

"White Slavery" As Metaphor

Anatomy of a Moral Panic

by *Mary Ann Irwin*

On 6 July 1885, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, one of England's premier daily newspapers, began a series titled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon." The series was an instant sensation; it not only rocked English society to its foundations, but sent shockwaves throughout Europe, through France and Belgium, and into the United States. The public outcry that followed forced Parliament to enact specific legislation and led to the establishment of local organizations and international networks which survive to the present day. The topic of "The Maiden Tribute" was white slavery—the abduction, sale, and organized rape of English virgins.

As the title suggests, "The Maiden Tribute" successfully linked in the public mind two basically unrelated topics—prostitution and slavery. The title was itself an odd admixture of Christian legend and Greek folklore, combining temple prostitution in ancient Babylon with the tale of the Minotaur. According to Greek mythology, every seventh year the people of Athens were compelled to sacrifice seven virgins to this "frightful monster, half man, half bull, the foul product of unnatural lust." But in "The Maiden Tribute," London had become the modern Babylon:

This very night in London, and every night, year in and year out, not seven maidens only but many times seven, selected almost as much by chance as those . . . flung into the Cretan labyrinth, will be offered up as the Maid. [1]

In successive installments, the *Gazette* presented the stories of prostitutes decoyed into the life while still innocent children. The series described the tricks used to lure virgins into the locked rooms that sealed their doom, and detailed the corruption of officials who winked at the trade and thus allowed it to continue. More shocking still, the *Gazette* drew back the curtain on those wealthy Victorian men to whom the white slave trade catered, suggesting graphically the sexual tastes of those to whom "the shriek of torture [was] the essence of their delight." As it progressed, "The Maiden Tribute" revealed the silk-hatted, kid-gloved Minotaur at play, secreted with his terrified human sacrifices in specially equipped rooms, there to "enjoy to the full the exclusive luxury of revelling in the cries of the immature child." [2]

As intended, the series threw Victorian England into a panic over prostitution and forced an official response to the activities described. But the idea of white slavery was nothing new. Rather, the moral panic which followed "The Maiden Tribute" drew its force from a potent reworking of reformist idioms made familiar in the course of England's long battle over the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. Briefly, the Acts provided for identification and registration of prostitutes in specific military depots in southern England and Ireland, mandated regular speculum examination of registered prostitutes, and granted police sweeping discretionary powers in identifying and incarcerating women suspected of prostitution. [3] Although prostitution had long been a fact of English life, in the late nineteenth-century it

assumed the proportion of a pressing social problem. Where only a few publications appeared between 1810 and 1840, sixteen books and twenty-six articles on prostitution were published between 1840 and 1870.[4] Although the Contagious Diseases Acts were designed to deal with a perceived increase in prostitution and a concomitant rise in venereal disease, the Acts essentially sanctioned an implicit system of regulated prostitution in England. Opponents of this system argued that regulated prostitution created a permanent class of sex slaves and stimulated the traffic in women and children. The white slavery metaphor thus became a staple of anti-regulation rhetoric, developed and refined in the context of England's struggle to define an official response to the problem of prostitution.

The metaphor "worked" because it succeeded in forcing separate and unrelated ideas into a single conceptual framework. This success was rooted in the social and material conditions of Victorian society; for men and women anxiously regarding signs of corruption and moral decline, the white slavery metaphor organized a number of nameless fears into a unitary moral framework. The tensions created by economic depression, political upheaval, social reorganization, and demographic imbalance found voice in the seemingly endless debate over private morality, and set the stage for the evolution of the white slavery metaphor and the panic its rhetoric fueled.[5]

In following this evolution, it becomes evident that the white slavery metaphor comprises an intriguing cluster of ideas concerning men and women, sex and society, rich and poor, villains and victims, corruption and exploitation. These themes and the rhetoric of white slavery are connected to the conditions and cultures of Victorian society. Reformers struck upon the rhetoric of white slavery as a means of redirecting the public debate over prostitution. The white slavery idea helped to recast the image of the prostitute, enabling the public to see her sympathetically as the victim of social and economic forces beyond her control. This reformulation allowed reformers to shift attention away from the prostitute and toward those who profited by her trade, redirecting censure from victim to exploiter, from individual to society, and, most importantly, from women to men. The white slavery trope thus structured a dialogue based in social criticism, outlining reformers' vision of the evils caused by an exploitive and oppressive economic system, the injustices countenanced by a heartless and hypocritical society, and the relentless cruelty occasioned by men's oppression of women.

Whether or not white slavery actually existed or represented a significant factor in prostitution will not be argued here. Many Victorians were convinced that white slavery existed, while many others were just as certain that it did not; what is of concern is the dialogue itself. The issue is essentially one of definition: acceptance of the white slavery idea depends a great deal upon how one defines it. For example, what the modern feminist might call white slavery the anthropologist benignly labels "the exchange of women." Claude Levi-Strauss identifies the exchange of women as "a fundamental principle of kinship," with women acting as the units of exchange by which men established kinship ties and avoided constant warfare; hence Levi-Strauss argues that the traffic in women is nothing less than the foundation of civilization.[6] Alternatively, Marxists draw upon the concept of white slavery as a means of blurring the distinction between sexual and economic exploitation; the earliest use of the term actually refers to the exploitation of wage laborers by industrial capitalism. It is in this sense that Karl Marx argues that "prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer," and hence casts the capitalist as white slaver.[7]

This blurring of sexual and economic function was a critical component of the white slavery image. Speaking on behalf of the Ladies' National Association, formed to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts, feminist-activist Mary Hume-Rothery used white slavery rhetoric to attack the subjection of women in marriage. Obliquely linking bourgeois marriage to prostitution, Hume-Rothery wrote that she would sooner see women risk starvation than "sell themselves, whether to wealthy husbands, or less eligible purchasers."^[8] Frederick Engels used the same logic to argue that when a husband assumed control of a woman through marriage, "she became the slave of his lust and a mere instrument for the production of children."^[9]

But in its most successful and long-lived formulation, white slavery has come to mean the kidnapping and sexual exploitation of women and children. This equation has retained most of the essential components and a good measure of its original emotional impact from the expression's earliest appearance in Victorian England. Many historians of prostitution, in fact, reproduce uncritically the stories which form the subject of this study; very few histories omit from their indices the categories "white slavery," "forced prostitution," or "traffic in women and children."^[10] Clearly the rhetoric of white slavery, if not the actual practice, is still very much alive.^[11]

Anti-Regulationists and White Slavery Rhetoricians

Whatever its precise symbolic configuration, the rhetoric of white slavery derived much of its impact by updating the familiar rhetoric of abolition, in which the degraded black slave was replaced by the demoralized white woman. Victor Hugo first made this connection in a letter to anti-regulationist Josephine Butler, in which he identified registered prostitutes as slaves. "The slavery of black women," Hugo wrote, "is abolished in America, but the slavery of white women continues in Europe."^[12] This parallel was still obvious in 1913, when the venerable American reformer Jane Addams compared prostitution to its evil "twin of slavery, as old and outrageous as slavery itself and even more persistent."^[13] In this context, the term "white slavery" was intended to distinguish female sexual slavery from the enslavement of Africans, but it was also meant to draw a moral comparison between the two types of exploitation.^[14]

In comparing the taking of black slaves for labor with the enslavement of white women for sex, writers often placed higher value on the sufferings of the women, whose purer natures made sexual contact particularly abhorrent. Anti-regulationist Alfred Dyer, for example, wrote that the entrapment of English girls was "infinitely more cruel and revolting than negro servitude" because it was slavery "not for labour but for lust; and more cowardly than negro slavery" because it fell upon "the young and the helpless of one sex only."^[15] This assessment undervalued the humanity of blacks and ignored the sexual exploitation of black women as it described a moral universe in which the misuse of white women constituted an evil far more heinous than perpetual slavery.

As the linkages between slavery and prostitution were so obvious to opponents of regulation, it is not surprising that many former abolitionists allied themselves with the anti-regulationists, nor that regulation opponents called themselves "the New Abolitionists." In fact, anti-regulationists sharpened the impact of their arguments by incorporating the well-known symbols and rhetoric of the anti-slavery crusade.^[16] Josephine Butler called upon this tradition as she broadened the definition of white slavery to include the practice of prostitution itself.

Butler argued that regulation created a permanent "slave class of women The inauguration of legal prostitution," she wrote, "is nothing else than . . . the protection of a white slave-trade-in a word, the organization of female slavery." [17] London Chamberlain Benjamin Scott, who was also an opponent of regulation and the chairman of the London society to suppress white slavery, agreed with Butler. Scott wrote that once a woman was registered as a prostitute she belonged to the police, and the police "were loath to let go their hold upon a woman, and so lose their control over her. She could not free herself. She was allowed to give up a vicious life . . . by favour of the police only as a matter of indulgence." [18]

The prostitution-slavery equation was not simply the histrionics of anti-regulationists; even advocates of licensed prostitution understood the system's bleak consequences for women. In his tract favoring regulation, Marseilles physician Hippolyte Meunier put the matter succinctly: "The system of registration which regulates and legalises [*sic*] the sorrowful industry of the prostitute," he observed, "is in fact, the sinister stroke by which women are cut off from society" Once registered, the women "no longer belong to themselves, but become merely the chattel of the Administration." [19]

Where police registration failed to maintain the prostitute in her trade, legal collusion in enforcing collection of brothel debts made her enslavement complete. Regulation opponent Alfred Dyer argued that brothels ensured the prostitute's obedience by arbitrarily assigning debts and threatening imprisonment for nonpayment. For example, women were "forced to accept garments of a disgusting nature, for the hire of which, and also for everything they require[d], they [were] charged exorbitant prices." Adding insult to injury, one English woman claimed that the brothel keepers who purchased her actually charged the fee of the placeur against her debts to the house. Debtor laws were used to enforce the claims of the brothel keeper, ensuring that prostitutes would be "kept deeply in debt and terrified with the threat of imprisonment if they dare[d] attempt to leave without paying." [20] For this reason, when women did escape and were chased screaming through the streets, the police came to the assistance not of the woman, but of her pursuers. "We have, in fact," wrote one anti-regulationist, "returned to the permitted practices of the slave-holders of America, and logically we might now also set up the practice of keeping bloodhounds to trace and hunt down the fugitives." [21] The rhetoric of white slavery thus urged acceptance of a symbol which combined sexual and economic exploitation as it conflated regulated prostitution with the institutionalization of racial slavery.

