

Kelsey Ransick  
Independent Study  
Final Historiography

**The First Profession Getting Second-Hand Treatment**  
*A Survey of Scholarship About Prostitution in Elizabethan England*

Prostitution is recognised as the “first profession” in numerous cultures,<sup>1</sup> and as such, much scholarly ink has been expended on its analysis. Many of these works attempt to cover prostitution across the globe through the millennia, and many of them focus on specific regions or towns during the period of a century or two. Interestingly, one area in this study that has been thus far underdeveloped is that of prostitution in Elizabethan England. While many works on women, law, or gender give passing reference to the state of prostitution in sixteenth century England, rarely does one see more than a few paragraphs on who these women were, what they did, and why they did it. After investigating a number of works<sup>2</sup> that touch on the subject of prostitution in late medieval and early modern England, it becomes clear that one of the main reasons for this lack of scholarship is the ever-present plague of the late medievalist scholar: a lack of sources. What sources we do have are interspersed evidence from court cases, occasional legislation, and mentions of public opinion found in various letters, plays, and pamphlets. This distinct lack of consolidated evidence directly pertaining to prostitution in England makes a general survey of the subject difficult, and scholars must often be content with including discussions of prostitution within other, larger works on

---

<sup>1</sup> Followed nine months later by the second profession: midwifery.

<sup>2</sup> Especially John Biggs et al., *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1996); Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Anne M. Haselkorn, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy* (Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983); Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1500-1620* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Melissa Mowry, “London's Bridewell: Violence, Prostitution, and Questions of Evidence,” in *Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern England*, ed. Joseph P. Ward (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008); Liza Picard, *Elizabeth's London* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003); G.R. Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979).

women, gender, and governmental legislation. It becomes evident that the subject of prostitution must be approached obliquely through the study of related topics. Though there is much left that one would like to discover about Elizabethan prostitution, when read together, what these works do offer are a general look at who a prostitute in medieval and early modern England was and why she conducted her business after about 1300, as well as the range of public opinion of her work and how she was regulated and punished by local government at various points in time.

### **Defining the Prostitute**

Defining what, exactly, constituted prostitution was the subject of much debate, both in Elizabethan England and in modern scholarship. Many of the authors discussed here use the term “whore” liberally and interchangeably with “prostitute”.<sup>3</sup> The term “whore” is both simple and complex, and governments and scholars alike have variously defined it to include only women who have sex for money or sometimes even a widower or single woman who has sex with a man who is not yet her new husband. For our purposes, we will use Anne M. Haselkorn’s simple definition unless otherwise indicated in the discussion of a specific author or work. Haselkorn<sup>4</sup> finds the following an apt definition for either whore or prostitute: “the commercial practitioner who has sexual intercourse with a man who is not her husband, primarily for payment in money, land, clothes, or jewels”.<sup>5</sup>

Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, in her book *Working Women in English Society, 1300-1620*, also offers a very good summary definition of prostitution during these centuries:

---

<sup>3</sup> In the interest of clarity and tastefulness, “prostitute” will be used as a rule, unless examining an author’s specific discussion of terms.

<sup>4</sup> Haselkorn’s work on prostitution in sixteenth and seventeenth century English comedies introduced her to such synonyms as “harlot, strumpet, punk, punk, trull, wench, mutton, *bona roba*, quean, doxy, aunt, cockatrice, tweak, trug, mermaid, road, polecat, waistcoater, frump, stall, Dutch widow, [and] Welsh virgin”. 4.1.

<sup>5</sup> Anne M. Haselkorn, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy* (Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 1.

In some cases it was undertaken on a full-time, semi-regulated basis, with young women hired...by the male or female keepers of established brothels. Other women worked on their own, soliciting partners on the streets or in an alehouse. Beyond that level it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether a given relationship should be labelled as sex work. Some women had sex with and sometimes lived with men who were not their husbands for weeks, months, or years at a time, in return for financial support. In such cases it is hard to separate the sexual/economic component of the relationship from love or at least a desire for companionship.<sup>6</sup>

