The Sex Workers' Revolution: Prostitution, Feminism and Female Virtue in British and Irish Women's Writing (1787-1801)

Alexandra Jane Collinson

A thesis submitted to the School of English Literature, Language & Linguistics

Newcastle University

In fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2024

Abstract

This thesis offers a comparative feminist analysis of women's writing on prostitution published during the French Revolutionary period. It examines the memoirs of sex workers, *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* (1787), *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan* (1794), *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson* (1795-1797), and *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* (1801), alongside the novels of authors now classified as revolutionary feminists. These include Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1795), Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), and Mary Hays' *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799). In these texts, prostitution becomes a basis for scrutinizing women's attempts to remain virtuous in a misogynistic system, especially by living according to their authentic desires and principles. I contend that the memoirists represent themselves as multidimensional moral subjects, negotiating with external patriarchal pressures to establish their autonomy. However, the novelists mobilise sex workers as objects of political concern, their authentic selves inevitably stifled by patriarchal oppression.

The two thematic sections of this project examine how representations of prostitution are shaped by major sociopolitical debates surrounding Moral Sentiment and Maternal Virtue. Each section contains two chronologically structured chapters, mapping the texts' shifting sociopolitical climate. Chapter One contends that Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson represent sex workers as authentic moral subjects, honouring principles of sincerity and benevolence alongside the theatrical demands of prostitution. Chapter Two examines representations of sex workers' stifled moral development in the novels, attributed to their sexual insincerity.

Chapter Three examines Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's destabilisation of ideological divisions between prostitution and maternal virtue; Chapter Four argues that the novelists reinforce these divisions, representing sex workers' struggles to fulfil their authentic maternal potential. My coda examines Mary Robinson's navigation of these moral debates, amid backlash against feminist politics at the turn of the century. Unlike the other memoirists' overtly transgressive self-representations, Robinson's strategic autobiographical silences regarding her prostitution help to assert her subjectivity in a hostile sociopolitical context.

Dedication

This thesis was written over some of the most transformative, difficult periods of my life, and with the support of many people.

Heartfelt thanks to my incredible supervisors, Dr Laura Kirkley and Professor Kate Chedgzoy, who have dedicated so much time and energy to helping me fulfil my potential as a researcher — right from my undergraduate studies to the completion of this project. Kate and Laura have steered me through challenging times with care, patience and empathy. They have supported me every step of the way, and instilled me with self-belief that I never thought I could have.

Thank you to the Northern Bridge Consortium for giving me the opportunity to undertake this thesis. As a working-class, first-generation university student, I am also deeply grateful to the staff of Newcastle University's English department, who have nurtured me from the beginning of my academic journey.

This project is fuelled by the unwavering love of the superwomen who raised me, and are now helping to raise my baby: my Mam, Ruth, and my godmothers, Jan and Claire. It really does take a village, and you're the best I could wish for. Thank you for the joy, laughter, cuppas, confidence building, and constant encouragement. Many thanks to Marc for his support, and to all my friends and family who have boosted me during this process.

Many Marys play a part in this thesis, but I dedicate it to the memory of one I call Nanna - Mary Collinson. To my much-missed Aunty Irene and Uncle Leslie, whose love, time, and weekly library trips helped cultivate my enthusiasm for literature from day one.

To my little boy, Reuben, who arrived at the very beginning of this project. Now you are four! I learned how to be your mammy while learning how to be a PhD researcher. It's been a wild ride, and look how we've grown together. Thank you for transforming my life beyond measure.

Contents

Coda

Introduction

'Sex Workers are the original feminists': Prostitution, Revolutionary Feminism and the Eighteenth-Century Prostitute Imaginary[1]

This thesis examines representations of sex workers by women writers, produced during the French Revolutionary period. It unites these 'public' authors of the late eighteenth century in a fresh discursive space — as individuals who ventured beyond the private, domestic domains they were confined to, by committing a range of literary, political, and sexual transgressions against the dictates of a patriarchal system. Their texts capture the zeitgeist of an era in which 'prostitution explicitly became a feminist issue,' created within, or influenced by, sites of intense transnational debate and radical change: England, Ireland, France, and America."[2] I bring the life writings of sex workers, *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* (1787), *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan* (1794), *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson* (1795-7), and *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* (1801), into conversation with novelists who deploy fictionalised sex workers to advance gender politics characteristic of what is now termed Revolutionary Feminism. I examine Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1795), Mary Wollstonecraft's *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman* (1798), and Mary Hays' *The Victim of Prejudice (1799).* These distinct, often fragmented feminist voices, most prominently Wollstonecraft, were inspired to intervene in radical debates fuelled by French political upheaval.[3] They 're-revolutionized [a] cultural revolution' which was becoming increasingly male-centric by the 1790s, through 'advocating the rights and claims' of women as equal citizens (Kelly, *Feminism* 2). The issue of prostitution, which magnifies socioeconomic relations between the sexes, is central to the novelists' concerns. They represent the corruption of their heroines Hannah, Jemima and Mary as they descend into prostitution, symptomatic of the suffering caused by patriarchal oppression. I contend that the memoirists are unacknowledged trailblazers within

[1] Juno Mac and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018, 5; Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore.* Verso, 2014, 4.
[2] Vivien Jones. "Placing Jemima: women writers of the 1790s and the eighteenth-century prostitution narrative." *Women's Writing,* vol. 4, no. 2, 1997, pp. 201-220, 206.
[3] Gary Kelly. *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 1.

this explosion of feminist thought, who use their experiences of prostitution to 're-revolutionize' radical discourses on a new, sexually charged level. Documenting their journeys from 'seduction' into the upper echelons of the elite sex trade, they explore innovative negotiations with the dominant culture, alongside fresh physical and textual methods of establishing their subjectivity and autonomy in a misogynistic system. Despite their different approaches to representing sex workers' experiences, all of these authors share a mutual interest in the relationship between prostitution and female virtue: a subject high on feminist agendas during this era of sociopolitical upheaval (V. Jones 206). I argue that, within these memoirs and novels, prostitution becomes a basis for interrogating the influence of external socioeconomic forces upon women's internal desires and principles. These authors scrutinize the difficulties women face in staying true to their authentic impulses, especially those they deem to be virtuous, in a patriarchal world. Foregrounding the complex relationship between individual women and their hostile circumstances, these texts depict sex workers grappling with the misogynistic pressures operating upon their minds, bodies, and identities.

The concept of authenticity is critical within these feminist debates. In the late eighteenth century, authenticity was understood as a state of being determined by an individual's close proximity to their 'original, authorizing essence,' and how in tune they were with their 'core, internal self.'[4] It was increasingly interpreted as a 'moral strength not based primarily on formal or institutional authority.'[5] If authenticity was a state of being, sincerity was a practice — authenticity *in action* — denoting the way in which actions correspond directly to an individual's intentions (Sinanan and Milnes 5). Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1782 autobiography contained a warts-and-all portrait of his authentic self, aligned with the 'truth of nature,' which suggested that authenticity did not necessarily connote virtue.[6] However, British radical authors of the 1790s charged authenticity with explicit moral and political significance, scrutinizing the corruptive impact of society upon their protagonists' authentic moral impulses (Sinanan and Milnes 10). French Jacobin demands for 'purity' of political purpose often translated into patriarchal fixations upon female citizens with pure bodies, a connection that undergoes feminist reassessment within the novels and memoirs I examine.[7] For these writers, the idea that individuals should be answerable to an internal moral sense, which ought to be

[4] Kerry Sinanan and Tim Milnes. "Introduction." *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity*, edited by Sinanan and Milnes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 1-30, 5.
[5] Geoffrey Hartman. *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity.* St Martin's Press, 2002, viii.
[6] Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *The Confessions.* Translated by Angela Scholar, Oxford World Classics, 2000, 5.
[7] Greg Dart. *Rousseau, Robespierre, and English Romanticism.* Cambridge University Press, 2005, 39; Joan Landes. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution.* Cornell University Press, 1988, 69.

developed and expressed beyond external authority, gives rise to the implication that rebellion could be justified in the quest for authenticity as well as broader social change. They prioritise a pure mind above patriarchal codes of *bodily* purity, which placed an overwhelming onus on chastity. Obeying such harsh standards could be inconsistent with living an authentic life, the memoirists and novelists imply, forcing women to deny their inner feelings and desires. They deem other virtues — especially benevolence, prioritised in radical discourses as a critical moral sentiment — to be more important. Pre-existing standards of sympathy from the school of sensibility were appropriated by radical commentators during the 1790s, advocating the benevolent treatment of those suffering under *ancien régime* oppression; beyond simply feeling for others, sympathy had to be developed into a moral sentiment which inspired virtuous action.[8] Interpreted as 'active virtue' by Coghlan, benevolence was not just the impulse to sympathise with others, namely the unchaste women that patriarchal society instructs people to condemn, but to actively *support* them in their suffering.[9] Benevolence involved both the attitude and practice of doing good for others. Frequently yoked to sincerity in these texts, it involves the pursuit of genuine, caring connections across social divides, beyond the hypocritical double-dealings of a misogynistic society.

Sex workers position themselves, or are positioned by others, at the heart of these debates about virtue and authenticity. Revolutionary feminists argued for women's role as active citizens, and defined their interpretation of female virtue accordingly. They lamented how, in a patriarchal society, women were frequently forced to prioritise male-centric ideals of feminine conduct over developing and acting upon their own moral impulses. The novelists represent heroines who are struggling under the dictates of male sexual agendas, suggesting that prostitution stifles their moral sense — a virtuous potential that must be allowed to expand and flourish. They contend that sex workers are estranged from their authentic selves through insincere sexual acts, prevented from developing the moral qualifications of citizenship. However, the memoirists represent their attempts to act sincerely, according to the dictates of their authentic selves. They engage in activities which they do not always deem to be virtuous, but in every case preferable to the pressures of social artifice. They also represent the virtuous dimensions of their authentic selves, unaltered by prostitution. Sheldon's title advertises her 'authentic' authorship and identity, Coghlan represents her 'honest... heart' (*Coghlan* 119), and

[8] Chris Jones. *Radical Sensibility*. Routledge, 1993, 13.
[9] Margaret Coghlan. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794, 135.

Leeson endorses a love of 'truth and justice.'[10] This strategy reflects contemporary concerns about 'the authenticity of the selves' represented through life writing, and 'the sincerity of the feelings they expressed' (Sinanan and Milnes 2). For example, Coghlan yokes authenticity to sentimental images of benevolence, in opposition to *ancien régime* corruption — a common strategy within radical calls for social reform (C. Jones 13). Therefore, all of these writers debunk misogynistic caricatures of sex workers' innate moral deviance, beyond concerns about chastity.[11] Virtue is located within women's minds, rather than their bodies.

While highlighting the similar lines of feminist enquiry pursued within these memoirs and novels, I also show that they reflect long-standing divisions in feminist debates surrounding prostitution which are shaped by an ever-fluctuating sociopolitical context. Seizing upon the 'optimism and sense of new opportunities' triggered by revolution in the late 1780s and early 1790s, French and British feminists set out their cases for female citizenship.[12] However, their treatises levelled dehumanising, exclusionary discourses against sex workers. These women fell short of their standards of female virtue, working against their justifications for women's involvement in public life. Reproducing dominant caricatures of sex workers was a strategy suited to their polemical purposes, shocking readers into confronting the damage that misogynistic oppression did to women. Moreover, explicitly condemning sex workers' conduct could help deflect patriarchal criticism of their own foray into politics, distinguishing their involvement from the charges of sexual corruption typically attached to women in public life (Caine and Sluga 15). Wollstonecraft's influence on the debates traced within this thesis is inescapable, especially through the exclusionary ideals of feminine virtue established by her treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). With Republican misogyny intensifying and hope of female liberation fading in the mid-to-late 1790s (Landes 128), Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays launched new, more nuanced explorations of the socioeconomic pressures operating upon women. Portraying sex workers in novels allowed them to flesh out more complex moral and maternal identities, endorse progressive ideas about their rehabilitation, and even ventriloquise them to articulate feminist ideals. Nevertheless, the novelists' attempts to mobilise women who engage in prostitution for their personal political agendas signal their broader failure to be fully cognisant of sex workers' subject positions. They

[10] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol I. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 3; Margaret Leeson. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson.* Edited by Mary Lyons, Lilliput Press, 1995, 3.
[11] Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. "Introduction: Venal Bodies – Prostitutes and Eighteenth-Century Culture." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. Routledge, 2012. pp. 1-16, 12.
[12] Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History 1780-1920.* Continuum, 2004, 15.

ultimately represent sex workers as suffering objects of moral concern who struggle to maintain contact with their authentic selves in oppressive social contexts. Furthermore, restrictions imposed upon radical writers by a paranoid British government meant that many were forced to couch revolutionary concerns in conservative tropes. Inchbald's fear of imprisonment amid the 1794 Treason Trials, an extension of the sedition trials launched against radical authors in 1792 and 1793, informed her writing of *Nature and Art* — and possibly her representation of the sentimental, shame-consumed 'seduced maiden' Hannah.[13] While sympathetic to the plight of a labouring-class woman, this characterisation is inflected by conservative ideology, shaped by rising hostility against radical literature which 'restrained [Inchbald's] presentation of a political agenda' (Garnai 122). Wollstonecraft's rehabilitation of Jemima reflects her mounting radical feminism, shaped by her 'personal experiences and political disappointments' in the years following her comparatively sexually conservative *Vindication*.[14] However, Hays' use of misogynistic tropes, especially surrounding sex workers' bodily contagion and corruption, is symptomatic of extreme backlash against radical ideals; by 1799, Wollstonecraft's feminist politics were broadly condemned.[15] With Napoleon's rise to power, women were definitively denied political rights, adult status, or any recognition as citizens (Caine and Sluga 15). My textual analysis maps the cycling backwards to patriarchal discourses on prostitution that results from this increasingly hostile climate.

The memoirs exist on the same tumultuous timeline, published before and between the novels of Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays. As sexually transgressive public women, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson already existed well beyond the bounds of respectability, which may fuel their bold approach to these feminist debates. Their texts do not only illuminate the blind spots of the novelists' politics with regard to their objectification of sex workers, but trailblaze multidimensional subjectivities that play with, modify and subvert dominant stereotypes of the period. Sheldon's memoirs appeared in 1787; spanning the opening years of revolution, all four volumes were re-issued seemingly by popular demand in 1788 and 1790. Her self-representation counteracts conservative codes of feminine virtue that gained fresh credence in the late 1780s, amid the resurgence of Rousseau's arguments against public women (Caine and Sluga 15). Sheldon represents a subversive, often defeminised public identity that coexists alongside her benevolent moral value system. Coghlan, writing at the peak of

[13] Amy Garnai. *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 137.
[14] Deborah Weiss. *The Female Philosopher and her Afterlives.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
[15] Claudia L. Johnson. *Equivocal Beings.* University of Chicago Press, 2009, xxii; Andrew McInnes. *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period.* Routledge, 2017, 4.

revolutionary action, harnesses Wollstonecraftian republican rights discourses and sentimental imagery to represent her moral and maternal subjectivity. Leeson combines all of these progressive elements with bold expressions of sexual desire. Felicity Nussbaum observes that, 'once a "fallen woman" speaks a textual "self," she becomes a subject — the perceiver instead of the perceived. In contrast with seeming to be a generic abstraction, she is an individual.'[16] The act of writing a memoir constitutes a particularly powerful statement of subjectivity for sex workers, women who were typically demonised according to boundaries of sympathy demarcated by everybody from conservative political writers to radical feminists in this period. These individuals are able to take ownership of their identities and experiences, thus defining themselves beyond the limitations of 'generic abstraction.'

The memoirists represent themselves as multidimensional moral, political and maternal subjects. They actively negotiate with patriarchal social pressures through sex work, and with discourses of the dominant culture when writing about their experiences. Dynamics of negotiation facilitate their survival, but also generate new forms of autonomy and subjectivity which were typically inaccessible to women in this period. Moreover, their texts give rise to new interpretations of female virtue, demonstrating that chastity is inessential, and can even be inhibiting, to the practice of living an authentic life. Crucially, the novelists and memoirists represent very different visions of prostitution. The latter group define themselves as courtesans, who experience forms of socioeconomic mobility closed off to the lower-ranking streetwalkers and mistresses of the novels. They reach a stage where they can 'have sex freely with whom they chose in return for money or goods,' despite experiencing episodes of poverty throughout their career.[17] The memoirists disseminate the feminist insights sex workers gain while — as Carol Queen puts it — 'labouring on the frontlines of patriarchy.'[18] However, representing sex workers as invariably impoverished, desperate, morally degraded victims is better suited to the novelists' political agendas. Depictions of financially empowered, authentic individuals would not help their cause. Thus, among women's writing on prostitution in the 1790s, this thesis recognises the 'complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond the dominant culture.'[19] Eva Pendleton argues that the forms of feminist opposition created within prostitution have been 'necessarily impure and draw from

[16] Felicity Nussbaum. *The Autobiographical Subject.* John Hopkins University Press, 1995, 186.
[17] Julie Peakman. *Lascivious Bodies: A Sexual History of the Eighteenth Century*. Atlantic Books, 2004, 74.
[18] Carol Queen. "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 125–135, 132.
[19] Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1975, 121.

the very systems of oppression [women] wish to overthrow.'[20] Pendleton associates sex workers' 'negotiations' with 'destabilisation... a partial and provisional strategy,' which more aptly describes the memoirists' activities, rather than the deliberate, dramatic, and clearly unfeasible act of 'overthrowing' a system in this eighteenth-century context (78). Demonstrating how the memoirists' negotiation processes 'expose [the] otherwise unseen histories' of women's lives in this period, I follow Sarah Knott in investigating 'what silences [there] are to be excavated, female subjectivities to be retrieved, and patterns of gendered experience to be discovered,' if one 'reads carefully among such traces of the age of revolutions.'[21] My study reads between the lines of texts by feminist figureheads, and beyond the stereotypes they impose upon sex workers. By placing the memoirists and novelists into conversation with one another, I recognise the importance of 'questioning past feminist assumptions,' and opening up these 'inconsistencies [to] critical re-evaluation.'[22] Analysing these texts through a modern feminist lens, while remaining alert to the particular challenges these authors faced in writing about prostitution, I show that some of the most transformative, fruitful feminist insights emerge from investigating elements of tension and discord between women's voices.

This thesis attends to the variety of genres through which women 'inserted themselves' into feminist debates (Knott 455). Sex workers' autobiographies have been consistently othered in modern scholarship under the category of 'scandalous memoirs,' grouped together on account of their authors' sexual transgressions rather than valued for their individual, innovative 'strategies for self-fashioning' and their engagement with different structures and modes.[23] As Caroline Breashears demonstrates, this practice suggests that patriarchal dichotomies of 'chaste' and 'unchaste' continue to govern the way we categorise women's writing ("Scandalous Categories" 188). While recognising the subversive, radical significance of scandal in these memoirs, this thesis follows Knott (455) and Breashears in disrupting the critically constructed generic categories which divide so-called Revolutionary feminist' texts from 'Scandalous Memoirs.'[24] I trace cross-genre connections between them, investigating how sex workers infuse their life writing with feminist sociopolitical commentary and modify a range of identifiable

[20] Eva Pendleton. "'Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-82, 78.
[21] Sarah Knott. "Female Liberty? Sentimental Gallantry, Republican Womanhood, and Rights Feminism in the Age of Revolutions." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2014, pp. 425-456, 455.
[22] Robin Runia. "Introduction." *The Future of Feminist Eighteenth Century Scholarship,* edited by Robin Runia, Routledge, 2018, pp. 1-9, 4.
[23] Caroline Breashears. "Scandalous Categories: Classifying the Memoirs of Unconventional Women." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2003, pp. 187-212, 188.
[24] Caroline Breashears. *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir.'* Palgrave, 2016, 86.

fictionalised tropes to represent their experiences. As Marilyn Francus notes, the specific use of the term 'memoir' has 'resonances of memory and recollection… allow[ing] for more digression and analysis,' rather than being 'chronologically bound.'[25] This fluid approach to life writing provides space for Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson to retrospectively connect their individual struggles to wider feminist concerns, in memoirs that 'discuss and prove sexuality's imbrication with social and public life.'[26] Meanwhile, the novelists engage in 'fictional rewritings of personal experiences.'[27] Maria in *The Wrongs of Woman* is a fictionalised self-portrait of Wollstonecraft, while Hays' *The Victim of Prejudice* is influenced by Wollstonecraft's struggles with social stigma.[28] While demonstrating how sex workers enrich women's rights discourses with fresh intersectional significance, I contend that more unites these texts than divides them.

My argument is informed by late twentieth and twenty first-century intersectional feminist political writing — most of which is written by authors who are or have been sex workers, including Molly Smith and Juno Mac, and Melissa Gira Grant — which intervenes in these debates and challenges these discourses. Inspired by Rebecca Bromwich and Monique Marie DeJong's study on modern-day sex workers' maternal experiences, I expand recent scholarship on unmarried motherhood and women's work in the eighteenth century by focusing on the lives and representations of women who were both mothers and sex workers.[29] I follow Kim F. Hall's 'strategically anachronistic' approach to investigating early modern texts; while embedding these memoirs and novels within their specific sociohistorical contexts, I contend that the complex, long-standing debates they invoke about prostitution are best examined with recourse to the perspectives of individuals who remain impacted by them in today's world.[30] Such an approach foregrounds the humanity of sex workers, resisting the

---

[25] Marilyn Francus. "Trying to Set the Record Straight: Alicia LaFanu, Frances Burney D'Arblay, and the Limits of Family Biography." *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century,* edited by Tanya Caldwell, Bucknell University Press, 2020, pp. 77-107, 85.

[26] Kathleen Lubey. *What pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest Since the Eighteenth Century.* Stanford University Press, 2022, 4.

[27] Tilottama Rajan. "Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1993, pp. 149-176, 149.

[28] Gina Luria Walker. *Mary Hays (1759 – 1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind.* Ashgate, 2006, 159.

[29] Rebecca Bromwich and Monique Marie DeJong, editors. *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work.* Demeter Press, 2015.
Jennie Batchelor. "Mothers and Others: Sexuality and Maternity in *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House* (1760)." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis, Routledge, 2012, pp. 157-170; Kate Gibson. *Illegitimacy, Family, and Stigma in England, 1660-1834.* Oxford University Press, 2022; Chelsea Phillips. *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage.* University of Delaware Press, 2022; Ellen Malenas Ledoux. *Labouring Mothers: Reproducing Women and Work in the Eighteenth Century.* University of Virginia Press, 2023, pp. 191-219.

[30] Kim F. Hall. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England.* Cornell University Press, 1995, 261.

notion that historical women's bodies 'take shape and form in a historical context and a rhetorical framework that necessarily divide[s] them from our current understanding of materiality and far from our lived experience.'[31] At the same time, I am conscious of my own socioeconomic distance from the issues surrounding prostitution confronted within this project. In Adrienne Rich's words, it is important to always 'recognise our location... name the ground we're coming from, the conditions we have taken for granted.'[32] My approach to analysing these novels and memoirs is both carefully grounded in the period of their publication, and conscious of the continued relevance these feminist debates have within the modern world.