But for men and women intent on changing government policy, regulation of prostitutes had even more pernicious effects. It was an item of faith among opponents of the Contagious Diseases Acts that state-monitored brothels created and fueled the white slave trade. In one of the earliest tracts on the European slave trade, Pastor T. Borel wrote:

Licensed brothels are not solely supplied from the class of women who voluntarily give themselves up to debauchery. These would not suffice. It is necessary to fill up deficiencies . . . and to procure an article of human merchandise which will attract clients by freshness, youth, or by mere novelty. [22]

Benjamin Scott agreed; with regulation came "a premium for abduction" in which "high prices are given for young, and often innocent, British subjects." [23] Alfred Dyer claimed that brothel patrons required an endless stream of women to "pander to [their] craving for novelty"; for this

reason, "the keepers of the houses provide[d] a constant succession of fresh victims, including sometimes a negress, and in a recent case in Brussels, a Zulu girl." [24]

Early in 1880, Dyer and Josephine Butler published personal accounts of their investigation into the white slave trade and separately petitioned Parliament to take action. In a memorial to Lord Granville, Butler described the "little children, English girls of from ten to fourteen years of age, who have been stolen, kidnapped, betrayed, carried off from English country villages." Held captive in Belgian brothels, "the presence of these children is unknown to the ordinary visitors; it is secretly known only to the wealthy men who are able to pay large sums of money for the sacrifice of these innocents." [25]

Dyer's account was scarcely less sensationalistic: Dyer bluntly described the ease with which "the wealthy Continental debauchee . . . paid an amount equal to a poor man's annual income for the opportunity of violating a betrayed, terrified, and helpless virgin." [26] Writing from Belgium (where he had gone in search of helpless virgins), Dyer sent beseeching letters to the editors of London's daily newspapers; he appealed for funds with which to rescue English girls and exhorted the English public—particularly those with young daughters—to beware the tricks of white slavers. Upon his return, Dyer published a lengthy account in *The Christian*; to his dismay and quite vocal outrage, the London dailies refused to carry it. [27]

For opponents of regulation, the reluctance to offend delicate public sensibilities amounted to nothing more than a conspiracy of silence or, worse still, tacit acceptance of sexual criminality. Anti-regulation tracts were rife with condemnation of government and newspapers for maintaining their sham propriety. Butler wondered how Christian men and women could "bear any longer to look on in silence at this costly and impious sacrifice of souls"; Butler was so enraged by the reticence which surrounded the exploits of a certain nobleman that she not only published an account of his crimes, but named him as well. Appealing directly to the mothers of England, Butler knew they would not blame her "for 'wounding the susceptibilities' of persons in high office, perverted judges, luxurious livers, who condone and take part in such horrors." [28]

Non-believers were tarred with the same broad brush as the procurers themselves. Editor-journalist and crusader William T. Stead answered his detractors with ominous innuendo: "If we had only committed these crimes instead of exposing them, not one word would have been said." [29] Stead challenged "the 'men of the world'" who cry out ". . . this is not done." They only say so, Stead claimed, because they are "accomplices of the criminal and the apologists." Never one for subtlety, Stead equated opposition with guilt: "[i]f these people told the truth," he claimed, "it might be found out that they'd done it themselves." [30]

But far from fearing exposure, many upright Britons freely admitted that "they'd done it themselves." Some even based their opposition to legislative reform on the historic privilege of the upper-class rake. For men unburdened with a puritan conscience, prostitution appeared to be both necessary and inevitable. Such men openly and repeatedly stated that their objections, for example, to raising the age of sexual consent arose from the understanding that they or their sons would be threatened by such legislation. As one member of the House of Lords put it in 1884, "very few of their Lordships . . . had not, when young men, been guilty of immorality." He thus hoped their Lordships would pause before enacting legislation "within the range of which" their own sons might come. [31]

Opponents of legalized prostitution soon realized that countering gender- and class-based assumptions of sexual *noblesse oblige* would require more than appeals to masculine chivalry or Protestant virtue. Although Butler's and Dyer's petitions did eventually lead to a Parliamentary investigation in the summer of 1881, their efforts to publicize the pernicious effects of regulated prostitution failed to stimulate either public outcry or legislation to protect women and children from sexual exploitation. By offering revelations of young, innocent English girls suffering the sexual attacks of foreigners, Butler and Dyer had hoped to inspire legislators to repeal the Contagious Diseases Acts. They might have been surprised to learn that the Government was already well aware of the traffic in English girls.

Regulationists and Anti-Rhetoricians

On 30 March 1847, a bill was presented to Parliament for "the suppression of trading in seduction and prostitution and the better protection of females." The bill was read only after spectators had been cleared from the halls and was withdrawn after only one reading. Members protested that the bill had already "done much injury by directing the attention of people towards [the subject] when they might never otherwise have heard of it."^[32] In 1881, police investigator C.E. Howard Vincent again voiced concern that the public might be offended should Parliament enact statutes on which to prosecute sex crimes against children. After Vincent testified to the rising tide of child prostitution in London, the committee asked why he had not recommended criminal sanctions for sexual assaults upon children. Vincent replied that "it would be such a horrible thing to put before the public, that I did not think it necessary."^[33]

As early as 1874, the British Home Office was monitoring certain individuals known to routinely travel with small groups of English girls clearly bound for foreign brothels. At the end of his report concerning a procurer convicted of transporting English minors to French brothels, Consul Wodehouse observed that "it is notorious that the only girls of tender age to be found in these [brothels] . . . are English or Belgian subjects."^[34]

Evidently, this traffic in underage women was not a new and unusual occurrence: in the summer of 1877, Belgian Consul Lumley advised Earl Derby that the "average number of young English girls rescued from houses of ill-fame in Brussels during the last seven or eight years has been two per month."^[35] Lumley's use of the word "rescue" in this context is somewhat ambiguous; while London reformers used it to describe their efforts to reclaim the fallen, "rescue" could also imply the official sense that at least some of these English women did not wish to be in Belgian brothels.

As one might expect, the tone of correspondence between government representatives is wholly unlike that found in the writings of anti-regulationists, and the reader must dig deeply to uncover the logic of the official response. But if the British Foreign Office was tracking the prosecutions of known traffickers and making quiet inquiries on behalf of English subjects held captive in foreign brothels, why did they resist the claims of anti-regulationists? The most likely reason is that government and police officials remained unpersuaded by the rhetoric of white slavery. Those charged with protecting and regulating English womanhood were not convinced that traffic in women and children was a necessary by-product of regulation; for many, their own experiences with prostitutes simply would not permit it. For example, many police investigators scoffed at repealers' claims that children required special legal protection

because they were highly prized by white slavers. Reformers claimed that children were favored sexual targets because popular wisdom held that sex with a virgin cured venereal disease.[36] Therefore, according to Alfred Dyer, "the more childish and innocent the victims, the more profitable they were." [37] But reformers' charges seemed to belie some officers' experience with child prostitutes, who apparently refused to consider themselves victims. In his testimony before Parliament, for example, criminal investigator Joseph Dunlop described the occasion on which he found "an elderly gentleman in bed with two of these children." When Dunlop asked the girls' ages and began a conversation with them, "they laughed and joked me," knowing he was powerless to interfere.[38] Though Dunlop admitted that child prostitution was rampant in his district, he denied that white slavery had anything to do with it. Rather, Dunlop alleged that prostitution was simply an accepted fact of lower-class life, a sort of family tradition handed down from mother to daughter. For example, when Dunlop returned one child to her home after the juvenile had been arrested for prostitution, the mother was indifferent. "I had to look after myself when I was her age," the woman replied, "and she must do the same." [39] The possibility that Dunlop's assessment was shaped by class prejudices must be considered. However much one might sympathize with officials expected to manage London's staggering number of prostitutes, it is likely that the values and prejudices of middle-class officers and bureaucrats made working-class mores completely unintelligible. In other cases, British foreign officers were obviously confused by the conflicting communiques which travelled the diplomatic channels between brothels, police stations, and foreign consulates. For example, in October 1876 French consul Hotham received the complaint of an Englishwoman that her sister was being held against her will in a brothel at Omar. Hotham wrote to the local authorities and sat back to await their response. The Sous-Prefet in Paris eventually forwarded to Hotham the report of the local Commissary of Police, which in turn had been obtained from the brothel at Omar. Despite its meandering course, Consul Hotham was satisfied with the report's conclusion that "the girl in question came to France with full knowledge of her destination," and moreover, "she does not want to return to England at present."

Oddly enough, however, three days later Hotham notified his superiors that this and another English woman had been sent to him from Omar without explanation. More puzzling still, Hotham noted, "the girls appeared only too grateful to be able to return to England."

On my remarking that the Commissary of Police had stated that they had no desire to return to England at present, they replied that this was not true, that they had begged the owner of the house to allow them to go, but that they had been partly frightened, and partly bribed by false promises to remain where they were.[40]

Hotham did not offer an explanation for the reversal, leaving the reader to wonder why the brothel operator, or the authorities at Omar, or both, suddenly determined it impolitic to keep the young women they had earlier claimed were quite content.

