

15

Prostitutes

Kathryn Norberg

PROSTITUTES WERE A common sight in early modern cities. One could not cross the Rialto in Venice without encountering them. The Spanish sailor who disembarked at Seville was greeted by their appeals. The London theatergoer was besieged by them on his way to Covent Garden. The Parisian artisan stumbled over them outside suburban taverns. Along with the cries that rang out in European cities advertising fish, used clothes, old pastry, and knife sharpening came, usually at dusk, the softer and more alluring question: "Would you like to make a pretty acquaintance?"

According to contemporary observers, prostitutes were everywhere. A census in Venice in 1526 counted 4,900 prostitutes among a population of 55,035; when pimps and procuresses are included, it appears that approximately 10 percent of the Venetian population lived off prostitution.¹ Contemporary estimates of the number of prostitutes in mid-eighteenth-century Paris run between 10,000 and 40,000, or between 10 and 15 percent of the adult female population.² A German traveler in London estimated that there were 50,000 harlots, without counting kept women and courtesans.³ All these figures are grossly exaggerated. To the righteous or even not-so-righteous observer, one prostitute seemed like ten. But such fanciful

10-15%
include pimps
procuresses?

estimates aside, prostitution occupied an important place in the early modern city, and mercenary sex constituted an occasional or regular occupation for many women.

How should we characterize these women, these *filles*? Were they rebels, social insurgents bent upon undermining patriarchy? Or were they victims, unwitting supporters of male domination? On the one hand, the prostitute lived in the world of men and survived only by catering to them. Her universe was that of the tavern, the gaming house, and the barracks. She was obliged to subordinate herself to men and abide by their whims. She was a vessel of male fantasy and an object of scorn, hunted and abused by the authorities. At worst, in police blotters, she was no more than a name or a number, a cipher almost always without identity or voice.

On the other hand, by disposing of her own body the prostitute challenged male domination and patriarchy at its very heart. She chose when and where she would grant her favors, and she flaunted women's sexuality. She publicly subverted the right of fathers and husbands to monopolize women's sexuality. Far from being submissive and silent, she made her cries heard throughout the city. Her story tells us a great deal about the fate of women in the years from 1500 to 1800.

Rebel or victim: the prostitute was neither in the late Middle Ages. She was a member of the urban community, a full-fledged citizen who occupied an important and honored place in city life. In medieval and Renaissance Europe, prostitution was not merely tolerated; it was accepted and institutionalized. In Florence and Venice the city fathers designated several streets—the area around the Mercato Vecchio in Florence and just off the Rialto in Venice—as official red-light districts where mercenary sex was encouraged in the hope of stemming an imagined rise in homosexuality and a decline in marriage. Honorable citizens such as the Medicis and the nobles of Venice owned the houses occupied by the prostitutes and shared in the profits without apparent embarrassment or shame. Florence encouraged prostitution by establishing a special court, the *Onesta*, whose police patrolled the red-light district and protected the prostitutes.

Outside Italy, towns established official bordellos in the course of the fifteenth century. In Strasbourg (1469), Munich (1433), Seville (1469), and cities of the Rhone Valley the right to administer the house was auctioned off to a *Frauenwirt*, *bordello padre*,

11/2
prostitution
in
one

or *abbesse*. Except in France, the owner-operators of official bordellos were men. They were entitled to charge the prostitutes for room and sometimes for board and to take a part of their earnings. In return they were obliged to observe certain rules. Most cities insisted that the municipal bordello be closed on feast days and proclaimed off-limits to priests and married men. The municipalities also levied special fines on prostitutes who lingered too long with a particular man, and they discouraged special relationships between whores and clients.

Despite similarities, the medieval bordello was no nineteenth-century *maison close*. Prostitutes came and went freely and found clients in taverns and bathhouses. Moreover, a host of *insoumises*, or unofficial prostitutes—usually younger—plied their trade outside the bordello in defiance of the municipal monopoly. Occasionally they were fined, but generally all prostitutes were accorded a place in the ritual life of their communities. In Germany they were honored guests at weddings; in Lyons they participated in municipal processions and festivals.