We cannot access unmediated sex workers' voices from the eighteenth century. As I demonstrate, sex workers were ventriloquised for different agendas throughout this period, and there is no concrete guarantee of authenticity despite their explicit claims to it. There is, however, no compelling evidence to suggest that Sheldon, Coghlan, Leeson and Robinson did *not* write their own memoirs, especially as their authorship is supported by contemporary reviews and the research of historians. Moreover, they represent complex subjectivities and commentaries that range far beyond the trademarks of pornographic, sentimental or political works of the period. Coghlan's claim to have 'written [her memoirs] by herself,' has been contested due to patriarchal assumptions about *who* could be a political subject in the late eighteenth century (Coghlan, *frontispiece*). Breashears persuasively debunks the dominant theory that radical hack Charles Pigott edited or wrote them, demonstrating that it is rooted in historian Phillip Young's sexist 'hunch' (Breashears, *Women's Writing* 87) that Coghlan's radical commentary could only have been added by the 'heavy masculine hand of some flunked Tom Paine.'[33] I also show that the specific issues Coghlan discusses were widespread in political discourses of the period; there is no reason why she would not have written about them.[34] Moreover, Young's heavy dependence upon pre-existing, dehumanising stereotypes of sex workers — in which he reads Coghlan's memoirs through the lens of Daniel Defoe's misogynistic depictions, alluding to 'crafty whores' and reproducing Paine's claim that Revolutionary America was 'crowded with whores' operating as Tory spies — likely obstruct his

[31] Cynthia Richards. "History Without Trauma: Recovering Bodily Loss in the Eighteenth Century." *The Future of Feminist Scholarship: Beyond Recovery*, edited by Robin Runia, Routledge, 2018, pp. 13-30, 13.
[32] Adrienne Rich. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, Routledge, 2003, pp. 29-42, 34.
[33] Phillip Young. *Revolutionary Ladies*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, 168.
[34] Young cites Pigott and Coghlan's similar lamentations on the poverty of the Spitalfields Weavers. However, this concern was addressed within different radical texts in this period. See David Parker. *A Charitable Morsel of Unleavened Bread*. J. Matthews, 1793, 13; Anon. *Rights of Swine: An Address to the Poor*. Publisher Unknown, 1794, 3.

ability to imagine a sex worker controlling her own moral and political representation (Young 144, 158). Such imaginings of sex workers, adjoined to Young's sexist assumptions about female writers in this period, continue to shape ideas about who can have a political voice, and hence qualify as a political subject.

To conceptualise the ways in which sex workers were perceived and represented in eighteenth-century texts, I draw upon Melissa Gira Grant's concept of the 'prostitute imaginary': a discursive framework that functions to categorise and objectify sex workers, denying their individuality and subjectivity (Grant 4). As its name implies, it is a product of the patriarchal imagination, which allows sex workers to be easily 'imagined, located, treated, and controlled,' rather than being rooted in the complex, varied realities of women's experiences (Grant 15). Notably, the term 'prostitute' was originally a verb; to use it as a noun is to transform 'a behaviour (however occasional) into an identity' (Grant 15). The term 'sex worker' was coined by activist Carol Leigh, who explains: 'it acknowledges the work we do rather than defines us by our status... "sex work" has no shame, and neither do I.'[35] This rejection of shame and stigma, Grant's distinction between women's identities and their work, and indeed the feminist understanding that sex work *is* work, informs my decision to use the anachronistic term 'sex worker' to reference eighteenth-century women who exchange sexual labour for material resources. This strategy allows me to distinguish between the prostitute imaginary and the alternative subjectivities represented within these eighteenth-century texts and, equally, map points of convergence between them. The prostitute imaginary does not provide one single, fixed vision of who 'the prostitute' is. Rather, it is an unstable ideological depository, populated by a range of different 'characters,' which can be appropriated by different commentators for a variety of ideological or rhetorical purposes. Particularly within this eighteenth-century context, the term 'caricature' might be a more apt way to describe these images based on the one-dimensional, exaggerated tropes they invoke. I demonstrate that this depository changes and expands according to broader social, cultural and political shifts, and even dominant literary representations — the forces which shape perceptions of sex workers, and female sexuality more broadly. People project moral anxieties about women's sexual conduct, used to determine female identity and social worth, onto sex workers.

Despite a mid-century shift towards more sympathetic interpretations of sex workers' experiences, multiple narratives of prostitution coexisted throughout this period; misogynistic

[35] Carol Leigh. "Inventing Sex Work." *Whores and Other Feminists,* edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997), pp. 223-231, 230.

stereotypes persisted alongside, and within, the most sympathetic-seeming discourses (Lewis and Ellis 14). Anti-prostitution feminists have long drawn upon the prostitute imaginary to advance their causes. However sympathetic the novelists I discuss in this project seem, their appropriation of figures from the prostitute imaginary to illustrate the damaging impact of patriarchal oppression upon women demonstrates that they do not fully acknowledge sex workers' subjectivities. These texts illustrate Gail Pheterson's argument that sex workers are 'disdained and blamed not only by traditional laws, attitudes and psychological analyses, but also by progressive ideologies.'[36] They are persistently judged by misogynistic ideologies surrounding female 'honour and worth' (Pheterson, "Stigma" 51). This means that

> women who claim self-determination as prostitutes lose victim status and ideological sympathy. In other words, a whore is viewed either as a casualty of the system, or a collaborator within the system. Regardless, she is not considered as an ally in the struggle for survival and liberation (58).

The novelists' political arguments are not against prostitution specifically, but against a broader, dehumanising socioeconomic system of which sex workers are deemed to be prime 'casualties' and 'collaborators.' This results in sex workers' exclusion from their visions for moral and political progress, despite the feminist perspectives shared by the novelists and memoirists. While Wollstonecraft complicates these divisions through her characterisation of Jemima in *Wrongs,* this heroine is only capable of feminist resistance after her departure from prostitution — when she has been rehabilitated with the support of a middle-class protagonist who is deemed virtuous by Wollstonecraft's standards.

The memoirists also draw upon tropes of the prostitute imaginary, but in order to negotiate with them through self-aware, humorous endeavours to assert their own subjectivity and autonomy within this misogynistic system. Drawing upon identifiable literary tropes allows them to connect to their imagined audiences, and tap into a money-spinning market for 'prostitute narratives' and other scandalous texts.[37] From this perspective, their material circumstances arguably impinge upon their efforts to carve out nuanced textual subjectivities. Juliet H. Fawcett contends that some eighteenth-century life writers, especially celebrities of the period, engage in textual 'overexpression,' whereby they 'invite... and disrupt the public gaze, paradoxically, by enhancing or exaggerating the features through which they might be

[36] Gail Pheterson. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Context*, no. 37, 1993, pp. 39-64, 57.
[37] Laura Rosenthal. "Introduction." *Nightwalkers: Prostitute Narratives from the Eighteenth Century,* edited by Laura Rosenthal, Broadview, 2008, xi.

recognized and evaluated by their spectators.'[38] This performance 'secures the spectator's interest by seducing him or her into believing that the [writer's] true identity will be legible to anyone attempting to interpret it' (Fawcett 4). Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's 'overexpressions' play with stereotypes of sex workers to entertain their paying readership, but also to facilitate forms of feminist resistance which reflect their complex subjectivities beyond these tropes. To foreground the ways in which stereotypes of sex workers are modified and appropriated within the novels and memoirs, the following subsection introduces five dominant caricatures of the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary. I then demonstrate how these objectifying caricatures were appropriated within Wollstonecraft's foundational revolutionary feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). *Vindication* exemplifies how the most ostensibly progressive texts, as products of this social and political landscape, continued to reproduce caricatures of the prostitute imaginary.

Caricatures of the Eighteenth-Century Prostitute Imaginary

i) Conniving and Criminal

Particularly during the early eighteenth century, sex workers were generally demonised as 'moral criminals,' with little focus being placed upon the socioeconomic motivations for their actions in many pamphlets, prints and medical treatises (Lewis and Ellis 12). The obvious stigma surrounding their sexual promiscuity was combined with a fixation on the ostensibly insincere nature of their conduct, and associated with a range of criminal activities. Some sex workers were driven to forms of theft, including pickpocketing, out of economic necessity — fuelling convenient depictions of male victimhood at the hands of duplicitous 'harlots.'[39] For the author of *Satan's Harvest Home*, sex workers' crimes included 'theft, Homicide and Blasphemy... Lying, perjury [and] fraud' — all cited as evidence of their innate moral depravity.[40] Defoe's heroines, *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724), are ventriloquised to describe themselves as 'abominable creatures' and 'deceitful... she-devils' for manipulating men.[41]

---

[38] Julia H. Fawcett. *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1691-1801.* University of Michigan Press, 2016, 3.
[39] Sophie Carter. *Purchasing Power: Representing Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century English Popular Print Culture.* Ashgate, 2004, 41.
[40] Anon. *Satan's Harvest Home.* Publisher Unknown, 1749, 25 and 8
[41] Daniel Defoe. *The Life of Moll Flanders.* J. Brotherton, 1741, 169; Daniel Defoe. *Roxana: or, the Fortunate Mistress.* H. Slater, 1742, 316.

Similarly, bawds were reviled for 'tricking [themselves] up like... grave Matrons, the better to deceive,' a stereotype perpetuated in William Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) which featured the conniving Mother Needham.[42] Even in the 1790s, writers were still reproducing and appropriating 'Harlot's Progress' style trajectories across different modes and genres, generally featuring caricatured sex workers who fell from innocence into moral deviance, disease and death.[43] Prostitution became synonymous with deception. Sex workers were depicted masquerading as chaste women to procure innocent female victims, feigning desire for men to extort money, or otherwise disguising themselves in line with patriarchal ideals of feminine virtue and beauty.[44] This caricature frequently functioned to create narratives of innate female culpability, heightening misogynistic anxieties about the potential of sex workers to subvert patriarchal power dynamics, or blur conservative categories of womanhood.

ii) Corrupt and Contagious

Sex workers were frequently defined as being both morally and physically corrupt, liable to spread contagion amongst male clients or any impressionable women they may recruit into prostitution. For many misogynistic commentators, these traits manifested in visions of 'rapacious female monster[s], criminal... diseased and alcoholic' who were dehumanised as othered objects of disgust — particularly due to their departure from patriarchal codes of female virtue (Lewis and Ellis 10). Sex workers' bodies were often imagined to be literally and figuratively dirty, inscribed with markers of physical and moral disorder; the tell-tale signs of pox dominated caricatures of lower-status women in particular (*Harvest* 8).[45] These stereotypes were frequently accompanied by anxieties about hidden corruption. Medical writer John Marten described a seemingly 'well-complexion'd... saint[ly]' body which is composed of 'powder, patch and paint.'[46] This turns out to be a 'whited tomb [containing] rottenness and sin' owned by a 'crafty cheat, [a] decoy, a mere trepan / a signpost made to tempt a foolish man' (Marten 388). The sex worker is reduced to dehumanised, disparate parts, assembled to create the illusion of an enticing object. Her image artfully conceals the threat of deadly venereal

[42] Anon. *The Honest London Spy.* Edward Midwinter, 1725, ii and 4; William Hogarth. "A Harlot's Progress (1732)." *Royal Collection Trust.* Accessed 5 December 2023. www.rct.uk/collection/811512/a-harlots-progress

[43] See Richard Newton's illustration "Progress of a Woman of Pleasure (1794)." *The Whores of Yore.* Accessed 5 December 2023. thewhoresofyore.com/progress-of-a-woman-of-pleasure-by-8203richard-newton.html; Hannah More's religious tract *The Story of Sinful Sally.* J. Marshall, 1796.

[44] Henry Fielding. *The Masquerade.* J. Roberts, 1728.

[45] Noelle Gallagher. *Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal Disease in the Eighteenth-Century Imagination.* Yale University Press, 2018, 252 and 175.

[46] John Marten. *A Treatise of the Venereal Disease.* D. Leach, 1711, 388.

disease, a physical malady which functions as a cipher of innate moral corruption. The narrator of libertine catalogue *Harris' List* (1789) mockingly represents sex workers as 'benevolent,' yet corrupted receptacles of men's sexual energies, 'sacrificing their health, their lives... their reputations, at the altars of benevolence.'[47] Without prostitution, he argues, 'the stimulating energy implanted in [men] will work its way out: deprive it of food, will bars, bolts or authority, protect the honour of the daughter, or the pious matron's virtue?' (iii). Herein lies the notion that some women matter more than others, that sex workers' yielding, corrupted bodies should be 'sacrificed' to prevent the rape of the chaste — an ideology which bolsters misogynistic categories of feminine identity and worth.

iii) Pleasure-seeking and sexually voracious

Male-authored pornographic literature of the period was dominated by images of 'lusty whores' driven to prostitution by their voracious desires.[48] While these depictions could be used to fuel interpretations of sex workers' moral deviance in rejecting patriarchal codes of feminine modesty and chastity, some pornographic texts were charged with sympathetic-seeming undercurrents. They trace women's difficult histories, represent apparent experiences of sexual empowerment, and suggest that their sexual desires do not dictate their moral degradation. Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) ventriloquised the voice of its eponymous heroine, describing her experiences from the point of her 'seduction' to her career in prostitution in salacious sexual detail. Yet Fanny is depicted as a feeling, reflecting individual, capable of conduct that is 'devoid of the least art and founded on... sincere regard and esteem.'[49] Kathleen Lubey contends that other texts, especially the male-authored *Memoirs of Fanny Murray* (1758), recognise 'sex workers have expertise in the disposal of their bodies and therefore merit ethical consideration,' exposing the 'unjust ways women's social identities are conflated with their vaginal conditions, conditions not always under their governance' (Lubey 108). This scrutiny of the social codes that led sex workers to be defined by their work destabilised the grounds upon which they were caricatured and essentialised as moral deviants. Alistaire Tallent explicitly connects one male pornographer's decision to represent the heroine of French text *La Cauchoise, ou Mémoires d'une courtisane célèbre* (1787) as a 'speaking subject' to a 'desire for

[47] Anon. *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies*. H. Ranger, 1789, iii.
[48] Jessica Steinberg. "For Lust or Gain: Perceptions of Prostitutes in Eighteenth-Century London." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2016, pp. 702-713, 704.
[49] John Cleland. *Fanny Hill* vol II. G. Fenton, 1749, 222.

upheaval and subversion' around the revolutionary period.[50] But libertine texts were 'not necessarily liberationist' for women (Lewis and Ellis 10). Hearing sex workers' ventriloquised voices has radical potential, but those voices — and the bodies attached to them — were still being appropriated for male-centric agendas. Fundamentally, these texts still contained persistent dynamics of objectification, beneath a masquerade of subjectivity.

iv) The Magdalen

From the mid-century, the objectification of sex workers persisted in a different guise, shaped by sentimental notions of human sympathy which were increasingly channelled into social reform. In philanthropic tracts and sentimental novels, sex workers were framed as 'innocent victim[s]... objects of passive distress,' and 'appropriate objects of benevolent concern and reformation' for charitable middle-class people, epitomised through the foundation of the Magdalen House in 1758 (Lewis and Ellis 12). The Magdalen became a key figure of the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary. Documented in philanthropist and founder Jonas Hanway's plans, the institution was designed to 'induce women, who have lived as *prostitutes,* to forsake their evil course of life' through making them 'pious [and] industrious.'[51] According to the anonymous novelist of *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House* (1759), this institution encouraged sex workers to 'efface their guilt by sincere repentance and a blameless life,' reconfiguring them as sentimental 'objects of sympathy' if they atoned for their supposed moral crimes.[52] As Jennie Batchelor contends, it is important to distinguish *Histories'* attempts to instil penitents with a new kind of 'moral subjectivity' by giving a first-person voice to fictional Magdalens, from the dehumanising efforts of the institution itself to render these women 'spectacular objects.'[53] However, *Histories* also exposes the 'exclusionary logic that underpinned sentimental ideology: the differentiation of the deserving from the undeserving' (Batchelor, "Limits" 128). These sentimental depictions of sex workers had conservative roots, demarcating strict boundaries of sympathy on the basis of whether women could be regarded as 'worthy objects of compassion' (*Histories* 3). The noun 'object' is key here. Sex workers were

---

[50] Alistaire Tallent. "Listening to the Prostitute's Body: Subjectivity and Subversion in the Erotic Memoir Novels of Eighteenth-Century France." *Journal of The Western Society for French History*, vol. 33, 2005, pp. 211-233, 223.
[51] Jonas Hanway. *Thoughts on the Plan for a Magdalen-House for Repentant Prostitutes*. James Waugh, 1758, 3.
[52] Anon. *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*, edited by Jennie Batchelor and Megan Hiatt, Routledge, 2016, 4.
[53] Jennie Batchelor. "The Limits of Sympathy: *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*." *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations during the long eighteenth century*, edited by Carolyn D. Williams, Angela Escott and Louise Duckling, University of Delaware Press, 2010, pp. 117-136, 121.

ventriloquised as objects of moral concern who follow a formulaic script of victimhood and shame, their voices manipulated to the patronising tune of this sentimental writer's case for social reform.

As Batchelor demonstrates, the *Histories'* author defines Magdalens in opposition to the 'unforgiving portraits' of other labouring-class women' (Batchelor, "Limits" 128). In particular, their moral subjectivities are elevated above more experienced, shameless madams and sex workers. Such contrasts were critical to sentimental renderings of fallen women, reflected within Samuel Richardson's earlier effort (*Clarissa,* 1748) to differentiate Clarissa's 'pious, penitential chastity' from her othered companions in the brothel — that 'hellish orgy of immorality populated by monstrous prostitutes.'[54] The Magdalens in *Histories* are elevated above other 'females whose frailty had not been accompanied with half [their] extenuating circumstances,' and who boldly 'blazon forth with their crimes' (*Histories* 9). These 'females' are memoirists like courtesan Teresia Constantia Phillips, described by the *Histories*' novelist — using poet Richard Graves' words — as 'luscious heroines of [their] own romance' for positioning themselves as human subjects within their own life writings (Graves, qtd. in *Histories* 9).[55] These writers, who challenged patriarchal caricatures of moral depravity and abject shame, are forerunners to the memoirists examined in this thesis. However sympathetic *Histories* may seem, this text still forecasts the inevitable descent of sex workers into states of moral corruption, a trajectory which must be disrupted by the Magdalen House's shaming strategies.

v) The Unnatural Mother

In the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary, sex workers were frequently caricatured as unnatural mothers, partly due to their perceived rejection of 'natural' feminine embodiment and conduct. This was despite the fact that maternity was often a motivation behind, and an occupational hazard of prostitution (Bromwich and DeJong 21). *Harris' List* references sex workers who 'met with slips incidental to the *sports of nature'* by becoming pregnant.[56] However, the archaic belief that sex workers were infertile due to the 'overuse' of their womb persisted, lingering in anxieties about fertility-destroying venereal disease.[57] Sex worker mothers

[54] Markman Ellis. *The Politics of Sensibility*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, 169.
[55] Richard Graves. "The Heroines; or Modern Memoirs." *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes by Several Hands* vol. IV, J. Hughes, 1782, l.16.
[56] Anon. Harris' *List of Covent Garden Ladies*. H. Ranger, 1787, 64.
[57] Mary Fissell. "Remaking the Maternal Body in England, 1680–1730." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 26, no.1, 2017, pp. 114-139, 132; Tony Henderson. *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London*. Routledge, 2013, 168.

were generally deemed to be selfish rather than self-sacrificing. The protagonists of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* abandon their multiple children; Moll admits that 'affection was placed by nature in the hearts of mothers to their children,' and thus her decision to leave her child was 'unnatural, and regardless of [its] safety' (*Moll* 161). Hogarth depicts his subject's young son left alone as she lies dying of syphilis — cooking his own dinner, while scratching his flea-infested head. Meanwhile, Roxana suggests that a sex worker should endeavour to 'get rid of' her offspring, for 'she is certain to see them all hate her and be ashamed of her' (141). Alongside these neglectful caricatures, *Satan's Harvest Home* warns that mistresses use their children only for 'whore-craft and pretences' in securing keepers' property, disguising abortions as miscarriages when their plans are thwarted (47). Sex workers' maternal experiences were generally associated with narratives of neglect, irresponsibility, and ruthless schemes of deception.

A 'maternal mythology' was formed in this period, which, in Toni Bowers' words, rendered motherhood 'an affective, individual matter, separate from material, political and social considerations.'[58] Such ideals were championed within the conduct writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[59] Rousseau argued that women are 'not in their place' in the public domain, endorsing a chaste, self-sacrificing, and hands-on maternal ideal who was committed to her domestic duties (*Letter* 316). This vision exerted widespread cross-channel influence, appropriated and adapted for different agendas across the century.[60] These narratives of 'natural' motherhood erased the multiple ways in which experiences of mothering were shaped by women's external circumstances. Furthermore, standards of maternal virtue were inextricably bound to chastity.[61] Patriarchal society experienced 'discomfort with a definition of maternal virtue that include[d] active female sexuality,' and social norms made marriage 'the only means to economic viability for women, while placing it permanently out of reach for women with sexual experience' (Bowers, *Motherhood* 184 and 108). Early advocates of the Magdalen Charity did not anticipate childcare as a concern of its beneficiaries, who were separated from their children upon admission (Ledoux 193). Even in the *Histories*'

[58] Toni Bowers. *The Politics of Motherhood*. Cambridge University Press, 1996, 100.
[59] Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile; Or On Education*. Translated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom, Dartmouth College Press, 2010; Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Letter to D'Alembert and Writings for the Theatre.* Edited and translated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom, University Press of New England, 2004.
[60] Mary Seidman Trouille. *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau*. State University of New York Press, 1997, 18 and 26; Geraldine Meaney, Mary O'Dowd and Bernadette Whelan, *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714–1960*. Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp. 30-31.
[61] Ruth Perry. "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol 2, no. 2, 1991, pp. 204-234, 209.

sympathetic portraits of sex worker mothers, the sexualities of sentimental 'Magdalen-Madonna' heroines are tethered to their romantic feelings for seducers (Batchelor, "Mothers" pp.159-60). They must part with their children to enter the Magdalen House; motherhood is treated as a powerful symbol of feminine worth which is symbolically denied to sexually stigmatised women (Ledoux 195). Meanwhile, bawds were often represented as perverted mother-figures, housing vulnerable young women under the pretence of caring for them while tricking them into prostitution. Hogarth's Mother Needham caresses Moll as a sexual predator lurks in the background of *The Harlot's Progress*. The *Histories*' penitent Fanny is exploited by Madam Tent, who pretends to be her biological mother (*Histories* 99). This reflects contemporary anxieties about women's maternal failures, unfolding against the capitalist marketplace's destruction of domestic relationships (Batchelor, "Mothers" 163).

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*: The Political Objectification of Sex Workers

As a foundational treatise of British revolutionary feminism, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* set a powerful precedent for the political objectification of sex workers in feminist texts of the 1790s. Wollstonecraft's paradigm of female citizenship is rational, chaste, compassionate and maternal; she contextualises women's struggles to reach this standard of moral development within their state of dependence upon men. Wollstonecraft condemns the forms of 'common and legal prostitution' imposed upon women in a patriarchal society.[62] She argues that marrying for money falls into the second category; women from all classes are pressured to deceive or counterfeit passion for survival. At root, she contends, prostitution involves the catastrophic disconnection of women's minds from their bodies. Their internal desires and external actions are misaligned, amounting to a state of perpetual inauthenticity which is detrimental to virtue, because virtue depends on staying attuned to a divinely implanted internal monitor. Wollstonecraft critiques the prejudices that render women who are raped, or make sexual mistakes based on genuine love or passion, irredeemable — the notion that 'with chastity all is lost that is respectable' (*Vindication* 143). Wollstonecraft emphasises the importance of passion in women's moral development, condemning the fact that women are forbidden to learn or recover from passionate errors in this misogynistic system. With 'no means of support' after their fall, 'prostitution becomes [their] only refuge' (*Vindication* 143). She demonstrates

[62] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 229.

that women are driven into the sex trade by prejudice and economic necessity, resisting misogynistic narratives of inherent moral culpability.

