

# Sinners, Victims, or Survivors?: Prostitution in the Moral Landscape of Eighteenth-century England

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the moral and social landscape of prostitution in eighteenth-century England, analyzing how prostitutes were perceived and represented in various cultural, economic, and legal contexts. In particular, it focuses on the interplay between moral judgment and social necessity that characterized the public discourse surrounding prostitution during this period. Through an examination of primary sources including Bernard de Mandeville's satirical work, *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1724), and William Hogarth's visual narrative series, *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), alongside contemporaneous writings on notable figures like Sally Salisbury, this research investigates the nuanced perceptions of prostitutes as sinners, victims, and survivors. It argues that prostitution in eighteenth-century England was not merely a moral or legal issue but was deeply intertwined with the socioeconomic conditions of the time by highlighting how urbanization, economic necessity, and evolving social attitudes contributed to the visibility and toleration of prostitution. My research concludes that the figure of the prostitute in eighteenth-century England served as a focal point for debates about morality, economy, and the law, revealing a society grappling with changing attitudes in its moral and social order.

**Keywords:** *Early Modern England, prostitution, morality, Hogarth, Mandeville*

## Introduction

The study of the history of prostitution uncovers a complex narrative that intersects with various aspects of social, economic, and cultural life. From the *bordellos* of ancient Rome to the streets of Victorian London, the practice of prostitution, in its pervasiveness throughout history, ensures itself as a multifaceted societal institution, encompassing more than the basic division between streetwalkers and brothel workers or courtesans and royal mistresses. This period saw prostitution interwoven into daily life and cultural expressions, encapsulated by the contradictory attitudes of moral repudiation and tacit acceptance; and at the core of English eighteenth-century moral philosophical thought, prostitutes transform from sinners, victims, to survivors (Munro 2012, 6).

Eighteenth-century England was a period marked by complex social and moral attitudes towards prostitution, which had been woven into the fabric of everyday life and culture. Often characterized by its contradictions between morality and vice, visibility and invisibility, the acceptance and repudiation of prostitution provide a nuanced outlook of the socio-cultural and moral dynamics of the early modern era. The changing attitudes towards prostitution and the women engaged in the trade are reflected in the writings of social commentators such as Bernard de Mandeville in his *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* (1725) and through the later establishment of the Magdalen Charity in the mid-18th century to support “fallen women” (penitent prostitutes) (Henderson 1999, 2; Nash 1984, 617).

Simultaneously, the widespread popularity of William Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, now recognized as a pivotal representation of visual culture for this period, represented a greater fascination with the institution of prostitution and its literature, which historians like Rosenthal and Henderson have attributed to urbanization, enclosure, emerging bourgeois sexual norms, increasingly limited employment opportunities for women, and a growing dependence on wage labor among English families, likening to the visual narrative of Moll Hackabout (Henderson

1999, 2; Rosenthal 2015, 12). For instance, the heightened public intrigue surrounding the institution of prostitution and the women of the trade during the 18th century led to the publication and sale of numerous pamphlets, one of which follows the life of Sally Salisbury, a renowned prostitute whose clientele included (but was not limited to) earls, dukes, and princes (Peakman 2006, 189). The widespread circulation of this new literary sub-genre of writings and graphics, termed ‘whore biographies’ by Peakman (2006, ix), which includes mainstream novels like Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) that inspired William Hogarth’s visual narrative, *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732), sheds light on the context in which certain moral and social attitudes towards prostitution changed. This trend is further explored in Sophie Carter’s *Purchasing Power: Representing Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century English Popular Print Culture*.

Consequently, this paper endeavors to dissect the complex character of prostitution in eighteenth-century England, delineating this period’s nuanced social and moral attitudes towards the trade. The nature of prostitution in eighteenth-century England illuminates the perceptions, contradictions, and cultural representations surrounding prostitution, as evidenced in the works of social commentators like Bernard de Mandeville, the visual narratives of William Hogarth, and the writings on Sally Salisbury.