It is relatively easy, on the other hand, to decode the responses of police officials to the charges of anti-regulationists. One inspector after another simply denied that white slavery existed in their divisions; this categorical denial alone is enough to raise suspicions. Both investigator Dunlop and advocate Alexander Truitt, for example, insisted that women and children could not be held captive in their divisions simply because they would know.[41] Inspector Daniel Morgan declared that children could not be prostituted in his division because it was too respectable; similarly, there could be no white slavery in Mr. Arnold's neighborhood because it

was too poor.[42]

Others argued that white slavery was simply too "un-British" to take root in English soil. Barrister Thomas Snagge, who officially documented the trade in English girls to Belgium, revealed his ethnocentrism when he rejected the possibility of a local slave trade. While foreigners were guilty of kidnapping innocent English girls and transporting them abroad, a counter-traffic of Continental virgins to England was clearly unthinkable. In the first instance, "there is more liberty in England"; in the second, it was difficult for Snagge to imagine a foreign virgin. "The girls brought from foreign countries into this country," Snagge declared, "are generally girls who understand their business perfectly well; they come over here to be professional prostitutes." English girls, however, "those put into these *maisons de debauché* abroad," were another matter; these were trapped "in houses where they are kept in as prisoners." [43]

But ethnocentrism was not the special province of either camp; Chamberlain Benjamin Scott also framed his attacks on the Contagious Diseases Acts in terms of prejudice against foreigners. "In other countries," Scott observed, "prostitution was tolerated and regulated, but France has the bad pre-eminence of being the most forward and devoted copyist of the vile Grecian and Roman systems of vice-licensing." [44] The Catholic Church, tellingly known as "the Whore of Babylon," also came in for a share of opprobrium; drawing upon centuries of Protestant-Catholic antagonism, Scott argued that prostitution was not an English sort of crime at all, but rather "the filthy product of pagan depravity." In a curiously virile body metaphor, Scott asserted that English immorality had resulted when "Rome impregnated Europe" with the insidious sexual practices of the Catholic Church. Thus Scott was able to blame the Vatican for England's perplexing problem with prostitution. [45]

In nineteenth-century terms, the Victorian furor over white slavery was very much an issue of race. By forwarding frighteningly plausible tales of Continental predators scouring train terminals and country villages for English virgins, Britons were invoking race as a morally acceptable explanation for the rising tide of prostitution at home. The rhetoric of sexual slavery operated, in Judith Bennett's phrase, at the critical "intersection of race, class, and gender." It was by tapping into that murky, inarticulate, but highly-charged freight of unexamined fears and prejudices that the white slavery metaphor was able to generate and sustain much of its psychic power. [46]

In weighing governmental response to the white slavery idea, we must also consider officials' basic attitudes toward prostitution and the women who practiced it. Apparent in their response is a willingness to believe that prostitutes chose their trade or, alternatively, an unwillingness to believe any prostitute's claim to the contrary. Little resistance was expressed in February 1880, for instance, when Consul Lumley passed along the reports of the Belgian Foreign Office which asserted that English girls knew precisely the sort of work they would find in Belgium. Moreover, the Belgian officials stated with remarkable precision that the girls identified by Alfred Dyer were hardly the innocents he claimed: one had been a clandestine prostitute for six months, the other for three years. [47]

The possibility that English officials believed that choice, not circumstance, dictated prostitution is also suggested by the delay of Parliament's investigation of the charges made in January 1880 until June 1881. Perhaps many authorities believed, as journalist Henry Mayhew did, that

"everything that a woman of loose morals says must be received with caution, and believed under protest." [48] Clearly this was Thomas Jeffes' motto; when called before Parliament the Belgian consul admitted he had initially believed the charges of white slavery were true. However, after interviewing several of the purported victims, Jeffes came to doubt their stories. "Now I do not . . . believe," he said, "that there was one single case of a virtuous girl, few who had not been leading a really loose life before they came over; and scarcely one, where the girl had not been leading a doubtful life before she came over to Brussels." [49] Jeffes insisted that no virtuous girl could be tricked into prostitution. If a girl had really been misled abroad with promises of marriage or employment, Jeffes argued, if "she were a virtuous girl . . . she would positively refuse" to undergo the legally required speculum examination. Jeffes reasoned that this internal inspection would be so "abhorrent to a decent girl" that examination alone could stand as incontrovertible proof of a woman's professional status. In tidily circular logic, Jeffes thus satisfied himself that no honorable woman would "undergo the ordeal if she had not already led an immoral life." [50]

In the same vein, English magistrate Arnold insisted that women recruited into foreign brothels knew where they were going and only complained because they had less freedom than they enjoyed at home. Arnold went even further and testified that no woman ever faced the choice between prostitution and starvation: "I never met with an instance where a girl became immoral or became a prostitute through poverty." Arnold might have accepted the notion that it was men, not women, who were the victims of sexual immorality; as the superintendent of the French Morals Police patiently explained to Josephine Butler, "women continuously injure *honest* men, but no man ever injures an honest woman." [51]

Victorian society understood that in the absence of chastity women had no redeeming social value, and this was precisely the attitude of many officials charged with regulating prostitution. The Roman Minister of Justice and Police chilled Butler to the marrow with his complacent assertion that "a woman who has once lost chastity has lost every good quality. She has from that moment *'all the vices.'*" [52] By this logic, impure women were undeserving of male protection, civil rights, or even the barest of sympathy. The central issue for English officials thus was one of morality—not of the procurers or brothel operators, but of the women themselves. Held in hopeless opposition was the social demand that women maintain their chastity at all costs, and the profound disbelief that they could actually do so.

Man's Salvation, His Temptress, His Victim

In the writings of journalist Henry Mayhew one finds exaltation of woman's spiritual purity resting side by side with a fear of her uncontrollable sexuality. On the one hand, Mayhew observes that "female chastity marks more closely than any other thing the moral condition of society." In almost the next breath he notes that few women actually were chaste. In an inventory of every class and category of English womanhood from the middle-class housewife to the lowest scullery maid, Mayhew methodically impugns the virtue of each. "Ballet-girls have a bad reputation," he writes, "which is in most cases well deserved." "Female servants" he also dismisses as "far from being a virtuous class." As maid-servants have "no character worth speaking about to lose," Mayhew explains, "it cannot be wondered that they are as a body immoral and unchaste." Even women who simply fell in love are struck by Mayhew's axe: "Literally every woman who yields to her passions and loses her virtue," he asserts, "is a

prostitute." [53]

More than a hint of misogyny is suggested by such attitudes. But however distasteful their sexual politics, the non-believers played a significant role in the rhetoric surrounding white slavery. It would not only be unfair to explain away Mayhew's or Consul Jeffes' attitudes as simply misogynistic, but such a dismissal would preclude consideration of social values critical to this inquiry. Much of nineteenth-century thinking and writing dwelt specifically on just this issue—the virtue of women. In the guise of ideal mother and wife, the nineteenth-century woman was heralded as the source of all goodness and purity. She thus found herself assigned the central (but not necessarily comfortable) role of society's conscience.

In *The Age and Its Architects*, Edwin Hood made the weight of the Victorian woman's social burden clear: "The hope of society is woman! The hope of the age is in woman! On her depends the righting of wrongs, the correcting of sins, and the success of all missions." [54] In a very real sense, the personal ideal of purity was also a social ideal. As literary historian Francoise Basch argues, for the frugal, social-climbing Victorian, "chastity for men and, even more, for women, was regarded as a force for action, as a means to avoid wasting time and energy." [55] Individual advancement, as well as social progress, demanded that base and unproductive animal energies be redirected, channelled into socially acceptable and hopefully remunerative activities. And at the center of this cultural fulcrum was the ideal of feminine purity.

Woman's responsibility for maintaining her own sexual purity weighed even heavier than that of saving society from itself. English novelist William Gayer Starbuck described Victorian woman's difficulty in 1864 in his declaration that, "when a woman falls from her purity there is no return for her—as well may one attempt to wash the stain from the sullied snow. Men sin and are forgiven; but the memory of a woman's guilt cannot be removed on earth." [56] In a society which prized female virginity above all else, it is hardly surprising that real English girls—no less than their fictional counterparts—were given the impossible choice between death and dishonor, and were clearly expected to prefer death. Believing without question that virginity was "what a woman ought to value more than life," William Stead made his own preference clear when he described a terrified young woman lured into a brothel and left to await her fate; Stead gallantly "would to God she died" before it arrived. [57] Victorian men and women both understood that there could be no happy ending for the woman who suffered the proverbial fate worse than death. [58]

For this reason, when opponents of regulated prostitution referred to the slaughter of innocents and called white slavery "murder," their hyperbole had the ring of social truth. The woman who lost her virtue also lost her every avenue for respectable life. Once discovered, she could no more redeem her position than the rescued white slave could return to her former life. Snagge put his finger on it when he told Parliament: "I do not think there would be any difficulty" in retrieving English girls from foreign brothels "and bringing them back to this country." Rather, he reported, "the only thing is to know what to do with them when you get them here." [59] Pastor Borel agreed that there was "no place in society" for the reclaimed captive. "If she escape death, and enter society again," he warned, "[w]hoever approaches her will be infected. . . . Her vast experience of evil . . . scatters the seeds of moral death far and near." [60] In other words, the unchaste were socially dead. Even the innocent victim of rape had no alternative to prostitution. Mixing metaphors madly, Stead argued that it was "bad enough when a man kills a

sheep for the sake of its fleece, but it would be worse if the animal were slaughtered solely for its ears." Yet this was a fair analogy to the sale of virginity; Stead drew a straight line from rape to prostitution when he argued that, even though the initial performance could never be repeated, the girl was still utterly "ruined . . . lur[ed] into a position from which a life of vice is the only exit."[\[61\]](#)

The theme of "ruin," in all its relentless finality, is repeatedly invoked in the nineteenth-century literature of prostitution. As Sally Mitchell observes, for unmarried women the personal cost of seduction was enormous. The poor could tolerate the raising of children by single mothers but those who aspired to something better could not—respectability was the dividing line.[\[62\]](#) Ruined women were outcasts, unfit for marriage, motherhood, or even the lowliest employment. Cast aside as irredeemable, the seduced woman was, once again, perpetually sacrificed to male lust.