Like Augustine, fifteenth-century municipal officials regarded prostitution as a lesser evil than adultery or the deflowering of virgins and as the bulwark of marriage. Prostitutes provided an outlet for male sexual energy, thereby protecting the wives and daughters of honest merchants. At the same time, prostitutes encouraged "normal" sexual activity, thereby promoting marriage and legitimate procreation. By protecting prostitutes, the officials protected their wives and daughters as well as the city's population. That most of the prostitutes were "foreigners" from outside the city helped the municipal elite rationalize their policy. That most of the girls had compromised themselves somehow—or been compromised by roving bands of young men—also soothed the burghers' consciences. At very little expense did the city fathers literally make a place for male libido within the municipal fabric.

But by the mid-sixteenth century most of the official bordellos had been closed—Augsburg in 1532, Basel in 1534, Frankfurt in 1560. Seville followed suit in 1620. Measures were less dramatic in Italy; but although they never officially closed the red-light districts, authorities in Florence and Venice adopted a more stringent attitude toward prostitutes after 1511 and tried to suppress all manifestations of venal sex. Throughout Europe authorities moved to quash unofficial prostitution. A series of edicts criminalized mercenary sex. In France the ordinance of Orléans in 1560

made owning and operating a bordello illegal. In 1623 Philip IV officially banned brothels throughout Spain. By 1650 the municipal bordello was a thing of the past.

Most historians attribute the sudden criminalization of prostitution to the advent of syphilis. But in fact the bordello closings occurred some thirty years after the worst syphilis epidemics of the 1490s.⁴ In one case, Seville, faced with a serious outbreak of venereal disease in 1568, city authorities were led to increase the number of official prostitutes rather than abolish the municipal bordello and its regulations.⁵ The connection between syphilis and prostitution was not strong in the sixteenth century, although Europeans understood how the disease was contracted and knew that prostitutes spread it. But they did not consider syphilis the most dangerous or even the most interesting threat posed by prostitutes. Unlike their nineteenth-century predecessors, early modern men did not fear for their bodies; they feared for their souls.

Religious change appears to have been the single most important factor in changing attitudes toward prostitution. In his *Address to the German Nobility* Martin Luther complained that "Christians tolerate open and common brothels in our midst when all of us are baptized into chastity." With the Reformation, men were to be held to the same standards as women—that is, chastity outside marriage—and masculine libido was not to be accommodated by an official bordello. For Luther and other Protestant reformers, Augustine's rationalization of mercenary sex was not tenable. In a short tract titled "Thoughts concerning Brothels," Luther refuted Augustine's defense and rejected the notion that prostitution curbed a greater sin. On the contrary, he argued, it promoted fornication and the ruin of young men. In 1543 he posted a notice warning students in Wittenberg about prostitutes, whom "the devil has sent . . . to ruin some poor young men." Elsewhere he prescribed severe punishments for prostitutes in the interests of preserving men from fornication and protecting the institution of marriage.⁶

The Protestant reformers were not alone in their condemnation of mercenary sex. Catholic reformers, too, railed against whores, and moral concerns appear to have motivated the closing of the bordellos in France, Spain, and Italy. In the 1480s preachers in the Rhone Valley began to condemn prostitution and to point to the municipal bordello as a sign of moral degradation. In 1511 Florentines began to attach as much opprobrium to prostitution

as to homosexuality. Moralists began to see in the whore a threat to honest women and the matrimonial order. A similar new morality, though it occurred later, led to the end of toleration in Spain. Catholic reformers in Seville publicly condemned prostitution and succeeded in closing the local bordello in 1620.

But religious fervor alone does not account for the criminalization of prostitution. Laws banning venal sex were accompanied by a rash of peculiar statutes regulating whores' appearance. Municipalities in Italy and in the Rhone Valley passed decrees penalizing whores who dressed as men and sumptuary laws prohibiting prostitutes from wearing elegant apparel. In France, Germany, and Geneva, the persecution of prostitutes coincided with witch trials and the closing of the bathhouses. These actions appear to reflect a new fear of female sexuality and a generalized anxiety over the blurring of gender and class lines. To the Florentine city fathers and the German burghers, whores dressed as men or, worse yet, as honest women threatened the sexual and the social hierarchy.