This difficulty in defining prostitution has led many authors to categorise prostitutes into various “levels” or types of prostitution. Very generally, these different types of prostitutes are: the private, the public, the itinerant, and the village prostitute. G.R. Quaife, whose work entitled *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* spends much time on these categories, notes that “some vagrant whores increased their mobility and maintenance, if not by income, by accompanying a particular male on his travels”.<sup>7</sup> Many of these private and often peripatetic whores served the clergy members of a given diocese.<sup>8</sup> Private whores living and travelling with the men who supported them, a subset of those McIntosh discusses, are in contrast to the “public whore [who] was sedentary....She operated usually from inns or bawdy houses and was available to anyone with money to spare. It was this type of woman that gave many alehouses such a bad name and added to the Puritan demand for their suppression”.<sup>9</sup> The village whore, often a woman commonly known in a town to provide sex for money, was “in many ways...similar to both the public and private whore. She kept a low profile, and for this discretion was rarely troubled by the authorities despite the tittle-tattle of Puritan parishioners. She was quite often a widow whose favours were usually returned in kind – her

---

<sup>6</sup> Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1500-1620* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>7</sup> G.R. Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 147.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

cows milked or her corn gathered”.<sup>10</sup> If women were being paid in kind, it is likely because they needed services or goods much more than they needed coin money.

This last point—that many women accepted payment in kind—points us in another direction in the discussion of prostitution: why women became prostitutes in the first place. Many prostitutes “may have started out with matrimonial aspirations similar to other girls”.<sup>11</sup> While matrimony may have occasionally resulted from such activities, such an event did not exclude the possibility of continued prostitution. In fact, “many private whore were encouraged by their husbands....Some husbands played an active role as panders for their wives”.<sup>12</sup> This was often done either to get cash or to encourage these (generally young and advantageously placed) men to steal from their masters or relatives. The most common prostitutes, however, were single women attempting to earn a living, and this last general economic theme is the main subject of McIntosh’s work.

McIntosh’s book focuses on work women did to produce income for themselves, not what they did for payment in kind, nor does McIntosh spend much ink on women’s role as consumers. Her specific focus is “the kinds of work that generated an income for women: the various services they provided for pay, and their role in producing and selling goods”.<sup>13</sup>

McIntosh also very purposefully discusses this work from 1300-1620—bridging the gap that many other authors create when they start or stop their studies in 1500. Like Haselkorn, McIntosh draws a connection between prostitution and a lack of alternative opportunities.

For instance, McIntosh writes:

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 272.

<sup>12</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 150.

<sup>13</sup> McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society*, 5.

Most types of labor were assigned either to men or to women in later medieval and early modern England, but this gender division was not rigid... To a limited extent, labor designations rested on physical strength... or biological factors.... But far more important was the assumption that because men were the heads of households, they had first claim on those types of work that brought in enough income to support a family... Although both husbands and wives contributed to the income of many households, men as a group were privileged over women.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, greater population numbers meant a larger supply of labour, and thus lower wages. McIntosh points out that this meant more women were forced out of any work where they might have been in competition with men, and for poorer women, often “what little work they could find was likely to be undesirable”.<sup>15</sup> This was especially true for single women and widows, as they made up a significant portion of the population and had no husbands to provide for them.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, McIntosh notes that low populations in conjunction with poor economic conditions often pushed women to publicly offer previously domestic services. This included opening up their homes to boarders, offering healthcare, and, of course, providing sex for money. McIntosh notes that “in [these] period[s], sex work was tolerated as a necessary evil in some towns”.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the inevitability of the presence of prostitution in English society is easily seen in McIntosh’s research on women who worked in drink-related trades. She notes that “women functioning independently... [were all] subject to sexual attention and official criticism from men”.<sup>18</sup> Men expected women unconnected to other men to be available to them sexually—in many ways, the mark of a society in which the presence of prostitution is accepted, whether or not it is officially sanctioned. While prostitution was accepted as a

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 41. Though the statistics McIntosh uses are based much earlier than our focus on Elizabethan England, the difficulty that many single women faced in finding work certainly continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

necessary social evil at various times, by the early seventeenth, it was yet again generally “castigated as a social and moral evil”.<sup>19</sup> Social concern with prostitution grew, especially as knowledge of venereal diseases developed, and many strains of Protestantism began new campaigns to limit “disruptive behavior among the poor”.<sup>20</sup> Both church courts and urban governments increasingly prosecuted women having sex outside of marriage and tried to delimit or end prostitution altogether.

