of the West End of London, that area of the metropolis in which, they supposed, no secrecy was possible and all activity visible to the naked eye?

Urban exploration narratives of the Late-Victorian period assessed West-End prostitutes through an inflexible class structure that symbolically associated middle-class prostitutes with the sphere of private, domestic life and associated those of the lower or working-classes with the public realm; the sections in West London which were immediately visible, apprehensible, and accessible to the senses. For example, Henry Mayhew developed detailed criteria by which to identify prostitutes from different social classes in his multi-volume work *London Labour and the London Poor*. Specifically, Mayhew divided West End prostitutes into the "higher order" and "lower order," based upon their relative social positions. He identified the "higher order" not only by the affluence of their patrons but by their comparative seclusion and privacy from the public eye. He noted, that those in the "higher order of prostitutes" were "kept as seclusive by men of wealth, high station and title."¹⁰ Mayhew's use of the term "seclusive" implicitly associated fashionable, middle-class prostitutes with private, domestic spaces. Furthermore,

¹⁰ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: Those that Will Not Work, Comprising Prostitutes, Thieves, Swineless Beggars* (Volume 4, 1862), 356.

Mayhew noted that the men who attended these workers generally “induced them to cohabit with them, or to live in apartments provided for them, where they are kept in grand style” and would frequently provide “tutors” or “governesses” to “train them in accomplishments, to enable them to move with elegance and grace in the drawing-room.”¹¹ In this description, Mayhew characterized middle-class prostitutes as accessories to the private lives of upper-class men, acquiring training in fashionable “accomplishments” that would equip them for domestic life. In doing so, Mayhew precludes the possibility of middle-class prostitutes entering the West End’s public space in any significant capacity, instead relegating them to internal spaces of the apartment or drawing-room.

Mayhew’s system of classification specifically proscribed these middle-class prostitutes from entering the West End’s public urban centers, designating these spaces as unlikely social territories for the “upper order” sex worker. This woman, he noted, remains “aloof from the gaiety of the Haymarket, and lives as though she were a married woman.”¹² In contrast, Mayhew describes his “lower order” as those “open prostitutes who traverse the streets of the metropolis for their livelihood,”¹³ consigning working-class sex workers to the West End’s public space. Additionally, whereas Mayhew’s description of the “higher order” of prostitutes focused primarily upon their location in the domestic and private sphere, his description of the “lower order” consists of lengthy descriptions of their physical attire. Specifically, he notes the various styles and qualities of dress that locate their owners

11 Ibid., 355-56.

12 Ibid., 357.

13 Ibid., 356.

in a particular socio-economic class:

Many of them are dressed in a light cotton or merino gown, and ill-suited crinoline, with light grey, or brown cloak or mantle. Some with pork-pie hat, and waving feather – white, blue, or red; others with a slouched straw hat.¹⁴

As Epstein Nord has observed, most social explorers of the middle class tended to maintain a binary mental map of London in which “the West represented all that was bright, open, dazzling, and enlightened.”¹⁵ Mayhew’s belief in the visibility or transparency of working-class prostitutes in the West End reveals this traditional regionalist assumption of the West End as a center of public exposure in which it would be perfectly possible to distinguish those prostitutes of the “lower order” from the respectable women attending the promenade. Ultimately, by relegating middle-class prostitutes to domestic interiors and unkempt working-class prostitutes to highly visible public spaces, Mayhew reinforced the urban explorer’s faith in his ability to identify the criminal activities occurring in London’s West End.

Mayhew’s categorical approach presumed that the working-class was wholly visible and detectible in London’s West End, revealing the urban explorer’s desire to attain certainty through empirical evidence. Similarly, in his 1897 investigation of the West End, Arthur Sherwell forcefully asserted the authority of the urban explorer’s sense perception in discerning the “intimate facts of [London’s] moral and social

14 Ibid., 358-59.

15 Epstein Nord, “The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travelers among the Urban Poor,” 123.

life.”¹⁶ Moreover, he noted the inadequacy of quantitative information to index the depth of moral degeneration in the West End:

serious as I know these facts to be, I am convinced that we are dealing only with partial and inadequate causes of a problem that lies much deeper, and which, more perhaps than any other problem, demands the utmost intellectual and moral honesty in those who try to investigate it [...] after all, the roots of the problem lie deep down in spiritual facts.¹⁷

Sherwell’s belief in the value of first-hand, observational evidence manifested in his treatment of West End prostitution. For example, he noted that “the closer one’s observation, and the wider one’s experience of the problem becomes,” pointing to unquantifiable facts of urban life such as the “helpless loneliness of London” as empirical proof of the West End’s moral degradation. Ultimately, Sherwell’s analytical approach further reveals the extent to which these urban spectators relied upon visual evidence in their social investigations of working-class prostitution in the West-End.