The closing of the bordellos not only stemmed from a number of anxieties; it also constituted a response to concrete changes in prostitution itself. Although our evidence is by no means conclusive, it indicates that many prostitutes had become more mobile and independent. Most apparently abandoned the municipal bordello even before it closed, and a few had become more prosperous. Municipal authorities had more and more difficulty confining mercenary sex to the official bordellos. In Spain, Italy, France, and Germany the closing of the municipal bordellos was preceded by numerous decrees seeking to contain and control prostitutes who worked outside the official houses. Authorities in Florence, Augsburg, Dijon, and Seville complained that whores were exercising their trade outside the official houses. By the 1490s many—perhaps most—prostitutes lived outside the bordellos, worked independently, and ignored municipal regulations. In Frankfurt, for example, so many prostitutes worked outside the municipal bordello that in 1501 no one could be persuaded to purchase the office of *Frauenwirt* because the local house was no longer profitable.⁷

The scanty evidence available suggests that by the early sixteenth century most or at least a large portion of prostitutes in European cities lived and worked independently. Some also moved about the town and the region. Authorities in Frankfurt com-

plained that "foreign" prostitutes inundated the city during fairs, and in Paris the great fairs of Saint Germain and Saint Laurent were notorious for the number of whores they attracted. During this period, camp followers also became more numerous. In Strasbourg, Frankfurt, and Nuremberg, local authorities complained of the women who followed the army, sometimes camping outside the city walls and bringing with them riot and disorder. As the size of armies grew, so did the number of camp followers; thus it may be the rise of the state with its new, larger armies that entailed the criminalization of venal love. In the sixteenth century prostitution became, in the words of historian Jacques Rosiaud, "more dangerous and more shameful."⁸ Camp followers and their rowdy clients came to occupy a larger place in the world of mercenary sex, and prostitution became equated with the riot, thievery, and murder typical of men at arms. Prostitution did not just seem more dangerous; it was.

It was also more expensive, at least for some. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries witnessed the birth of a new kind of whore—the courtesan. Already, in the late 1400s, preachers and municipal authorities in Dijon, Venice, Florence, and elsewhere railed against the appearance of a better sort of prostitute, one who wore fine clothes and plied her trade secretly, a prostitute who risked overturning the matrimonial order because she seduced respectable men and attached them to her permanently.

Although the rise of the courtesan has yet to attract the attention of a serious historian, her appearance seems to signal a major change in the habits and the attitudes of the elite. Clearly, the rich no longer cared to frequent the municipal bordello; they preferred secret pleasures. Just as clearly, they also preferred a more refined, more intimate sexual experience. Does the birth of the courtesan mean that the elite had acquired a taste for genteel sexual relations? The great courtesans such as the Venetian poet Veronica Franco and the writer Tullia d'Aragona offered more than sex; they offered eroticism, that is, sex with an elegant and accomplished expert. It is not by chance that the first pornographic work, Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti* (1534), had a courtesan as its heroine. *La cortegiana* aroused fantasies, but she also raised anxieties. Unlike the diseased, disgusting bordello prostitute, the courtesan threatened to draw men away from their lawful wives and to prevent respectable youths from seeking spouses.

Courtesans enjoyed more independence and certainly more

money than their sisters who followed armies or plied their trade in bordellos. Paradoxically, these advantages in elegance and prosperity, such as they were, came in the train of criminalization. In the aftermath of the bordello closings, many prostitutes escaped regulation and operated, like most prostitutes today, as independent entrepreneurs or at least under the control of other women. With criminalization came a need for discretion, so old women who could pass as a prostitute's mother or mistress assumed the managerial role previously filled by male brothel *padres* and *Frauenwirt*. Pimps were certainly not unknown; in Venice *lenos*, or panderers, continued to dominate prostitution as they had always done. But generally elsewhere older women, often former prostitutes, functioned as intermediaries between clients and prostitutes and therefore helped themselves to most of the profits previously enjoyed by male owner-operators. By 1600 prostitution was among the few all-female trades.

Criminalization and the consequent need for discretion among both clients and whores probably account for these changes. The switch from pimps to procuresses is less easy to explain. Perhaps for the client who spent a night with a girl in her room, dealing with an old woman and a girl rather than with a man and a girl provided more assurance against disclosure of his debauchery.