Wollstonecraft's reliance upon dehumanising tropes from the prostitute imaginary to communicate these moral concerns reveal deep inconsistencies in her feminist arguments. She mobilises caricatures of impoverished streetwalkers and duplicitous higher-class harlots, an approach that perpetuates the stigmatisation of sex workers. Wollstonecraft contends that a woman's 'character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power' through prostitution, 'unless she possesses an uncommon portion of sense and loftiness of spirit' (143). Beyond patriarchal fixations on bodily purity, Wollstonecraft suggests that modesty is a 'purity of mind,' and therefore prostitution causes mental corruption (198). The 'poor wretch,' a Magdalen-esque source of sympathy, unavoidably becomes 'depraved.' This marks a shift between Wollstonecraft's characterisation of the helpless fallen woman and the experienced sex worker, who is transformed into a vicious criminal through this Harlot's Progress-style trajectory. To borrow Pheterson's terminology, Wollstonecraft signals the point where 'casualties' of the system become 'collaborators' ("Stigma" 58). Her portrait of the streetwalker relies on Magdalen-esque notions of pity, as well as tropes of contagion:

> The shameless behaviour of the prostitutes who infest the streets of London, raising alternate emotions of pity and disgust... trample on virgin bashfulness with a sort of bravado, and glorying in their shame, become more audaciously lewd than men, however depraved, to whom the sexual quality has not been gratuitously granted, ever appear to be. But these poor ignorant wretches never had any modesty to lose, when they consigned themselves to infamy; for modesty is a virtue not a quality. No, they were only bashful, shame-faced innocents; and losing their innocence, their shame-facedness was rudely brushed off; a virtue would have left some vestiges in the mind, had it been sacrificed to passion, to make us respect the grand ruin (100).

Alongside this misogynistic othering of sex workers as disease-ridden and potentially contagious, Wollstonecraft echoes contemporary concerns about the audacious, public visibility of prostitution. Marie Madeleine Jodin, French feminist author of *Vues législatives pour les femmes* (1790) similarly critiqued the revolting yet pitiful 'vermin who infect [the] streets' — sex workers defy Rousseauvian ideals of domestic womanhood, or 'the natural and social order,' by 'brazenly provoking the other sex.'[63] On one hand, the streetwalker is a disarming, pitiful figure of the prostitute imaginary, whose moral failings are more glaring than insidious. She is a casualty of the system, the kind that Grant describes as 'a fantasy of absolute degradation who is

[63] Marie Madeleine Jodin. "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, eds. Gordon and Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206, 189.

abandoned by all but those noble few who seek to rescue her' (Grant 15). This caricature boldly 'glories' in her transgressions, exposing her impoverished depravity on the streets. The sentimental bounds of sympathy are established here, shifting gear into Wollstonecraft's moralistic repulsion. Still, the way these women 'consign themselves to infamy' communicates a sense of weary inevitability in their dire socioeconomic circumstances — distanced from any sense of 'self-determination' (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). For Wollstonecraft, modesty is not a sexual quality, but a moral sentiment to be refined and developed. Deprived of a virtuous education, these once 'bashful, shame-faced innocents' cannot fortify themselves against moral depravity after the fall. Streetwalkers are essentially portrayed as casualties of the system, rather than collaborators within it (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58).

Wollstonecraft desires to 'descend from her height [and] mix in the throng,' refusing to be an 'unmoved spectator' by building sympathetic connections with others rather than judging them from afar (*Vindication* 187). She endorses Adam Smith's vision of forging sympathetic connections through imagination, 'bringing home... every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer.'[64] But in dehumanising terms, she declares that she cannot 'respect' streetwalkers, described as 'grand ruins,' out of the assumption that their falls did not result from love. This is not the wreck of virtue, she contends, but the devastating consequences of its deficiency. No virtuous education develops their faculties, and they wield no control over their circumstances after they fall. Streetwalkers become political objects within Wollstonecraft's argument, deprived of the subjectivity awarded to her middle-class moral standard. She condemns the restrictions imposed upon women's moral development but communicates her disdain at the results of their stifled agency, distinguishing her superior understanding of virtue on the basis of this streetwalker's moral failings. For Wollstonecraft, these figures are recognisable others; they openly bear the scars of misogynistic oppression, distortions that she struggles to represent without invoking classist moral narratives and well-worn, misogynistic caricatures of sex workers.

Caricatures of duplicitous, socially mobile sex workers lurk throughout *Vindication*, deployed to reinforce Wollstonecraft's concerns about female inauthenticity. Their traits are derived from stereotypes of conniving, theatrical sex workers in the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary. These tropes were also reflected in French Republican caricatures of higher-class courtesans and mistresses, embodiments of *ancien régime* corruption who engaged in insidious boudoir politics. Marie Antoinette was envisaged as the quintessential courtesan, a

[64] Adam Smith. *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. JJ. Tourneisen, 1793, 24.

dissimulating, sexually voracious individual who manipulated her husband to secure illicit forms of public power.[65] Wollstonecraft perceives such women as true collaborators within systems of patriarchal oppression. She defines 'cunning' as the most degrading feminine vice, activated as an 'instinct of nature to enable [women] to obtain indirectly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share' (*Vindication* 68, 260). Climbing elite society through 'serpentine wrigglings,' such women 'mount the tree of knowledge and only acquire sufficient to lead men astray' — operating with an insidious degree of self-interest (*Vindication* 260). This echoes French feminist Olympe de Gouges' caricatures of courtesans who, in the absence of legitimate rights, 'resort to the power of their charms' to seize illicit forms of control, deployed to confirm her theory that 'what force stole from [women], ruse returned.'[66] Unlike the streetwalker, this figure — sometimes referenced as 'the harlot' by Wollstonecraft — is not afforded a sympathy-inducing backstory in *Vindication.* She is a shadowy outsider to the chaste, middle-class family unit, who embodies and inspires corruptive artifice. The father 'debase[s] his sentiments by visiting the harlot,' prompting his wife to 'practice the arts of coquetry' to regain his attention (*Vindication* 68). Wollstonecraft differentiates the streetwalker's open, public corruption from the threatening invisibility of these higher-class harlots. She deploys them to condemn society's brand of feigned sensibility, where the 'celestial suffusion which only virtuous affections can give to the face' are replaced by 'the harlot's rouge' — a garish parody of authentic modesty (250). She observes that 'sensibility [is] excited and hackneyed in the ways of women, whose trade [is] vice; and allurement's wanton airs' (250). The purely sensual, monetised brand of sensibility they arouse falls short of genuine, refined sentiment. Wollstonecraft's duplicitous, masquerading caricature resonates with Marten's misogynistic visions of 'crafty cheats' wearing 'powder, patch and paint' to disguise their true corruption (Marten 388). She contends that, while this villainous figure may deceive men — apparently destabilising the gendered dynamics of predator and prey, master and slave — these temporary triumphs reflect her forced state of inauthenticity. Wollstonecraft critiques the ways in which middle and upper-class women are similarly drawn into this insincere conduct. As Julie McGonegal notes, Wollstonecraft seems most concerned about threats to the higher-ranking

[65] Lynn Hunt. "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution." *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen*, edited by Dena Goodman, Routledge, 2003, 117-138, 121.
[66] Olympe de Gouges. *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne.* Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts* (par 33). olympedegouges.eu/docs/declaration-des-droits-de-la-femme.pdf. Accessed 28 December 2023.

woman's 'respectability... [which] she is "owed" by virtue of her social class.'[67] Having argued that middle-class women 'appear to be in the most natural state' (*Vindication* 72), beyond high-society artifice and labouring-class economic pressures, she deploys caricatures of the prostitute imaginary to urge their improvement, and 'secure [their] entitlement to moral pre-eminence' (McGonegal 250). Wollstonecraft's caricatured sex workers seem incapable of forging sincere, sympathetic bonds with others, existing beyond her ideal feminist community of virtuous middle-class women.

Wollstonecraft also reproduces caricatures of sex workers as unnatural mothers, failing to fulfil their natural domestic callings. Images of self-sacrificing, devoted, breastfeeding mothers were synonymous with moral purity in conduct books, medical treatises and political discourses of the period.[68] French Republican politicians insisted upon women's rightful place in the home as hands-on maternal carers, inspired by Rousseau's 'naturalistic arguments against women's participation in the public sphere' (Trouille 279). Wollstonecraft established an alternative vision of 'progressive domesticity,' in which women's supposedly natural domestic skills — particularly as mothers — were framed as critical social duties, legitimising their equal rights as citizens.[69] She contended that women could not 'fulfil the peculiar duties of their sex, till they became enlightened citizens,' exercising authoritative roles as nurturing maternal educators who 'form their [children's] principles' with reason and care (*Vindication* 250). Such women of 'chastened dignity' manage to 'discharge the duties of their station,' especially breastfeeding, with only 'the luxury of cleanliness' — and, of course, a servant on hand to support this middle-class idyll (223). This desexualised, companionate wife prioritised her maternal offices over subservience to her husband's desires. Women could dispute the terms of marital subordination from this position of wisdom and agency. Wollstonecraft aligned such 'domestic affections' with the 'refreshing green everywhere scattered by nature,' as an antidote to *ancien régime* corruption (223). Women's natural maternal instincts, like their moral impulses, could only be strengthened and developed in a society that acknowledged their rights as equal subjects.

Sex workers, defined by tropes of unnatural motherhood and contagion in the prostitute imaginary, disrupt these visions of moral purification in *Vindication*. They exhibit

---

[67] Julie McGonegal. "Of Harlots and Housewives: A Feminist Materialist Critique of the Writings of Wollstonecraft." *Women's Writing*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347-361, 353.
[68] Hugh Smith. *Letters to Married Women, on Nursing and the Management of Children*. G. Kearsley, 1792, 65; Mary Jacobus. *First Things: Reading the Maternal Imaginary*. Routledge, 1995, 214.
[69] Gary Kelly. *Women, Writing and Revolution.* Oxford University Press, 1993, 101.

forms of moral and physical corruption which seemingly exclude them from the drive for revolutionary progress. The father does not only 'weaken his constitution by visiting the harlot,' but also 'forgets, in obeying the call of appetite, the purpose for which it was implanted' (68). This drives the insecure mother to 'neglect her children' by spending more time at her mirror than in the nursery (68). Wollstonecraft therefore perceives the 'harlot' as a diseased, homewrecking threat to the chaste, middle-class family unit. Her mercenary, non-reproductive sexuality becomes a force of physical and moral corruption, threatening to contaminate both husband and wife and thwarting the birth of future legitimate children. Sex workers' bodies were persistently associated with a 'chain of destruction' in this way, 'failing to engage in reproductive behaviour.'[70] Wollstonecraft imagines 'libertine' women who practice 'heartless intercourse' with the opposite sex, a group that implicitly includes sex workers, 'sacrificing [parental affection] to lasciviousness... destroy[ing] the embryo in the womb, or cast[ing] it off when born' (208). Appropriating Defoe-esque stereotypes of maternal failure, she suggests that these women refuse to develop their natural maternal impulses. She ultimately expresses classist concerns about the heinous conflation of sex workers and middle-class mothers: 'the woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and should not be treated like a prostitute' (142). Like French feminist writers of the revolutionary period, Wollstonecraft was concerned with the processes of social conditioning and socioeconomic factors that estranged women from their ideals of maternal civic duty (Jodin 178).[71] However, this argument depended upon stereotypes of defeminised, dehumanised sex workers who were ostensibly ill-equipped to feel and act according to their natural standards.

Wollstonecraft's reliance upon tropes of the prostitute imaginary in *Vindication* ultimately means that 'middle-class women's rights are afforded legitimacy through a fetishistic invocation of the prostitute' (McGonegal 350). Lena Halldenius worries that 'twenty-first century feminist awareness serves as a norm against which thinkers of the past are measured and against which they inevitably fail,' amounting to a 'huffiness' which neglects to appreciate 'what the battle was' for Wollstonecraft.[72] I contend that we can balance an awareness of Wollstonecraft's 'battle' with sensitivity to the enduring impact of her words on the women she professes to represent. We cannot know how contemporary sex workers responded to

[70] Miriam Borham-Puyal. "Jemima's Wrongs: Reading the female body in Mary Wollstonecraft's prostitute biography." *IJES*, vol 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 97-112, 102 and 106.
[71] Olympe de Gouges. *Le Cri du Sage, Par une Femme.* Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts* (par 11). olympedegouges.eu/docs/d.cri-du-sage.pdf. Accessed 28 December 2023.
[72] Lena Halldenius. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism.* Pickering and Chatto, 2015, 17.

Wollstonecraft — Sheldon's memoirs were published before *Vindication,* while Leeson and Coghlan do not engage explicitly with her work. However, Pheterson highlights the exclusionary impact of Wollstonecraft's representations: 'although she claimed to speak of the condition of the whole sex... she distinguished prostitutes from worthy women and portrayed them as "poor ignorant wretches."[73] Pheterson declares: 'two hundred years later, those wretches — those whores — are standing publicly with their sisters and demanding inclusion in the Vindication of the Rights of Women' (29). Activist Margo St James is credited as sparking this new '*Vindication* in 1973, when she became the first contemporary sex worker to speak out publicly for the rights of sex workers' (Pheterson, "History" vii). Pheterson's essay features in her anthology *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (1993). This collection contains sex workers' discussions of the social and legislative issues impacting their lives, while — as suggested by her modification of Wollstonecraft's title — powerfully asserting their inclusion as speaking subjects within feminist communities, and the importance of their feminist activism. Pheterson highlights Wollstonecraft's othering and segregation of sex workers via her invocation of 'wretched' caricatures from the prostitute imaginary. By implication, sex workers are not deemed 'worthy' of central concern, of respect, of nuanced representation — of being 'considered an ally in the struggle for survival and liberation' (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). While contextualising Wollstonecraft's sociopolitical motivations, it is important to acknowledge the impact and legacy of these feminist blind spots. Inherited by anti-prostitution commentators down the centuries, they persistently reproduce divisions between women (Mac and Smith 28). By locating caricatures of the prostitute imaginary in Wollstonecraft's foundational feminist treatise, I contextualise the memoirists' battles to assert their roles as active participants — rather than mere objects of pity and concern — within moral and political debates that persist far beyond the French revolutionary period.

Thesis structure

This project is divided into two overarching thematic sections, each containing two corresponding, chronologically structured chapters. In each section, I focus first on the memoirs of Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson, and then on the novels. I conclude with a coda focused on the latest text discussed in this thesis, Robinson's memoirs. This strategy allows me to plot the novels and memoirs against the specific ebbs and flows of their shifting social,

[73] Gail Pheterson. "Not Repeating History." *Vindication of the Rights of Whores*, edited by Gail Pheterson, Da Capo Press, 1993, pp. 3-32, 28.

historical and political contexts. Each thematic section examines how representations of prostitution are shaped by major social and political debates surrounding female virtue, which were high on radical agendas during the 1790s. Section I, encompassing Chapters One and Two, focuses on ideals of moral sentiment in relation to prostitution. In Chapter One, The 'Honest Whore': Defining Moral Subjectivity in the Memoirs of Sheldon, Coghlan, and Leeson,' I contend that these memoirists represent sex workers as multidimensional moral and political subjects, highlighting the coexistence of their authentic sincere and benevolent moral values alongside the theatrical demands of prostitution. In Chapter Two, 'I Became a Monster': Failures of Humanity in *Nature and Art*, The *Wrongs of Woman,* and *The Victim of Prejudice,'* I argue that Wollstonecraft, Inchbald and Hays define sex workers as morally degraded political objects rather than active participants in feminist progress; they invest sex with monumental moral significance, arguing that mercenary intercourse causes catastrophic moral damage.

Section II, encompassing Chapters Three and Four, focuses on ideals of maternal virtue in relation to prostitution. In Chapter Three, 'These Illegitimate Children Gave me Pleasure': Mother Work and Sex Work in the Memoirs of Ann Sheldon, Margaret Coghlan and Margaret Leeson,' I argue that the memoirists destabilise essentialist classifications of maternal identity and ideals of maternal care. By depicting the intimate workings of their domestic lives, they expose the broader social and legal structures that functioned to categorise and oppress (unchaste) working women in this period. In Chapter Four, 'Defining 'Natural' Motherhood: the Incompatibility of Maternal Virtue and Prostitution in *Nature and Art*, *Wrongs*, and *The Victim of Prejudice*,' I contend that Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays appropriate essentialist discourses on what it meant to be a 'natural' woman, and indeed a 'natural' mother during the late eighteenth century, mobilising sex workers in these debates — as caricatures of damaged femininity, or images of thwarted maternal instinct — to construct their individual cases for gender equality. My thesis ends with a coda, 'A Different kind of Sex Worker: Redefining Prostitution in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* (1801)' which argues that Robinson's autobiographical absences mark a new strategy for asserting her moral, maternal and political subjectivity beyond the 'overexpressions' of Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson, better suited for a hostile post-revolutionary context (Fawcett 174). Together, all of these sections trace an uneven history of women's writing on prostitution, unfolding over an intense period of feminism in flux.

Section I: Moral Sentiment

Chapter 1. The 'Honest Whore': Defining Moral Subjectivity in *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* (1787), *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan* (1794), and *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson* (1795-7)

Introduction

This chapter contends that the memoirs of Ann Sheldon, Margaret Coghlan and Margaret Leeson represent sex workers as multidimensional moral and political subjects, counteracting duplicitous, corruptive caricatures of the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary.[1] The memoirists document wide-ranging, tumultuous experiences in a misogynistic society, encompassing forms of sexual exploitation and erotic pleasure, poverty and socioeconomic mobility. In this process, they frame sincerity and benevolence as integral moral qualities, woven into a broader, intricate tapestry of female subjectivities which extend far beyond superficial standards of chastity.[2] Their self-representations are shaped, but not defined by their 'necessarily impure' negotiations with external patriarchal pressures.[3] Unfolding through their sexual interactions with men *and* their unique methods of textual self-representation, these negotiations facilitate new explorations of sex workers' identities and desires beyond dominant dynamics of objectification. The memoirists acknowledge the theatricality of prostitution, scrutinizing the complex interplay between interior self and outward action. But through courting caricatures of feminine identity, they also disrupt and redeploy these personas within broader schemes of feminist resistance. Rather than amounting to objectification or moral corruption, prostitution becomes a basis for negotiating new forms of subjectivity and autonomy in a patriarchal system. These writers elevate their genuine moral impulses, preserved *alongside* this work, above the performative virtues of respectable society. Moreover, they demonstrate that they deserve compassion from others, shifting the terms of debates about sex workers' moral inauthenticity onto condemning the artifice of those who exploit, judge and ostracise them. Challenging reductive stereotypes associated with so-called 'scandalous memoirs,' Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson imply that they are well equipped to intervene in

[1] Melissa Grant. *Playing the Whore*. Verso, 4.
[2] Although I use 'benevolence' broadly here, the memoirists refer to sentiments associated with 'doing good' for others using a variety of terms, including 'humanity,' 'compassion,' and 'kindness.' I gloss these specific terms as they arise within the texts.
[3] Eva Pendleton. "Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-82, 78.

moral and political debates surrounding female virtue that escalated during the late 1780s, intensifying amid the publication of feminist treatises during the early 1790s.[4] These writers wield the authority, as women battling to honour complimentary and conflicting desires, moral principles, and aspirations of autonomy, to critique the systems that pressure women into suppressing their authentic selves. They relay the vital intelligence sex workers obtain while 'labouring on the frontlines of patriarchy.'[5]

Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson undermine the moral baggage typically attached to insincere sexual performances, to suggest that their virtuous selves can be maintained alongside — or even enhanced by — their experiences of prostitution. They strive to be perceived as individuals who can feel and act according to their personal dictates, rather than dehumanised, morally corrupted objects who are controlled and defined exclusively by external forces. Radical commentators like Wollstonecraft continued to police women's sexual expression and perpetuate exclusionary classifications of female virtue, interpreting sex as 'intrinsically too special to be sold — something intimate reserved for meaningful relationships,' and a 'volatile substance for women [which] must be controlled or legitimised by an emotional connection.'[6] However, the memoirists defy the notion that prostitution necessitates the loss of women's 'essential selves,' mixing a range of different discourses to represent their multidimensional moral, and in Coghlan's case, political subjectivities (Mac and Smith 29). Their texts, like other life writings of this period, 'purport to allow a correspondence with the self, and, through sincerity... forge a privileged connection with other human beings.'[7] They elevate the importance of female authenticity, tapping into the radical notion that honouring one's true self could be a virtuous act.[8] Like many Scottish Enlightenment philosophers of the late eighteenth century, they endorse the notion that human morality has 'a voice within."[9] Understanding right and wrong is 'not a matter of dry calculation, but... anchored in our feelings' (Taylor 26), rather than external, institutional standards of virtue.[10] The memoirists endorse female-centric interpretations of libertinism, prioritising personal pleasure. They yoke this to sincerity, cultivating the 'free expression of emotion and sexuality' and the 'celebration of passion and

[4] Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History 1780-1920.* Continuum, 2004, 15.
[5] Carol Queen. "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 119-24, 132.
[6] Juno Mac and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018, 29.
[7] Kerry Sinanan and Tim Milnes. "Introduction." *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity*, edited by Kerry Sinanan and Tim Milnes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 1- 30, 13.
[8] Chris Jones. *Radical Sensibility.* Routledge, 1993, 13.
[9] Charles Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Harvard University Press, 26.
[10] Geoffrey Hartman. *Scars of the Sprit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity.* St Martin's Press, 2002, viii.

honesty.'[11] They juxtapose this with the forms of deceit condoned by a chastity-obsessed patriarchal society. In this sense, erotic self-expression reflects a 'truth of identity, a subjective authenticity tied to their desire' with radical implications of rallying against oppressive standards of feminine behaviour.[12] The memoirists represent their libertine exploits coexisting alongside steadfast principles of sincerity and benevolence; their sexual expression bolsters these moral and sociopolitical commentaries. Evidently, the moral 'selves' they represent are also performative. By appealing to their readers' trust and sympathy, Leeson, Coghlan and Sheldon strive to rehabilitate their public images beyond the stereotypes imposed upon them. Rather than being accounts of moral perfection, these memoirs offer new interpretations of what it means for a woman to live authentically within a misogynistic system — playing with its codes of feminine identity, while engaging in broader schemes of resistance against its hypocrisies and constraints.

My analysis orders the memoirs chronologically. First, I examine Sheldon's playful reworking of both the Harlot's Progress trajectory, and Rousseauvian codes of feminine modesty and subservience that were re-emphasised within radical and conservative discourses of the late 1780s (Caine and Sluga 15). Through comic scenes of rebellion and violence, she represents a subversive, often defeminised identity that coexists alongside her moral value system of sincerity and benevolence. Coghlan, a radical writing at the height of revolutionary action, deploys sentimental and libertine tropes to connect her experiences to the broader political climate of the 1790s. She elevates her integrity and care for others above the corrupt establishment that constrains her, deploying prostitution as a basis for feminist sociopolitical reflection and Republican sentiment. Coghlan's memoirs expand the feminist politics of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* (published two years prior) to accommodate the voices and rights of sex workers. Writing as an older woman, Leeson implicitly filters past experiences in the 1770s and 1780s through the radical context of her publication. Published a year after the 1794 Treason Trials, Leeson's text articulates a potentially inflammatory resistance against Ireland's Protestant establishment. She deploys a range of sentimental, comic, libertine and religious tropes to reinforce her moral and sexual subjectivity, connecting her individual gendered struggles to broader systemic issues surrounding patriarchal tyranny and the limits of sympathy towards fallen women. Sexual pleasure is high on Leeson's agenda, intensifying the radicalism

[11] Laura Linker identifies a similar kind of female-centric 'Natural Libertinism' within Delarivier Manley's 1714 novel *The Adventures of Rivella*. See Linker's *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730.* Routledge, 2016, 98.
[12] Kathleen Lubey. *What pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest Since the Eighteenth Century.* Stanford University Press, 2022, 10.

of a text punctuated with passages of feminist polemic. The memoirists' perspectives are powerful at a period in which the sexual reputations of female authors were routinely scrutinized and weaponised against them. Even Wollstonecraft reinforced 'sexual limitations' within feminist rights discourses, continuing to incorporate chastity and modesty within her moral value system.[13] Thus, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson offer bold new interpretations of what feminist resistance can look like, and who can participate in it.