This paper aims to provide a cohesive examination of how prostitution, viewed through the lens of an emerging institution rather than merely an industry, integrated into and influenced the moral and social dynamics of 18th-century English society. By exploring the cultural and moral debates surrounding prostitution in early modern England, this paper articulates a transition in societal moral attitudes, positing that the works of these eighteenth-century personalities reflect a shift from traditional views to a more nuanced understanding within the societal fabric, thus framing prostitution distinctly as a multifaceted institution within this historical context.

### **Origins of the Prostitute: Hogarth and Mandeville**

*Urbanization in London*

By the turn of the 18th century, London was a rapidly growing city, becoming a major European capital with its population rising from 674,000 in 1700 to 1,274,000 in 1820 (Henderson 1999, 1). This urban influx, driven by rural migrants seeking new opportunities, significantly altered the city's economic and social landscape. Among these migrants, a considerable number were women from impoverished backgrounds, originating from rural English provinces and Ireland. Their migration into London highlights a critical intersection of socioeconomic forces and urban development, underscoring the role of specific actors—these migrant women—in the growing industry of prostitution (18).

As London expanded, so too did the visibility and economic significance of prostitution, challenging the traditional separation between the public and private spheres. The commodification of sexuality, once confined to the private domain, became a public spectacle and an economic commodity, drawing widespread interest and debate. The growth of prostitution as an industry targeted young, lower-class women, offering a stark reflection of the limited employment opportunities available to them (Rosenthal 2015, 2). In this context, eighteenth-century social reformers and commentators, attuned to the changing social landscape, began publishing writings and assertions on the social origin, nature, and morality of prostitution (Henderson 1999, 13). Their works reflect an ongoing attempt to grapple with the moral socioeconomic underpinnings of prostitution in a rapidly urbanizing society.

*An Introduction to Mandeville*

In 1724, Bernard Mandeville, a Dutch physician who had settled in London, published his work *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, one of the best-known calls for the legal acceptance of bawdy houses (like publick stews, a term used in 18th-century England synonymous to a “whorehouse”) (Henderson 1999, 99). While the work is a satirical critique of eighteenth-century legislation and

moral views of prostitution, Mandeville, nevertheless, condemns the hypocrisy of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners (an organization that sought to regulate public behavior across a wide spectrum of social and private behaviors from drunkenness to swearing and prostitution) that placated women in the industry as mere sinners (Grant 2012, 106, 113). While Mandeville was generally seen as a supporter of vice and an opponent of virtue by his eighteenth-century contemporaries, a significant portion of his moral philosophy was grounded in the belief that certain vices were necessary and beneficial for progress and civilization (Peakman, Pettit, and Spedding, eds. 2006, 209). As will be explored further in this paper, Mandeville's central argument in his work stated his belief that "publick stews" were a necessity to protect the "Honour of [ones'] Wives and Daughters" (209). Mandeville's work, therefore, served as a catalyst for a broader discourse on the socioeconomic dimensions of prostitution. By advocating for a pragmatic approach to what he viewed as an inevitable aspect of urban life, Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews* laid the groundwork for future debates on the intersection of morality, economics, and law in the management of prostitution. His engagement with these themes illustrates the nuanced and often controversial perspectives that characterized the early modern discourse on the prostitution industry in London.

### *Hogarth and A Harlot's Progress*

In 1732, William Hogarth, a contemporary of Mandeville, inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* published in 1722, published his visual narrative, *A Harlot's Progress*. The six plates, engraved by Hogarth, meant to serve as a cautionary tale, follow the slow "moral" descent of Moll Hackabout, from her innocent arrival in London to her eventual insignificant death as a "fallen" woman (Hogarth 1732). Across the six plates, the first plate follows Moll's arrival in London; the second plate illustrates her quarrel with her Jew protector; the third plate depicts her apprehension by a magistrate; the fourth plate highlights her fall as a prostitute with her in Bridewell; the fifth plate shows doctors quarreling over the treatment of Moll on her deathbed; and lastly,

the sixth plate concludes Moll's story with her funeral (Carter 2004, 28). *A Harlot's Progress* gained widespread popularity during its publication and became one of the key works of Hogarth's career as an artist, to the extent that it inspired many subsequent literary works, like Theophilus Cibber's play, *The Harlot's Progress*, published in 1733, and pirated prints (Hogarth 1732). Ronald Paulson, the author of one of the most extensive studies on Hogarth's art and life, illustrates the 'mythic power' that *A Harlot's Progress* exerted over its contemporary audience (Carter 2004, 27). This section of the paper will primarily aim to situate *A Harlot's Progress* in the broader context of its production, reception, and significance to pinpoint the social and cultural mechanics (with a concentration on the moral aspect) of the narrative of prostitution it endorses.