### **Social Concern With the Prostitute**

Such social concern is another significant component of scholarly literature on early modern prostitution. For many reasons, the prostitute was often considered a necessary component of English society, most common among them was that the prostitute was often considered “a sexual outlet for the unmarried male”.<sup>21</sup> This was for both economic and moral reasons, as Quaipe explains that in many ways, prostitutes were economically necessary inasmuch as “recourse to experienced village women provide[d] the sexual outlet...necessary until such time as heterosexual coition with the village virgin became socially and economically possible”.<sup>22</sup> Rural “village youths in the early seventeenth century did not have to go far for sexual release. There were many discreet semi-respectable village whores”.<sup>23</sup> By visiting an already acknowledged non-virgin, the youth who visited his local prostitute was saving a local virgin from sin. In her book, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy*, Haselkorn takes on this disparity of opinion about the prostitute in her work that examines prostitution in popular plays of the time. She uses her evaluation of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays to determine that there were three main attitudes or approaches to considering the

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 246.

<sup>22</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 247.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

whore: the Cavalier, the Puritan, and the Liberal.<sup>24</sup> While certainly not so named in their own time, these outlooks generally regarded the prostitute as morally irredeemable, sinful and lewd but not without hope for reformation, and sympathetically understandable but still in need of reclamation, respectively. Those with the Cavalier attitude had no desire to “reclaim” the prostitute to morality and readily encouraged the use of physical punishments. The Puritan understood both sexes’ fault in the situation and thus favoured simple monogamy for both partners. The Liberal attitude eschewed beatings, repentance, and hospitals such as Bridewell, and, like the Puritans, favoured the solution of marriage.

As with any written evidence, the reader must keep an eye to the descriptive and prescriptive intentions of the author, but this does not mean that scholars cannot mine, for instance, Shakespeare’s various depictions of the prostitute for valuable information about popular opinions and concerns of the day. In fact, despite an obvious variation between playwrights and eras, “it is Elizabethan and Jacobean comedy, under its bluster and swagger, which treats prostitution seriously. It addresses the concerns of the day—the nature and position of women in general, and the whore specifically.... Problems are posed, attitudes are probed, resolutions are sought after”.<sup>25</sup> Though her study is based in literature, Haselkorn is very much able to historicise her observations, because as she says, playwrights used the character of the whore as “a vehicle for the examination of many questions concerning the sexual morality of the period”.<sup>26</sup> In one chapter of her work, Haselkorn discusses the growing legislation against bordellos in London in the mid-sixteenth century. Partly spurred by large-scale outbreaks of syphilis, public brothels were closed in 1546. The prostitutes in Strassburg, however, began a petition, “stating that they were prostitutes not out of love, but out of a need

---

<sup>24</sup> Haselkorn, *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

to earn a living”.<sup>27</sup> Many reformers began — or continued with renewed enthusiasm — to seek solutions, one of which was to marry off the prostitutes. Such a solution is seen throughout English comedies, from Thomas Middleton to Francis Beaumont. Soon after and “possibly due to a feeling that whores were more sinned against than sinning, some legislation was enacted during Queen Elizabeth’s time to attempt to protect the prostitute. There may have been a growing feeling that part of the blame for the prostitute’s condition should rest on the male”.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, though prostitution was often tolerated as a necessity, “the prostitute was viewed as a moral pariah; the desire for her body was coupled with an abhorrence of the woman as a whore. In spite of its increased liberality, the Renaissance continued to proclaim female chastity as an absolute — the fall of a woman heralded the corruption of her nature and automatically made a whore of her”.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, despite any recognition prostitution had as a necessary evil, it was not officially morally accepted, and thus it remained a designator of a woman’s low class, lechery, and general sinfulness. As such, the accusation of involvement in prostitution, whether a woman was merely involved in the running of the brothel or she actually offered her body for money, fell heavily on a woman’s reputation. In fact, “the accusation of adultery was a powerful weapon in the personal and political feuds of the parish and in the fight for economic survival. The newly established local elite, the upwardly mobile yeoman or husbandman, found its position challenged by attacks on the reputation of their wives”.<sup>30</sup> Women were not the only partners under threat of accusation, however. More than once, “the honest, upright master was often the victim of his servants, male or female, that he

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 158-159.