Not surprisingly, criminalization brought with it as many problems as benefits. From the prostitutes' perspective, the advantages of newfound autonomy were readily offset by vulnerability and new institutions of repression. Under the old system of regulation, prostitutes had enjoyed protection by municipal authorities. Although rape was extremely common, registered prostitutes were a distinctive token that preserved them from the gangs of youths who roamed the cities. Official prostitutes could also appeal to the municipal authorities when clients beat or cheated them. The prostitute of the early modern period had no such recourse. A criminal herself, she could hardly ask the police to protect her from landlords and tavernkeepers who overcharged her or clients who beat her or refused to pay. Such clients were all too common, and occasionally the inspectors in Paris, particularly those in the morals brigade, stepped in to help the whore. Blackmailers or extortionists were another constant plague; they slept with prostitutes and then refused to pay under the threat of revealing them to the police, or they demanded a portion of the prostitutes' wages in return for their silence. Lacking official protection and working outside the law, more and more prostitutes attached *souteneurs*,

or pimps, to themselves. In Paris, for example, a former soldier or a gambler might function as the protector of a small bordello, handling unruly clients and intimidating curious neighbors. In Marseilles the *souteneur* functioned as an intermediary between the small waterfront bordellos and the officers of the ships in port. Because the police did not pursue *souteneurs* provided they left respectable girls alone, evidence on their number and activities remains sketchy. But like policemen, they appear to have become more numerous in the eighteenth century.

Criminalization made the prostitute vulnerable to violence and thievery; it also left her defenseless before a harsh judicial system. In France, a series of laws beginning with the edict of 20 April 1684 established severe penalties for prostitution (incarceration in a special hospital) and gave the lieutenant of police or his equivalent in the provinces absolute authority over prostitutes. In 1713, 1724, 1734, 1776, and 1777 royal edicts reiterated the stipulations of the original law and reconfirmed the powers of the police. Despite these royal decrees, power in matters of prostitution remained where it had always been, with the municipalities. In Paris the situation was somewhat special: the lieutenant of police was a royal official with sweeping powers, and maintaining order in the capital was particularly important to the crown. In the provinces, in Marseilles, Nantes, Lyons, or Montpellier, local governments were left pretty much to themselves when it came to the policing of morals, and the degree of enforcement and severity of penalties varied greatly from one town to another. In this respect little had changed since the Middle Ages; the community maintained authority over prostitutes.

What changed were the number and authority of the police. Paris stood at the forefront. There, a host of inspectors devoted themselves solely to gathering intelligence about high-toned prostitutes, mainly opera dancers and actresses. The more prosaic streetwalkers were subject to periodic sweeps that brought scores of prostitutes before the lieutenant of police each Friday for a mass sentencing. But despite greater numbers than in the past, the police in this period were by no means as effective as their counterparts today. Enforcement was haphazard and arbitrary. Sweeps and night visits by special squads were sporadic. Only those who blocked the streets or caused uproar were likely to be apprehended. Prostitutes, who were superficially respectable and discreet, however, were unlikely to be bothered by the police.

For prostitutes who were careful, there was an unwritten tol-

eration. For those who were not or who were just unlucky, there were terrible penalties. Whores who were apprehended by the patrol or night guard were taken to the Saint Martin holding prison (later to the Hôtel de Brienne) and sometime after that were sentenced to the Salpêtrière hospital for periods ranging from two to six months. In the provinces the penalties could be steeper: prostitutes in Marseilles in the first half of the eighteenth century could spend as many as five years in a *maison de force*. Once inside the dirty, crowded hospital, these women were usually proclaimed syphilitic, sometimes without examination, and subjected to the mercury "cure," which constituted a part of their punishment.

With the physical cure came a moral cure. Many of the prostitute asylums in Europe were staffed by nuns and were intended to serve spiritual as well as social ends. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, devout Catholics in Spain, France, and Italy established numerous small convents or asylums designed to shelter and reform prostitutes. In France the Order of the Refuge, founded by the visionary Elizabeth de Ranfaing, sheltered wayward girls in Nancy, Avignon, Marseilles, Lyons, and other cities. In Florence the orders of the Convertite and the Malmaritate and in Seville the convent of the Sweet Name of Jesus provided asylum to repentant and not so repentant prostitutes. By the early eighteenth century such institutions had ceased to perform their religious functions. Though still staffed by nuns, they had become penal institutions usually operated and funded by municipal authorities. In Marseilles, for example, a municipal court—usually referred to as the Refuge court—tried prostitutes and sentenced them to long periods in the Refuge convent. The city also accepted petitions from angry parents who sought to incarcerate their wayward daughters and save the family honor.