While the narrative of prostitution illustrated in *A Harlot's Progress* was not invented by Hogarth and, as Carter writes, already considered a "cultural property" of its time, the work ultimately reinforced contemporary, conflicting attitudes towards women in prostitution. Prostitutes from the 18th century were not limited to a single narrative of their origin and their "fall," while such a narrative may have been commonplace for its time for it to arise. Nevertheless, its original intention as a cautionary tale for plebians to understand the dangers of metropolitan life segues into a greater moral debate of whether Moll Hackabout intentionally enters into prostitution from the first plate of *A Harlot's Progress* (Fig. 1). In the initial plate, Mother Needham, a well-known procuress, seduces Moll Hackabout to join the trade as a prostitute, to which the audience knows she agrees as evidenced in the second plate.

From early eighteenth-century writings, the dominant narrative characterizes Moll's decision as one made knowingly and willingly. In her analysis of *A Harlot's Progress*, Carter presents the writings from *The Lure of Venus* as largely composed of the overarching narrative that the general public had chosen to believe. While the reasons that Moll succumbed to Mother Needham's proposal differ, the result largely remains the same—the narrative of the prostitute where the prostitute remains a criminal and a sinner, one who willingly chooses to fall into moral

depravity, which, Carter asserts, remained into the end of the 18th century (Carter 2004, 40-48). However, while Carter attributes this to be the dominant narrative of prostitutes in eighteenth-century thought, the narrative of the prostitute as a victim begins to take hold by the mid-18th century as well. As Hogarth never provides any commentary on the nature of Moll's decision to become a prostitute, his intention to depict Moll's downward gaze toward Mother Needham as a marker of her innocence and naiveté is unknown. Yet, Hogarth, by choosing to initiate Moll's journey under the guidance of Mother Needham—a notorious procurer—deliberately engages with the prevalent discourse of the time, which oscillated between viewing prostitutes as complicit sinners and as victims of circumstance. The scene not only depicts a personal tragedy but also comments on the broader societal dynamics at play. The interaction, set against the backdrop of London's bustling city life, subtly critiques the societal structures that channel vulnerable women towards prostitution. The audience, aware of Moll's eventual agreement to join the trade as seen in subsequent plates, is invited to consider not just her individual choices but the systemic pressures that frame these choices. This portrayal challenges the dominant narrative of the prostitute as a willing participant in her degradation, suggesting a complex interplay of economic necessity and exploitation instead.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a wagon of women arriving from York underscores the socioeconomic disparities and urban-rural divide contributing to the proliferation of prostitution. In the background of the first plate, Hogarth illustrates a group of women in a wagon presumably from "York," a provincial county with a population estimated at around 12,000 (notably smaller than that of London) in the early half of the 18th century ("The eighteenth century: Topography and population," 212). Presumably, these unsuspecting women arrived in Drury Lane, London from smaller towns in search of work; and like Moll Hackabout, they too would be "seduced" by the madams and procurers in the new city, and fall into moral depravity, willingly or unwillingly. While prostitutes are associated with having a large sexual appetite, writings of some social commentators began to suggest the narrative that women enter the trade due to being victims

of poverty (Henderson 1999, 182). *Some Considerations upon Streetwalkers*, published in 1735 posthumously of its author Daniel Defoe, proposes that prostitutes were not willfully immoral as they would not purposely subject themselves to this “condition,” adding expressions of pity and a call to reform (Defoe 1735). Like the women on the wagon from York depicted in Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, poor, lower-class women arguably fell into prostitution as a means to put an end to their poverty, which in part, was representative of a larger societal problem. These women, like Moll, are depicted as being seduced into the trade, highlighting the role of economic desperation and manipulation in their descent. By illustrating the various forces—economic hardship, manipulation by figures like Mother Needham, and societal indifference—that conspire to entrap women like Moll, Hogarth moves beyond the binary of sinners or saints. His work reveals a society grappling with the contradictions of its moral and economic realities, where prostitutes emerged not merely as characters in moral tales but as individuals caught within a web of social and economic determinants. Rather than being characterized simply as wanton and wayward women, prostitutes were victims of a socioeconomic condition that sought to work against them.