Part I: *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon*

In her preface, Sheldon initially assumes the role of a sincere moral subject, challenging caricatures of dissimulation that dominated the prostitute imaginary and bled into dominant literary stereotypes. She attempts to forge an emotional contract with her imagined readership. Their acceptance of her textual representation depends upon her expectations of their trust and sympathy. Sheldon proclaims: 'I submit myself such as I have been... to the benevolent attention of the public.'[14] This past 'self' may not fulfil patriarchal ideals of feminine virtue, but she insists upon the moral value of the truths she tells about it. She individualises her identity and experiences as a suffering subject who details her 'melancholy truths' (1), encouraging a 'humane' and 'benevolent' response to them (5). The adjective 'humane' gained its modern connotations of sympathy and benevolence in the eighteenth-century.[15] Drawing upon this sentimental moral framework to present her 'interesting' memoirs, Sheldon reflects:

> Public curiosity has of late manifested a very considerable gratification in Memoirs similar to those which I have now published; and, without entering upon an invidious comparison... [with] others... I make a solemn and unequivocal declaration, that the contents of these volumes are absolutely true (4).

Sheldon knows that her work will be lumped into a broad generic category: memoirs attributed to sexually transgressive women in this period, often of dubious authorship, which were loaded with the additional moral stigma attached to sex workers. Fundamentally, the story of a middle-class English girl being groomed by a bawd, raped by an aristocrat, embarking on a debaucherous career in prostitution, and struggling in poverty as she ages, would have been interpreted as a typical Harlot's Progress. Mid-century critics of sexually transgressive women's

[13] Sarah Knott. "Female Liberty? Sentimental Gallantry, Republican Womanhood, and Rights Feminism in the Age of Revolutions." *The William and Mary Quarterly,* vol. 71, no. 3, 2014, pp. 425- 456, 428.
[14] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol I. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 5
[15] R.F Brissenden. *Virtue in Distress*. Macmillan, 1974, 32.

memoirs wondered whether they should 'believe these Apologists,' questioning the validity of 'fatal causes' they blame for their downfall and accusing them of manipulating others into 'pity[ing] their Misfortunes.[16] Such works were frequently dismissed as accounts of moral corruption, veiled by textual performances of penitence — interpreted as extensions of the duplicitous figures who penned them. Sheldon deploys a strategy of image rehabilitation modelled by mid-century courtesan Teresia Constantia Phillips, appearing to accept conservative standards of Magdalen-esque shame through initially describing her narrative as an 'Apology' (*Sheldon* I 1).[17] Invoking the classical interpretation of 'apology' as defence, this performance of shame could disarm critics while still 'vindicating the apologist from blame [and]... attempt[ing] to escape the moral and social system that requires that very explanation' (Nussbaum 181). As I show, Sheldon swiftly undercuts her penitent image by courting unapologetic stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary, striving to entertain rather than moralise, while representing an individual who is far more subversive and even violent in her resistance against a patriarchal system. But at this pivotal point of capturing her readers' sympathies, Sheldon resists the typecasting of sexually transgressive female memoirists. She carves out a new role as a sincere, suffering moral subject, who deserves a fair literary hearing from an open-minded readership.

While Sheldon foregrounds her sincerity as a redeeming, non-sexual quality, one critic conflated it with her sexual immorality. They describe her work as 'the genuine memoirs of a prostitute who... appears to have intrigued with almost every known character for sixteen years back, of whom she speaks with the utmost freedom,' and as 'one of those publications which cannot fail of increasing the corrupt manners of the age.'[18] Sheldon's 'free' speech is interpreted only as a form of libertine self-expression. Her promiscuity, and her openness in describing it, are used to define her moral degradation. This text is perceived as a corrupt object, an extension of the 'prostitute' herself. Sheldon attempts to counteract these dehumanising social and generic stereotypes. She assumes the role of a moral advisor, engaged in a new form of conduct writing for the benefit of 'unexperienced' young girls and potential male seducers (*Sheldon I* 4). She argues that her memoirs are motivated by concerns about female welfare, a 'profitable source of instruction' for this imagined readership (4). They were advertised as taking 'every opportunity... which is not common in works of this period, of giving a moral

[16] Anonymous letter to Lady Vane, qtd. by Felicity Nussbaum. *The Autobiographical Subject.* John Hopkins University Press, 1995, 184.
[17] Teresia Constantia Phillips. *An Apology for the Conduct of Mrs T.C. Phillips.* Printed for the author, 1748, Frontispiece.
[18] "Account of New Books and Pamphlets." *Town and Country Magazine*, 20, 1788, 268.

tendency to the circumstances which are related.'[19] This strategy was deployed in the mid-century memoirs of alleged adulteresses Laetitia Pilkington and Lady Vane, whose self-representations were marketed 'not as an example, but a warning' to young women.[20] Sheldon initially declares that the 'loss of female virtue includes the loss of everything that can make female life honourable and happy' (2), reproducing patriarchal fears about women losing their 'essential selves' through sexual transgression (Mac and Smith 29). Conduct book writer Charles Allen conflated female worth with chastity by warning women to conserve 'a treasure, which is so precious in the possession, and so irrecoverable when lost.'[21] However, Sheldon centres herself as a speaking subject with a superior degree of knowledge and experience. She confesses to have 'known the highest splendour of elegant prostitution... experienced all the giddy pleasure that mingles with the mercenary gratification of libidinous passion,' culminating in 'neglect and scorn and poverty' (2). By explicitly situating herself in this world, Sheldon candidly confronts her sexual experiences rather than omitting them, or allowing them to define her moral degradation. She laments: 'when the beauty which tempted the spoiler begins to decay, admiration turns to new objects; passion seeks for other sources of gratification, and neglect and scorn, and poverty succeed' (4). Sheldon compels 'unreflecting men... to feel the moment of reflection,' and 'stop [their] ruinous career' (4). She critiques their casual commodification and disposal of female 'objects,' placing male exploitation, not female moral fault, at the origins of the Harlot's Progress. She disrupts this familiar trajectory, which plots the culpable, objectified sex worker within various stages of degradation, by carving out a new subjectivity for herself beyond it. Instead of succumbing to this progress and being silenced by shame, she is well-equipped to demonstrate women's suffering under sexual double standards, critique this mistreatment, and guide others accordingly. She suggests that women should be 'more interested in the things [sex workers] see, hear and experience' on the 'frontlines of patriarchy' (Queen 132).

Sheldon's account of her rape seemingly follows the formulaic beginnings of the Harlot's Progress, invoking familiar conservative renderings of fallen women as passive objects of moral concern. But both through the actions she represents in her text and the way she relates them, Sheldon engages in the 'mimetic play' that Pendleton describes, deploying 'an

[19] "Advertisements and Notices." *World*, 27 March, 1788. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001503878/BBCN?u=new_itw&sid=bookmark-BBCN&xid=a827e879. Accessed 29 Nov. 2023.
[20] Caroline Breashears. *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir.*' Palgrave, 2016, 49; Pilkington, qtd. by Breashears 4.
[21] Charles Allen. *The Polite Lady.* Newberry and Carnan, 1769, 191.

endless repetition of heteronormative gender codes for economic gain' (Pendleton 79). Femininity becomes 'an economic tool... exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings (79). Sheldon plays with fictionality. Her self-conscious representation of these experiences implicitly critiques both the textual performance expected from her in recounting them, and the social performances she was written into as a young middle-class woman, against her authentic desires. She is 'about fifteen years of age' at the point of her rape, when many girls were deemed particularly vulnerable (Sheldon *I* 7) — as portrayed in *Pamela, Fanny Hill*, and *Histories*. One commentator predicted that 'a young creature is perhaps debauch'd at fifteen, soon abandoned, quickly common, as quickly diseas'd and as quickly loathsome.'[22] Sheldon writes: 'as I may now be now supposed to speak of the beauty which undid me, without vanity, I shall add, that I was very much admired' (7). She seems aware of the formula her characterisation should follow, and the victim-blaming tropes she is expected to perpetuate. This retrospective commentary resists her crystallisation into a tempting object for male consumption, the cause of her own downfall. Instead, Sheldon partly attributes her fall to her middle-class upbringing as a naïve, helpless young woman, locked away and controlled by her family. She notes that she 'most certainly would have returned home,' had not her mother 'suggested... a design of marrying [her] to a person who was an object of [her] utter detestation' (83). To this, she 'owes all the succeeding disgrace and misery of [her] life' (83). Sheldon's subjectivity is denied both within the middle-class society she inhabits, and the underworld she is drawn into. Her 'innocent mind' and 'feeble reason' are exploited by a Mother Needham-esque 'old sorceress' who 'flatters [her] foolish wishes' and 'vanity' with promises of finery (pp. 18-19). She is unknowingly absorbed into the theatrics of the brothel she inhabits, full of duplicitous stock characters who pull her into a Pamela / Mr-B style performance of virtuous resistance. She is 'desired to perform' a servant's offices for sexual predators (25), who test her 'uncorrupted mind' and make false promises of marriage (38). Walsingham leaves a copy of the adulteress Lady Vane's memoirs for her to read before raping her, foreshadowing the transgressive social *and* generic performances imposed upon her (112). Sheldon reflects upon her treatment as a voiceless commodity, using military metaphor — common within seduction narratives of the period — to represent her 'cries' being silenced in a 'conflict [which] was unequal' (122).[23] Appropriating tropes and stereotypes surrounding female seduction, Sheldon

[22] Anon, qtd. by Maja Mechant. "The Social Profiles of Prostitutes." *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s,* edited by Magaly Rodriguez Garcia et al, Brill Publishers, 2017, pp. 833-860, 847

[23] M. John Cardwell. "The Rake as Military Strategist: *Clarissa* and Eighteenth-Century Warfare." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol 19, no. 1, 2006, pp. 153-180, 154.

represents a girl groomed into artifice, objectified and unwittingly written into exploitative sexual performances. She injects the stereotypical Harlot's Progress with subtle criticism of the external forces that dictate female inauthenticity.

Sheldon soon learns to perceive femininity as an 'economic tool' which can be performed upon her own terms (Pendleton 79). Theatricality becomes integral to her narrative, but she insists upon the preservation of her authentic self despite the performative work her profession demands. Walsingham initially controls her image according to his own gaze. Selecting her mercer, he dresses her like a doll. He also dictates her whereabouts and company to prevent external 'contamination' (*Sheldon I* 163). Sheldon briefly humours his Rousseauvian feminine ideals of a wife-like 'retired life' (215). However, she covertly rejects this inauthentic arrangement; it is incongruous to her desires. Having been typecast as a sexual object and deceived by her keeper's performances of romantic devotion, she begins to conceptualise sexual relationships beyond authentic emotional attachment. She represents her ability to negotiate with men's desires, and objectify *them* based on their wealth. 'Slender, transitory objects' (3) — clothes, jewellery, carriages — become essential components of her business model, generating her display of 'superior quality' in elite prostitution (185). Moral and sentimental discourses are supplanted by inventories of material acquisitions, and comic anecdotes of clients' humiliations. Despite retrospectively condemning her own 'extravagant gaiety,' Sheldon consistently describes the power she harnesses through 'mimetic play' with codes of feminine identity (Pendleton 79).[24] Fuelled by her 'love of dress and pleasure,' Sheldon's 'splendid appearance' is an elaborate show, purposefully designed to attract wealthy keepers (*Sheldon* II 50). Notwithstanding her love for Walsingham in later years, most men are valued and disposed of according to their degrees of generosity. She entertains Sir Lester behind her controlling keeper's back: 'I received from his generous attachment, upwards of a hundred pounds during the first week of my acquaintance with the enamoured little knight' (*Sheldon* I 183). This diminutive address signals a shift in gendered power dynamics. She becomes an agent in pursuit of new connections, destabilising the misogynistic sexual economy that first ensnared her. As Pendleton notes, making men pay for sex can be 'subversive,' as it 'reverses the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women's bodies' (79). Sheldon borrows Lester's carriage to 'present [her] figure in its new exalted state to the gazers of Hyde Park — where [she is] surrounded by Lord Barrymore... [and] several other men of

[24] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Mrs Ann Sheldon* vol II. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 186.

fashion,' who deliver 'high flown compliments, familiar flattery, proposals for assignations' (*Sheldon* I 184). She literally elevates herself above these 'gazers,' recognising their objectification of her body, but harnessing their attraction to secure a new form of socioeconomic control over her situation. She strategically uses Lester to promote herself to other, wealthier clients. Sheldon's performances draw from the mechanisms of oppression she ultimately destabilises (Pendleton 81). Feminist writer Virginie Despentes similarly describes playing her 'femininity game' through prostitution, during the 1990s; she felt empowered by sexual performances that 'belonged to [her] alone' and which were a 'crucial step in [her] reconstruction' after she was raped.'[25] Sheldon's performances also signify her reclamation of sexual agency beyond the exploitation she suffers during her early years in a misogynistic system.

Sheldon regularly leans into stereotypes of conniving, mercenary sex workers which dominated eighteenth-century prostitute imaginaries. Through comic scenes of manipulating and humiliating clients, she boosts the entertainment value and marketability of her memoirs, playing into the salacious expectations of her imagined readership. However, she implicitly reframes these episodes as important examples of her impure resistance against the exploitative codes of a patriarchal sexual economy. In one farcical anecdote, two men, Lester and Standish, vie for her attention. Lester hides from Standish beneath her sofa — upon which Standish unwittingly seats himself to persuade her into his 'sole protection,' calling Lester 'an old, shrivelled, carbuncled, skinny, herring-gutted fellow,' while attempting to assault the resistant Sheldon (*Sheldon* I 192). Lester later 'creeps' out, almost 'crushed,' and having 'lain, in filth and misery, for near three hours... wretched and melancholy' (192). Sheldon vividly represents his humiliation, documenting each degrading, comic insult. He becomes a pathetic object, subordinated at her feet. She relishes Standish's ignorance and Lester's shame, securing both of their financial offerings. Lester begs her to stay quiet, 'lest he should become [a] laughing stock,' before Sheldon 'laughs herself almost into hysterics at a scene, which has not a parallel in all the variety of our stage' (192). Sheldon disregards his wishes in relaying this episode to a widespread literary audience. Her theatrical metaphor is revealing; she showcases the humiliation of aristocratic 'sirs' who have since discarded her. Playing men against one another is a key strategy for Sheldon's success in elite prostitution. Laughing in the face of this exploitative system, she reasserts her subjectivity and autonomy beyond the misogynistic codes of female sexual worth that men now use to devalue and dismiss her.

[25] Virginie Despentes. *King Kong Theory.* Translated by Frank Wynne. Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020, 61, 67.

Sheldon's performances frequently involve clear assertions of her sexual subjectivity, through implementing personal boundaries of bodily access. Sincere terms of business are essential to Sheldon's exchange, as in any working contract. She anticipates modern feminist understandings of prostitution as *work*, which does not violate her 'essential self' (Mac and Smith 29). This is reflected through her account of posing for an artist, Mr P, in 'the character of a Magdalen,' for a portrait which will be 'exhibit[ed] at the Royal Academy.'[26] The madam of the brothel she resides in suggests that her image 'being hung in the exhibition might... make [her] fortune' (*Sheldon* IV 105). Sheldon, for whom money is 'always a powerful inducement,' interprets this as a profitable business strategy (104). Such exhibitions were 'crucibles of celebrity,' which helped 'generate, shape and sustain the reputations of a wide range of public figures,' particularly courtesans.[27] Alan Barnes and Stephen Leach identify 'Mr P' as Matthew William Peters, and the portrait as *Sylvia, A Courtesan* (1778).[28]

Fig 1: *Sylvia, A Courtesan* by *The Revd Matthew William Peters.*[29]

Sheldon stares boldly out of the painting, hand placed beneath a bodice that is drawn down to reveal her breasts; she thus appears to expose and showcase her own body. Her head is tilted to one side, as though assessing her onlooker. If anything, she appears to gaze *back*. She wryly

[26] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol IV. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 104.
[27] Mark Hallet. "Reynolds, Celebrity and the Exhibition Space." *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity,* edited by Martin Postle, Tate Publishing, 2005, pp. 35-49, 35.
[28] Alan Barnes and Stephen Leach. "'Sylvia' (1778) by the Revd Matthew William Peters." *The British Art Journal,* vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 68-71, 70.
[29] Matthew William Peters. *"Sylvia, A Courtesan.* C.1777." *National Gallery of Ireland.* http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/8175/sylvia-a-courtesan?ctx=122a46dc-4692-4995-8aba-6d73d4f4e95d&idx=8 Accessed 1 December 2023.

notes in her memoirs that she was by 'no means an improper model,' for 'every part of the character, but the repentant one' (105). This performance is designed to tantalise the libertine male gaze; she is simultaneously pure and impure, reformed and seductive. Sheldon subverts and capitalises upon this sentimental stock figure from the prostitute imaginary, teasing her own unapologetic sexual licence. However, Sheldon recalls that Lord Grosvenor, a politician who has pursued her for some time, interrupts her sitting. She writes:

> I was so extremely displeased with the painter for suffering any person whatever to come into the room to see me in such a dress, or rather such an undress, that I took myself away, leaving the picture half finished... [with a] strain of reproach which I levelled at him for what I conceived, and I believe, with great justice, a purposed arrangement between him and Lord Grosvenor to expose me in such a situation to the latter (105).

Sheldon's performance does not dictate her sexual availability. She is not an object for Grosvenor to gaze upon, evaluate, and claim for his keeping. She challenges what she perceives as a deceptive contract between these men to secure Grosvenor's dominion, and only resumes sitting in his absence. This performance involves an eroticised image rather than sex itself, but Sheldon's boundaries function to destabilise, in Pendleton's words, 'the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women's bodies' (Pendleton 79). Disrupting this covert scheme constitutes an assertion of her subjectivity as a performer, and her role as an active negotiator within her sexual contracts. She refuses to be crystallised into a passive object of male consumption or accept broader cultural conceptions of sex workers as public property.[30] Peters failed to pay Sheldon, but her image would have reached a wide audience at the Royal Academy (Barnes and Leach 70). *Sylvia* could easily be interpreted as a vision of female sexual objectification, but Sheldon represents the negotiation process behind this portrait. She endeavoured to maintain her subjectivity in a business transaction designed to cement her celebrity, setting her own boundaries against aristocratic male entitlement.

In contrast, Sheldon associates forced performances of modesty and chastity with inauthenticity and oppression. Throughout her memoirs, she regularly references — and sometimes castigates — her 'rambling' or 'truant disposition.'[31] She cannot deny the impulses of this 'wayward truant self,' a free-spirited libertine who rejects male jurisdiction and embraces personal pleasure, both in erotic terms and through the action-packed adventures she engages

[30] *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies.* H. Ranger, 1789, iii.
[31] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol III. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 107 and 195.

in throughout her memoirs.[32] She leans into stereotypes of wild, 'roaming' sex workers, objects of titillation in male pornography, but modifies them to assert the female-centric freedoms that this lifestyle brings her.[33] These wandering metaphors represent her authentic drive to reject the gendered roles she is expected to follow, even as a kept woman. Sheldon's spirited recollections of these transgressions undermine the initial packaging of her memoirs as a source of moral instruction. However, Walsingham repeatedly compels Sheldon to act as a 'prudent [and] retired' wife; his support depends on her 'resigning [her]self to that manner of life which would be most agreeable to him' (73). Despite her fleeting performances in this role, and her description of Walsingham as her 'first... and best friend,' sentimental discourses of affection jostle with the language of tyranny (*Sheldon* II pp. 129-30). Sheldon is repeatedly 'nettled by his dictatorial impertinence' (*Sheldon* II 216), stressing her right to independence as an unmarried woman who is not 'debarred from the liberty which formed the happiness of [her] life' (131). When Walsingham's wife discovers his infidelity, he delivers an ultimatum. Sheldon must marry, or he will place her in a French convent. She emphasises that neither option is 'in union with the temper of [her] mind' (148). She argues that, since he raped her, and prevented her from 'marrying a man of fortune with whom she could have been happy,' he is 'the last person... who should now even hint at [her] becoming a votary to hymen' (148). Here, she confronts one of the biggest paradoxes of her memoirs, indicative of the system she must survive in: her emotional and financial bond with this controlling, abusive man, which endures throughout her career. Sheldon's focus upon her own mentality amidst his dehumanising schemes constitutes a powerful declaration of her subjectivity. By refusing to censor his name, she now reveals his corruption. She accepts marriage as the lesser of 'two evils,' to a sailor whom Walsingham — a naval captain — will keep at sea (150). This way, he can continue their relationship. Sheldon bitterly exposes this method of 'saving his honour, and deceiving his lady' (pp. 151-2). Reversing misogynistic narratives of dissimulating sex workers and male victims, she condemns his performance of honour in a faithless marriage. While she persistently reinforces her enduring emotional connection to Walsingham, distinguished from her other sexual transactions, Sheldon elevates her emotional authenticity above the unsanctioned hypocrisy of this aristocratic keeper and the high-society façade he represents.

[32] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol II. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 154.

[33] This term is deployed in the libertine text *Nocturnal Revels* to describe women who are compelled to become promiscuous: 'roaming at large,' after they are abandoned by keepers. See *Nocturnal Revels* vol. II. M. Goadby, 1779, 72 and 87. Sheldon strives to 'ramble' on her own terms, beyond Walsingham's jurisdiction.

Prostitution ultimately cultivates subjectivity and independence for Sheldon, beyond the dehumanising role dictated by her marriage. Her memoirs scrutinize the emotional and moral cost of living inauthentically, examining the conflict between her internal desires and the performance of wifehood determined by external male pressures. She notes that everything 'was settled for the marriage, but [her] wayward truant self' (*Sheldon* II 154). Although she was 'dressed out in all the lily-white semblance of virgin innocence, [she was] on the point of... returning home, an unsanctified and independent woman' (154). Sheldon's costume of bridal purity cannot disguise her restless inner drive for autonomy. Appropriating religious discourses typically associated with the *Histories*' Magdalens, she implies that marriage would absolve her sins. However, the 'sanctified' state of wifehood constitutes an undesirable condition of dependence upon her husband, Benedict Archer. Repurposing this language for feminist ends, she implies that such marriages are sinful because they enforce female subordination and inauthenticity: 'of my marriage I most sincerely repented' (*Sheldon* II 155). Notably, Sheldon never explicitly 'repents' prostitution. Despite Walsingham's episodes of control, prostitution gives rein to her authentic libertine subjecthood, whereas marriage confines her to the fixed role of a commodified wife. As Lubey notes, the earlier, male-authored pornographic text *Celebrated Courtesans* (1780) 'generates commentary on marriage as a form of sexual exploitation' (108), by suggesting that actress Sophia Baddeley's marriage 'prostitute[d] her mind and person' (quoting *Celebrated Courtesans* 108). However, Sheldon makes the radical suggestion that prostitution is preferable to marriage, not comparable to it. Under coverture laws, husband and wife were 'one person in law,' as 'the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.'[34] Attempting to implement these restrictions, Archer 'talks of his rights as [Sheldon's] lord and master,' but she recalls: 'to let him discover the opinion which I entertained of them, I quietly left the house, and went to *Thornton's* Bagnio' (*Sheldon* II 155). Sheldon passes her wedding night in a brothel with female friends, in licentious rebellion against the institution of marriage and the modest, passive feminine role it dictates. She further resists Archer's authority by subverting the typical, gendered dynamics of objectification: 'so much was my husband an object of disgust, that I generally slept with the maid' (157). Sheldon refuses to act obsequiously and insincerely,

[34] William Blackstone. *Commentaries on the Laws of England* vol I (1765). Edited by David Lemmings, Oxford University Press, 2016, 284.

according to her husband's whims. Instead, she provides a powerful feminist indictment of the male-orchestrated forces that combine to violate the will of her authentic, autonomous self.