Confinement in such a *maison de force* was greatly feared, but generally a prostitute could hope to escape detection and punishment provided she placated her neighbors, the most frequent source of complaints. Records indicate that about 80 percent of the prostitutes sentenced in Marseilles had been turned in by working-class men and women living near them. The sparseness of records makes comparisons difficult, but the proportion appears to have been about the same or higher elsewhere in France.

The role of neighbors in the prosecution of whores sheds some light on popular attitudes toward prostitution. From the court

records of Nantes, Paris, and Marseilles, it is clear that neighbors felt authorized to police single women's behavior and that they heartily disapproved of prostitution, especially when it brought with it noise, disorder, and the threat of bodily harm. In Marseilles and Nantes neighbors went to the police when a prostitute's clients insulted them or, worse, threatened them with bodily harm. Certainly the proprietor or manager of a building had incentives to root out prostitutes, since he was liable for heavy fines if caught harboring them. But common artisans, renters like the prostitute, also complained, and even elite madams lived in fear of being turned in by their neighbors. The hazards of venal love in the early modern period included some isolation or separation from the working-class community.

The prostitute had to fear her neighbors because she now tended to ply her trade in a rented room, usually in a respectable house, instead of a bordello. The criminalization of prostitution and with it the need for discretion led to the dispersion of whores throughout the urban landscape.

Bordellos had not, of course, disappeared, but they tended to operate at either the highest or the lowest end of the trade. In Paris and London a few luxury establishments offered unusual sex in a discreet setting to men who could afford it. For those who could not, a series of pornographic texts purported to describe accurately the activities in these elite establishments but in fact grossly exaggerated their elegance and size. According to the *Portefeuille de Madame Gourdan*, a small pamphlet about the most famous madam in Paris, Gourdan's establishment had many rooms, something like a swimming pool, and an endless supply of willing nymphs. In fact, as the Paris police reports show, most bordellos consisted of no more than four rooms and were staffed by at most three girls, a madam, and a servant. When Casanova visited one of the most famous Parisian houses, he found it only adequately appointed and the madam ugly and flagrantly greedy.

At the other end of the spectrum, the working-class bordello usually took the form of an apartment building given over entirely to streetwalkers. The Cour Guillaume adjacent to the Palais Royal was such a building, where upward of 200 prostitutes rented rooms at exorbitant rates. Whores in Marseilles occupied entire buildings near the Carmelite, and Nantes boasted a bordello with 40 inmates. The prostitutes in such houses were not subject to the discipline of a madam. They came and went as they liked and

solicited clients outside the house, either on the street or in taverns. But they did pay unusually high rents and were dependent on the discretion of the owner.

The furnished rented room in a private house provided a relatively discreet setting for venal sex, but it also posed a dilemma: how was the prostitute to be discreet enough to escape imprisonment yet demonstrative enough to attract clients? Some prostitutes solved this problem by employing a go-between, a *marcheuse* or *macquerelle*. The *marcheuse* solicited clients on the public thoroughfare, most often the boulevards in Paris; the *macquerelle* or procuress contacted men less openly. She also recruited young girls, rented them rooms, forced clients to pay, loaned the girls money and clothes, and generally skimmed as much as she could (sometimes as much as half) off the prostitutes' earnings. The procuress did not contend with unruly clients; that was the role of the pimp or *souteneur*. But she nonetheless provided a service to the prostitute, albeit at a very high price.

Most prostitutes did without a *macquerelle* and solicited on their own in areas known for prostitution, in unofficial red-light districts. The location of these *rues chaudes* varied from city to city according to history and tradition. But in general prostitutes were to be found near important markets such as Les Halles and in abandoned areas such as construction sites. Whether in England, France, or Germany, prostitutes solicited in cabarets, and any tavern serving girl was assumed to be for sale. Some bars had *cabinets*, small rooms for sex; others rented out rooms on the first floor for private parties. Since any "trick" began or ended with the sharing of food and wine, the drink shop was an obvious site for venal love. Sometimes it was virtually the only spot. In Marseille taverns, wine shops, and tobacco shops of the old port constituted the principal locations for prostitution.