This narrative shift, from viewing prostitutes solely as moral deviants to recognizing them as victims of broader socioeconomic forces, marks a significant departure in the discourse on prostitution. It reflects an emerging awareness of the socioeconomic underpinnings of prostitution, challenging viewers to reconsider their perceptions of prostitutes. Through Hogarth’s lens, prostitutes are seen not just as figures of moral failure but as a symptom—and indeed, a casualty—of the socioeconomic conditions of 18th-century England.

The evolving discourse on prostitution finds a notable illustration in a 1797 Old Bailey court case involving Elizabeth Harman, a prostitute charged with theft. While she admitted to having stolen the pocket watch, the accuser John Grocot was later chastised by the court for not providing sufficient payment to the prostitute and for dereliction of his duty as a father and husband through his frequent visits to Drury Lane (“ELIZABETH

HARMAN. Theft; theft from a specified place. 15th February 1797" n.d.). The court's reprimand of Grocot for his insufficient compensation and neglect of familial duties, stemming from his dealings in Drury Lane, signals an emerging recognition of prostitutes not merely as perpetrators but as victims within the legal system. This acknowledgment of their complex position—compounded by economic vulnerability and exploitation by clients—mirrors a broader transformation in societal attitudes towards prostitution by the late 18th century. This case serves as a poignant reflection of the nuanced narratives surrounding prostitutes, portraying them as individuals caught in a web of socioeconomic and moral dilemmas rather than agents of their downfall.

Such narratives, emphasizing the prostitute's victimhood to a client's desires and the systemic forces at play, echo the earlier insights of Bernard Mandeville. Mandeville's writings, advocating for the regulation of prostitution through public stews, underscore a pragmatic approach to addressing the realities of prostitution. He acknowledges the economic underpinnings of the trade, proposing a system that, while controversial, seeks to manage the inevitable presence of prostitution in urban life. The juxtaposition of Hogarth's visual narrative with the realities highlighted by the Harman case, and further contextualized by Mandeville's theoretical propositions, underscores a pivotal moment in the discourse on prostitution. It marks a departure from simplistic moral judgments towards a more complex understanding of the socioeconomic conditions that ensnare women like Harman. This shift, from visual and literary representations to legal recognitions and economic theorizations, illustrates a multifaceted approach to grappling with the phenomenon of prostitution, revealing a society in flux, navigating the intricate interplay between morality, economy, and the law in 18th-century London.

While Hogarth's narrative of the *harlot* was widely debated by eighteenth-century writers and commentators, there remain echoes of Mandeville's schema of the prostitute found in *A Modest Defense of Publick Stews* within Hogarth's image of the harlot. As mentioned previously, Mandeville builds on the idea whereby since prostitution is an inevitable vice due to the

sexual appetites of men, its practice should be legalized within state-inspected brothels to safeguard the virtuous chastity of the generality of women (Grant 2012, 106; Henderson 1999, 118; Mandeville 2006, 205). Therefore, according to Mandeville's argument, prostitution remains a necessary evil to sacrifice a few women to save many others. Similarly, in Hogarth's version of the harlot, her fate is decided from the first plate to the final plate depicting her death. Within the discourse of prostitution set forth by the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, Hogarth's harlot acts as that necessary sacrifice, the lesser evil, to prevent greater evils like illegitimate children and the spread of venereal disease (Grant 2012, 109). Although Mandeville's premise of establishing public stews may have been unconventional for his time, ultimately, his misogynistic views are consistent with eighteenth-century societal attitudes to women and sex; however, his acknowledgment of reasons why women entered into prostitution and acceptance of the "necessity" in perpetuating the industry, combined with Hogarth's perception of the inevitability of the harlot's fate, demonstrates a larger shift towards viewing these women less as "degenerated devils" (a term derived from Brevil's *Progress of a Rake*, 1732) and more so as victims of their circumstances, a belief that would lead to later initiatives like the Magdalen Charity (Gallagher 2018, 62; Grant 2012, 113; Peakman, Pettit, and Spedding, eds. 2006, 213).