had had occasion to chastise”.<sup>31</sup> Regardless of the cases wherein men were slandered, Laura Gowing’s study of the relationship of words, women, and sex in England makes clear that “gendered insults marked off the outlines of gender roles in sexual, marital, and social relations. Slander was the linguistic exposition of a model of gender, sex, and morals whose principles governed a much wider sphere; the testimonies of defamation expose the workings of that model both in language and in life”.<sup>32</sup> More often than not, women accused other women of being involved in sexual misbehaviour. In these accusations, it is important to remember that the actual “words of insult were understood to be related only opaquely to actual sex”.<sup>33</sup> Thus “whore” other derogatory terms were generally used as contrivances rather than firm accusations. These accusations “stemmed from the psychology of the accusers, from elements of personal jealousy, social antagonism and sexual fantasies”.<sup>34</sup>

Of the books surveyed, Gowing’s *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* uses the most court cases in her research, drawing up tables and charts to illustrate who went to court and why. One of the largest pools of court cases involves women going to court for defamation. Quite regularly, it seems, women were accused of being prostitutes,<sup>35</sup> and the resulting cases dealt with the actual *defamation* rather than the prosecution of those proven to be prostitutes or otherwise involved in the running of brothels. Though Gowing’s work focuses on the seventeenth century and beyond, many of her general conclusions hold true for the preceding centuries as well. For instance, she notes, like Quaife, that “women and men...characterize[d sexual misconduct] through a central picture of the

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 159.

<sup>35</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, of the 1,258 defamation suits Gowing surveyed, 628 of them were women suing women.

whore, delineating the emotional, material, and sexual dislocations that whoredom was supposed to effect, and calling for whores to be named and punished. They referred, sometimes, to actual sexual misconduct or rumours about it; but the word ‘whore’ rarely meant a real prostitute”.<sup>36</sup>

### Legislating and Punishing Prostitution

Cases actually prosecuting women for prostitution do appear in the records. Thus, we come to the legislation regarding and prosecution of prostitution in Elizabethan England. Throughout this period, “keeping a house of bawdry was properly a common law offence, and in any case organised prostitution was probably rare outside the metropolis and a few other major urban centres”.<sup>37</sup> As McIntosh notes, “brothels were accepted on pragmatic grounds, because they were less harmful to men and society than were individual prostitutes working on their own...Public officials tried to ensure that prostitutes were readily distinguishable from other women through distinctive clothing...and/or that brothels were well run and maintained relatively good health”.<sup>38</sup> In London, Henry VIII had officially closed brothels in 1546, but during Edward VI’s reign, they had been legalised again.<sup>39</sup> Most of these brothels were found outside of the city limits, especially in the poor quarters of Westminster, Shoreditch, and Whitefriars.<sup>40</sup>

For the most part, this was the end of legislation specifically directed at prostitution and brothels. As Quaipe notes, most magistrates were not (theoretically) concerned with prostitution, but their involvement in such matters came about primarily as “a consequence of

---

<sup>36</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England*, 284.

<sup>38</sup> McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society*, 76.

<sup>39</sup> John Biggs et al., *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1996), 171.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

their peace-keeping function”.<sup>41</sup> A second “source of magisterial jurisdiction in sexual matters was the direct responsibility, as a result of Tudor social legislation, for bastardy”.<sup>42</sup> In regards to the first responsibility, Quaipe cites a handbook written by Michael Dalton in his 1618 work “Country Justice Conteyning the Practice of the Justices of the Peace Out of Their Sessions”, wherein Dalton advises magistrates that they are allowed to enforce good behaviour

Against those that are greatly defamed for resorting to houses suspected to maintain adultery or incontinence...also against the maintainers of houses commonly suspected to be houses of common bawdry...also against common whore mongers and common whores for (by good opinion)...bawdy is an offence temporal, as well as spiritual, and is against the peace of the land.<sup>43</sup>

One will note that in this advice, Dalton makes it clear that the *people* repeatedly conducting themselves poorly and not the *nature* of the offences constitute the threat to peace. Upon these people, then, was generally placed a “bond of good behaviour”.<sup>44</sup>

As a result of the peacekeeping efforts of these magistrates, in general, “official investigation concentrated on those persons most likely to disrupt the peace of the community – the adulterous wife, the predatory widow, the vagrant whore and the violent lecher”.<sup>45</sup> Included in this are the men, and more commonly women, likely to produce bastards. For many years, this was a major recourse for those wishing to prosecute prostitutes. Much legislation, directed at any type of “bastard-bearer” rather than specifically prostitutes, sought to enact much harsher punishments for persons producing children out of wedlock that could therefore very easily become dependant upon the state and local charities for subsistence. As a result,