With the advent of new forms of leisure in the eighteenth century, new sites for prostitution appeared. The pleasure gardens of the rich—Vauxhall, the Colisée, Ranelagh—were reputed to attract whores. The *guinguettes*, or suburban taverns, of the laboring poor in the outskirts of Paris and along the Rhone also drew prostitutes. In Paris prostitutes were particularly numerous in the unsavory Porcherons suburb near Montmartre. There, whores worked out of large cabarets and hired themselves out to soldiers and working men in the dancing gardens behind these taverns or in the very fields of Montmartre.

The theater also acted as a magnet for prostitutes. Whores clogged the Parisian boulevards where the laboring poor came to enjoy popular amusements.⁹ They also clustered around more respectable theaters such as the Comédie Française in Paris, Covent Garden in London, and the theater in the Place des Celestins in Lyons. When the theater moved, so did the whores. In the late eighteenth century, when both Nantes and Marseilles built new operas, the whores established themselves in the surrounding streets. Prostitutes also invaded the vestibules and corridors of the theaters. At the final curtain, they rushed into the streets and accosted men leaving the Paris Opéra or Covent Garden.

Of course, actresses and singers were themselves regarded as prostitutes, and most were. The records of the Parisian police inspectors Marais and Meunier from the 1750s are very instructive. The typical Parisian courtesan was an adolescent opera dancer, a student in the appropriately nicknamed *magasin*, or storehouse, of the Opéra, whose entry into the royal troupe had been engineered by an older lover. A place in one of the royal theaters conferred immunity from judicial pursuit for loose morals. The girl whom the *prévôt des marchands* had admitted could not be confined for loose behavior by her father, and she could pursue the life of a courtesan without dreading a *lettre de cachet*. For her favors, the opera dancer could expect her lover, whether he was a banker or a prince of the blood, to give her clothes, an apartment in Saint Germain, and furniture. She could not, however, expect much in the way of ready cash. If the police records are correct, the average Parisian protector bestowed on his mistress between 200 and 500 livres a month—a princely sum by working-class standards but hardly enough to maintain the style of life a kept woman expected. To feed her horses and maintain her carriages, the kept woman supplemented her income with suppers in the Bois de Boulogne or occasional service in a *chic bordello*.

Often, the courtesan in question had worked for the house before: many of the actresses had begun in the lowest ranks of the trade. Mlle. Carlier, according to the police inspector, had risen from the sordid status of common camp follower to distinguished madam, proving that a career in prostitution was not always a downward spiral. We tend to assume that prostitutes are at the peak of their careers when they begin and gradually decline as their charms deteriorate. In early modern Europe, that was not always the case: prostitutes moved up and down the ladder of

their profession, graduating from streetwalking to life in a bordello, returning to the independence of streetwalking only to be elevated to the rank of kept woman. Some prostitutes in old age had descended into the lowest ranks of the profession to become *pierreuses* who slept with clients in the quarries of Montmartre or the vacant construction sites around Paris. Others had become procuresses or even bordello owners, for all madams had once been common prostitutes themselves. Former whores also opened gambling and drinking establishments. We have no records to tell us what happened to those prostitutes who had to retire. Probably we may assume that they returned to the working class from which they sprang.

If the statistical data collected in France are typical of Europe as a whole, most prostitutes in the early modern period did indeed come from the laboring poor. The police did not much care about the origins of those they arrested, but they did ask them their age, address, home parish, and occupation. None of this information was verified, and it is possible that the prostitutes lied or simply told the police what they expected. Still, certain patterns emerge. Virtually all the prostitutes were between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Most were unmarried, and most were resident in the city where they were apprehended. Many were fairly recent migrants; the proportion of these in Paris was quite high (about 70 percent), but this figure is comparable to the total number of migrants to that city. In provincial towns such as Montpellier the proportion was similar.¹⁰ In early eighteenth-century Marseilles, however, natives constituted only 30 percent of the prostitutes brought before the Refuge court.