### **Public Intrigue and Sally Salisbury**

Sally Salisbury (c. 1690-1724) emerged as a notorious figure in London's underworld during the early eighteenth century. Renowned for her profession as a prostitute, she gained a significant reputation and became one of the preferred associates of the infamous procuress, Mother Wisebourne. Salisbury's life and exploits captivated public attention, leading to the publication of numerous pamphlets and stories that glorified her escapades. Among these, a notable work was *The Effigies, Parentage, Education, Life, Merry-Pranks and Conversation of the Celebrated Mrs. Sally Salisbury* published in 1722 (Peakman, Pettit, and Spedding, eds. 2006, 189). This work, like many others,

exaggerated and romanticized her life for the entertainment of its readers. While details of her life were often embellished by writers and pamphleteers to provide further entertainment for their readers, there remains a sufficient agreed fact of her life that allows for further analysis of her story and life as a means of perceiving societal attitudes towards prostitutes in the early eighteenth century.

Salisbury's narrative stands in stark contrast to the depictions of prostitutes in works like Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* and Mandeville's *A Modest Defense of Publick Stews*. While these narratives often portrayed prostitutes in a generalized manner (falling victim to the same tropes), accounts of Salisbury's life provide a more nuanced and individualized perspective on perceptions of prostitutes in this era. They underscore the idea that the lives of prostitutes were diverse and complex, with no two experiences being identical. Each woman's story was unique, shaped by her personal circumstances and societal interactions. This broader context is crucial for understanding the varied and multifaceted lives of women like Salisbury, who navigated a challenging and often stigmatized profession in a time when societal norms and attitudes towards such lifestyles were vastly different from today. Salisbury's life, therefore, not only tells her own story but also reflects the broader sociocultural dynamics of early eighteenth-century London.

The broadsheet *The Effigies, Parentage, Education, Life, Merry-Pranks and Conversation of the Celebrated Mrs. Sally Salisbury* was printed with the intention of distribution around shops and taverns after Salisbury stabbed her lover in a tavern with a bread knife. Nevertheless, the pamphlet celebrates Salisbury as a woman with great wit and above the "common streetwalker" ("The Effigies, Parentage, Education, Life, Merry-Pranks and Conversation of the Celebrated Mrs. Sally Salisbury" 2006, 196). The eventual acquittal of her charges of attempted murder of her lover and subsequent publications following the trial was recounted by Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* published in 1722 how the "freshest News in Town" at the time was Salisbury's stabbing (192). As a popular yet notorious public figure, Salisbury was able to defy the convention of the early modern prostitute, whose

narrative likens that of Hogarth's harlot explored previously. The widespread distribution of these pamphlets and writings surrounding Sally Salisbury constructed an alternative narrative of a prominent figure at the center of public intrigue. As Peakman had detailed before in her introduction to *Whore Biographies*, this new literary subgenre reflected the greater interest of the public in the "notorious" lives of prostitutes, particularly those of greater fame (ix). Even after her death in prison due to consumption, writers recounted her life fondly, illustrating the significance of her character and popularity amongst early eighteenth-century readers. Salisbury, although a prostitute, was viewed with great sympathy by the public, placing her amongst the outliers of many others who came before her and signifying a form of acceptance of prostitutes within the English societal fabric.

Sally Salisbury's life, as revealed through the lens of historical accounts and dramatized narratives, stands as a testament to the complex and multifaceted nature of societal perceptions of prostitutes in early eighteenth-century London. Her story, particularly prominent in works such as *The Effigies*, *Parentage*, *Education*, *Life*, *Merry-Pranks* and *Conversation of the Celebrated Mrs. Sally Salisbury*, diverges from the conventional narratives surrounding women in her profession. Through the public's avid consumption and romanticization of her life's details, Salisbury's story transcends the typical boundaries and stereotypes associated with prostitution. The widespread distribution and fascination with Salisbury's life, especially following the dramatic episode of her stabbing her lover, underscore the intricate relationship between society and the individuals deemed outside its traditional moral bounds. Her experiences and the public's reaction to them highlight a societal view that is paradoxically both judgmental and captivated, revealing a complex dynamic in the perception of morality and infamy. Her enduring popularity and the sympathetic portrayals that followed her even after her death in prison signify a rare level of societal acceptance for a woman in her profession. This unique stance challenges the prevailing narratives of the time and illustrates an evolving perspective within the English societal fabric of the early eighteenth century. Sally Salisbury's story, emblematic of a rare societal embrace of a notorious figure, not