For Josephine Butler, this inevitable ruin could not be the fault of women, whose essential purity she never doubted. Rather, Butler placed the blame squarely on the sporting men of England. "How many of these girls are thrust upon the streets by abandonment after seduction?" she asked accusingly, and "[w]hat is your part in the matter? . . . You engulf them further; you thrust them down lower; you throw on them the last shovelful of earth to hurl them into the abyss."[\[63\]](#)

[Implicit in Butler's indictment of male morality are assumptions regarding male and female sexuality. The best scientific minds of her day would have agreed that, by their natures, women were inherently passionless, whereas men's sexual appetite was naturally a raging tide.](#) "In men," writes William Rathbone Greg, "the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous. In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent."[\[64\]](#) Physician William Acton agreed, reassuring his (male) readers that "what men are habitually, women are only exceptionally." A modest woman, Acton wrote, "submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions."[\[65\]](#)

The argument that women lacked sexual instinct could work in favor of those who pleaded the cause of the prostitute as victim of society and masculine appetites. But it could also be used against them: if women fell from grace, then the offense had to be deliberate. Absent physical force, women's sin was necessarily the conscious and knowing choice of evil over good. But the rhetoric of white slavery cut to the heart of this dichotomy, uncoupling a conceptual framework which had held disastrous consequences for women.

For Butler and those swayed by her logic, the idea of sexual slavery offered a way of thinking about prostitution that shifted the blame from the individual to society, from the victim to her exploiter, and, most importantly, from the prostitute to her patron—that is, to men. This shifting of terms opened the contested terrain of male and female relations to new interpretations, and offered women new strategies for personal and collective social action. Butler herself was well aware of the political implications of her anti-regulation campaign. While working for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, for example, she and her followers expanded their efforts to expand the rights of married women, including the Married Women's Property Act (which guaranteed wives the right to their own earnings) and reform of the Mutiny Act (which required that married and unmarried soldiers take financial responsibility for their children). Butler also pressed for women's access to higher education: in 1865, Butler petitioned the

University of Cambridge to open entrance examinations to women and, in 1867, she served as president of the North of England Council for the Higher Education of Women. In that same year, Butler's name was included among signatories to John Stuart Mills' woman suffrage petition to the House of Commons.[66]

But arguments regarding women's innate sexuality also had pressing implications for Britain's growing number of "redundant" women. If what was called sexual instinct in men was an innate desire for maternity in women, then what became of women who could not mother? The 1851 census revealed that the excess of females over males in Great Britain was more than half a million; almost forty percent of the women in England between twenty and forty-four were unmarried.[67] Moreover, one man in ten left the country, temporarily or permanently, as he approached marriageable age. Many more simply chose to remain single; a bachelor could have an unmarried sister to maintain his household, while women from the underside of Victorian society could tend his other wants. The surplus of women, combined with the shortage of husbands and unavailability of respectable female employment, assured the bachelor an ample supply of prostitutes.[68] Ironically, Victorian society came to idealize the home, or more precisely, marriage and family, at precisely the moment many women found it impossible to achieve either.

This suggests a provocative question: did the Victorian problematization of prostitution hide a growing realization of women's marginal social and economic status in an increasingly industrialized and urban nation? Did middle-class Victorian women who were no longer needed as economic partners in marriage, but had instead become financial liabilities, subconsciously fear that men might not marry if they could get sex cheaper elsewhere, thus leaving them childless and unfulfilled?[69] Perhaps the Victorian preoccupation with prostitution had less to do with prostitution than with a very real clash between cultural ideals and social reality.

As the abundant literature of prostitution reveals, at the same time the Victorian public was displaying an insatiable interest in all things sexual, it was also developing a consciousness of sex as an acute problem. Sex seemed to be, in Steven Marcus's words, "a universal and virtually incurable scourge." [70] Behind the fictive and clinical literature of sexuality (allowing for a good deal of overlap between the two), beneath the fantasies and the ignorance, one senses the Victorian's genuine fear of uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexuality. In nineteenth-century writings the reader finds fear of sex in general and sex in particular, fear of impotence and potency, fear of indulgence and excess. When William Acton observed that "the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind"; when W.R. Rathbone echoed that, if women were as passionate as men, "sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception," it is the word "happily" which most intrigues us. This one word speaks eloquently of the extent to which Victorians viewed individual sexuality as a vexing social problem.[71]

It is also intriguing to note that the Victorian preoccupation with individual sexuality emerged during a troubled reordering of England's economic and political landscape. A critical component of the white slavery story is its reinterpretation of the increasingly disputed terrain of social relations, not only between men and women, but also between classes. The social and private responsibilities of women and women's legal, political, and economic position in society were issues which had already been raised, if not resolved.[72] The social and economic order

of English society was also undergoing challenge and reorganization, as successive legislation widened male suffrage and as a growing middle class gained an economic foothold and accumulated the numerical strength required to enforce its values on English society. It was from these class tensions that the white slavery idea drew its most explosive and potentially disruptive power, just as it was from the recently -enfranchised that the metaphor claimed its potential for inciting political upheaval.[73]

The ability to invoke and effectively channel working- and middle-class hostility toward a profligate aristocracy was central to white slavery's evolution from metaphor to full-blown moral panic. The theme of sexual poaching across class lines had long been present in white slavery rhetoric, just as the seduction of lower-class girls by upper-class men had long been a recurrent theme in nineteenth-century writing. William Acton acknowledged that such seduction was a common occurrence. "No one acquainted with rural life," he wrote, "would deny that seduction was a sport and a habit with vast numbers of men, married . . . and single, placed above the ranks of labour." [74]

Invariably in nineteenth-century tales of seduction, the unchaste girl was of a lower social class than the man. Typically she was a servant, seamstress, or uneducated village girl, and he was a gentleman or the son of a newly-rich commercial family. Joan Scott notes the same undercurrent of class animosity in her study of French peasants. Following in lock-step the patterns found in English literature, the story of the seduced seamstress was recounted again and again, becoming a folk tale with a predictable plot and outcome. The destroyed seamstress was a middle-class symbol which simultaneously idealized young womanhood while it showed the full measure of bourgeois hypocrisy and class oppression. "Working class 'reality' was shown to be a far cry from bourgeois ideals," Scott observes, in which ruin arrived as the "young fop who takes advantage of a working girl's straitened circumstances" and thus destroys her only chance for happiness.[75]

The popular consciousness of cross-class sexual exploitation readily lent itself to the rhetoric of white slavery. Josephine Butler was scathing in her condemnation of the sexual proclivities of the privileged. Without exception, the destroyers of women were the aristocrats, "the wealthy miscreants, the purchasers, [the] sheltered unjudged." [76]

In one instance, Butler described the plot by which the Baron de Mesnil Herman "had somewhere set his adulterous eyes" on the daughter of a respectable, middle-class Belgian widow. The Baron easily engaged a procuress to abduct the child from school; some weeks later and much the worse for wear, the child was located in a Parisian brothel. Although the authorities were fully aware of his role, to Butler's dismay "the Baron de Mesnil was not even summoned as a witness at the trial Silence on the subject was for a long time maintained by the press, on account of the Baron's high position." [77] Thus, even worse than the conspiracy to rape small children was the conspiracy of silence which cloaked the sexual predations of upper-class men.

The Anatomy of a Moral Panic

Ultimately it was the sensationalist William Stead who proved most adept at putting the class terms of the metaphor to work. Editor of an influential Liberal Party daily newspaper, the

crusading Stead had guided the *Pall Mall Gazette* through a series of shocking exposes which had made the Gazette required reading for public life. In the 1885 publication of "The Maiden Tribute," Stead made the revisions needed to develop the white slavery idea into a full-blown moral panic. Where earlier versions of the story had pitted upper-class rakes against the daughters of the dubious poor, Stead had redefined the white slaver's victims as the respectable daughters of the ascendant middle classes.[78] Where earlier critics of official policy toward prostitution had pointed to the practices of foreign municipalities, Stead brought the slave trade home to London. But the critical factor in creating moral panic, perhaps even more powerful than the rhetorical gymnastics of the editor, was the potent instrument of the *Pall Mall Gazette* itself. A mass circulation daily newspaper that could reach into virtually every business and dwelling in the United Kingdom, it was the power of the press which brought the white slavery idea home.

From start to finish, the series was a masterpiece of sensation, manipulation, and showmanship. It began on Saturday, 4 July 1885, with "a frank warning" to its readers. Stead explained that the House of Lords intended, once again, to allow the session to end without considering the Criminal Law Amendment Bill. As initially drafted, the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was intended to extend police powers in dealing with prostitution and, perhaps only incidentally, to raise the female age of sexual consent from thirteen to sixteen. Motivated by what he described as his sense of public responsibility, Stead warned his readers that he intended to publish his investigation into "those phases of sexual criminality which the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was framed to suppress." He cautioned "the squeamish or prudish" that those "who would prefer to live in a fool's paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious of the torment of those whose lives are passed in the London Inferno, would do well not to read the *Pall Mall Gazette*" of the following days.[79] Whatever may have been the true depth of Stead's sense of responsibility, nothing could have been better calculated to stimulate public interest.