---

<sup>41</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

The reigns of Elizabeth and James I witnessed a long series of bills on adultery, fornication, and bastardy, some of them supported by churchmen or paralleled in convocation by fearsome pronouncements against immorality...The only substantive achievements were measures to ensure the maintenance of poor bastard children and the punishment of guilty parents, these laws being enacted in the context of poor relief and vagrancy legislation in 1576 and 1610.<sup>46</sup>

These laws show “a significant hardening of the law against sexual offenders”,<sup>47</sup> yet most advocates of moral reform were not satisfied with the final results of this legislation. Soon after, clerical involvement in the campaign for penal legislation dropped and “the movement became associated with the more ‘godly’ or puritan elements in church and parliament”<sup>48</sup> and the discipline of prostitutes and other sexual vagrants was left to the church courts.

What likely spurred this action was the general growth in concern with the “depravity of man and the dangers of unbridled license”.<sup>49</sup> Proponents of this legislation pointed to the largely tacit acceptance of prostitution as discussed above—another dangerous moral situation in their eyes. Because of this, “the issue of jurisdiction became more urgent during the sixteenth century. One major reason for this was a growing demand in some educated circles for harsher punishments against sexual offenders. The movement began before the Reformation but in England became particularly associated with advanced protestants and, ultimately, with more puritan-minded members of the church”.<sup>50</sup> There were, as Martin Ingram points out in *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*, “a number of imprecise areas of overlap between the secular and ecclesiastical courts. Rape and brothel-keeping were, as such, common law offences, though the church courts would punish the acts of unlawful copulation that these crimes implied”.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England*, 152

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 151

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

In fact, in Elizabethan England, it was more often than not that church courts were the ones prosecuting those accused of prostitution. Cases involving brothel-keeping “did occasionally come before the local church courts, either in the form of condonation of adultery prosecutions or in some other guise”.<sup>52</sup> Quaife makes these courts the main source in his investigations, based mostly on depositions from 1601-1660 in Somerset. While later than our proposed area of discussion, the patterns that emerge in these court cases very likely held true for decades on either side of this time period. To the accusation that court records are too biased to provide proper evaluative information, Quaife asserts that

These depositions provide one of the few sources from which the activities and attitudes of the largely illiterate lower orders can be discerned. The claim that [the use of] such records... is analogous to writing a social history of the contemporary working class based on current criminal records, is rejected....The surveillance of the ecclesiastical courts in the late twenties and thirties was so thorough and their attitude to evidence so liberal that the tiniest part of village gossip seems to have found its way into the records”.<sup>53</sup>

The cases these church courts heard often resulted from the concerns of slander discussed above and they continued throughout this period thanks to the growing Puritan concern with moral sexual activity.

One of the institutions that stands out in this discussion is that of Bridewell Hospital. In “London’s Bridewell: Violence, Prostitution, and Questions of Evidence,” Melissa Mowry focuses on the Bridewell Hospital, an institute for the reformation of the poor begun in the mid-sixteenth century. Mowry suggests that “the institution leapt to the forefront of England’s cultural imagination during the Elizabethan campaigns against vice when it was used to suppress commercial sex by its ‘godly governors’”.<sup>54</sup> In the 1570s, Puritan reformation leaders

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>53</sup> Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Melissa Mowry, “London’s Bridewell: Violence, Prostitution, and Questions of Evidence,” in *Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern England*, ed. Joseph P. Ward (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 208.

saw in the hospital “an obvious tool for their moral agenda and an ideal venue for emasculating London’s underclass by extending poor law prohibitions against vagrancy to include prostitution”.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the “acquisition of the authority to punish purveyors of commercial sex under the Elizabethan poor laws was no mean feat given the complex legal history of sexually dissident women during the middle ages and early Renaissance”.<sup>56</sup>

There were numerous consequences to this appropriation of power. One of which, Mowry asserts, was that the overseers of Bridewell “were effectively empowered to interrupt rituals that had served formerly as social adhesives”.<sup>57</sup> This is because prostitution had, though certainly not officially sanctioned, been very much tolerated in England throughout the course of the Middle Ages. Part of the tolerance lay in the lack of explicit definition of who was a whore and who was not. In fact, “The existence of medieval sumptuary laws, which suggested that prostitutes had been tacitly tolerated even as they had been differentiated from ‘respectable society’ at various points in England’s past, further complicated efforts to define the sexually dissident women as such”.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, ecclesiastical liberties, wherein many “officials not only tolerated commercial sex, they profited from it”<sup>59</sup> muddied the picture still further. Mowry suggests that though “women characterized as ‘whore’ had always been vulnerable to prosecution in both secular and ecclesiastical courts...the charge of ‘whoredom’ foregrounded questions of honor and reputation rather than behavior”,<sup>60</sup> and thus was inherently more difficult to legislate against on grounds other than personal morality.