only reshapes our understanding of the lives and perceptions of early eighteenth-century prostitutes but also marks a significant, albeit nuanced, shift in the social and cultural landscape of her time, challenging and redefining the boundaries of acceptance and infamy in historical context.

### **Venereal Disease and the Magdalen Charity**

#### *Visual marks of morality - Pox marks*

In the study of prostitution in early modern England, an important factor that remains to be considered is the spread of venereal disease and the direct association of venereal disease with the prostitution industry. However, it remains difficult to consider venereal disease, specifically pox (more commonly now known as syphilis), in the context of eighteenth-century stews without examining the moral connotation of the disease itself. Both in Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* and Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, pox is alluded to, if not addressed, whether it be through visual depictions of pox marks (Hogarth) or outright condemning the spread of the disease (Mandeville). Venereal diseases such as pox were one of the evident products of London's population of illicit sex workers (Grant 2012, 113). This section will focus on the visual marks of morality—pox marks—and how these marks, in the broader context of understanding the changing attitudes towards prostitution, transformed from signs of immorality to indicators of disease and suffering.

While views of social commentators addressing prostitution varied throughout the early 18th century, a point of agreement held by Mandeville and his contemporaries was the responsibility of prostitutes in the spread of venereal disease (Peakman, Pettit, and Spedding, eds. 2006, 212). In *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, Mandeville states that “This Disease is propagated reciprocally from the Woman to the Man, and from the Man to the Woman; but the first is the most common for several Reasons” (Mandeville 2006, 244). In his attribution of the spread of the disease being propagated by women, Mandeville alludes to the nature and existence of pox at the fault of the women and suggests the

inherent “immorality” of women in the trade as being perpetrators of disease. He places a disproportionate emphasis on the role of women, particularly those engaged in prostitution, as the primary vectors of venereal diseases. His commentary implies a deeper societal inclination to attribute the proliferation of venereal diseases, notably pox, to the activities of prostitutes, thereby casting these women in a morally culpable light. Mandeville’s reference to the disease being more commonly spread from women to men reflects a broader accusatory stance towards women in the sex trade, suggesting an inherent moral failing or “immorality” on their part. This stance is indicative of the era’s gendered moral judgments and the tendency to vilify women for their participation in prostitution, which was often driven by a complex interplay of economic necessity and limited social mobility, as explored previously. Furthermore, by highlighting the role of women as perpetrators of disease, Mandeville’s work contributes to a discourse that further stigmatizes these women as propagators of disease transmission in early modern sexual commerce. This framing serves to reinforce existing societal prejudices against prostitutes, casting them as not just participants in a morally dubious profession but also as the sole perpetrators in the spread of disease, thereby intertwining the notions of health and morality.

One of the most notable symbols of a “fallen” woman in Hogarth’s *A Harlot’s Progress* is the presence of pox marks on the visages of both Moll Hackabout and Mother Needham. In the initial plate (Fig. 1), Mother Needham, depicted as a predatory figure, displays pox marks dotting her face. Pox marks in Hogarth’s work henceforth symbolize the downward mobility, or “progress,” towards an inevitable death resulting from venereal disease (Gallagher 2018, 102). In the plates beginning to depict Moll’s fall from grace as a “kept woman” (plates 3-6), Moll is illustrated with pox marks on her face (Fig. 3). Additionally, the pocket watch that she holds out to the viewer implies involvement in petty theft, indicating her descent into immorality through Hogarth’s interplay with crime and venereal disease (and arguably prostitution). However, the debate surrounding Moll’s willingness to become a prostitute remains: Had Moll consciously