As promised, Stead began the series on Monday, 6 July 1885. From the first moment of his descent into the underworld, Stead reported that the world of vice operated in much the same fashion as the worlds of business or politics. This was not surprising, Stead wrote, because the same characters dwelt in each. "I heard much of the same people in the house of ill-fame as those of whom you hear in caucuses, in law courts, and on exchanges," Stead wrote, "but all were judged by a different standard, and their relative importance was altogether changed. It was as if the position of our world had been suddenly altered, and you saw most of the planets and fixed stars in different combinations." [80]

Stead described the ease with which he himself had arranged the purchase of five virgins—the assortment of human chattels presented for his inspection, the arrangements made to satisfy his insistence upon virginity, and the inevitable dickering over price. These transactions complete, Stead wrote, arrangements were then made for consummation of his evil bargain. The first installment ended with the delivery of thirteen year old "Lily" to Stead in France. The reader was left beholding Lily asleep in a locked hotel room, dreaming the last dreams of innocence. Suddenly, "a stranger enters. The child awoke crying . . . and then all once more was still." [81]

As intended, the first installment of "The Maiden Tribute" hit London like a bombshell. The public purchased every single copy of Monday's *Gazette*. There were accusations of profiteering, and extra editions were successively reprinted to meet demand. Tuesday morning the street in front of the Gazette was clogged with men fighting for the next edition. With the

exception of the *Manchester Guardian*, which termed the story "prurient," the London papers maintained a stoic silence. Newsstands in train terminals refused to carry the *Gazette*, and newsboys were arrested for selling it. George Bernard Shaw, then working as a reviewer for the *Gazette*, took a bundle of papers on the Strand and sold them. In Parliament, M.P. Cavendish Bertick asked the Home Secretary "whether his attention ha[d] been called to several objectionable matters being printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and whether he intend[ed] to take any steps in the matter." Bertick's inquiry raised cries of "Hear, hear" from the Ministerial benches.[82] On Wednesday, the London magistrate refused to charge the arrested newsboys. Mindful of the dangerous shoals of public opinion, the official observed, "Well, Mr. Crawford, this of course is a very important matter." But whether the *Gazette* was right or wrong in publishing its serial, the Lord Mayor noted his sincere belief that "the editor is influenced by high and honorable views." By Friday, 11 July, public response was unmistakable. In that morning's *Reynolds' Newspaper* appeared evidence that no elected official could afford to overlook: "The daughters of the poor are bought and sold like cattle," charged an enraged reader, "yet Parliament has steadily refused to pass any law by which girls above thirteen can be protected from ruin." [83]

Clearly the tide of public opinion had turned. Legislators understood that opposition to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill would be tantamount to admitting that one regularly molested little girls. Friday afternoon, Sir R. Cross resumed the adjourned debate on the Bill, and remarked that "the House of Lords' report and evidence left no doubt . . . that a bill of this kind was imperatively necessary." Albert Gray announced that "tomorrow he should ask the Home Secretary if he could assure that . . . every possible exertion allowable by law [was used] to suppress the abominations revealed by the *Pall Mall Gazette*." Gray even suggested that more stringent amendments be added to the Bill to ensure that those committing "such abominations should be brought to justice." In marked contrast to their response only four days earlier, references to the Bill and the *Gazette* now provoked universal cheers from the Ministerial benches.[84] With no small measure of cynicism the *Liverpool Echo* reported on Saturday morning that the Bill

which a few days ago was regarded as a dropped measure, and which was almost universally cold-shouldered by the representatives of the people, has been suddenly taken up by the Government of the day as one thoroughly ripe for discussion and urgently needing immediate attention.[85]

For weeks following publication of "The Maiden Tribute," readers's letters filled the *Gazette* and provincial papers; statesmen, clergymen, housewives, and even skeptics poured out heartfelt horror. Typical was the letter of a member of the House of Lord's Committee on the Protection of Young Girls, who thanked the *Gazette* for "the masterly way in which you brought light into those infernal regions" of modern Babylon. Every offense and inconvenience was justified, if it "save[d] young girls from the lusts of the Minotaur and the artifices of the traders in iniquity." A clergyman agreed, writing "we need to set up a Committee of Vigilance, a moral police, to put down this infamy. Meanwhile, let the light shine in without stint." In the same vein, a woman wrote that "the deeds you expose are, indeed, the deeds of darkness and hell; and it is the letting in of the pure light of heaven above that can cleanse society from the foul putrefaction which, if allowed to flourish in obscurity, would eat out the heart of the nation." [86]

Striking each key theme in the white slavery metaphor, public addresses were made to crowds at the Exeter Hall in London and the Princes' Hall in Picadilly. Participants at the Picadilly rally included Josephine Butler and social purity worker Ellice Hop kins, who urged the ladies present to rouse public opinion in favor of the Bill "if their homes were to be kept sacred" from the moral pollution that surrounded them. Canon Knox-Little addressed a large assembly of working men at the Worcester Cathedral on 17 July, telling them that "the crying evil of our day is impurity, unchastity, and want of self-control." A rally for working men was held at Mile-End, in which James Wookey denounced the government for "refusing the same protection to the poor, orphan friendless girl that they gave to their own daughters, who often had footmen to ride behind them to protect them from harm." A petition to the Government urging passage of the Bill was placed in every Salvation Army hall throughout Britain. When signed by 393,000 people, the sheets joined together stretched two and one-half miles. On Friday, 7 August 1885, the Bill was read for a third time and, a week later, became law.[87] No one was ever prosecuted under its provisions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, "The Maiden Tribute" succeeded in creating a moral panic over white slavery where previous efforts had failed. The ensuing panic forced legislative action designed to prevent prostitution by offering greater protection to women and children. The major social themes of the metaphor had not been changed but simply rearranged. Stead had moved the practice of white slavery home to London and had made the victims the daughters of the respectable middle class, rather than those of the unsympathetic poor. In focusing public concern on an identifiable and easily maligned villain-the rapacious aristocrat-and narrowly focusing his call for action on passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, Stead grossly oversimplified the causes of prostitution and made the problem and its solution appear quite clear. This, of course, is the vital feature of the effective metaphor-its ability to reduce complex issues to manageable proportions.[88]

In itself, the white slavery panic probably accomplished very little. Despite its sound and fury, it is unlikely that the Criminal Law Amendment Bill which followed in the wake of public outcry actually diminished the traffic in women or ended the sexual exploitation of children. It is even less likely that the panic did anything to resolve class antagonism, redistribute wealth, provide meaningful employment opportunities for women, raise wages or improve labor relations, reorganize the personal lives of the urban poor, or ameliorate any of the social and economic problems which reformers saw as the root causes of prostitution. Through the frenzy of newspaper coverage and the drama of public demonstrations, the white slavery panic brought with it the appearance, but not the reality, of social change. When the tumult dissolved, the problem of prostitution and its causes remained.

On the other hand, the white slavery metaphor itself was quite effective; like the panic, its work was symbolic rather than substantive. The white slavery idea provided a new conceptual framework for *thinking* about the position of women in Victorian society. The metaphor served to reform the popular image of the prostitute, enabling the public to see her not as the internally corrupt fallen woman, but as the pitiable victim of malignant external forces. Reformers tradition-ally had been concerned about prostitution, the plight of the prostitute, the viciousness of the double standard, and the problems of the working-class woman and the "redundant"

middle-class spinster, but without the white slavery story they lacked the symbolic charge to generate public support. Protestant cries for fidelity and chastity were too tepid to evoke the kind of uprising "The Maiden Tribute" generated. It was the metaphor's symbolic power that propelled a truly effective national effort to check prostitution and to enforce the moral values of the middle classes.

But the success of the white slavery metaphor had particular significance for women, a success with implications that merit further study. For example, the white slavery metaphor may have worked against the interests of proto-feminists. Perception of the prostitute as victim, an image the white slavery metaphor clearly provided, emphasized the helplessness of women and undermined women's claims to legal, social, and economic equality with men. As Deborah Gorham observes, the image of the prostitute as the sexually innocent, passive victim of individual men did not threaten the images of womanhood and family life that formed an essential part of the middle-class Victorian's world view. Had they allowed themselves to see that many young girls engaged in prostitution because their choices were so limited, reformers might have been forced to recognize that the causes of prostitution were to be found in an exploitative economic structure. Instead, as Judith Walkowitz has shown, focus on women's inherent vulnerability served to funnel reformist zeal into more traditional social purity programs to rescue and redeem the "fallen."[\[89\]](#)

Public outcry for more stringent "protection" of feminine virtue in the wake of "The Maiden Tribute" reveals another of the panic's unintended consequences. Following the public explosions of 1885, social purity campaigners were more than willing to countenance repressive measures to enforce their middle-class moral values and sexual standards. Although intended to reform the intimate habits of both sexes, purity efforts probably served to maintain the double standard and thus to preserve women's sexual disfranchisement.