Were prostitutes fresh country girls seduced by evil procuresses and corrupted by city ways, as the pictures by Hogarth and the texts by Restif de la Bretonne would have us believe? Apparently not, for most of the whores came from towns, not villages. Parisian prostitutes came from towns such as Rouen; Marseilles whores came from Aix or Aubagne. In this regard, prostitution reflects familiar patterns of migration in the eighteenth century, patterns shared with professions such as domestic service. Still, the cliché of the country servant who was seduced and "fell" into prostitution does not hold.

Certainly, many domestic servants became prostitutes. In Montpellier they constituted about 40 percent of the women confined in the Bon Pasteur asylum, but that proportion is peculiarly

high. In Marseilles they accounted for no more than 25 percent of the prostitutes tried before the Refuge court in the years 1680-1750.¹¹ Domestics made up an even lower share of the Parisian trade; in the late eighteenth century they accounted for no more than 12 percent of the women sentenced by the lieutenant of police.¹² Because domestic service was the most common occupation of unmarried women in the ancien régime, servants appear to be grossly underrepresented among prostitutes—all the more so in that the appellation *servante* used in Marseilles covered not just housemaids but bar girls, in particular the women who worked in the taverns that lined the old port. Consequently, we may assume that the label *domestique* covered not just maids of all work, but hardened prostitutes as well. Literary clichés notwithstanding, domestic service was not an inevitable route to prostitution.

On the other hand, washing, sewing, and selling may have led women to mercenary sex. In data for both Paris and Marseilles the needle trades bulk very large. More than half of the women in Paris worked as embroiderers, seamstresses, ribbon makers, or menders in the city's large and diverse garment industry. Most of the rest sold a variety of goods in the streets or in small shops, with *revendeuses*, or secondhand dealers, occupying a special place among the prostitutes. Once local variations are taken into account, the data for Marseilles are not very different. On the shores of the Mediterranean, needlewomen and vendors were very prominent among the prostitutes, as were women who made rope, knitted caps, and purveyed food and drink.

These data are not easy to interpret. All the professions occupied by women were represented among prostitutes, but which were overrepresented? Because we have no precise evidence about the distribution of female occupations in the world of women's work, it is hard to say which professions were most conducive to prostitution.

However, a number of plausible conclusions emerge. Domestic service and venal love appear to have been virtually incompatible. The conditions of a maid's work—her hours, the close supervision by her employer, and her residence in his home—made it difficult to work as a streetwalker on the side. Street vending and linen mending, on the other hand, could easily be combined with or lead to prostitution. Indeed, they could be an easy cover for soliciting. Street vendors often took their wares into customers' homes; washerwomen and linen menders went to their customers' rooms

to pick up and return linen. Contemporary authors regularly claimed that the women who sold food, drink, or clothing on the streets also sold themselves and many boutiques, especially those of *marchandes de modes*, or dealers in women's finery, were really *boutiques pr  textes*, fronts for bordellos.

Much of women's honest work, such as washing and selling, shared many of the features of prostitution: personal contact, solicitation on the streets, and visits to the customer's home. Thus in early modern Europe venal sex was compatible with virtually every kind of women's work except domestic service. What was not comparable was the pay, although the exact amounts involved are impossible to determine. Data on wages in this period are notoriously hard to come by even for work that was legal. Additional complications arise from the facts that kept women and bordello inmates received part of their wages in room and board, while other prostitutes had to share a part of their pay with procuresses, tavern owners, and pimps. Moreover, the amount of money a man paid was largely up to his discretion. Fees varied enormously even within the same establishment; a bordello patron in Marseilles might pay anything between 10 livres and 25 sous for similar services.¹³ Still, it is clear that prostitutes generally made more money than other working women. In Marseilles, for instance, a skilled worker in the city's Arsenal received 25 sous a day in the 1690s.¹⁴ At the same time, a bordello prostitute received that much per trick. In Paris, literary sources and judicial records provide the best indication of the average prostitute's fee. A number of pamphlets published on the eve of the Revolution claim that 12 sous was an average sum for a streetwalker. The figure is repeated so often in prostitutes' testimony that it carries weight. At 12 sous per trick a prostitute could clear in two tricks more than the average artisan woman earned in a full day.¹⁵ As today, prostitution paid better than most women's work and brought with it one of the advantages missing from other forms of labor: relative autonomy. It is not surprising that so many women engaged in mercenary sex.