chosen a profession that isolates, imprisons, and finally infects her? Gallagher argues that “venereal infection, in this context, becomes something like an occupational hazard: predictable, given the nature of the profession—but nonetheless lamentable when it happens” (106). Still, Hogarth’s harlot wears the pox marks as signs of morality, characterizing her as a “degenerate devil.” This portrayal of pox marks by Hogarth serves not only as a literal depiction of the physical consequences of venereal diseases but also as a metaphorical commentary on the moral judgments of society towards women in prostitution. The visual representation of these marks conveys a message about the stigma and social ostracization faced by prostitutes, where their physical ailments become symbols of moral condemnation, thus perpetuating a cycle of shame and marginalization. This imagery also reflects the societal tendency to equate physical diseases with moral corruption, a perspective that simplifies complex human experiences into a binary of moral purity versus degradation. The intertwining of venereal disease with moral judgment in *A Harlot’s Progress* thus becomes a commentary on the societal norms and values of the 18th century, illuminating the moral nuance of prostitutes beyond the label of “sinner.”

Contrary to early 18th-century social philosophy, by the mid-18th century, a number of medical texts and moral treatises explicitly invoked the prostitute’s plight in order to campaign for social or health care reform (112). One of the most controversial of such texts was *Thelyphthora, or a Treatise on Female Ruin*, published in 1780, by the Anglican clergyman Martin Madan, who invoked the sentimental narrative of an innocent woman forced into prostitution and subsequently infected with venereal disease, identifying prostitutes as the chief victims of venereal disease rather than its propagators (112). This shift in narrative from condemnation to compassion marks an evolution in societal attitudes toward prostitution and its associated ailments. The emergence of such texts underscores a growing awareness and sensitivity to the complexities and hardships faced by women in the sex trade, challenging prevailing notions of moral culpability and instead highlighting the societal institutions that contribute to their predicament. This change in discourse is indicative of

a broader enlightenment in thought, reflecting an increasing inclination towards reformist policies that seek not only to address the symptoms but also the root causes of social ills. By positing prostitutes as primary victims of venereal disease, these texts call into question the effectiveness of punitive measures and underline the necessity for comprehensive services that could offer prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation.

### *Establishment of the Magdalen Charity*

The founding of the Magdalen Charity of 1758 by philanthropist Jonas Hanway represented one of the first institutions and secular charities established to support “fallen women,” marking a significant turning point in the societal stigmatization of prostitution and the treatment of poor, working women. This transformation was underscored by a shift from viewing these women as moral outcasts to recognizing them as individuals in need of support and rehabilitation. Before the turn of the eighteenth century, societal perspectives on “fallen women” were steeped in moral condemnation, often viewing them solely through the prism of their profession, as *sinners* beyond redemption.

The Magdalen Charity, as detailed in Stanley Nash’s work, “Prostitution and Charity: The Magdalen Hospital, a Case Study,” (1984) represented one of the earliest secular initiatives to extend a helping hand to these women. Nash describes how the charity offered not just a refuge but a chance for rehabilitation, reflecting a profound change in the way these women were perceived and treated. The establishment of the charity was a radical departure from the punitive and judgmental approaches that were prevalent at the time. The shift towards a more compassionate approach was also indicative of a growing understanding that many women in prostitution were victims of their circumstances, driven by socioeconomic pressures and personal misfortunes. This new perspective recognized these women not merely as sinners, but as individuals deserving of empathy and support. In a broader scheme, the Magdalen Charity represented a move towards addressing social issues with understanding and empathy, rather than with

judgment and punishment. This change in attitude towards prostitutes was part of a larger shift in the eighteenth century, characterized by a gradual move away from harsher punitive measures for moral transgressions towards more rehabilitative approaches. The charity's ethos, articulated by Jonas Hanway's prospectus (1759), emphasized the transformative potential of converting "bad women into good ones," heralding it as a work "worthy the applause of Angels." This sentiment resonated with the Magdalen's founders, who were notably sympathetic to the plight of women entrapped in prostitution, often through no fault of their own but as blameless victims of male seduction. Horace Walpole's observations during his visit to the charity highlight the diversity of the women it served, including young girls barely in their teens, underscoring the charity's role in their recovery and return to health (Walpole 1760). Such testimonials underline the charity's commitment to rehabilitating women marginalized by society, offering them a path to reclaim their dignity and place in society.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of prostitution in 18th-century England, particularly through the lens of works such as Bernard de Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews*, William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress*, and the lives of Figures like Sally Salisbury, reveals a complex narrative reflective of an evolving societal view of prostitutes that transcends the simple categorizations of sinners, victims, or survivors. Instead, these women and their stories exist in a nuanced gray area that challenges the traditional moral paradigms.