Repressive social purity measures were also far from the original ethos of the libertarian repeal movement. William Stead, for example, argued against legal interference in private sexuality, asserting that "the streets belong to the prostitute as much as to the vestryman" and advocating the same punishment for customers as prostitutes. Stead even encouraged open and frank discussion of sexual matters with young girls, and excoriated the ignorance and prudery of English mothers, who kept their daughters "in total ignorance of the simplest truths of physiology."[\[90\]](#) Ironically, this liberal approach would increasingly be at odds with the repressive social purity movements that grew out of efforts to abolish the dehumanizing system of regulated prostitution.[\[91\]](#)

But the white slavery metaphor and the panic it engendered may also have had positive consequences for women. The shift in the terms of public debate over prostitution gave women a compelling basis for cross-class alliance. One study suggests that "traumatic is not too strong a word to describe the reactions of women, shielded from such realities, as the evidence of the sexual abuse of children and the forcing of women into prostitution." The panic may have "achieved a solidarity among women that the earlier attempt to expose the exploitation of what were thought to be willing prostitutes failed to do."[\[92\]](#)

The metaphor may have performed another political service for women. In the same way that female anti-regulationists had expanded women's access to collective political action simply by the fact of their agitation, so women's insistence upon public discussion of sexual matters

expanded women's ownership of a topic to which they had previously held little claim. The sexual slavery idea provided the moral framework within which women found justification for their discussion of sexual practices-especially men's sexual practices.

The panic which followed "The Maiden Tribute" suggests another indirect benefit for women. The *Gazette* insisted that it was performing a public service by bringing every smarmy detail of life in the London Labyrinth out of the darkness of ignorance and into the light of day. Such claims for the benefits of frank discussion buttressed women's demands for unhampered access to sexual information. Reformers had long argued that unlimited access to scientific information on sex and physiology would protect women from the deceit, exploitation, and conflict that inevitably ensued from sexual ignorance. But viewed from the twentieth century, the principle of "no secrets" could be used as a rationale for women's claims to ownership of their own bodies. Reformers like Josephine Butler insisted upon the "inalienable rights of every woman, chaste or unchaste, over her own person." Although Butler claimed this right as a means of protection against speculum-wielding physicians, the principle of bodily ownership also carried the seeds of an argument for reproductive autonomy. From the principle of "no secrets," as well as the notion of bodily ownership, women could launch a direct assault on masculine control of female sexuality, to which challenges had already begun to surface before publication of "The Maiden Tribute."[\[93\]](#)

Intriguingly, it is the issue of bodily ownership which returns full circle to the original question -that is, the definition of sexual slavery. Men's assumed right to ownership of sexuality, and hence their right of control over women's bodies, is little different from the privileges assumed in any other form of slavery-inherent in each is the notion that one individual may possess and control another. To contest masculine control of sexuality, women would have to rebel against the dictates of Victorian society in general and their "decently-educated" husbands and fathers in particular. To assert their right to bodily autonomy, women would need the strength to abandon those polite conventions-including the imposition of silence-which, in Josephine Butler's words, had "bor[n]e with such murderous cruelty" upon them.[\[94\]](#) The white slavery metaphor offered women a new conceptual framework for understanding sexual relations and provided reformers with a platform from which to question and, if necessary, attack masculine prerogative. What had begun as a revolt against the system of regulated prostitution had thus become a serious challenge to the sexual hegemony of men. As Butler told the Northern Counties' League in 1874, "our operations [have] widened . . . since the time when we first challenged public opinion"; the issue had become instead the "root question of human life-the true relation of the sexes."[\[95\]](#) Butler advised women that even more important than passing legislation to protect women and children was ensuring that women "re quire sternly of men that they be pure," that women demand virtue of men "as they have hitherto demanded it of us."[\[96\]](#) The shift in focus from women, as prostitutes, to men, as their exploiters, opened a formidable wedge in the previously forbidden topic of sexuality and, in the process, exposed male and female relations to new-and potentially radical-interpretations.

Endnotes

1 *Pall Mall Gazette* (hereafter "PMG"), Monday, 6 July 1885, 1:1. [Return to essay](#)

2 *PMG*, 6 July 1885, 5:2. [Return to essay](#)

3 See Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). [Return to essay](#)

4 Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1957), 366. [Return to essay](#)

5 The concept of moral panic was developed by British sociologist Stan Cohen, cited in Frederick K. Grittner, *White Slavery: Myth, Ideology and American Laws* (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1990), 64. My use of "metaphor" is drawn from Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 210-211. "Rhetoric" is used in the usual sense of persuasive argument, but see John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey's discussion of historical rhetoric in *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987). On the "problematization model" of prostitution, see Linda Mahood, *The Magdalenes: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1990). As Mahood observes, studying prostitution in its social and economic setting allows one to see the interplay between economic forces (such as depression, poor wages, unemployment) and cultural processes (including the sexual double standard, sentimentalization of home and family) and the role of these forces in reconceptualizing prostitution. I have made this model more complex by considering the demographic conditions (sexual imbalance, late marriage, changes in fertility and mortality, and so forth) which structured the possibilities of Victorian life. [Return to essay](#)

6 The feminist can be thankful for the evolution of the handshake. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* [1969], quoted by Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, Rayna R. Reiter, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210. For discussion of "White Slavery: Myth or Reality," see Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), Chapter 7. [Return to essay](#)

7 The earliest such use I have found is Richard Oastler's *A Letter on the Horrors of White Slavery* (Leeds: J. Smithson, 1830); the latest is Wile Britton's *The White Slavery; a Study of the Present Trades Union System* (1909). Quotation from Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, quoted in Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 223. [Return to essay](#)

8 Mary Hume-Rothery, A Letter Addressed to Right Hon. W.E. Gladstone, M.P., . . . , quoted in Walkowitz, 128. [Return to essay](#)

9 Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1891), 120-121, quoted in Reiter, 169, no. 1. The view that all women are prostitutes was shared by the anonymous author of the Victorian sexual memoirs, *My Secret Life*. Describing women's false modesty, he wrote: "I came to the conclusion that in the woman it is the result of training, with

the cunning intention of selling the view of their privates at the highest price-and inducing the man to give them their huge price for it-the marriage ring. Women are all bought in the market-from the whore to the princess. The price alone is different, and the highest price, in money or rank, obtains the woman." Quoted in Jeremy Sandford, *Prostitutes: Portraits of people in the sexploitation business* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), 206. [Return to essay](#)

10 Note the Victorian tone used by Charles Terrot in his study of white slavery, published in 1960: "The white slave traffic had existed in Britain since time immemorial. . . . The business consisted of capturing by trickery and abducting by force young girls who were transported to Continental brothels from which escape was almost impossible. Within a few years there arose an insatiable demand for English girls." *Traffic in Innocents: The Shocking Story of White Slavery in England* (New York: Dutton, 1960), 13. One of the best general histories of prostitution is Vern and Bonnie Bullough's *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1987), but even the Bulloughs' carefully balanced account draws a straight line from 1885 to 1987, accepting without question the *Pall Mall Gazette's* argument that England's relatively low age of consent created the traffic in English girls. [Return to essay](#)

11 Nor are white slavery stories confined to a distant past; consider the *Washington Post's* 5 August 1993, article, "Japan Apologizes to Sex Slaves," in which the Japanese Prime Minister asked the forgiveness of Asian women forced into prostitution by the Imperial Army during World War II. For analysis of the sex industry created for American soldiers during the Vietnam war, see Kathleen Barry's *Female Sexual Slavery* (New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979). Outlines of the well-known tale are also evident in *Far Eastern Economic Review's* 28 September 1989, article, "Shanghaied for Sex: Women Kidnapped and Enslaved by Prostitution Rings," and literally dozens of stories like it. [Return to essay](#)

12 Victor Hugo to Josephine Butler, 20 March 1870, in Josephine E. Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* (Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1911), 13. [Return to essay](#)

13 Jane Addams, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (New York: MacMillan, 1913), 4. [Return to essay](#)

14 The 1921 Conference of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons dropped the term "white slavery" for the less loaded term "traffic in women and children." See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Study on Traffic in Persons and Prostitution* (Suppression of the traffic in persons and of the exploitation of the prostitution of others), (New York: United Nations Publication No. 59. IV. 5, 1959). The United Nations group derives from the British organization formed in the wake of the "Maiden Tribute" panic. [Return to essay](#)

15 Alfred S. Dyer, *The European Slave Trade in English Girls; a Narrative of Facts* (London: Dyer Brothers, 1880), 6. [Return to essay](#)

16 In 1875, James Stuart published a history of the Acts entitled *The New Abolitionists*. [Return to essay](#)

17 Butler, 42, 98. Walkowitz notes that of the thirty-three women leaders of the Ladies National

Association, ten had been involved in the earlier anti-slavery movement. Walkowitz, Table 1, 126-127. The rhetorical connections between black and white slavery have been explored; Grittner and Barry note that authors often take pains to depict the sexual slavery of white women as somehow crueller than racial slavery; Grittner, 5; Barry, 10. Grittner incorporated race and ethnicity as a critical feature of the American white slavery panic which resulted in passage of the Mann Act of 1911. Similarly, British prejudice against foreigners was also revealed in the earlier English version, but unlike the American episode, the British panic seemed to draw more of its strength from class antagonisms than from racial or ethnic prejudices. [Return to essay](#)

18 Benjamin Scott, *A State Iniquity: Its Rise, Extension and Overthrow* (London: Kegan Paul and Company, Ltd., 1890), Reprints of Economic Classics (New York: Augustus M. Kelley Publishers, 1968), 42. [Return to essay](#)

19 Hippolyte Mireur, quoted in Pastor T. Borel, *The White Slavery of Europe; or, Licensed Houses of Debauchery in Their Relation to the Law and to Public Morality* (1875), trans. by Joseph Edmondson (London: Dyer Brothers, 1876), 25, no. 1. [Return to essay](#)

20 Dyer, 5, 4. "The Memorial to the Right Honorable the Earl of Granville, K.G., Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs" (1880) (hereafter "Memorial"), Declaration of A-- T-- (26 July 1880), 129. [Return to essay](#)