In their narratives of urban exploration, Mayhew and Sherwell both asserted the value of visual evidence in identifying, assessing, and classifying the working-class prostitutes of London’s West End, upholding the notion that prostitution was “a symptom: an outward and visible sign of a hidden moral disease.”¹⁸ Specifically, these writers pointed to distinguishing habits of dress and manners of solicitation as

¹⁶ Arthur Sherwell, *Life in West London: A Study and a Contrast* (Methuen & Co., 1897), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

identifying features of working-class prostitutes of the West End. The urban explorers’ valuation of empirical evidence, their understandings of the West End as an open and observable space, and their practice of designating “lower order” sex workers to the realm of the visible urban centers contributed to a rigid understanding of working-class prostitutes in the West End; one which presumed that they were inherently distinguishable and assessable. However, various urban explorers experienced a kind of intellectual crisis as working-class prostitutes altered their manners of dress and behavior and contested the epistemological categories that designated them as wholly innately conspicuous public actors. Through such transgressive activities, these social actors subverted urban spectators’ attempts to gain knowledge of London’s West End through empirical methods of analysis.

During the late nineteenth century, many working-class prostitutes began adopting middle-class fashions of dress, manners of behavior, and social activities which contested the urban explorer’s expectations of social behavior. Additionally, these alterations allowed them to enter the West End’s public space discretely, without attracting the attention of bourgeois male observers. Several urban spectators noted this tendency among working-class prostitutes. For example, a miscellaneous 1785 poem titled “The Art of Living in London” was re-published in the late-1800s featuring an extended series of footnotes by the editor. Among these was a lengthy invective against the presence of prostitution in London society:

What prostitution in former days carefully concealed, is in the present degenerate age, with an uncommon assurance, exposed to the view of almost every passenger. Actions disgraceful and immodest, formerly confined to the brothel, are now audaciously

transacted in the public streets, in open defiance of law, and a total disregard to modesty

[...]

They ape the manners of persons of distinction and fortune, emulate them in their dress, and even frequent more places of public resort and amusement. The very farmer's daughter has laid aside her stuffs for muslins, her handkerchief for the meretricious [sic] display of naked charms, and her diffidence for coquetry.¹⁹

Walkowitz notes that the new consumer culture in the Late-Victorian period transformed popular understanding of the public space, enabling women of various classes to enter urban centers while still maintaining an image of distinction and respectability.²⁰ The editor of "The Art of Living in London" clearly registered this occurrence in London, exhibiting frustration over working-class prostitutes' tendency to adopt alternative manners of dress and the relative freedom of movement that they enjoyed in the public space as a result. Such practices allowed these workers to refashion themselves in accordance with middle-class norms, to disguise their social class and profession and thereby present themselves in public inconspicuously.

This practice of refashioning among working-class prostitutes in the West End violated of the urban spectators' rigid systems of classification, which presumed the immediate visibility of this social group. Ultimately, this precipitated a kind of intellectual crisis among some social

19 William Green, "The Art of Living in London" (London: Piccadilly), 41-42.

20 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 41.

explorers, as these transgressive activities contested and weakened their empirical methods of analysis. For example, William Acton remarked upon this new tendency among working-class prostitutes during his visits to the Argyll Rooms in West London:

By their dress, deportment, and general appearance, the visitor might be inclined to suppose them to belong to the kept mistress rather than the prostitute class. This is, however, not the case, as with a few exceptions, they fall within the latter denomination.²¹

Acton's own knowledge of the prostitutes' presence relied primarily upon anecdotal, secondary evidence relayed by various informants, revealing the sudden inefficacy of empirical evidence in identifying and categorizing the working-class prostitutes present in the West End. Judith Walkowitz notes that the emergence of various social actors marked London's streets as contested terrain, "which imperiled the *flaneur's* ability to experience the city as a totalizing whole."²² Acton's testimony is particularly significant, as it underscores the primary ways in which the social practices of middle-class prostitutes challenged urban spectators to reconfigure their mental maps of London's urban space.

As middle-class prostitutes adapted to the social conventions of London's West End, they challenged male observers' systems of knowledge on multiple levels. First, they challenged bourgeois perceptions of the working-class as an object of empirical study and a source of

21 William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns*, 20.

22 Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight*, 39.

male pleasure. While middle-class observers had previously been confident in their ability to categorize and classify working-class groups by visual markers, working-class prostitutes' efforts to disguise, or even transcend, their social class effectively rendered them "unreadable" to male spectators. Second, they confused middle-class conceptualizations of public life and disrupted the traditional boundaries limiting access to the city. As groups that were traditionally relegated to marginal sectors of London unobtrusively entered into middle-class social settings, they surreptitiously laid claims to spaces from which they had previously been excluded. In doing so, they contested the urban spectators' preconceived socio-spatial division between London's East and West Ends. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these activities revealed the *flâneur's* inability to reliably monitor this affluent sector of the London metropolis. In other words, they conflicted with the middle-class observer's traditional understanding of the West End as a familiar location in the urban environment. In his 1976 work *Into Unknown England*, Peter Keating noted that the urban explorers believed "a Dark Continent lies at one's doorstep."²³ In this instance, however, they were searching for the lights in their own parlors.

²³ Peter Keating, *Into Unknown England 1866-1913: Selections from the Social Explorers*, 21.

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