To defend her subjectivity in the face of this exploitation, Sheldon frequently resorts to acts of physical violence, conforming to stereotypes of violent, rioting sex workers that dominated misogynistic prostitute imaginaries.[35] Sexually transgressive women were often associated with duplicitous feminine wiles, but also caricatured as 'unfeminine and unnatural' — such anxieties were later reflected in the classification of Wollstonecraft as an 'unsexed female.'[36] Feminist writer Jodin reviled sex workers for 'perverting' Rousseauvian codes of feminine conduct, 'inverting the natural and social order' since women's 'duty [is] to be discreet and reserved.'[37] This demonstrates how interpretations of female 'nature' were used to justify social constructions of female 'duty.' However, Sheldon repudiates such rigid gendered roles, instead reframing her aggression as a form of resistance against misogynistic abuse. When Archer seizes control of her house, robs its contents and takes a mistress, Sheldon threatens to kill them both and has him conducted to the sponging house. One aristocrat, Lord Masham, vows to pay her eight-hundred pounds a year under his protection. After much discussion, he assembles lawyers to complete the business which would make her 'rich and independent for life' (*Sheldon* II 8). However, he imposes 'insult[ing]' last-minute conditions for this deal which Sheldon condemns as 'not only disgraceful to [her] sex but to human nature' (8). Imposing clear boundaries upon the forms of work involved in her prostitution, and implicitly, the limits of bodily access involved within it, Sheldon is furious about his attempt to deceive and exploit her. Her response is 'a violent blow under his ear, which laid him onto the floor — where [she] continued to treat the old rascal with all the indignity [her] feet and hands were capable of bestowing on him' (8). In a fierce show of solidarity, Sheldon's friend Miss Harvey 'seized the hearth-brush and completed [her] manual chastisement' (8). As with Lester's humiliation, Sheldon provides a detailed, comic account of this absurd attack. Her revenge continues in a textual form, exposing Masham's perversion to her literary audience. The women later 'laugh at the correction which [they] had given the old brute,' but are also 'ready to cry at the loss of such a comfortable income' (11). Again, laughter becomes a form of feminist resistance in

[35] *Satan's Harvest Home*. Publisher Unknown, 1749, 27.
[36] Kirsten Pullen. *Actresses and Whores*. Cambridge University Press, 2005, 63; Richard Polwhele. *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem*. W.M Cobbett, 1800.
[37] Jennifer Frangos. "The Woman in Man's Clothes and the Pleasures of Delarivier Manley's 'New Cabal." *Sexual Perversions, 1670-1890,* edited by Julie Peakman, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 95-116, 106; Marie Madeleine Jodin. "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, eds. Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206, 179.

these memoirs. Sheldon reverses the terms of objectification typically levelled against sex workers. Her emphasis upon Masham's aged body and animalistic appetites reduces him to a pathetic object of disgust, who desperately attempts to exert sexual dominion through financial means. Like Lester, Masham is literally pushed to the floor, subordinated beneath her feet. As demonstrated by the large sum she forgoes, Sheldon is true to her authentic self. She prioritises her personal boundaries, undermining stereotypes of mercenary, money-driven sex workers. Her physical aggression, which might typically be interpreted as a masculine performance of power, constitutes a rebellious statement of sexual subjectivity against the degrading role that Masham attempts to impose upon her.

Sheldon's cross-dressing is an important facet of this theatrical resistance against a misogynistic establishment, leaning more explicitly into stereotypes of gender-subverting sex workers to liberate her authentic 'rambling' self beyond patriarchal codes of feminine identity. In her memoirs, actress Charlotte Charke documented multiple episodes of cross-dressing in her memoirs (1755) to widespread public outrage. Kirsten Pullen identifies links between cross-dressing and prostitution, since eighteenth-century sex workers frequently appeared in masculine clothing at masquerades, or to attract clients; ironically, 'the very clothes which suggest masculine privilege and autonomy also suggest excess female sexuality' (Pullen 87). Charke's masculine clothes 'allowed her new pleasures and new powers,' adding weight to the notion that she 'figures discursively as a whore because she is outside of mainstream understandings of femininity' (Pullen 88, 86). She enjoys the 'power and privilege of being a man,' able to walk the streets after dark and protect her female companions (Pullen 88). Similarly, Sheldon revels in masculine disguise because it gives her new freedoms beyond the attention associated with being a recognisable public woman. Practically speaking, masculine dress facilitates her many escapes from the authorities, but it also gives rein to her 'wayward truant self' (*Sheldon II* 154). She flees from 'caitiff catchpoles,' by wearing 'clothes belonging to a servant boy,' and then a gentleman's suit (Sheldon *III* 69). She gleefully observes:

> I now no longer appeared as a flaunting girl but as an elegant and well-dressed macaroni... My disguise prevented them from knowing me; and so completely did it shroud me from their recollection, that I was not afraid to stand at the door of the inn, when they were prowling about outside of it (71-2).

Sheldon relishes her transformation from a showy, attractive 'girl,' a term that carried connotations of prostitution, to a smart yet inconspicuous man.[38] She can roam freely in a public space, even stand boldly at an inn, without being marked and accosted as a public woman. Her assertion that she is 'not afraid' captures her sense of empowerment. Sheldon also 'revenges' an unfaithful keeper by dressing '*en cavalier'* to invade his lover's home (*Sheldon,* pp. 165-6). She admonishes the mistress before seizing his sword, 'triumphantly' carrying it under her arm as she 'dismisses [him] from [her] service' (*Sheldon* II 167). She assumes a role of masculine authority: wielding this phallic weapon, describing the keeper as being in *her* service, and feeling empowered to dismiss him on these terms. Sheldon blurs categories of gendered identity to assert her freedom and subjectivity in a system that persistently forces women into silence and compliance.

These outrageous episodes coexist alongside Sheldon's reflections on the benevolent dimensions of her authentic self. Through anecdotes of sympathy and friendship, Sheldon encourages readers to recognise her multidimensional moral subjectivity beyond mercenary stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary — while representing female solidarity as an important mode of resistance against the socioeconomic impact of male exploitation. She disavows the 'general belief' that a sex worker's experiences 'deprive the heart of every amiable propensity [and] chills the warmth of affection' (*Sheldon III* 116). 'In the sorrows, wants, and other calamities of my foolish and abandoned life,' she notes that she has 'received comfort' from her acts of kindness (34). Sheldon appears to invoke patriarchal judgements of her moral transgressions, but also implies the possibility of defining her beyond them. Highlighting the 'communities of mutual aid' that sex workers form, which are 'missing from many tellings of feminist history,' Mac and Smith contend that 'caring for one another is political work' (6). Indeed, Sheldon takes vulnerable women under her wing, disrupting the stereotypical Harlot's Progress — paying for treatment of venereal disease, securing alternative employment, even helping them settle in marriage. Sheldon represents the meaningful impact of her support for one live-in friend Miss O'Neal, who wishes to leave prostitution. She reflects: 'I thought it would counteract her wishes to remain with me any longer, and therefore hired a private lodging for her till I could procure her some sort of establishment' (*Sheldon III* 89). This pragmatic, compassionate intervention alters Miss O'Neal's life trajectory. Sheldon selflessly anticipates that her own reputation might impact her chances, so finds her alternative

[38] Samuel Johnson. "Girl, n.s.1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755. Accessed 30 November 2023. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/girl_ns

accommodation, and then secures her work in service — a difficult feat, given the limited employment opportunities available for fallen women. By detailing these practical forms of care work, she counteracts social mechanisms which dismiss unchaste women as corrupt objects, and condemn them to a life of isolation and poverty. Sheldon demonstrates that this transformative support is critical to women's recovery and survival in a ruthless misogynistic system.

Sheldon's female friendships are rooted within an inclusive spirit of sympathy and solidarity, transcending concerns about chastity. As Batchelor argues, 'the ameliorative potential of female community' is highlighted amongst penitents in *Histories,* with prostitution being understood as the 'failure' of these bonds in a patriarchal society.[39] However, this 'sisterhood' rests on conservative limits of sympathy — instilling Magdalens with 'middle-class' sensibilities, moulding them into suitable objects of concern — while exposing the 'exclusionary logic that underpinned sentimental ideology: the differentiation of the deserving from the undeserving' (Batchelor, "Limits" 118 and 128). Sheldon's caring connections transcend the casualty / collaborator binary, particularly significant in a context when 'efforts made by women writers to identify utopian alternatives to patriarchal capitalism [become] fraught and often flawed endeavours,' rooted within the same dynamics of division and exclusion upon which patriarchal systems operate (Batchelor, "Limits" 120).[40] Sheldon reflects on her friendship with fellow sex worker Sally Metham: 'in our situation of life, friendships, as well as enmities, are soon made, and we became extremely intimate, so as for some time to be almost inseparable... I found her, in every respect, so pleasing and accomplished, that I desired her to come and reside for some time at my house' (*Sheldon III* 91). Her friendship with Sally arises from a mutual understanding of the specific struggles experienced by women in their circumstances. Her representation of this genuine, devoted connection, the most significant of all her female friendships, transcends her generally fleeting attachments to men. The two-woman household they form — pooling resources, sharing emotional and physical support — is a progressive alternative to the heteronormative living dynamics that stifle her authentic 'rambling' self. Similarly, Sheldon 'retreat[s] to the house of [her] friend Miss Ratcliffe' after escaping her abusive husband (*Sheldon II* 158). Another friend, Miss Harvey, offers moral support and

[39]Jennie Batchelor. "The Limits of Sympathy: *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*." *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations during the long eighteenth century*, edited by Carolyn D. Williams, Angela Escott and Louise Duckling, University of Delaware Press, 2010, pp. 117-136, 127 and 119.

[40] Gail Pheterson. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Context*, no. 37, 1993, pp. 39-64, 58.

business advice, with her 'far greater share of worldly knowledge' (*Sheldon* I 237). She admonishes Sheldon for the 'sacrifices [she is] making' to Walsingham, helping her recognise his exploitation, and warning her that she is missing out on the support of kinder, wealthier keepers (*Sheldon II* 47). Sheldon also explores shared interests, beyond gendered struggles, that foster affinities with other women. The 'strengthening of... friendship' with one sex worker is based upon their shared love of 'dress and pleasure,' meaning that they are 'never separate' (*Sheldon IV* 34). While Sheldon feels constrained by her keepers, and persistently deceives them, she communicates unwavering loyalty towards her female friends and genuine enjoyment in their company. The *Histories*' middle-class narrator only endorses sympathetic bonds with sentimental objects of shame; women are only deemed capable of friendship in this state of penitence, outside of the sex trade. However, Sheldon represents genuine friendships that flourish beyond concerns about sexual reputation, resisting the divide and conquer strategies of patriarchal society and the performative, exclusionary terms of supposedly virtuous communities (Batchelor, "Limits" 120).

Sheldon deploys sentimental discourses to scrutinize the authentic moral roots of her benevolent actions. Destabilising the sentimental power dynamics of the *Histories* — where former sex workers are represented only as recipients of charitable concern — Sheldon and Miss Harvey aid a labouring-class woman who has been seduced by a middle-class man, then abandoned with his child. Sheldon is 'extremely affected with the poor woman's story,' recalling: 'I knew how to apply it to my own situation, which, though removed from want, was far more involved in disgrace than that of the poor unfortunate girl who sat crying before us' (*Sheldon II* 35). Sheldon's sympathy, rooted within her personal experiences of sexual exploitation, moves her to compassionate action. Broadly speaking, sympathy was understood by moral philosophers as an onlooker's ability to 'partake of the joys and sorrows of those [they] observe,' a process involving 'observation of the outward signs of emotion which [they] recognise because of the similarity of all human expression' (C. Jones 27). Sympathy did not inevitably generate a compassionate response, but it was an important prerequisite. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith contended: 'to see the emotions of their hearts in every respect beat time to his own [an individual must] bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer.'[41] The onlooker must imagine how the sufferer is feeling, 'striving to render as perfect as possible that imaginary change of place on which [their] sympathy is founded' (25). Sheldon knows exactly how to place herself

[41] Adam Smith. *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* JJ. Tourneisen, 1793, 24.

in the girl's position. With their similar experiences, she does not struggle to imagine her suffering, and forge a sympathetic connection. While she appears to internalise those limits of sympathy endorsed within the *Histories* — distinguishing sentimental, passive 'casualties' of the system from those, like herself, who reclaim 'self-determination' through prostitution (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58) — Sheldon represents the unique capacity of a woman in 'disgrace' to truly sympathise with, and support, society's most vulnerable individuals.

Sheldon defines this moral authenticity beyond the performative virtue of those who refuse to sympathise with others, or provide compassionate support. She reworks the religious parable of the Good Samaritan to showcase her genuine care for those in need. Sheldon and Miss Harvey are sharing a carriage with a priest and a doctor when they are approached by beggars. Sheldon represents the 'affecting nature' of one woman's story; she 'weeps bitterly' while recounting her family's financial struggles, with four small children 'crying for bread' (*Sheldon II* 19). While Sheldon arguably deploys such individuals as sentimental objects to highlight her own moral attributes, she also challenges conservative stereotypes of *who* might deliver charitable support to people in need. She writes: 'our good clergyman, like the priest in the gospel, was for passing by on the other side of the way, but we were determined to sanctify our journey with, at least, one good action, and quitted the carriage to accompany the poor woman and her family' (20). Sheldon modifies the biblical narrative of the priest who crosses the road to avoid helping an injured Jewish man, who is instead supported by a Samaritan – traditional enemies of the Jewish people. Sheldon assumes this role, demonstrating a sex worker's capacity for such 'sanctifying' compassion. This resonates with the language she uses to describe 'repenting' her marriage. Religious discourses are repurposed in these memoirs to emphasise what she perceives as integral moral qualities, beyond constrictions of chastity (*Sheldon II* 155). She and Harvey donate money, 'happy... in having made others so,' while 'the Parson would have nothing to do with it' (20). The doctor 'cants from a number of stale, commonplace observations on beggars and vagrants,' which the sex workers answer 'by the well-known text of scripture, that Charity covers a multitude of sins' (21). Sheldon wryly adds that they 'did not, in the least, suspect the quantity or nature of our offences' (21). While acknowledging these sexual 'offences,' she simultaneously undermines their significance in light of greater moral concerns. Apparently well versed in the true essence of Christian teachings, her outward actions align with her internal moral principles. Sheldon's authentic virtue is distinguished above those who disguise their cruelty and selfishness beneath a respectable exterior.

However, Sheldon's sympathies have class and race-based limits, demonstrated through her disdainful treatment and representation of sex workers from different social groups. A similar strategy is deployed within *Histories*' 'unforgiving portraits' of labouring women, especially experienced sex workers, who are used to foreground the penitents' moral subjectivity (Batchelor, "Limits" 128). Sheldon and her friends laugh at the 'spectacle' of a Lord rounding up 'the lowest class of abandoned prostitutes' and 'examining their respective charms' (*Sheldon III* 25). He selects two 'dirty drabs,' and his audience is entertained by these 'creatures' fighting (25). Dehumanising discourses of physical corruption, typically applied by misogynistic writers to streetwalkers, are appropriated by a courtesan who elevates herself within this moral and sexual hierarchy (*Harvest* 8). Mac and Smith highlight examples of epistemic violence in the discourses of anti-prostitution feminists, where women's ways of 'understanding and describing the world [are] stifled, forcing [them] to use oppressors' concepts and language,' but Sheldon levels misogynistic, classist and racist discourses against other sex workers (Mac and Smith 21). She recruits two other sex workers, described as 'coal black and mulatto brown,' for her client Lord Grosvenor (*Sheldon IV* 208). She visits them with 'all the conscious superiority which a fair skin gave [her] over a sooty complexion' but is shocked at their 'impertinence,' while Grosvenor is 'horribly ashamed of his assignation with people, as he said, whose manners were as black as themselves' (pp. 209-10). This is apparently 'the very low career of his amours' (210). Sheldon encodes complexion with aesthetic and moral worth, a common racist strategy. She dehumanises these women on multiple levels: as objects of curiosity, to be incorporated as 'sable daughters of pleasure' within Grosvenor's '*African rendezvous*,' objects of disgust to the white female onlooker, and objects of shame for the once-titillated white male client (pp. 208-9). Sheldon thus legitimises the fetishization of women of colour in the eighteenth-century sex trade through mythologies of 'savage and illicit [hyper]sexuality.'[42] Men like Grosvenor frequented the 'entirely black bordellos' of King's Place, pursuing black women as 'desirable and elusive commodities.'[43] The narrator of *Nocturnal Revels* notes of one black sex worker, Harriot: 'we cannot suppose [she] had any of those nice, conscientious scruples... usually called chastity, and by some Virtue,' while her complexion is deemed 'not so engaging as that of the fair daughters of Albion' (*Revels* 102). Sheldon is complicit in 'constructions of female beauty and sexuality [which] reflect racial hierarchies of white supremacy and black subjugation' (Hobson 10). She validates Grosvenor's misogynoir, perpetuating the commodification and

[42] Janell Hobson. *Venus in the Dark*. Routledge, 2018, 50.
[43] Bonnie Blackwell. "Corkscrews and Courtesans: Sex and Death in Circulation Novels." *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* edited by Jolene Zigarovich. Routledge, 2013, pp. 49-75, 56.

contempt experienced by black sex workers.[44] This exposes the limits of Sheldon's intersectionality, as a white woman of middle-class origin operating in the highest echelons of this sexual economy. It is crucial to note these points at which representations of her personal virtues rest upon strategies of othering, a disturbing but nevertheless integral aspect of Sheldon's efforts to represent her own multidimensional moral subjectivity.

Part II. *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan*

Coghlan's preface establishes her status as an authentic moral and political subject. Like Sheldon, she disrupts the Harlot's Progress by reinforcing the didactic benefits of discussing her struggles so openly in her memoirs, but with recourse to republican rights discourses that flourished during the early 1790s. Coghlan injects conventional narratives of fallen womanhood with fresh political significance. Her account is a remarkable infusion of these worlds. Due to the loyalism of her father, Major Moncrieffe, Coghlan is used as a political pawn by Patriots of the American revolution. Born in America, educated in Ireland, then brought back to New York, she is eventually taken prisoner of war by George Washington in his bid to change Moncrieffe's allegiance. Forced by her father into an abusive marriage, away from the man she loves, she takes a succession of wealthy keepers across Ireland, England and France. She does not reference the loaded, scandalous literary legacy that Sheldon acknowledges, or perform any kind of penitent apology. Instead, Coghlan immediately establishes herself as a radical commentator, individualising her memoirs with a unique mission statement: to deliver 'remarks moral and political' (*Coghlan* frontispiece). Unlike her father, she aligns herself with the 'bright immersive cause of liberty; a cause that... first struck root in [her] dear native country.'[45] Invoking ideals of benevolence which dominated revolutionary discourses of the 1790s, she associates compassionate acts with illumination and hope: striving to be a 'beacon to others of her sex,' while compelling her country to 'shine resplendent' with the 'lustre' of 'amiable benevolence' (xiv).[46] Her identity and narrative are inextricably bound to the broader revolutionary landscape; she reinforces the political stakes of her experiences throughout her memoirs.

[44] The term 'misogynoir' was coined by Moya Bailey, 'describing the uniquely co-constitutive racialised and sexist violence that befalls black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalisation.' *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance.* New York University Press, 2021, 1.
[45] Margaret Coghlan. *The Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794, 12.
[46] Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man,* edited by Claire Grogan, Broadview, 2011, 151.

Coghlan elevates her sympathy and sincerity above aristocratic artifice. Where Sheldon seeks to forge a sympathetic contract with her 'humane' imagined readership (*Sheldon I* 5), Coghlan launches a patriotic appeal to the 'generous character of the British Nation' (*Coghlan* xiv). Distant cousins have claimed her rightful inheritance from Moncrieffe. Coghlan condemns the English government's financial neglect of a woman in need, especially since her father, to her dismay, fought for the king:

> Amidst the tempest that now rages in the political world, the cabals of faction, and the terrors of revolution, the private sorrows of an individual pass unregarded... all the passions inherent in the human breast, are awakened and set in motion, to give a pompous display to the humility and weakness of tender-hearted charity (v-vi).

Coghlan represents sentimental scenes of unheeded suffering, aligning herself with other impoverished and isolated citizens oppressed by 'the Great, who thrive on the Misfortunes which the present system creates' (viii). However, her victimhood does not make her passive. She condemns the hypocritical social performances of the powerful, representing herself as an authentic individual whose quiet, meaningful deeds correlate directly with internal moral sentiments. Like Wollstonecraft, she rejects 'insipid grandeur... slavish ceremonies [and] cumbrous pomp.'[47] Coghlan condemns those who prioritise the pursuit of their own wealth, rather than following the 'dictates of charity in relieving the pangs of domestic woe' (viii). Images of pestilence, applied to sex workers in revolutionary feminist treatises, are now redeployed to describe these 'locusts' (viii). The courtesan is not a morally corrupt object, but a moral *superior* to those in power. Coghlan's concerns about sociopolitical justice are tethered to steadfast moral principles of sincerity and benevolence, stripped back from the excesses of aristocratic artifice. These values are 'undisturbed by the frenzy of party politics,' because she is 'only zealous in the general cause of Humanity... chastened by affliction's school, restored to reason by the wholesome lessons she has received from that most instructive of all Monitors – Adversity!' (xiii). Coghlan deploys the terms 'humanity' and 'humane' throughout her memoirs; she endorses sympathetic connections that transcend borders, political persuasions and social classes. The turmoil she has experienced in a life beyond conventional codes of feminine virtue has 'chastened' her, a term that connotes both sexual and moral reform. Her struggles have strengthened her value system, negating superficial concerns about her reputation. In this capacity, Coghlan is well-equipped to operate both as a wise moral commentator, and an astute political critic.

[47] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 223.

Coghlan establishes herself as a benevolent advocate for the vulnerable. Rather than a passive penitent of the prostitute imaginary who simply laments her descent into abandonment and poverty, she defines herself as an authentic source of 'active virtue' (*Coghlan* 135). Just as Sheldon's experiences fuel her concerns for female welfare, Coghlan connects her suffering to broader, divisive systems of aristocratic duplicity: 'where the very persons who had beguiled her with their delusive flatteries, who had encouraged her errors... were the first to keep aloof, and shun the wretchedness they helped accomplish' (xii). For Coghlan, the system that sanctions men to exploit and discard women enables all kinds of *ancien régime* corruption. The personal is political. She compels the Prince of Wales to 'reflect on the enormous salary he receives, the magnificence and waste by which he is surrounded,' while 'so many forlorn wretches are perishing through want of the smallest part of those superfluities' (x-xi). Coghlan exposes the socioeconomic divisions that emerge from such careless debauchery, under an institution that expands their own wealth while neglecting those in poverty. 'We should all be leagued in one bond of Confraternity,' she declares (137), emphasising the importance of 'doing good,' since 'active virtue is what the world... requires' (135). If more people engaged in these acts of care, she contends, revolution would not be necessary. Coghlan's implication that Britain and France could form a transnational bond to end human suffering would have been deeply inflammatory in this period, especially with her suggestion that a British Prince would be 'doing good' by recognising the value of the democratic politics and distributive justice represented by the French Revolution. Resonating with Sheldon's hands-on approach to supporting other women, Coghlan associates true virtue with the work of supporting others. While Coghlan later expresses more extreme justifications of revolutionary violence, her analysis here invokes Wollstonecraft's definition of compassion as work in *Rights of Men*: where 'the active exertions of virtue' must be distinguished from the 'vague declamation of sensibility.'[48] Wollstonecraft similarly lamented that 'the few have sacrificed the many to their vices' (*Rights of Men* pp. 8-9). Coghlan follows Wollstonecraft in defining 'lively compassion' for those 'who are broken off from society,' especially fallen women, as foundational to moral and political progress (*Vindication* 142). By representing vivid images of human suffering, Coghlan compels her literary audience to imagine others' situations. This resonates with Wollstonecraft's Smith-inspired belief that an onlooker forges sympathetic bonds through a process of 'experience and observation,' where imagination involved the 'integration' of feeling into judgement, and could

[48] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of The Rights of Men.* Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 54.

help stimulate their compassionate response.[49] Courtesans were often dismissed by radical writers, including feminists, as complicit in *ancien régime* corruption. They were imagined by Jodin as toxic drains upon the 'force and energy' of the 'body politic [which] as for the physical body,' depends on 'public continence and sober morals' (Jodin 178). However, Coghlan represents herself as a champion of solidarity and compassion. She is not a corrupt object, but a true citizen, actively participating in the moral work that she positions at the heart of social progress.