Another explanation for the lack of enforceable legislation against prostitution is, according to Mowry, the “conflation of sexually dissident women with vagrants [that] was

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

physically and imaginatively potent”.<sup>61</sup> The more strongly prostitutes were associated with vagrants who had wandered from their home parishes and thus become a potential burden rather than contributor to their new parish, the more such women became “legally invisible”.<sup>62</sup> The campaign against prostitution begun in the 1570s was therefore forced to expand into a less focused “attack on vagrants and the poor”.<sup>63</sup> Eventually, such prosecution refocused on the individual groups, with the punishment of prostitutes taking a perhaps unexpected turn. By the mid-seventeenth century, “the prostitute [had] increased legal visibility [as] a direct consequence of the mid-century upheavals who vitriolic polemics had transformed the whore from a dishonourable woman to a...potent symbol of the degradation and corruption to which a ‘state Democratical’ based on the ‘People’s Power’ and self-interests would ‘enslave’ England”.<sup>64</sup> The growing rhetorical tropes that “characterized prostitutes as ‘common women’” meant that “it was only a short step to understanding that all women of the commons were really common women and that the commonality itself was effeminate and sexually dissident”.<sup>65</sup> Such logic began to show itself in theatre, political satires, and other popular cultural indicators, and such motifs are the subject of Haselkorn’s book.

Regardless of how the public perceived the success of such laws, legislation was certainly not ineffective, and when courts—either lay or ecclesiastical—found women guilty of involvement in prostitution, there were quite often real consequences beyond the payment of a fine. Whoredom was generally punished by public shaming, as seen by the common

---

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), quoted in Mowry, “London’s Bridewell”, 211.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

punishment of “carting”<sup>66</sup> enacted on sexually dissident women by both secular and church courts.<sup>67</sup> Lay magistrates charged with keeping the peace had “discretionary powers to deal with notorious cases of adultery or incontinence, especially those discovered by search of suspect houses”.<sup>68</sup> These powers permitted “draconian punishments like branding, whipping, or driving the culprits out of town...But the scope of these secular remedies against sexual immortality, though not negligible, was on the whole limited: the punishment of sexual offender was overwhelmingly left to the church courts”.<sup>69</sup> Regardless of who was doing the punishment, Mowry argues that such public violence “sought to dissociate spectators from the spectacle and frustrate any possibility for affiliation among the various subject positions — judges, condemned, and audience — alike”,<sup>70</sup> especially after the 1670s.

## Conclusions

An examination of the field of prostitution in Elizabethan England reveals much about the limitations of our sources. To begin in, beyond case studies of specific towns or counties, the evidence we have regarding prostitution in Elizabethan England very rarely warrants its own chapter, let alone book. What little evidence we do have is generally from court cases — either lay or ecclesiastical — or occasionally in legislation. By definition, the majority of women whom scholars define as prostitutes were part of the lower classes, and thus their literacy was incredibly low if not inexistent. For this very reason, no brothel ledger books or diaries or letters from prostitutes were discussed in the books noted here.

---

<sup>66</sup> Carting, as explained by John Biggs et al., *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1996), 79, generally involved the offender standing in a cart driven through town, often with a piece of paper that detailing the offence attached.

<sup>67</sup> Mowry, “London's Bridewell”, 210.

<sup>68</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England*, 150-151.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Mowry, “London's Bridewell”, 207.

Another common theme is that of discussing prostitutes alongside widows and other single women and subsequently separating these sexually licentious women into categories.