21 Butler, 160. [Return to essay](#)

22 Edmondson, 6. [Return to essay](#)

23 Benjamin Scott to Earl Granville, August 5, 1880, in "Correspondence Respecting the Immoral Traffic in English Girls in Belgium" (1881). Parliamentary Papers, C.2910 XCVIII.183 (mf 87.851-852) (hereafter "Correspondence"). [Return to essay](#)

24 Dyer, 5. [Return to essay](#)

25 Butler's account of French and Belgian traffic in English girls was first printed in London in the 5 March 1881 edition of *The Shield* (the official organ of the National Association, an anti-Contagious Diseases Acts organization). Complaints from Belgian authorities regarding Dyer and Butler's accusations prompted an official investigation under the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Law Relating to the Protection of Young Girls, the report of which is cited here. Parliament also sent barrister Thomas Snagge to Brussels to investigate the charges and to monitor legal proceedings against the accused procurers. These charges were evidently sustained, with a number of brothel owners and procurers receiving prison terms ranging from ten months to three years. Butler, 210. [Return to essay](#)

26 Dyer, 5. [Return to essay](#)

27 "Correspondence," Consul Lumley to Earl Derby, 17 June 1877; also in Dyer, 9, 16. Several provincial papers carried Dyer's story, and the Marquis Townsend published it in his weekly periodical, *Social Notes*. Dyer would later offer the same information in his testimony before the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Law Relating to the Protection of Young

Girls in 1881. [Return to essay](#)

28 Butler, speech at Croyden, 3 July 1871, quoted in Scott, 113-114; Butler, 226-227. [Return to essay](#)

29 *PMG*, 10 July 1885, 3:1; 8 July 1885, 1:2. It is worth noting that feminist historian Kathleen Barry employed the same rhetorical device in her 1979 study of white slavery. Barry argued that those who refuse to recognize sexual slavery for what it is must in some way benefit from preserving the status quo-if not by direct financial profit, then by the psychic satisfactions of "general participation in the sexual power that accrues to men through female sexual slavery." Barry, 7. [Return to essay](#)

30 *PMG*, 6 July 1885, 3:1. [Return to essay](#)

31 Hansard Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 3d ser., 300 (30 July 1885), cols. 579-585, quoted in Deborah Gorham, "The 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' Re-Examined: Child Prostitution and the Idea of Childhood in Late-Victorian England," *Victorian Studies*, Vol 21, No. 3 (Spring 1978), 353-379; Walkowitz, 3. [Return to essay](#)

32 Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 43, no. 19. [Return to essay](#)

33 C.E. Howard Vincent, Director, Criminal Investigations (12 July 1881), from the *Report from the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Law Relating to the Protection of Young Girls*; together with the "Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix" (1881). Parliamentary Papers, Rep., Proc., Mins. of Ev., App., Index 1881 (448) IX.355 [mf 87.60-62) (hereafter "Report"), 73. [Return to essay](#)

34 Consul Wodehouse to Marquis Salisbury, "Correspondence," 12 January 1874. [Return to essay](#)

35 Consul Lumley to Earl Derby, 17 June 1877, "Correspondence." In keeping with her emphasis on female agency, Walkowitz argues that these investigations found little evidence of "widespread involuntary prostitution of British girls at home or abroad" Walkowitz, 247. Clearly, two women per month over a seven or eight year period would only account for 168 to 192 British women rescued from Belgian brothels, which is a mere fraction of the estimated thousands of "voluntary" English prostitutes. The evidence also suggests that few of these rescued women were the innocents Dyer or Stead described. Yet one wonders how many incidents of involuntary prostitution constitute "significant" evidence. Even if only a dozen British women of the highest moral character had been decoyed into foreign brothels, each would have found the incident highly significant. It does no damage to Walkowitz's argument to concede that some women may have been victims, at least temporarily, or at least long enough to do damage. [Return to essay](#)

36 Ronald Pearsall, *Night's Black Angels: The Forms and Faces of Victorian Cruelty* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1975), 243; Gorham, 371. Note the ongoing link between disease and child prostitution: in the nineteenth century, men sought sex with children to "cure" venereal infection; alternatively, men fearing infection sought sex with children, whom they

assumed would be free of disease. In the twentieth century, fear of the AIDS virus has once again made children sexual targets; sadly, in neither century has extreme youth guaranteed sexual purity. See Vitit Muntarbhorn, "U.N. Says Prostitution of Children Growing," *New York Times*, 19 February 1992. [Return to essay](#)

37 Dyer, 5. The reformers' position is supported by the earlier account of policeman John Fielding, who suggested that the sexual abuse of children was a practice of long standing in England. It was usually the "mothers [who], either starved by their Necessities, or drowned in Gin, and, for a Trifle . . . have trepanned their Children into Bawdy-Houses, and shared with the Bawd the Gain of their own Infant's Prostitutions." In the same year philanthropist-reformer Robert Dingley also referred to parents who sold their children's sexual services, and urged the rescue of "Female Children, from Twelve to Fifteen Years, of the lower Class of people, who are often abandoned by their Parents, and even sometimes sold by them to Procuresses." John Fielding, "An Account of the Origins and Effects of a Policeman Set on Foot by His Grace the Duke of Newcastle in the Year 1753, Upon a Plan Presented to His Grace by the Late Henry Fielding, Esq., to Which is Added a Plan for Preserving Girls Who Become Prostitutes from Necessity" (1758), 46; Robert Dingley, "Proposals for Establishing a Public Place for Reception of Penitent Prostitutes" (1758), 7, both in *Prostitution Reform: Four Documents*, London, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1985. [Return to essay](#)

38 Joseph Dunlop, Superintendent, C Division, Metropolitan Police (10 July 1881), *Report*, 76, 77. [Return to essay](#)

39 This sort of dialogue made up the bulk of administrative testimony before the Select Committee in 1881. Magistrate William Hardman, for example, testified that he was well aware of child prostitution in London; like Dunlop, Hardman also attributed the prevalence of juvenile prostitution to environmental causes. "I can see how evil influences are early brought to bear upon [juvenile prostitutes]; and there are assaults committed upon them in many cases by their own near relations, by brothers and even fathers. . . . Only the other day I tried the case of a man who assaulted a little child, who was his own granddaughter, and he was convicted." William Hardman, Chairman, Quarter Sessions, Surrey (19 July 1881), *Report*, 91-92. [Return to essay](#)

40 Consul Hotham to Earl Derby (12-15 October 1876), "Correspondence." [Return to essay](#)

41 Dunlop, 76; Alexander Truitt, Advocate, French Bar (12 July 1881), *Reports*, 57. [Return to essay](#)

42 Daniel Morgan, Inspector, Criminal Investigations Department, Paddington, X Division (19 July 1881), 87; Inspector Arnold (19 July 1881), *Reports*, 88. [Return to essay](#)

43 Snagge, *Report*, 20. The same invincible pride in all things English is revealed in journalist Henry Mayhew's global history of prostitution. In his discussion of the various classes of prostitutes, for example, Mayhew wrote that "there are very few English girls who can properly be termed sailors' women; most of them are either German or Irish." Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor; A Cyclopaedia of the Conditions and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those That Can not Work, and Those That Will Not Work* (London: Griffin Bohn & Company, 1862), 228. [Return to essay](#)

44 Scott, 6. [Return to essay](#)

45 Ibid, 4. The 1830s saw a wave of anti-Catholic fictional literature exposing the evil practices of the Catholic Church; novels with such titles as *Secrets of Nunneries Disclosed* revealed that convents were "slave factories," "Popish br othels," and "priests' harems." Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, quoted in Grittner, 30. As Grittner observes, "by attributing sexual deviancy to these 'alien' groups, their opponents drew symbolic boundaries demarcating appropriate se xual roles, values and behavior. The construction of boundaries," in this case between Protestant and Catholic, "was an exercise in power designed to affirm traditional cultural values." Grittner, 30. [Return to essay](#)

46 Judith M. Bennett, "Feminism and History," *Gender & History* 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1989), 256-257. [Return to essay](#)

47 Consul Lumley to Marquis Salisbury, 22 February 1880, "Correspondence." [Return to essay](#)

48 Mayhew, 257. [Return to essay](#)

49 Thomas Edward Jeffes, Belgian Consul (12 July 1881), *Report*, 33. [Return to essay](#)

50 Jeffes, *Report*, 35. Considering the vehemence of Jeffes' testimony, it is worth considering the contradictory evidence given by Ellen Cordon. Cordon was one of the underage women reportedly held against her will in a Belgian bro thel (and-perhaps not coincidentally-one of the countrywomen for whom Jeffes was officially responsible). Cordon reported that she had been taken to Belgium by a young man who promised marriage but instead sold her to a brothel. The initial medical examin ation revealed that, not only was Cordon a virgin, but due to an unspecified defect, she was "incapable of sexual intercourse." After several unsuccessful attempts to breach her virginity in the usual way, Cordon reported that she was sent to a Belgian ve nereal hospital where "they commenced to operate upon me for the purpose of making me capable of prostitution. They did not even give me chloroform, but the students held my hands and feet, whilst the operator seemed to tear and cut away my living flesh." Dyer, 27. [Return to essay](#)

51 *Report*, Arnold, 90, 88. In some cases, the observation was true; one English woman told Parliament: "Before I entered the house I knew it was a maison de tolerance, but not that my clothes would be taken from me, or that I shoul d not be allowed to go in and out when I pleased, or that the door would be locked, or that the 200 francs, the fee of the placeur, would be charged against me. I was led to believe that I should lead a jolly life, but I was much disappointed. . . . I tho ught I should have more liberty." Declaration of A-- T--, Memorial, 129. Butler, 76. [Return to essay](#)

52 *Ibid*, 89. [Return to essay](#)