As a sex worker whose republican arguments are embedded within her sexual experiences, Coghlan operates as a new kind of female political commentator. Her analysis is particularly bold in light of the sedition trials of 1792 and 1793, escalating in the year of her memoirs' publication through the Treason Trials of 1794. Breashears notes that she charters new territory by 'presenting the scandalous woman as a political subject, not just a sexual object.'[50] By elevating her non-sexual moral attributes, Coghlan undermines the prostitute imaginaries of radical commentators who deployed sex workers only as inauthentic political *objects* in their debates. Wollstonecraft argues that prostitution stifles natural moral development, but Coghlan is able to form her moral principles alongside and implicitly *because* of her experiences. Breashears acknowledges Coghlan's generic fluidity, arguing that she pioneers a new hybrid genre, the 'political scandalous memoir,' in which she 'personalises the political and politicises the personal' (Breashears, *Women's Writing* 11). Knott suggests that Coghlan's memoirs counteract the apparent 'sexual puritanism' of Wollstonecraftian rights-feminism in this period, in which 'coquettes and courtesans' were juxtaposed with the 'rational' ideal of liberated womanhood (Knott 452). She aligns herself with libertine and radical circles in a similar way to Mary Robinson, who seemed 'equally at home in the world of Charles James Fox and his aristocratic libertine cronies and the antielitist radical circle of Wollstonecraft and William Godwin' (Knott 543). While I dispute this description of Wollstonecraft's 'puritanism' and note that Fox was a liberal who supported the American and French Revolutions, Knott captures Coghlan's amalgamation of prostitution and politics. The assertion of her moral and political subjectivity, and her intervention in these radical debates, constitutes a powerful resistance against caricatures of corruption that dominated the prostitute imaginary, especially given the political objectification of sex workers in *Vindication*.

[49] Karen Green. "The Passions and the Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Theory of Moral Judgement." *Utilitas*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1997, pp. 271–290, 285 and 282.
[50] Caroline Breashears. *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir*.' Palgrave, 2016, 99.

Wollstonecraft recognises the importance of passion in women's moral development, and in *Wrongs* openly endorsed female sexual expression within the bounds of a loving relationship — a principle which underpins her condemnation of prostitution. However, *Vindication* does not accommodate the prospect of even *former* sex workers contributing to such discussions. Resisted by the memoirists in this eighteenth-century context, such divisions continue to be exposed and contested by modern intersectional feminists who highlight the diverse political voices and activism of sex workers in today's world (Mac and Smith 5).

Coghlan decisively rejects the prospect of sexual performance while describing her early relationships with men. Sheldon courts caricatures of the prostitute imaginary through impure strategies for asserting her subjectivity, but Coghlan does not entertain stereotypes of mercenary, ruthless courtesans. She politicises authentic sentimental ties, representing the value she imposes upon sincere social and sexual conduct. Rather than being forced into marriage with loyalist John Coghlan, she longs to have 'follow[ed] the bent of her inclinations' with the republican solider she loved in her youth, even if they resided 'in the wildest desert of [their] native country, the woods affording [them their] only shelter, and the fruits [their] only repast' (*Coghlan* 19). This rustic setting is juxtaposed with the 'canopy of a costly state; with all the refinements and embellishments of courts,' and the 'royal warrior, who would fain have proved himself the conqueror of France' (19). The sincere expression of her natural sentiments, flourishing beyond the constrictions of marriage, is synonymous with moral purity, estranged from the inauthentic unions cultivated by *ancien régime* corruption. Coghlan portrays the violation of the feelings and ambitions that define her true 'self' — described as 'everything most valued and sacred' (32). Although Sheldon's sexual libertinism frequently extends beyond genuine emotional ties, this resonates with her declaration that she 'repents' her marriage as the sacrilegious suppression of her authentic 'truant self' (*Sheldon II* 154). Coghlan insists that she never 'learnt the secret to disguising her genuine feelings' (41). Her utopia resonates with the vision of the American wilderness as a 'paradise' in Prévost's *Manon L'Escaut* (translated by radical contemporary Charlotte Smith in 1786), where Manon operates as a promiscuous courtesan in French society, but is 'at liberty' to be a devoted monogamous lover in America.[51] Coghlan associates her free expression of romantic devotion with this setting, implicitly contrasted with what she describes as the inauthentic 'prostitution' of her marriage (31). Unlike her lover Gilbert Imlay in *The Emigrants* (1793), Wollstonecraft was yet to endorse non-

[51] Abbé Prévost. *Manon L'Escaut, or the Fatal Attachment.* Translated by Charlotte Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith* edited by Judith Stanton, Taylor and Francis, 2022, pp. 1-124, 114 and 7.

conjugal sexual unions legitimised by authentic sentiment in print. However, *Vindication* stressed the importance of genuine 'mutual affection... and mutual respect' between husband and wife (281). Writing back to caricatures of artificial sex workers, mobilised by Wollstonecraft to condemn widespread female inauthenticity, Coghlan the courtesan prioritises the free expression of women's emotional and sexual subjectivity.

Coghlan shares Sheldon's feminist focus on the emotional and moral cost of inauthentic marital unions. Moving into the radical 1790s, she scrutinises these issues with broader sociopolitical change in mind. Resonating with Wollstonecraft's reference to marriages of convenience as 'legal prostitution' in *Vindication* (229), Coghlan condemns the union she is forced into, aged fourteen, as 'honourable prostitution,' as she 'really hated the man whom they had compelled [her] to marry' (*Coghlan* 31). Coghlan's analogy undermines the legitimacy of the union, by aligning it with this 'illegitimate use of female embodiment.'[52] It also reflects her belief in mutual affection and consent, not male-sanctioned legal binds, as the basis of female freedom and happiness. The 'inhuman' John Coghlan imprisons his wife, vowing to 'break her spirit' (*Coghlan* 37). Like Sheldon, she represents this abuse through images of despotism and oppression, observing that his 'horrid chains of matrimony' subject her to lifelong 'SLAVERY' (97). Metaphors of slavery and tyranny were common in radical feminist discourses, frequently deployed within women's rights treatises to represent the 'slave status of supposedly free British women' under the arbitrary will of their masters.[53] Coghlan problematically links her situation to chattel slavery, tapping into abolitionist discourses which gathered momentum in the 1790s. Despite Coghlan's physical escape from her husband, she lives in fear of this 'viper, who has stung [her] even unto death' and 'forever banished [her] from all... enjoyments of society' (*Coghlan* 30). Wollstonecraft also condemned the 'absorption' of a woman's person in that of a 'tyrant' husband, expressing sympathy for fallen women who are 'broken off from society' and become 'infamous' outside of a legitimate union (*Vindication* 170). Sheldon and Coghlan depart from Wollstonecraft in their representations of more authentic existences on society's margins, undermining this persistent ideological connection between marriage and virtue. Little wonder, they imply, that the theatricality of 'dishonourable' prostitution offers a more liberating

[52] Rebecca Bromwich and Monique Marie Dejong. "Introduction." *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work,* edited by Bromwich and DeJong, Demeter Press, 2015, pp. 9-42, 21.
[53] Srividhya Swaminathan and Adam R. Beach. "Introduction: Invoking Slavery in Literature and Scholarship." *Invoking Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Imagination*, edited by Swaminathan and Beach, Routledge, 2016, pp. 21-26, 10.

way of life for women in their position. From this perspective, the memoirists suggest that unjust sociopolitical structures, rather than innate flaws, compromise their moral purity.

While aligning herself with radical ideals of authentic emotional connections and sincere sexual unions, Coghlan candidly depicts a necessarily impure negotiation she must engage in at one vulnerable stage in her life. Like Sheldon, she now recognises theatricality as a means of survival — and of asserting her subjectivity and autonomy in a misogynistic system. Following her brief acting career, a teenage Coghlan finds herself alone and four months pregnant with the child of Whig politician Fox (also a lover of Sheldon and Robinson). She shifts from sentimental praise of this 'sincere and affectionate friend... [and] tender... ardent lover,' admiring his 'luminary' radical politics, to coldly describing Mr Fazakerly as 'in almost every instance, the reverse of the former' (*Coghlan* 52). He is nevertheless useful as a keeper. Courting caricatures of mercenary, money-driven courtesans in the prostitute imaginary, Coghlan observes: 'Fazakerly was rich, and what rendered him yet more valuable in my sight — he was generous! He offered me his house, and presented to me his purse; money seemed no object to him, and such a man was adapted to my purpose' (52). By embedding this stereotype within her difficult circumstances, she reinforces the need for her pragmatic perspective. Coghlan uses Fazakerly strategically to support herself and her child for four years, while boosting her own social and intellectual development. Contemporary memoirist Elizabeth Gooch describes the 'pretty Mrs Coghlan, who... lived with Mr Fazakerly, and went by his name,' indicating that Coghlan gained further social security by temporarily taking her keeper's moniker.[54] As Elizabeth Bernstein observes, sex workers have 'traded in capacities other than sex throughout much of history,' especially when labour is relocated 'from the street to indoor venues such as private homes.'[55] Coghlan eventually ends their union on the grounds of his 'morose and capricious' temper — implicitly, she is now in a financial position to prioritise her own contentment, for she never experienced 'real happiness' with Fazakerly (55). She admits side-lining her feelings in exchange for the 'superior quality' attributes that are also attained by Sheldon in elite prostitution (*Sheldon* I 185). However, this is described in practical terms, not as the tragic moral sacrifice imagined within *Histories* and *Vindication*. Fazakerly takes her on a European tour, doing 'all in his power to cultivate [her] understanding, and to give her the superficial knowledge and acquirements,' which, Coghlan observes, are 'considered to yield such a polish to our *travelled ladies* (54). During this time, her 'understanding and person...

[54] Elizabeth Sarah Real Gooch. *The Life of Mrs Gooch* vol II. C and G Kearsley, 1792, 136.
[55] Elizabeth Bernstein. "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex." *Intimate Labours*, edited by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Eileen Boris, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 148-165, 160 and 154.

acquired graces and accomplishments' (54). The ironically italicised '*travelled*' highlights this adjective's double entendre, given the promiscuous, or in Sheldon's words 'rambling' woman's ability to access privileges typically reserved for chaste high-society women (*Sheldon* III 107). Like Sheldon with Lester, she represents herself as an active negotiator in this arrangement. She obtains tools which facilitate this feminine performance, enhancing her marketability to more elite clients. Wollstonecraft lamented women 'sacrificing solid virtues to the attainment of superficial graces' for male amusement (*Vindication* 100). However, Coghlan implies that this 'superficiality' can coexist alongside her preserved sense of self, and the steadfast moral and political principles of sincerity and benevolence she develops throughout her life.

Coghlan shifts the terms of moral debates about sex workers' theatricality to critique truly superficial women, those who perform codes of chaste femininity while failing to possess the 'active virtue' that she positions at the heart of sociopolitical progress. She specifically blames lapses in female solidarity for her unjust suffering in debtor's prison, amidst her financial struggles. One reviewer testifies that Coghlan was 'a prisoner for debt' at the point of publication, sympathetically noting that since the memoirs 'seem to have been written to procure a temporary supply to the unfortunate author... [they] shall not, by any unseasonable criticism... counteract its effects.'[56] This implies that her self-portrait resonated emotionally with some readers, beyond the stigma and contempt attached to contemporary prostitute imaginaries. Supporting Coghlan's account of her constant arrests for debt around the point of writing her memoirs in December 1793, one King's Bench discharge record from 1797 states that Margaret Coghlan was once again imprisoned in May 1794.[57] This reinforces Breashears' case against Young's claim, based on an unverified obituary, that Coghlan died in 1787 and therefore could not have completed her memoirs (Breashears, *Women's Writing* 87). Coghlan was heavily pregnant with her youngest son in Easter 1790 when first imprisoned at the King's Bench for debts to a female milliner. 'To the utter disgrace of *my own sex*,' she notes, 'the two creditors whose cruelty and inflexible obstinacy obliged me to continue *two years* in the King's Bench, were women' (*Coghlan* 94). Coghlan emphatically establishes solidarity with her 'own sex.' She emphasises her betrayal at the hands of those who should sympathise with her struggle for survival in a misogynistic system, and act accordingly with compassion. Coghlan ironically notes that 'the conscience of this *honest woman* (for she is married)' did not 'scruple'

[56] *The British Critic and Quarterly Theological Review* Vol 3. F. and C. Rivington, 1794, 346.
[57] "Piece 141: King's Bench Prison: List of Prisoners, 1797." King's Bench and Fleet Prison Discharge Books and Prisoner Lists 1734-1862, *Ancestry.* ancestry.co.uk/ image viewer/ collections/9158/images /42479_635001_11685 00012?usePUB=true&_phsrc=yeb1&_phstart=successSource. Accessed 5 June 2022.

to prevent her release until payment, for she 'persisted in pursuit of her dearly loved self' (95). Nothing could 'awaken the feelings of this married *lady,* this paragon of her sex' who believes it 'quite immaterial whether [Coghlan] was brought to bed in a prison, or elsewhere,' despite her condition surely 'claim[ing] some compassion' (95). Just as Sheldon condemns the inauthenticity of those who disguise their moral faults under a respectable exterior, Coghlan's sardonic italicisations undermine traditional interpretations of feminine virtue which valorise such cruel, solipsistic individuals purely on the basis of chastity.

By comparison, Coghlan praises the authentic virtue of one unchaste woman who helps negotiate her freedom from French debtor's prison *La Force* in the late 1780s. This individual, like herself, is not of 'rigid virtue, [but] not therefore less susceptible of generosity and compassion' (*Coghlan* 78). Coghlan decouples chastity from what she represents as more important moral sentiments, advancing Sheldon's argument that such compassionate acts can 'cover a multitude of sins' (*Sheldon* II 21). Female solidarity is not circumscribed by sexual reputation, she contends. She rejects the conservative coding of 'virtue,' 'honest' and 'lady' with superficial sexual concerns, implying that her moral essence is untainted by promiscuity. Like Sheldon, she counteracts the *Histories*' exclusionary communities of chaste or penitent womanhood. Coghlan's reflections resonate with Wollstonecraft's focus on redefining such loaded terms: 'with respect to reputation, the attention is confined to a single virtue — chastity.... if the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, is safe... she may neglect every social duty' (*Vindication* 398). While Wollstonecraft advocates the compassionate support of those whose moral identities are wrongfully defined by their rapes or passionate mistakes, Coghlan expands bonds of solidarity between women across social divides. Her vision of feminine solidarity encompasses those who are married, single, fallen, or of far less 'rigid' sexual conduct.

Coghlan deploys her experiences with aristocratic clients across England and France as a basis for asserting her own moral and political authenticity. Like Sheldon, she evaluates her clients based on their wealth and generosity, but with explicit commentary upon their political leanings. Sex workers were persistently objectified as accessories of *ancien régime* corruption in feminist treatises of the early 1790s: 'serpentine' (*Vindication* 260) social climbers whose 'constraint and dissimulation' spilled from boudoirs into governments.[58] Through complex negotiations with powerful men, Coghlan establishes herself as a moral and political subject in

[58] Olympe de Gouges. "Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne." Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts* (par 33). olympedegouges.eu/docs/declaration-des-droits-de-la-femme.pdf. Date Accessed 28 November 2023.

her own right. She gleans special insights into their machinations, above which she elevates her own integrity. While radical pornographers ventriloquised sex workers for accompanying aims of male sexual titillation, Coghlan defies these mechanisms of objectification disguised as subjectivity; nor does she subscribe to *Vindication*'s modest ideal. Her political analysis is not divorced from her sexuality, but rather embedded within it. Of her relationship with Mr Giffard, she notes:

> My humble roof was often visited by Princes of the Blood Royal, and by Nobles of the highest distinction – and here, I should do a violence to my own feelings, if I did not draw a just comparison, in favour of Plebeian virtue; let me then honestly proclaim to the world, superior to flattery or dissimulation, that in my journey through life, I have found more liberality of sentiment, more candour and ingenuousness, in this plain country gentleman, and others of a similar description, than I ever experienced from a certain Duke of Royal Lineage (61).

Invoking familiar radical binaries between aristocratic immorality and 'plebeian virtue,' Coghlan's value system — centred around sincerity, generosity and compassion — is reaffirmed through her prostitution. Coghlan's bond with Giffard resembles the 'bounded authenticity' discussed by Bernstein, involving the 'sale and purchase of an authentic emotional and physical connection' (Bernstein 154). The memoirist distinguishes such unions from her interactions with corrupt dukes and princes. While servicing these men sexually, she remains untainted by their company, and certainly does not perform according to their political ideals. Her work does not necessitate the disavowal of her personal feelings. She elevates her own principles above superficial strategies of 'flattery or dissimulation.' Rather than reflecting her personal inauthenticity, she suggests that her encounters with them only reinforce her radical political position.

Coghlan's sexual experiences are frequently deployed to bolster her incisive political criticisms. Exhibiting her extreme radicalism, she justifies the execution of one marquis on the grounds of his insincerity, because public figures should be 'really and honestly attached to the principles which they profess' (*Coghlan* 69). In a more playful attack upon 'a certain duke's' sexual prowess, she observes: 'if this princely Lothario shines not with greater advantage in the plains of Mars, than he excels in the Groves of Venus, the Combined Forces have little to expect from his martial exertions' (62). Young cites this phrase as evidence of Pigott's intervention, because this writer also critiques a different military figure whose conquests in the

'plains of mars' are doubtful due to his failures in the 'groves of Venus.'[59] But this insult invokes classical tropes that were standard within libertine discourses, levelled at totally different people.[60] Here, Coghlan's approach resonates with Sheldon's playful courting of promiscuous and manipulative stereotypes — but with a political twist. She wryly suggests that her erotic encounters with the duke make her well equipped to comment on his military performances. Her private sexual experiences propel her into the public domain. Coghlan's witty commentary casts her in a proud light of moral superiority, while destabilising the sexual, social and political hegemony of her hypocritical clients. Her sexual arrangements with these men do not dictate her moral degradation; *they* are marked as corrupt performers, distinguished from Coghlan's own state of moral and political authenticity.

The Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson

Leeson's preface features the most decisive rejection of dehumanising social and literary roles imposed upon sex workers in this period. She distinguishes the story of a middle-class girl, Peg Plunkett — who is seduced, gives birth to an illegitimate child, falls into poverty and prostitution, then climbs the ranks of elite sex work — from the stereotypical Harlot's Progress. Sheldon and Coghlan demonstrate a similar awareness of the tropes they must counteract, but Leeson's explicit resistance against stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary involves the construction of a shifting subjecthood that is impossible to define and compartmentalise. While she later attempts to forge a sympathetic contract with her imagined readership — encouraging female readers to place themselves in her position, before judging her transgressions — she initially issues them a much more defiant challenge: 'MANY WERE, doubtless, the opinions of the public, when the appearance of this work was first announced; and most of them will possibly be found groundless.'[61] She debunks their expectations:

> The Voluptuary perhaps expected to find here constant food for his inordinate desires... The Prudish were fearful that my memoirs would be totally unfit to be read by any female of delicacy — The Gay thought they might contain nothing but musty morals, grave declamation, dolorous lamentations and puling penitence... The prudent Parent declared they should be kept out of sisters' nieces' and daughters' sight, lest they should prove infectious —Whilst the antiquated Maidens... hinted they might take a peep in *private,* for they were sure my Book must offer... *delicious morsels of scandal* (*Leeson* pp. 3-4).

[59] Phillip Young. *Revolutionary Ladies.* Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, pp. 168-9.
[60] See *Nocturnal Revels* II, which notes one man's 'inability of commanding in the field of Venus, however well qualified he may be to wield that truncheon in that of Mars' (120).
[61] Margaret Leeson. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson.* Edited by Mary Lyons, Lilliput Press, 1995, 3.

Leeson rejects the caricatures which defined sex workers' presence in print during the eighteenth century. She is not the licentious whore, revelling in her sexual experiences for the benefit of the libertine male gaze, nor the shame-consumed Magdalen performing a moralistic script of 'puling penitence' to prove her reformation. She disavows familiar patriarchal tropes surrounding sex workers' 'infectious' corruption, and refuses to be pigeonholed as a salacious scandalmonger who — of course — can *only* write a 'scandalous' memoir. Leeson knows that her text will be conflated with the identity of its writer, just as Sheldon and Coghlan battle against preconceptions of moral corruption. By defining what her memoirs are *not,* she opens up a new range of generic possibilities. Sheldon and Coghlan employ sentimental discourses within their prefaces to establish their subjectivity and elicit a sympathetic response from readers — later offset by Sheldon's tongue-in-cheek humour, and Coghlan's bold politicisation of these issues. Leeson adopts the alternative, satirical strategy of projecting stereotypes onto those who mould author and text to the shape of their own imaginaries.[62] Instead, *they* are exposed, caricatured, and ridiculed, particularly those performative moralists who hide behind a respectable exterior. Leeson's authoritative, witty textual presence is neither a shame-consumed sentimental 'wretch' nor a 'luscious,' titillating object for male consumption, binaries established by Graves in his response to mid-century scandalous memoirs, and reproduced within the *Histories* (*Histories* 9).[63] She does not wish to excite 'blushes on the most refined and delicate cheek,' but shall 'yet endeavour to dimple it into a smile' (*Leeson* 4). Moral discourses are repeatedly offset by her mission to entertain. 'Blush' inducing reflections on her sexual exploits coexist alongside serious moral reflections. As Leeson acknowledges, patriarchal 'conjectures' are inadequate for portraying the ever-shifting, multidimensional individual who narrates her memoirs (4). She refuses to function as a categorizable object, or conform to any kind of prescriptive moral and literary standard.

While Leeson is deliberately evasive about her self-representation at this stage, she still establishes a clear moral framework through which readers are invited to interpret her memoirs. This manifests in the poem that opens her preface. She elevates 'Kind Nature's tenderest feelings,' above 'petty tyrants' who 'enslave' people in 'kingdoms... empires' *and* the family home — like her abusive brother, the focus of her following chapter (*Leeson* 3). Coghlan is explicitly political in her attack on the mercenary, artificial men who dominate nations.

[62] I also analyse Leeson's subversion of stereotypes in my MLitt dissertation, 'Making Pacts with the Patriarchy: Self-Possession and Subjectivity in *An Apology for the Life of George Anne Bellamy* (1785) and the *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson* (1795-97), 2019, 24.
[63] Richard Graves. "The Heroines; or Modern Memoirs." *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes by Several Hands* vol. IV, J. Hughes, 1782, l.6 and l.16.