It is clear why women became prostitutes, but less clear how. Contemporary wisdom had it that women were either seduced and abandoned or sold into prostitution by their mothers. And indeed, cases of women's selling their daughters or at least launching them in the profession are not unknown. In Marseilles there were whole dynasties of women who owned and staffed bordellos with the

tacit consent of their men. Most prostitutes, however, embarked upon their careers not with the help of their mothers but in spite of them. Police records indicate that many prostitutes began as wayward adolescents who rebelled against parental authority and ran away from home. A few were confined by their parents in one of the Refuge or Bon Pasteur prostitutes' asylums. But most did not have parents well enough off to pay for their imprisonment. These girls gradually drifted into prostitution not because of a failed love affair, but because they had a girlfriend who sold herself on the side. Such friendships tended to endure among prostitutes, for most worked in pairs and shared expenses or simply a spot on the boulevards.

In general, prostitutes were not victims; they did not "fall" into a life of sin, nor were they duped by a procuress or an ungrateful lover. Most were working-class girls who had defied first their parents and then society by disposing freely of their own bodies. Nor were they victimized by pimps or dependent upon a madam. Most were independent entrepreneurs who controlled their own labor. Such independence, such unfettered female sexual energy troubled late eighteenth-century moralists. Novelists and social commentators adopted two defenses. Novelists portrayed the prostitute as a victim, a child whose innocence and modesty bore out Rousseauist notions of femininity.¹⁶ Social commentators portrayed her as the embodiment of disease, a contagious working-class girl bent on spreading her corruption throughout an unsuspecting society. By the late eighteenth century, syphilis came to dominate the discourse on prostitution, and anxiety over the biological consequences of venal love gradually replaced dread of its moral consequences. Bernard Mandeville as early as 1724 argued that prostitution was not criminal in and of itself but dangerous only when uncontrolled. In *A Modest Defense of Public News* he attributed every social scourge from adulterous women to illegitimate births to unregulated prostitution and proposed its legalization and strict supervision. Later, in 1770, Restif de la Bretonne also argued for the seclusion and regulation of prostitutes in a series of Parisian whorehouses. A host of lesser-known authors joined the chorus for legalization and promoted regulation in order to protect families and save the army.

Such publications proved prophetic. In 1792 Berlin instituted a system for regulating prostitutes that required police approval before a brothel could be opened and compelled prostitutes to live

in certain streets. In 1796 the Paris Commune instructed its police officials to search out and register prostitutes, who received cards. In 1798 two physicians were assigned the task of examining Parisian whores. In 1802 a physician established a dispensary where prostitutes underwent compulsory examinations. Napoleon's precepts continued the struggle to contain and control prostitution. In Lyons, Nantes, Marseilles, and other cities local officials undertook a census of prostitutes and bordellos. They also attempted to contain prostitution in a few, preselected streets and required that all bordellos be registered. By the end of Napoleon's reign the foundations of a complete regulatory system were in place, although it was not fully implemented until many years later.

With the return of the authorized bordello, Europeans appeared to have come full circle, to have returned to the status quo ante of the late Middle Ages. But despite appearances the two regulatory systems rested on very different assumptions. In Napoleonic Paris the prostitute did not belong to the community. She was by definition diseased and therefore outside the social order. Nor was authorization synonymous with approval. Late eighteenth-century moralists did not promote the registration of bordellos in order to preserve them for use by the city's youths; they registered brothels in order to control them, to see that they did not operate secretly and escape the vigilance of the police.

For eighteenth-century observers, the prostitute was, to answer the question that began this essay, a rebel. If she were not dangerous, why did she merit so much attention, so much repression? Because she defied social norms she had to be watched and controlled. Disease was but a metaphor for the real danger she posed: the overturning of patriarchal order, that is, order *tout court*. It was not by chance that nineteenth-century conservatives identified the prostitute with the threat of working-class insurrection. Uncondoned female sexuality was dangerous, and the early modern whore, be she courtesan or tavern maid, kept woman or street-walker, challenged and upset the established order.