For example, Quaife asserts that

It was convenient to see the adulterous wife or wayward widow as one of six types. Of the five criteria of willingness, frequency of intercourse, permanency of the situation, range of men involved and financial return, it was possible to distinguish the reluctant recipient, the fleeting partner, the regular lover, the *de facto* wife, the promiscuous wanton and the prostitute.<sup>71</sup>

In a discussion of these categories, Quaife argues that the adulterer, widow, and spinster generally fell into one of three hybridisations of these categories: the fleeting partner, the regular lover/*de facto* wife, or the promiscuous wanton/prostitute. The last of these categories can be broken down into a further four categories:

The vagrant whore – a woman usually of little or no means who wandered from parish to parish earning what little income she could by soliciting...at inns, markets, fairs or crossroads.... The public whore, who usually operated from a particular inn or bawdy house. The private whore gave her services over a longer period of time to a particular man, or couple of men....[And] the village whore...ranged from the slut to the almost respectable protector of the chastity and fidelity of other village women.<sup>72</sup>

While perhaps useful in specifying what type of sexually active woman a scholar is discussing in a case study, this lengthy breakdown can become confusing and lead to a desire to classify these complex figures as merely one or two “types” of woman when multiple categories are really warranted. Quaife is not the only author to break these women down into multiple categories and subcategories, but his work is most illustrative of this tendency.

Quaife’s work is another example of one of the shortcomings of this field: that of the case study. The author himself admits that the book’s focus on Somerset is both a strength and a weakness in that using just records from Somerset avoids the hazard that “sexual behaviour might reveal geographical variations [and] by limiting the discussion of illicit sex to

---

<sup>71</sup> Quaife, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 146.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

Somerset it remains a more reliable basis for later comparative studies”.<sup>73</sup> Because works such as these focus on regions or town, many areas of potential research are foregone until a larger project comes along that can tie in various case studies into larger patterns. In this vein of thought, Quaipe knowingly leaves many possible points of examination out of *Wanton Wenches*, urging future scholars to examine such things as “the level and nature of illicit sex with size and type of settlement, social structure, predominant economic activity, religion and sex ratio”.<sup>74</sup> Despite the small number and somewhat obscure nature of these potential sources, many authors reference case studies and localised studies done through the use of court records and larger legislation from the Tudor government. Perhaps what this really means is that no one has yet done the admittedly enormous task of an overarching study of the state of prostitution in Elizabethan England by combining these laws, multiple regional surveys, and specific case studies.

Despite the limitations of the field, much knowledge can still be garnered from the works surveyed here and their brethren. Prostitutes could constitute varying amounts of the population, depending on who did the counting and what criteria they used. Women entered the profession for a range of reasons, often out of economic necessity. Various times and locations held different opinions of prostitution, and “while sex work was...potentially an option for many women, especially in urban communities, it was problematic. It exposed women to disease as well as violence, was frowned upon by all Christian moralists, and might be seen by other people in the community as a threat to solid marriages and good order”.<sup>75</sup> Public opinion could be measured by cases of slander seen in lay and ecclesiastical courts, efforts to legislate the institution, and the figure of the whore in contemporary popular

---

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society*, 75-76.

culture, and always “central to the language of insult was a project of naming whores and symbolically exiling them from the city, an enterprise whose corollary in actual practice — keeping prostitutes outside the city walls — was an established part of urban moral regulation”.<sup>76</sup> From the works discussed here, it becomes evident that despite what Puritan reformists would have us believe, “the promiscuous/prostitute activity of many wives, widows and experienced spinsters was widespread and regarded with much less opprobrium than Puritan publicists would like us to believe”.<sup>77</sup> Summed up best by a sixteenth century homily, prostitution “is counted no sin at all, but rather a pastime, a dalliance, and but a touch of youth: not rebuked, but winked at; not punished, but laughed at”.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 67.

<sup>77</sup> Quaipe, *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, 146.

<sup>78</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England*, 154.

### Bibliography

- Biggs, John, et al. *Crime and Punishment in England: An Introductory History*. New York: St. Martin's Press 1996.
- Gowing, Laura. *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Haselkorn, Anne M. *Prostitution in Elizabethan and Jacobean Comedy*. Troy: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983.
- Ingram, Martin. *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- McIntosh, Marjorie Keniston. *Working Women in English Society, 1500-1620*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Mowry, Melissa. "London's Bridewell: Violence, Prostitution, and Questions of Evidence," in *Violence, Politics, and Gender in Early Modern England*. Ed. Joseph P. Ward. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Picard, Liza. *Elizabeth's London*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.
- Quaife, G.R. *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1979.