Leeson draws upon similar radical discourses to encode her natural compassion and sincerity with moral distinction, above those who violate 'every tie of nature and humanity' in their quest to oppress countries, and subjugate families (*Leeson* 3). She too connects the private suffering of women with broader social corruption. 'Nature' was associated with 'purity' and 'authenticity' in revolutionary discourses, connected to radical virtuous ideals of an 'inner truth... expressed by means of a sensibility that found an outlet in an active concern for others.'[64] Such images dominate revolutionary feminist treatises, and are deployed by Coghlan in her vision of female authenticity. Leeson represents herself as a pillar of 'Justice and Truth,' principles endorsed throughout her memoirs — alongside 'humanity,' a term which invoked sympathy and benevolence (*Leeson* 3). As Brissenden notes, 'to be human in the true sense of the word was to be *humane'* in the eighteenth century (32). Just as Sheldon and Coghlan suggest that their experiences have equipped them with new moral insights, Leeson repeatedly implies that her moral development has unfolded *because* of her struggles. She later hints at similar radical political leanings to Coghlan, by condemning the 'tyranny and oppression' (147) that dominate Ireland, and referencing the 'demolishing [of] the odious bastille' (152). Implicitly, her perspective as an Irish Catholic gives her special insight into the broader consequences of (English) aristocratic male tyranny. Leeson was writing at a time of rising enthusiasm for French revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality amongst the disenfranchised Catholic populace.[65] She criticises the Protestant establishment by condemning the 'Popery laws' as a 'disgrace to any nation,' implemented by 'merciless, sanguinary villains' (202 and 208). Leeson also refuses to honour royal protocol or engage in 'mean servility' in company of the Prince of Wales (84). Her ideals would have been deeply controversial in England, even considered seditious when expressed by an Irish person. The Irish Rebellion took place in 1798, a year after Leeson's death and the posthumous publication of her final volume. Capturing the rising radical energies of her context, she launches powerful moral arguments against social and political oppression, yoked to her persistent advocacy of 'humane' conduct.

Leeson, like Coghlan, is concerned with how patriarchal interpretations of female 'honour' and 'virtue' are deployed to define women's moral worth. She condemns the conflation of virtue with chastity:

[64] Marisa Linton. *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution.* Oxford University Press, 2013, 185.
[65] Jim Smyth. "Introduction: The 1798 Rebellion in its Eighteenth-Century Contexts." *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union: Ireland in the 1790s,* edited by Jim Smyth, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 15.

> CHASTITY I willingly acknowledge is one of the characteristic virtues of the female sex. But I may be allowed to ask — Is it the only one? Can the presence of that one, render all the others of no avail? Or can the absence of it, make a woman totally incapable of possessing one single good quality? One woman may indulge in frequent inebriation, she may ruin her husband, neglect, beggar, and set an evil example to all her children — but she arrogates to herself the character of a virtuous woman — truly, because she is chaste... a second female is a propagator of scandal... A third cheats at cards, robs her unsuspecting and dearest friends... yet as she may be chaste, she is a virtuous woman (4).

Leeson cites examples of women whose immoral behaviour is overlooked because they conform to conservative codes of female sexual conduct. She delves beneath the respectable veneer of a society that sanctions all kinds of malicious, deceptive and neglectful behaviour, so long as women perform according to patriarchal ideals of chastity. Leeson exposes the hypocrisy of condemning and ostracising those who fall short of these standards but possess more important virtues, such as honesty, integrity and compassion. This desexualised redefinition of female virtue resonates with Wollstonecraft's views in *Vindication*:

> with respect to reputation, the attention is confined to a single virtue — chastity. If the honour of a woman, as it is absurdly called, is safe, she may neglect every social duty; nay, ruin her family by gaming and extravagance; yet still present a shameless front — for truly she is an honourable woman! (211).

There is no evidence that Leeson read *Vindication*, republished in Dublin two years before the first edition of her memoirs, but the similarities in argument and language here are striking. Wollstonecraft writes in defence of fallen women that fit certain specifications of feminist sympathy, and deploys courtesans as ciphers of stunted moral development. However, Leeson defines an experienced sex worker's moral subjectivity beyond these stereotypes, elevated above the inauthenticity of high-society hypocrites. Framing her narrative in this way undermines the moral significance attached to women's sexual conduct, encouraging readers to approach her experiences with an understanding of the sentiments that endure at the core of her identity.

Leeson represents constant endeavours to honour her authentic self, that of a socially and financially ambitious, sexually desiring woman — especially through her struggles against the jurisdiction of controlling keepers. Like Sheldon, she engages in 'mimetic play' with heteronormative gender codes by performing an obedient, wife-like role for her keeper, while conducting affairs outside of this union (Pendleton 79). Of all the memoirists, Leeson is most explicit about her urge to fulfil her sexual desires, often with a variety of men, beyond mistress / keeper contracts. She sometimes offers retrospective, conservative conduct-book style condemnations of women with 'loose turns of mind,' reproducing stereotypes of 'cunning,'

ruthless sex workers, while noting that men can have 'no confidence in an affection... that is not founded on Delicacy and Virtue' (*Leeson* 41). However, she invites her readers to probe the contrasts between these stereotypes and her nuanced self-representation, implicitly justifying her conduct on the grounds of her keeper's oppression (41). Mr Leeson demands that she drop all connections, 'both female as well as male... and confine [her]self solely to his society,' which she describes as 'ill-natured, selfish and tyrannical' (35). She thinks she 'owes a compliance to his wishes,' since 'he was to bear the sole expense of, not only every necessary, but of every comfort, convenience, and even luxury of life' (35). Leeson confronts the negotiation process involved in her kept womanhood. She outwardly tolerates his behaviour, generating a façade of 'seeming complacency' for the sake of securing relatively reliable, long-lasting financial support (35). Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson illuminate the mutual struggles shared by wives and mistresses, wherein states of dependence upon 'dictatorial' (*Sheldon* II 216), 'inhuman' (*Coghlan* 37) and 'tyrannical' (*Leeson* 35) men could condemn women to inauthentic and oppressed lives. Keepers like Walsingham and Mr Leeson implemented similar modes of financial control to husbands like Archer, conveniently securing this sense of ownership beyond the legal and financial commitments of marriage. Leeson continues to expose the parallels between 'common and legal prostitution' (*Vindication* 229). She scrutinizes the conflict between her authentic feelings, and her external, insincere actions: 'however I might have carried myself outwardly, a recluse and retired way of life was not agreeable to me' (37). She thus rebels against the 'external constraint [she] was forced to assume' (37). Leeson escapes to visit her lover Mr Lawless, but enlists a merchant and her servants in orchestrating an elaborate performance to deceive her keeper. Theatrical scenes ensue of the household being notified via 'cues,' her dramatically rushing home to change clothes and 'put on a morning cap,' then, upon Mr Leeson's return, sitting 'very calmly in the summerhouse, attentively reading a book' (39). She feigns an image of domestic serenity, wearing modest dress, and engaged in an activity that any chaste, retiring wife might practice. Like Sheldon's comic anecdotes, these episodes carry the dual function of entertaining readers while destabilising male sexual hegemony. Paradoxically, Leeson's performances allow her to pursue authentic erotic connections beyond this repressed state of monogamy.

Leeson harnesses theatricality for her personal pleasure. Like Sheldon, she channels the subversive power of playing with gender roles, reaffirming her subjectivity in the face of male exploitation. She describes her costumes with relish, particularly that of Diana 'goddess of chastity,' which she keeps up 'as well as the famed Lady Arabella D__ of charitable memory,

would have done amidst her own Magdalens' (*Leeson* 147). She does not choose Cleopatra or Messalina, 'as to be in masquerade is undoubtedly to be in an assumed character' (147). This resonates with Sheldon's libertine appropriation of the Magdalen stereotype. By assuming an oppositional persona, Leeson encodes it with the playful expression of her own unapologetic sexual licence. Denny was a charitable aristocrat who founded the Magdalen Asylum for Protestant Girls; Leeson therefore adopts a role which is both chaste and benevolent. She confounds familiar reference points of the dominant culture, unsettling these fixed categories of feminine identity. However, when one man dressed as 'Beelzebub' takes 'most indecent libertines with the beautiful Vice Queen, by thrusting his nasty black hands into her fair bosom, and attempting to do more,' Leeson establishes firm boundaries of bodily access by having him expelled from the company (147). Like Sheldon, she rejects perceptions of sex workers as public property open to 'unlimited access,' asserting her subjectivity in the face of sexual violence (Pendleton 79). Her performance centres her own enjoyment, resisting male entitlement. Leeson also leans into stereotypes of defeminised sex workers through episodes of crossdressing; she puts on a military uniform belonging to her client, wearing it publicly at the Rotunda. She is not disguised like Sheldon, but displaying her 'excess female sexuality' in a place people visited to see and be seen (Pullen 78). Leeson is pursued and intimidated by a soldier who, after her refusal to speak to him, asks how she 'dares to wear [this] uniform, and threatens to pull it off [her] back' (113). She reports his conduct to the committee of officers, who court-martial him. For Leeson and Sheldon, sexual theatricality does not necessarily transform women into objects for male consumption. Leeson's experimentations facilitate subversive modes of sexual self-expression in ways that appropriate and rework stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary, while resisting forms of misogynistic exploitation.

While Sheldon and Coghlan associate their lifestyles with various forms of erotic, emotional and political authenticity, Leeson explicitly adapts male-centric libertine philosophies to undermine the misogynistic moral baggage typically attached to female promiscuity. Her account also complicates pornographic male-centric fantasies of sex workers as insatiable sexual objects acting to quench their own lust.[66] Leeson prioritises her own pleasure over male titillation, asserting her sexual subjectivity. During her early career, she enjoys sexual relationships with multiple men. She states that she has 'long since seen the fallacy' of her previous arguments in support of promiscuity, but still presents them to her audience —

[66] Jessica Steinberg. "For Lust or Gain: Perceptions of Prostitutes in Eighteenth-Century London." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2016, pp. 702-713, 706.

perhaps in the spirit of honesty and titillation, but possibly because she still thinks them worthy of consideration (*Leeson* 40). Leeson believed that 'polygamy was not wrong in its own nature, but merely as it was a great difference between what was evil in itself and what was evil by human prohibition' (40). Likewise, contemporary libertine discourses condemned the imposition of 'unnatural' sexual restraints upon society.[67] Cook and Bougainville's voyages during the 1760s and 1770s generated reports of public promiscuity amongst Polynesian women, ideas circulated by Hawkesworth and Diderot, seized upon by male libertines, and deployed by prominent brothel owner Charlotte Hayes to arouse clients in a theatrical sexual display (*Revels* 22). As suggested by Hayes' money-spinning performance, reproduced in salacious detail in *Nocturnal Revels,* visions of natural sexual freedom were marketed primarily for male arousal. But Leeson uncovers her own, female-centric justifications, beyond the 'voluptuary's' male gaze, and what she defines as a suffocating state of monogamy (3). She reflects: 'if there was no express law against a plurality of husbands, there could be none against a plurality of gallants; and that [she], as yet single, should commit much less sin in admitting them than if [she was] married' (40). Leeson finds loopholes within any religious and legal impediments to her lifestyle. She exposes this conduct within seemingly respectable marriages, alleviating herself of stigma as a single woman operating on her own terms. Although Leeson enters into clear monetary contracts with her clients, she reaches the privileged position of prioritising genuine pleasure in prostitution. She charges one client ten guineas but deducts money for every orgasm she experiences, wryly declaring that she 'wishes to lose a guinea or two if possible' (186). More so than the other memoirists, Leeson explicitly defines her work as an opportunity for uncovering new avenues of erotic enjoyment beyond emotional attachment or even pure financial interest. In doing so, she contests misogynistic expectations of male sexual dominance, as well as feminist concerns surrounding the denial of female sexual subjectivity in prostitution.

Leeson undermines the moral baggage attached to non-conjugal relationships, instead shifting concerns about emotional inauthenticity to the patriarchal institution of marriage. She takes Sheldon and Coghlan's arguments in a new legal and sociological direction, through connecting her experiences to the systemic repression of female sexuality. Advancing arguments against marriage which were common within libertine and radical circles of this period, she writes: 'I looked upon marriage merely as a human institution, calculated chiefly to

[67] Aaron Garrett. "Human Nature." *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-century Philosophy,* edited by Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 160-233, 207.

fix the legitimation of children... ascertain the descent of property; and also to bind two persons together, even after they might be disgusted with, and heartily tired of each other' (*Leeson* 40).[68] Leeson rejects what she perceives as a calculating, male-centric system, orchestrated purely to secure lineages and maintain social facades. Female affection and pleasure are deemed superfluous, breeding resentment and infidelity. This reflects the common libertine disdain for 'institutions that impede the supposedly natural, free flow of pleasures,' including 'marriage for expedience or by force.'[69] Leeson engages in one marriage of convenience, because of the socioeconomic power her husband's family wields. She declares her 'detestation' for him, extorting five-hundred guineas from his father for annulment (*Leeson* 168). She avoids remaining bound to these men, but Sheldon and Coghlan's experiences of being trapped in contracts with cruel husbands give weight to her fears about the consequences of legal constraint. This certainly constitutes what Leeson describes as 'one of the many customs sanctioned by law far worse in their effects than a Polygamy' (40). Wollstonecraft also attacked marriages of convenience and condemned the conflation of female chastity with virtue, but still advocated commitment over promiscuity. She described 'polygamy [as] another physical degradation' which 'blasts every domestic virtue,' while critiquing the appropriation of natural discourses in libertine arguments for covertly misogynistic ends: 'if polygamy be necessary, woman must be inferior to man, and made for him' (*Vindication* 141). Wollstonecraft does not consider the prospect of a *woman* actively pursuing a polyamorous lifestyle, and asserting her sexual subjectivity within it. For her, this lifestyle transforms women into objectified playthings of men, rather than independent moral subjects. Feminist-seeming arguments against marriage could be appropriated for questionable ends; Wollstonecraft's lover Imlay condemned its 'barbarous codes,' while 'espousing the cause of oppressed women' in *The Emigrants*, but deceived her through his own sexual infidelities.[70] Nevertheless, Wollstonecraft, Coghlan, Sheldon and Leeson share aspirations of negotiating women's social and sexual freedoms outside of male jurisdiction — even if Leeson's libertine philosophies are a far cry from Wollstonecraft's comparable sexual conservatism, and the former's vision of freedom in promiscuity is estranged from the latter's ideals of monogamy.

Leeson weaponizes her sexuality against men who seek to exploit her. Her self-conscious erotic performances constitute a key strategy for reclaiming subjectivity and

[68] William Godwin. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness,* vol II. C. and J. Robnson, 1793, 850.
[69] James Steintrager. *The Autonomy of Pleasure.* Colombia University Press, 2016, 100.
[70] Gilbert Imlay. *The Emigrants*. Penguin, 1998, 46.

socioeconomic independence beyond their jurisdiction. Following her keeper Mr Lawless' abuse, infidelity and abandonment, she shifts from performing a chaste, wife-like role, to assuming a new persona: 'the ill-usage of Lawless... changed me to what I never was before.... I [became] a complete Coquet. I entertained everyone who fluttered about me... gave them all hopes, yet yielded to none' (*Leeson* pp. 60-1). Similarly to Sheldon's reclamation of autonomy beyond Walsingham's control through realising the destabilising power of her superficial charms, Leeson once again plays with 'heteronormative gender codes' by deploying her femininity as 'an economic tool' (Pendleton 79). Leeson was 'disgusted with the man of [her] heart, therefore gave [her] heart to none,' and 'looked upon all men as [her] lawful prey... wished to punish the crimes of one on the whole sex; to get all [she] could from each, and grant nothing in return' (61). Leeson explicitly connects Lawless' behaviour to a broader system of male corruption, which she seeks to subvert and capitalise upon. Julie Peakman lists the 'coquette' as one persona that Leeson fulfils, amongst the 'gamut of characteristics necessary for the life and survival of the courtesan.'[71] I would add that she modifies this caricature — superficial, flirtatious and fickle — to represent the emotional struggle that motivates her actions. Like Wollstonecraft, she challenges the Rousseauvian notion that women are naturally coquettish, showing that they are *socialised* into this conduct by men (*Vindication* 154). However, Leeson's 'coquettish arts' do not reduce her to a passive object of the male gaze that exists merely to 'gratify the sensualist' (*Vindication* 97). The gendered dynamics of predator and prey are reversed; the Coghlan-esque sentimental discourses previously deployed to distinguish Lawless as the 'man of [her] heart' are exchanged for strategies of objectification (43). Sheldon and Leeson rediscover their ability to destabilise systems of male control, through negotiating with the male gaze and defying expectations of feminine tenderness. Sexual performance is an essential mode of resistance against the emotional manipulation that first ensnared them.

Leeson explicitly appropriates and modifies identifiable literary and classical figures to articulate her reclamation of sexual power through performance. In her retaliation against Lawless, she assumes the vengeful character of sex worker Sarah Millwood from George Lillo's tragedy *The London Merchant* (1731). She writes: 'I applied to myself the words of Millwood, who I sought to imitate in everything but her cruelty,' citing this character's speech where she exposes the injustice of blaming women for 'arts' which were 'first taught' by men (Lillo qtd. in *Leeson,* 61). Millwood declares that a 'violated' woman can 'from her destruction raise a nobler

[71] Julie Peakman, *Amatory Pleasures*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 102.

name [and] right her sex's wrongs,' vowing that 'future Millwoods [will also] plague mankind' (Lillo qtd. in *Leeson,* 61). Leeson emulates this subversive spirit of reinvention and regeneration through prostitution. Just as Sheldon manipulates men who vie for her attention, this impure resistance involves Leeson harnessing male sexual attraction to her advantage. By contextualising her insincere sexual conduct, she argues that women should not be demonised for exploiting the misogynistic sexual economy they are forced into. Moreover, Leeson's sexual performances do not transform her into a scheming, thieving caricature of the prostitute imaginary. Having 'begun a kind of course of coquetry,' she recalls, her 'natural turn was not adapted to continue long in it' (*Leeson* 61). Although she 'perfectly reconciled [her] conduct towards men, under the colour of just retaliation,' her 'passions were not totally extinguished' (*Leeson* 61). Leeson's understanding of her 'natural turn' lends itself to the notion of moral sense, suggesting she is drawn back to a 'voice within' which is anchored in feeling (Taylor 132). She expresses admiration for her next 'amiable' keeper, once again indulging her preference for genuine, passionate connections with men (*Leeson* 61). But Leeson adapts to her fluctuating experiences, drawing power from performance whenever she needs to rebuild her autonomy. After Lawless' second betrayal, she honours the aspirations of her authentic self by becoming entirely [her] own mistress,' while reaching 'the very zenith of [her] glory,' as the 'reigning vice queen of the Paphian Goddess' (*Leeson* 143). She demands: 'who dare vie with honest Peg?' (143). The adjective 'honest' could mean 'upright, true, sincere,' or, in gendered terms when applied to a woman, 'chaste.'[72] Extending Coghlan's scrutiny of this term regarding the performative virtue of her female creditors, and her own commentary on patriarchal semantics, Leeson playfully hints at the maintenance of integral moral principles beneath the persona of this libertine Aphrodite. While leaning into pre-existing tropes of duplicitous, salacious sex workers, Leeson also distinguishes these temporary performances from what she represents as a steadfast and authentic moral core.

Leeson contrasts these genuine moral impulses with the performative virtue of those who judge her, highlighting the devastating impact that failures of female compassion can have upon women's welfare in a misogynistic socioeconomic system. Like Coghlan, she modifies pre-existing paradigms of feminine virtue to place greater emphasis upon 'generosity and compassion,' but embeds her concerns in a more direct, polemical attack on her moral critics (*Coghlan* 78). She refuses to court sympathy through sentimental tropes of seduction, confessing

[72] Samuel Johnson. "Honest, adj.1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. Accessed 3 December 2023. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/honest_adj

that she 'met [her] seduction halfway' (*Leeson* 19). For this, she again 'anticipates' particular judgements from her imagined readership — 'the exclamations of many of [her] female readers' regarding her entry into prostitution as a single mother, deprived of her family's support and unable to seek employment 'without a character' (32). They probably believe that she 'should have really died for want, rather than have procured sustenance at such a price as [she] paid for it' (32). Leeson exposes this absurd, *Clarissa*-esque system of female worth, where chastity is prioritised over survival. Instead, she demands self-reflection and sympathy: 'Were you ever on the point of starving? Did you ever experience real want?' adding, 'perhaps you utter your censures in a decent, comfortable room, after a plentiful meal, and surrounded by your relations and friends' (32). These hypocritical figures fail to sympathise with Leeson's bleak image of isolation and starvation, her lack of emotional and material comfort. Without experiencing or at least imagining her suffering, their arguments are invalid. Leeson emphasises her expectation of support from female family members, her '*own sex'* (94). She declares:

> My harsh sisters indeed, might have saved me from ruin, but that their *outrageous virtue* disdained. Had they pitied and forgiven my first fault, in all human probability I had not committed a second; but instead of holding out a hand to raise me up and support me; instead of alluring me back to the paths of Virtue, by gentleness and compassion, they plunged me into sorrow and distress; and by rendering me wretched and desperate, hurled me down the descent of Vice... *they,* not me must be chiefly condemned. Nay I will affirm, from the evidences of observation and experience, that the real cause of the multitude of unhappy women, is the harshness of their own sex, who, thinking to elevate their own real, or pretended virtue, by condemning the failures of others, shut the door against repentance and amendment (33).

Leeson situates this failure of sorority, through which she is dehumanised and discarded on the basis of her passionate mistake, at the root of her downfall. She distinguishes 'outrageous virtue' — a shallow, competitive performance of chastity — from authentic virtue, defined by compassion, and benevolent acts of uplifting other women. Echoing Coghlan's incredulity about this betrayal by those who should sympathise, Leeson demonstrates how patriarchal standards of feminine virtue are weaponised by those who elevate themselves through letting others fall. She values compassionate care 'work' amongst women (Mac and Smith 6), associating the transformative labour of supporting other women with true virtue. Leeson exposes a misogynistic dynamic of divide and conquer amongst women who internalise figments of the prostitute imaginary, including tropes of contagious moral corruption and narratives of culpability. Leeson subverts these stereotypes by caricaturing such inauthentic,

'outrageous' women as theatrical extremists, 'passing all reason and dignity.'[73] This cruelty is defined as the most heinous moral failure; *they* are held responsible for the breakdown of social bonds.

Leeson offers a more open-minded approach to moral improvement, rooted in a spirit of indiscriminate compassion. While Sheldon represents her identification with the fallen woman she supports, Leeson's forceful, polemical approach also compels her readers to form a Smith-inspired sympathetic connection fuelled by their imagination. She follows Coghlan and Wollstonecraft in drawing upon 'experience and observation,' integrating feeling and reason through imagination, in order to stimulate compassion (Green 282). At the critical midway point between fallen womanhood and prostitution, Leeson anticipates the limits of her readership's sympathies: 'we pitied your first transgression; you might plead youth, inexperience, and affection, but here you had no excuse. You weakly yielded to the temptation of a stranger, a casual acquaintance' (*Leeson* 32). However, she compels other women to reach beyond the 'casualty / collaborator' binary, and the stigma attached to insincere sexual acts (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). Through demanding to know whether *they* have experienced similar suffering, she directly calls upon them to imagine the particularities of her experiences, to consider how they would feel and act in her predicament. This exercise should form the basis of 'tenderness and compassion,' founded on the assimilation of rational reflection with emotional sensitivity (33). Leeson's moralistic critics refuse to acknowledge or imagine the extent of her suffering — integral to the formulation of a compassionate response. Within her revised moral framework, their 'outrageous virtue' is irrational, austere, and ultimately damaging in the quest for broader social improvement. As Wollstonecraft observed, the 'crimes' of others may initially be viewed in the 'deepest shade of turpitude, and raise indignation,' but they must also be perceived with 'compassionate forbearance' (*Vindication* 187). The world cannot be 'seen by an unmoved spectator,' but by one who 'mixes in the throng' and feels as others feel before they judge (*Vindication* 187). Wollstonecraft's social distance from the corrupt objects she represents in *Vindication* prevents her from truly recognising their subjectivity or sympathising with their suffering, much like the *Histories*' narrator (Batchelor, "limits" 185). Leeson represents genuine connections between all women, rather than performative virtue and divisive limits of sympathy, as integral to social progress.