53 Mayhew, 215, 198. Victorians at mid-century had not yet exclusively defined prostitution as the exchange of sex for money. Like Mayhew, writers of the period frequently equated sexual promiscuity with prostitution. Larry Wolff, "Juveni le Criminality and Erotic Sentimentality: The Gendering of Victorian Prostitution," paper given at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, San Francisco, California, 8 January 1994. [Return to essay](#)

54 Edwin Hood, *The Age and Its Architects*, quoted in Houghton, 352. [Return to essay](#)

55 Of course, frugal Victorian men were cautioned not to frivolously "spend" their sexual energy as well. Quote is from Francoise Basch, *Relative Creatures: Victorian Women in Society and the Novel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), xix. Discussion of nineteenth-century Victorian fiction is drawn from Basch, Houghton, Mitchell, and the indispensable Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1964). For discussion of trends in intellectual, as opposed to popular, literature, and especially for the influence of Enlightenment thinking on proto-feminist thinking, see William Leach's *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980). [Return to essay](#)

56 Mitchell, x. [Return to essay](#)

57 *PMG*, 6 July 1885, 1:1; 8 July 1885, 2:2. [Return to essay](#)

58 Basch, xv. [Return to essay](#)

59 Snagge (5 July 1881), *Report*, 23. [Return to essay](#)

60 Edmundson, 18. [Return to essay](#)

60 *PMG*, 10 July 1885, 4:1. [Return to essay](#)

62 Mitchell, 17. [Return to essay](#)

63 Butler, 119. As Judith Walkowitz points out, feminist repealers such as Butler linked their defense of prostitutes to a "separate spheres" ideology which stressed women's purity and moral supremacy over men. This ideology naturally limited feminists' ability to empathize with unrepentant prostitutes. Butler and her cohorts were indignant when registered prostitutes' signatures appeared on a Pro-Acts petition in 1872, the prostitutes claiming that "the women signing this petition are not reclaimed women or women seeking to be reclaimed but are practicing prostitutes under Government sanction; whereby . . . they procure increased custom, more money, and a recognized social position." *Wester Daily Mercury*, 16 September 1872, quoted in Walkowitz, 186-87. [Return to essay](#)

64 William Rathbone Greg, "Prostitution," *Westminster Review*, 53 (1850), quoted in Mitchell, xi. [Return to essay](#)

65 William Acton, *The Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations* (1857), quoted in Marcus, 31. See also Thomas Walter Laquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction* (London: Allen Lane, 1979); David F. Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988). [Return to essay](#)

66 See Millicent G. Fawcett, *Josephine Butler: Her Work and Principles, and Their Meaning*

for the *Twentieth Century* (London: Orchard House, 1927), 26-27. [Return to essay](#)

67 *Census of Great Britain*, 1851, in Mitchell, 16-17. Between 1851 and 1900 no further enumerations were undertaken. See Sheila Ryan Johansson, "Demographic Contributions to the History of Victorian Women," in Barbara Kanner, *The Women of England: From Anglo-Saxon Times to the Present*, Interpretive Bibliographic Essays (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979) 259-295. [Return to essay](#)

68 In an era in which a man "was expected to provide his wife with a carriage and to associate with men of wealth," one demographer found that "the average age at which he could afford to marry was almost thirty." John A. Banks, *Prosperity and Parenthood; a Study of Family Planning and the Victorian Middle Classes*, quoted in Houghton, 384. [Return to essay](#)

69 Mitchell, 17. [Return to essay](#)

70 Marcus, 14-15. [Return to essay](#)

71 Greg, quoted in Mitchell, xi; Marcus, 14-15. [Return to essay](#)

72 The seeds of feminism were present long before the passage of universal suffrage in 1918 and 1928; in 1837 Caroline Norton was fighting for married women's property and child custody rights; 1847 saw the first restriction on working hours for women and in 1857 the first divorce law was passed. In 1867, John Stuart Mill moved for an extension of the Reform Act to include suffrage for women and, in 1869, published his highly influential *Subjection of Women*. [Return to essay](#)

73 The Reform Act of 1832 marked the first stage in the sharing of political power by the landed aristocracy and the newly affluent members of the middle classes. The second Reform Act of 1867 went even further: though it still contained property qualifications, the Act granted the franchise to the lower-middle class and to a small, privileged section of the working class. The Reform Acts created an electorate in which the working class was in a considerable majority; the strength of this new electorate was revealed in the success of the anti-regulationists' 1870 electoral campaign against Sir Henry Storks. Basch, xvi; Butler, 11. [Return to essay](#)

74 Acton, *Prostitution*. . . , quoted in Houghton, 365. Robert Dingley assumed in 1758 that most prostitutes were foolish lower-class women seduced and abandoned by upper-class rakes. Dingley, 4. Christine Stansell observed the same penchant for cross-class sexual pillaging in nineteenth-century America, wherein "popular dissatisfaction with the privileged crystallized into an image of aristocratic sexual license." *Stansell, City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 23-25. [Return to essay](#)

75 Mitchell, 31; Joan Scott, 110. The class antagonisms tapped by the white slavery metaphor underscored real economic divisions and political tensions in British life. Houghton points out that during the Victorian period, England suffered periodic bouts of explosive economic and political discontent, entering the last quarter of the nineteenth century in a severe depression. Houghton, 239-40. [Return to essay](#)

76 Butler to *PMG*, 9 July 1885, 3:2. [Return to essay](#)

77 Butler, 221. Condemnation of the sexual habits of the rich was not limited to reformers. A woman who claimed to have personally experienced white slavery also pointed an accusing finger at society's elite. Ellen Cordon told Parliament that "one ruffian, who bore a title, treated me so brutally, I thought I should have died under it." Dyer, 27. [Return to essay](#)

78 I disagree on this point with Deborah Gorham's "The 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' Re-Examined." Gorham argues that the subjects of Stead's expose were "in almost all cases, young working-class children-the daughters of the people." I believe Gorham reads Stead's reference to "the people" too literally; unlike Gorham, I argue that "The Maiden Tribute" was able to achieve its stunning political success by invoking the anxieties of the middle-classes regarding their own daughters. Gorham admits, however, that, after initial working-class enthusiasm died out, social purity reform would remain primarily a middle-class movement. Gorham, 353, 377, 378. [Return to essay](#)

79 *PMG*, 4 July 1885, 1:1. [Return to essay](#)

80 *PMG*, 4 July 1885, 1:1. [Return to essay](#)

81 In the weeks following the "Maiden Tribute" series, the woman who (purportedly) sold Stead her thirteen-year-old daughter Eliza Armstrong was (purportedly) encouraged by Stead's enemies to file kidnap charges against him. Stead was prosecuted under these charges and eventually spent six months in prison. [Return to essay](#)

82 Terrot, 171; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July 1885, 6:1. [Return to essay](#)

83 *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July 1885, 8:4; *PMG*, 11 July, 12:2. [Return to essay](#)

84 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 July 1885, 1:1.; 10 July 1885, 1:1; 6:2. [Return to essay](#)

85 Terrot, 181. The surge of public interest that followed publication of "The Maiden Tribute" illustrates what Roger Cobb and Charles Elder have called "the dynamics of agenda-building." In any society at any one time there are a variety of political issues and controversies that are perceived as the legitimate subjects of governmental concern; only a few of these items ever make it from this "systematic agenda" to the "formal agenda" of governmental action. In Cobb and Elder's theory, an issue will only receive review and possible action by moving from the systematic to the formal agenda. Roger W. Cobb and Charles D. Elder, *Participation in American Politics: The Dynamics of Agenda-Building*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1983), quoted in Grittner, 133. In the summer of 1885, the moral panic over white slavery made this move in dramatic fashion, squarely placing the issue on the formal agenda of federal, state, and local governments. [Return to essay](#)

86 *PMG*, 9 July 1885, 3:1, 4:1, 11 July 1885, 3:1. [Return to essay](#)

87 *PMG*, 17 July 1885, 7:2; Terrot, 184, 186. [Return to essay](#)

88 Geertz, 210-1. [Return to essay](#)

89 Gorham, 355. This raises an important distinction: although many middle-class reformers shared common objectives, such as repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts or raising the age of sexual consent, reformers did not necessarily have identical social agendas. Whereas social purity campaigner Ellice Hopkins, for example, advocated a code of repressive individual morality, as a means of reducing prostitution, Josephine Butler insisted that economic necessity drove many women to prostitution, and advocated a restructuring of the wage system which would permit working women a "living" wage. See *Women's Work and Women's Culture: A Series of Essays*, Josephine E. Butler, ed. (London: MacMillan & Co., 1869). [Return to essay](#)

90 *PMG*, 7 July 1885, 2:1; 10 July 1885, 3:1. [Return to essay](#)

91 Paul McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 263. *It is worth noting that politics continues to make strange bedfellows. In order to secure legislative reforms, Josephine Butler threw in social purity activists agendas much more repressive than hers--and came to regret it. In her current efforts to abolish pornography, feminist historian Kathleen Barry has in the same way allied herself with fundamentalist religious groups who share her aversion to pornography--but surely little else.* [Return to essay](#)

92 *Synopsis of Michigan Papers, "white Slavery,"* in Barbara Kanner's bibliography, *Women in English Social History, 1800-1914. A Guide to Research in Three Volumes (vol. II)* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988). [Return to essay](#)

93 Butler, 12. [Return to essay](#)

94 Quoting Josephine Butler, *Fawcett*, 21-2; also in Mitchell, 41. [Return to essay](#)

95 Butler, speech of 11 November 1874, quoted in Scott, 186. [Return to essay](#)

96 Butler, speech at Croydon, 3 July 1871, quoted in Scott, 114. [Return to essay](#)