The shift in moral attitudes towards prostitution during this era is notably evidenced in the social and cultural responses to these works and figures. Mandeville's satirical approach in advocating for the regulation of prostitution, while controversial, points to an underlying acknowledgment of the socioeconomic factors driving women into the trade. His work, along with the reactions it garnered, underscores the dichotomy in public opinion—between viewing prostitutes as necessary evils in a flawed society and

condemning them as mere agents of immorality. Hogarth's "*A Harlot's Progress*," on the other hand, serves as a visual narrative that intricately portrays the descent of Moll Hackabout into the depths of prostitution. This series, while initially intended as a cautionary tale, sparked broader reflections on the circumstances leading women into such lives. The widespread popularity of Hogarth's work, alongside the narratives of known prostitutes like Sally Salisbury, indicates a growing public fascination with the lives of these women. This fascination, however, was not merely voyeuristic; it reflected an emerging recognition of the complex human stories behind the label of "prostitute." The accounts of Salisbury, especially, offer a glimpse into the diverse experiences of women in prostitution. Her life, as depicted in popular pamphlets, diverges from the typical narratives of degradation and moral downfall. Instead, her story and the public's reaction to it suggest a grudging respect and sympathy, underscoring the shift in societal perceptions of prostitutes from mere moral pariahs to individuals with complex, varied experiences.

The evolving discourse on prostitution is further exemplified by the changing perceptions of venereal disease. Initially seen as a moral stain and a physical manifestation of sin, primarily attributed to women in prostitution, the later part of the century saw a shift in its connotation. Medical and moral treatises began to portray these women more as victims of circumstance and disease, rather than its wilful propagators. This change in narrative is crucial in understanding the transition from viewing prostitutes as sinners to recognizing them as sufferers and survivors of societal and bodily afflictions.

The establishment of the Magdalen Charity in 1758 is perhaps the most telling evidence of this shift. The charity's creation marked a significant move towards providing support and rehabilitation for "fallen women," reflecting a growing societal empathy towards these individuals. This initiative, although not without its own set of moral and administrative complexities, symbolizes a departure from punitive attitudes towards a more compassionate approach, acknowledging the myriad reasons women found themselves in prostitution.

Ultimately, the study of prostitution in 18th-century England

uncovers complexities of societal attitudes that cannot be easily categorized. The transition in moral perspectives, as reflected in literary, artistic, and social responses, reveals a complex interplay of sympathy, condemnation, and pragmatic acceptance. The prostitutes of this era, far from being mere caricatures of sinners, victims, or survivors, emerge as multifaceted individuals navigating the challenging socioeconomic and moral landscapes of their time. This nuanced understanding is crucial not only in comprehending the history of prostitution but also in recognizing the enduring heterogeneity surrounding the discourse of sex work and morality.

## Appendix



Figure 1. First Plate



Figure 2. Second Plate



Figure 3. Third Plate



Figure 4. Fourth Plate



Figure 5. Fifth Plate



Figure 6. Sixth Plate

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## Author Bio

**Biona Hui** (she/her) is a fourth-year majoring in History from the San Francisco Bay Area. After taking a history of medicine course in her second year at UCLA, she has since taken an interest in the field, leading her to focus her departmental honors thesis on the history of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the United States. Outside of her current research, she has taken an interest in the history of women's health and prostitution in early modern Europe, which inspired her to write her first publication for *Aleph*. In her free time, Biona enjoys reading and painting, and she volunteers with the UCLA 3 Wishes Program, providing fingerprint paintings for families of deceased loved ones. After graduation, Biona is aiming to pursue a career in medicine and integrate her historical studies with her future medical career.