[73] Samuel Johnson. "Outrageous, adj. 1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. Accessed 04/12/23. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/outragious_adj

Leeson showcases genuine sympathy and compassion in action, through representing the authentic emotional roots of her friendships with other women. Just as Sheldon represents transformative networks of care between sex workers, Leeson emphasises that she has witnessed 'the distress of many... and always relieved them as much as [she] could' (103). Her life writing encompasses biographies of the many women she has encountered, particularly those who suffer extreme hardship, and offer kindness at times of need. These narratives are acts of care and remembrance. Leeson expresses profound interest in the particularities of their experiences, conveying her own sympathy and admiration. She describes her late friend and cohabitant Sally Hayes as her 'constant companion whilst she lived, and the woman [she] loved best, as she had a spirit congenial with [her] own' (113). Leeson and Sally are represented as kindred spirits bound by their similar experiences and characters. While keepers come and go, enduring love underpins the emotional and physical support they share. This echoes Sheldon's depiction of her being 'inseparable' from Sally Metham; these women form contented households beyond the jurisdiction of controlling keepers (*Sheldon* III 91). Leeson represents Peggy, initially hired as her maid, as a friend of 'great comfort,' who is 'intelligent, faithful, sober, discreet and honest' (*Leeson* 247). She writes: 'when my distresses became too severe for human nature to bear, I found every consolation in my poor dear Peggy Collins, who never forsook me... I had great occasion for a trusty, faithful friend, who would sympathize in my uncommon and unheard of misfortunes' (247). Principles of loyalty and trust are prioritised above concerns about sexual reputation. Moreover, Peggy can truly understand Leeson's struggles, based on her first-hand experiences of misogynistic exploitation. These women engage in the processes of sympathetic identification that Leeson endorses, finding female solidarity a source of comfort and resistance in the grip of a ruthless male establishment. Leeson's portraits of fallen women and sex workers as multidimensional moral subjects, capable of forming such genuine bonds, counteract mercenary stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary.

It is important, as with Sheldon's memoirs, to acknowledge the limits of Leeson's sympathetic feminist bonds. In this nuanced portrait of her moral subjectivity, caring moral attributes coexist alongside a volatile, violent streak — sometimes manifested in attacks on other women. At these points, she leans into stereotypes of aggressive, brawling sex workers, portrayed in *Satan's Harvest Home* as a fighting 'colony of hell cats' (27). This behaviour was frequently coded as masculine, reflected through Sheldon's cross-dressing, sword-wielding image, and Leeson's description of herself as a 'bold masculine termagant' (*Leeson* 242). After

actress Ann Catley 'speaks scurrilously' of her in a gentleman's home, Leeson seeks to 'mortify' her through publicly addressing her as a 'little street-walking, London ballad singer' (*Leeson* pp. 73-4). A court case ensues after Catley accuses her of violence. The bill is dismissed, mainly because Leeson is valued for her economic services to Dublin, spending 'considerable sums amongst the traders of the city' (74). Leeson thus weaponizes her socioeconomic status as a heavyweight of the elite sex trade against Catley, who is denigrated as an impoverished streetwalker performing for pitiful income. Like Sheldon, Leeson demonstrates a degree of class prejudice towards 'lower ranking' sex workers. She retrospectively condemns her 'revengeful' spirit, especially when she finds Lawless entertaining the courtesan Julia Johnston; her 'jealousy [is] wound up so high a pitch' that he has to 'prevent her from murder' (53). Leeson informs Johnston's keeper of her infidelities, breaking up their arrangement. Her sense of feminist solidarity is ruptured by this envious rivalry for male attention. However, by detailing her precarious socioeconomic status under the protection of a reckless keeper — and even at the height of her success — she demonstrates the extent to which her career depends on eliminating female rivals who may damage her reputation or turn clients' heads. She complicates stereotypes of violence and social disorder through commentary upon the 'distress' caused by Lawless' aggression and 'exhausted finances' in this period, the suffering of herself and her children (53). Despite her efforts to support other women who do not overstep the boundaries of business in the sex trade, Leeson cannot fully escape the divide and conquer dynamics of a patriarchal sexual economy.

Out of all the memoirists, Leeson reflects most candidly on the interplay between her internal moral sense, and external socioeconomic pressures. She embeds anecdotes of her compassionate conduct within a portrait of her complex moral interiority, which counteracts superficial stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary. Leeson's discussion opens with a quotation from playwright Ben Jonson: 'Heav'n only sees the Heart / Then let us not condemn from outward show... incline our thoughts to comely Charity, towards our neighbour' (Jonson, qtd. in *Leeson* 106). Like Sheldon the 'Good Samaritan,' she extends 'love thy neighbour' to women of all sexual backgrounds — scrutinizing deeper, heartfelt qualities, beyond concerns about social appearance or ideals of moral perfection. Scrutinizing the impact of her fluctuating circumstances upon her moral conduct, she argues: 'life is chequered, good and bad fortune alternately arise. So it is with the actions of those who do not derive them uniformly from principle, but solely from the impulse of the moment' (106). Leeson suggests that she has frequently been forced to act upon her impulses rather than fulfilling a Wollstonecraftian

paradigm of moral growth, in which women are able to develop their moral principles, and always act authentically. She contends that her 'heart was naturally good, and thence arose [her compassionate] conduct,' but this 'natural good was frequently perverted by evil examples, by the love of pleasure, and from want of reflection' (106). Leeson details her struggle to act according to the dictates of her authentic self, appearing to reproduce *Vindication*'s stereotypes of sex workers who lack the 'delicacy of reflection' while indulging in thoughtless hedonism (*Vindication* 199). However, this debauchery does not exclusively define her moral identity, or preclude the caring acts she represents throughout her memoirs. As Leeson wryly asserts: 'there are very few possessed of a greater portion of the milk of human kindness, than I have ever been; and if charity covers a multitude of sins — honest Peg, thy only failing, of making use of what God gave, must be forgiven' (*Leeson* 173). Leeson aligns herself with the implicitly feminised 'milk' of humanity, rejected by Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play.[74] Playfully appropriating the same religious principle as Sheldon, she suggests that prostitution is merely the resourceful use of her God-given body, not an unforgivable transgression that negates her compassion. Where Wollstonecraft represents the corruptive influence of external patriarchal pressures upon female moral development, Leeson complicates *Vindication*'s caricatures of corrupt objects whose moral impulses are entirely destroyed by their circumstances. She generates the more nuanced image of a moral subject whose conduct is inevitably shaped by the ebbs and flows of human experience, but who is not defined or dehumanised by her perceived moral lapses.

While documenting the final years of her life, in which she attempts suicide and seeks religious penitence, Leeson seemingly struggles to reconcile the different dimensions of her character. However, this strategy ultimately functions to cultivate her readership's support. She periodically reproduces misogynistic codes of feminine virtue in her memoirs, appearing fully to endorse pre-existing caricatures of the prostitute imaginary. Sheldon and Coghlan do not engage in such extensive episodes of self-condemnation; Leeson's could be ascribed to her developing Catholicism, and a priest's editorial interventions in the final two volumes of her memoirs. Sharply juxtaposing her initial rejection of Magdalen-esque 'puling penitence,' this may well constitute a self-conscious textual performance of reformation designed to elicit sympathy and support from her readership (*Leeson* 4). Crucially, these particular reflections take place during her state of 'distress' and 'delirium' — as she pleads with God, and seeks his

[74] William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Bloomsbury, 2015, Act 1.5.17.

forgiveness — and are not part of a present tense commentary upon her life (222). They are frequently communicated in third person, perhaps indicating moments at which she struggles to block out the prejudiced voices that dominate conversations about sexual morality in her social context. Since the rest of Leeson's memoirs reinforce her multidimensional subjectivity, I contend that she encourages her readers to probe the contrasts between misogynistic stereotype and reality. She recalls questioning how 'the depraved, the wretched, the prostituted, the polluted Peg' could possibly be 'set up for a reformer of Men and Manners' (222). After establishing her authority as a moral commentator, she suddenly undermines her ability to fulfil this role. Leeson demands:

> Does she... presume to preach up morality to would-be senators and highborn men? The wretch who has reduced herself below the dignity of almost any of the animals of thy numerous and wonderful creation; for there's not creatures of the four-footed tribe, would go indiscriminately from male to male, and suffer perhaps a score in four and twenty hours to enjoy their favours (pp. 221-2).

Leeson reproduces images of physical and moral contagion that pervaded misogynistic and feminist discourses of the late eighteenth century. Such dehumanising parallels between sex workers and 'degenerated animals' were common, perpetuated by some modern anti-prostitution activists (Mac and Smith 10), as well as misogynistic commentators (*Harvest* 20). Reducing her life to a 'sink of infamy,' she declares: 'in vain you may solace yourself with the idea of your being charitable, humane, compassionate, tender hearted; of what avail are all those virtues to a blasphemous prostitute? Who shared her charms indiscriminately with every ruffian who could afford a price' (222). In this state of despair, she laments: 'in all my life I have not secured a real friend; the prostitutes my associates, and the libertines whose caresses I submitted to, all despise me' (222). Leeson's feelings contradict her memoirs' carefully constructed image of moral subjectivity. At the point of suicide, she suggests that her compassionate care ethics are invalidated by the catastrophic moral impact of prostitution. Fixating on the 'indiscriminate' nature of her sexual encounters, she reproduces the misogynistic notion that loveless sex can diminish women's 'essential selves' (Mac and Smith 29). Furthermore, Leeson reduces her meaningful friendships with other women to mercenary, insincere business 'associations.' Under these patriarchal codes of religious virtue, Leeson is defined exclusively as a 'blasphemous prostitute,' a corrupt object who lacks any redeeming moral features. However, having been presented with detailed, compelling evidence of her integrity and compassion, the reader is ultimately guided towards a more nuanced, sympathetic assessment of Leeson's character.

This strategy is reinforced through the sudden re-emergence of Leeson's bold resistance against the prostitute imaginary. Reconciling the different dimensions of her identity in a way that foregrounds her moral subjectivity, she embraces a more nuanced, defiant persona, the 'honest whore.' She recalls her struggle for rehabilitation:

> Had lady Arabella Denny lived, a lady who has left but one like herself behind, Mrs. Latouche; that paragon of charity, piety and humanity, I would have given all I possessed to the Magdalen asylum, and retired into it myself.... I was determined.... to shake off my profligate acquaintance, both male and female, and gracious heaven! where was there to be found a reputable one, who would associate with the abandoned Peg Plunket? Oh! Piteous case, that no penitence, no contrition for past levities can atone for a lapse from virtue—the wretched Magdalen, has no Saviour now to take her to his bosom; if she is poor she must continue so, for our ladies of virtue are too delicate, too sentimental, too refined, to succour or give bread, or encouragement to a honest W—— who was in the possession of more good and amiable qualities, than ever fell to the lot of such made up Automatons of the day — "Sans face, sans teeth, sans shape, sans hair, sans principles, sans everything" (225).

Leeson briefly assumes the sentimental Magdalen caricature. She defines herself as a pitiful object of moral concern seeking support from benevolent middle-class women like Denny and Latouche, figureheads of Dublin's Magdalen House. In their absence, no humane support can be found. This idealistic route to rehabilitation — represented within the *Histories,* and its exclusionary community — is denied to Leeson. She thus undermines this penitent role, by representing its futility. Instead, she resumes her polemical attack upon those who condemn fallen women, particularly experienced sex workers like herself, to poverty, isolation and misery. Her self-condemnatory, suicidal reflections are swiftly undercut by a witty exposure of those so-called virtuous women who robotically perform empty shows of sensibility before the watchful eye of the establishment, prioritising the preservation of their own reputation over supporting others. She reinforces her case against the 'outrageous virtue' practiced by her own biological sisters (33). Repurposing a line from Shakespeare's *As You Like it* —Jacques' 'All the world's a stage' monologue — she sardonically represents their physical and moral inferiority.[75] Leeson aligns the sentiment of compassion with moral work, self-sacrificing acts of female solidarity. While this Sheldon-esque practice of defining her own moral subjectivity by denigrating other women is far from feminist, it is crucial to contextualise Leeson's claims in a society that denied sex workers' humanity. Condemning the cliquish circles formed by supposedly virtuous women, she makes the case for female solidarity across social boundaries. Through defining herself as an 'honest whore,' she confounds their specifications of sympathy.

[75] William Shakespeare. *As You Like It.* Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Washington Square Press, 1997, Act 2.7.173.

This epithet was the title of a seventeenth-century comedy by Dekker and Middleton, featuring a sex worker, Bellafront, who vows to give up prostitution because she has fallen in love. They invoke the sexual definition of 'honest,' denoting chastity, to portray her reformed conduct — not any moral attributes she possesses or develops. Harking back to her self-representation as 'Honest Peg,' who is simultaneously a 'Vice Queen,' Leeson reworks this literary trope by binding herself to the primary etymological roots of 'honest' — suggesting that her compassionate impulses have always coexisted alongside her sex-worker status. Just as Coghlan challenges the gendering of this term, Leeson dismantles fixed, conservative interpretations of female virtue. She reasserts her genuine moral substance as a woman who is unafraid, like Sheldon and Coghlan before her, to engage in transformative activism on the very 'frontlines' of this patriarchal system (Queen 132).

Conclusion

Both through the experiences they relay in their memoirs and their methods of textual self-representation, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson engage in complex, subtle and inevitably 'impure' negotiations with the dominant culture (Pendleton 78). They transform the terms of debates surrounding sex workers' inauthenticity by undermining the identity-defining moral stigma attached to their work, and shifting focus onto the truly pernicious performances enacted within respectable society. Through life writing, they expose the nuances of their moral subjectivity, counteracting caricatures of moral disgust or concern that dominated eighteenth-century prostitute imaginaries. While these pervasive stereotypes could not be eliminated altogether, the memoirists redeploy them as tools; they appropriate and rework them according to the expectations of their imagined readerships, and to fuel broader schemes of resistance against the misogynistic socioeconomic systems in which they operate. The memoirs are multilayered with various discourses, enriched by feminist commentary and the radical spirit of their contexts. At a period in which sex workers were mobilised to represent broader concerns about female moral degradation, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson demonstrate that they are more than dehumanised, morally corrupted objects who are controlled and defined exclusively by external forces. Through pushing sincerity, benevolence and solidarity to the forefront of their moral agendas, these writers rework rigid, patriarchal definitions of feminine virtue which pervaded even feminist treatises of the period. They break down boundaries of sympathy, refusing to be categorised as dangerously corrupt harlots or sentimental objects of moral concern.

Undermining the cultural emphasis imposed upon chastity, and the notion that prostitution can threaten the moral fibre of women's 'essential selves,' Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson represent forms of feminist resistance that are facilitated by their experiences on the margins of chaste society (Mac and Smith 29). Their insincere sexual performances have no bearing upon their ability to function as moral and political subjects. They uncover new methods of leading authentic lives by negotiating with male desires, thus destabilising the heteronormative power dynamics imposed by controlling keepers and husbands. Sheldon's anecdotes of 'rambling' from chaste feminine ideals, Coghlan's radical rebellion against aristocratic male corruption, and Leeson's portraits of female-centric erotic pleasure reflect complex efforts to honour the dictates of their authentic selves. Their experiences form the basis of their arguments against misogynistic exploitation, and a catalyst for their compassionate support of other women, where caring for one another truly becomes 'political work' (Mac and Smith 6). The memoirists reflect candidly on the struggle to fulfil their own ideals in a misogynistic socioeconomic system, and often perpetuate the divisions and prejudices that emerge from it. But rather than becoming voiceless, passive objects in these debates, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson treat prostitution as a basis for extensive sociopolitical reflection — and a fruitful, transformative site of feminist protest.

Section I: Moral Sentiment

Chapter 2. 'I became a monster': Failures of Humanity in *Nature and Art* (1796), *Maria; Or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799)

Introduction

Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays politicise moral anxieties surrounding prostitution in their novels *Nature and Art* (1796), *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799). This chapter argues that they mobilise sex workers as political objects to represent the damaging influence of male-orchestrated socioeconomic pressures upon female morality, deploying caricatures of the prostitute imaginary to construct their arguments against women's sexual objectification.[1] I foreground the tension between this radical aspiration, and their reliance upon misogynistic stereotypes to portray the descents of their heroines Hannah, Jemima and Mary from fallen womanhood into prostitution. This strategy illuminates the limitations of the novelists' feminism. By investing sex with moral significance, they inadvertently uphold the patriarchal systems that circumscribe female sexual behaviour and define women's identities according to their sexual conduct. Beyond rape or seduction, their imaginings of loveless or passionless intercourse are fraught with guaranteed moral degradation, involving the separation of the 'essential self' from bodily actions in a way that defies feminist ideals of sexual subjectivity.[2] In *Wrongs,* Wollstonecraft legitimises authentic sexual unions beyond marriage. However, intercourse is 'too special to be sold,' and must be 'controlled or legitimised by an emotional connection' (Mac and Smith 29). Hannah, Jemima and Mary spiral into inauthenticity through prostitution, losing touch with their innate moral sense — the capacity for benevolence that defined 'humane' conduct — to the point of committing 'monstrous' acts of deceit and cruelty.[3]

During the mid-to-late 1790s, as restrictions on radical writers tightened and revolutionary hopes began to wane, radical arguments were increasingly packaged in

[1] Melissa Grant. *Playing the Whore.* Verso, 4.
[2] Juno Mac and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 29.
[3] R.F Brissenden. *Virtue in Distress.* Macmillan, 1974, 32; Mary Wollstonecraft. *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman.* Edited by Anne K. Mellor, Norton, 1994, 66.

conservative tropes.[4] Thus, for the novelists' rhetorical purposes, the 'honest whore' could not exist.[5] Their heroines are characterised according to conservative limits of sentimental, middle-class sympathy, boundaries which are reinforced through the demonisation of more hardened sex workers who populate the criminal underworlds into which they descend. While the memoirists represent themselves as multidimensional moral subjects engaging in sex *work* — thereby challenging stigmas attached to their sexual theatricality — the novelists define sex workers as morally degraded political objects rather than active participants in feminist progress. Wollstonecraft's Jemima is rehabilitated beyond prostitution, but women actively working in the sex trade are excluded from communities of virtuous women who *are* thought capable of advancing the novelists' feminist causes. Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays trace a symbiotic connection between moral development and political change, deploying sex workers to represent the processes by which women are alienated from their authentic moral principles, and estranged from the standards of compassionate conduct they deem essential for radical action. These novelists amplify *Vindication*'s anxieties about female moral degradation by thinking of 'The Prostitute' only in terms of what she represented to them, 'claiming ownership of sex worker experiences in order to make sense of their own,' and thus perpetuating time-worn strategies of objectification (Mac and Smith 11).

At a period when radical authors scrutinized the corruptive impact of society upon the authenticity of their protagonists, Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays expose the insincere sexual conduct demanded of women in a misogynistic system.[6] While the memoirists rework conservative codes of feminine identity as part of their 'impure' feminist resistance, the novelists contend that this behaviour makes women inauthentic — denying their innately virtuous selves, and weaponizing their sexuality for survival.[7] Unlike many male commentators, their concerns lie not with ensnared keepers or plundered fops. They worry about the impact of prostitution on the *female* psyche, ventriloquising sex workers to the tune of these concerns. No matter how sympathetic the novelists are, this strategy demonstrates that these writers are not fully cognisant of sex workers' subject positions. Inchbald's novel is written in the third person, but also includes Hannah's morally disillusioned lamentations. Mary and Jemima communicate extensive first-person accounts of their experiences. The latter characters are

[4] Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, xxiii.
[5] Margaret Leeson, *The Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson.* Lilliput Press, 1995, 255.
[6] Kerry Sinanan and Tim Milnes. "Introduction." *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity*. Edited by Sinanan and Milnes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 1-30, 10.
[7] Eva Pendleton. "Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73- 82, 79.

given hybrid voices, through which Wollstonecraft and Hays simultaneously perpetuate stereotypes about sex workers, and communicate their feminist ideals: all the better for moralising about their degradation.

The novelists imply that their heroines possess moral sense, a 'voice within' which is 'anchored in [their] feelings."[8] This exists beyond external, institutional standards of virtue, giving rise to the radical prospect of rebellion against these forces.[9] Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays elevate these natural impulses above socially dictated terms of feminine duty, while counteracting misogynistic prostitute imaginaries which interpret sex workers only as caricatures of innate moral deviance. However, they also imply that virtuous potential must be developed, a process impeded by Hannah, Jemima and Mary's hostile socioeconomic contexts. Articulating similar radical value systems to Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson, the novelists yoke benevolence to sincerity by endorsing the active pursuit of open, caring connections across social divides — as opposed to the double-dealings of a corrupt, misogynistic society. They endorse 'benevolent,' 'humane,' 'compassionate,' and 'kind,' conduct throughout their texts. Broadly speaking, these sentiments signify not only the impulse to sympathise with others, but to support them in their suffering, reflecting Wollstonecraft's differentiation between 'the active exertions of virtue' and the 'vague declamation of sensibility.'[10] For the memoirists, 'active virtue' also involves such dynamic forms of care work; but the novelists estrange this conduct from prostitution.[11] Moral acts cannot be undertaken without 'moral agency,' as Lena Halldenius describes it.[12] Halldenius focuses upon women's struggle to perform 'in accordance with and for the sake of reason' in Wollstonecraft's works (Halldenius 86). I emphasise the equally important role of *feeling* in this model of moral development, a concern shared by Inchbald and Hays. If moral agency is dictated by context, the characters' capacities to be morally *authentic* — true to their inner feelings and moral impulses — rests upon freedom from subordination. In their worlds of destructive artifice, they are not treated with, and therefore struggle to practice, the standards of humane care endorsed within these novels. They cannot cultivate sincere, benevolent connections with others.

This chapter examines the novels chronologically: *Nature and Art,* followed by *Wrongs of Woman,* and *Victim of Prejudice.* This structure maps the conservative circling backwards

[8] Charles Taylor. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1992, 26.
[9] Geoffrey Hartman. *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity.* St Martin's Press, 2002, viii.
[10] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of The Rights of Men.* Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 54.
[11] Margaret Coghlan. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794, 135.
[12] Lena Halldenius. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism.* Routledge, 2016, 86.

in feminist depictions of sex workers outlined in my introduction, regressing into misogynistic caricature through Hays' depiction of Mary amidst the anti-Wollstonecraft backlash of 1799 (Johnson xxiii). My close readings are organised into three parts, tracing three stages of a moral trajectory across all of the novels. I demonstrate how this trajectory converges with, and departs from, the conventional Harlot's Progress. In 'Moral Beginnings,' I examine how the novelists represent their heroines' authentic moral impulses, to foreground the extent of their degradation as they descend into prostitution. In 'Sexual Morality: The Impact of Inauthenticity,' I examine the tropes of theatricality and objectification they attach to prostitution, used to distinguish between the heroines' falls and the mercenary intercourse that unfolds afterwards. In 'Conditions for Redemption,' I argue that the novelists represent certain conditions for sex workers' rehabilitation, which, to varying degrees, reproduce sentimental tropes of shame and penitence, and reinforce specific limits of sympathy. My analysis of the novels is interwoven with points of comparison to the memoirs. This allows me to investigate critical moments of convergence and tension between their representations of morality and prostitution, and illuminate the exclusionary blind spots within the novelists' visions of moral and political progress.

Moral Beginnings

Hannah, the protagonist of *Nature and Art,* is introduced as the illiterate, innocent daughter of a rural labouring-class family. Inchbald foregrounds Hannah's authentic moral impulses, aligning her with middle-class sentimental sympathies and emphasising the extent of her degradation as she follows a Harlot's Progress-style trajectory into prostitution. While rejecting caricatures of innate moral depravity typically ascribed to labouring-class women and sex workers, Inchbald's attempt at intersectionality veers into another stereotype: the naïve, impressionable young woman, evocative of Hogarth's rural-born Moll. She serves as a suitable object of sympathy, much like the love-struck, sentimental heroines of *Histories*.[13] Hannah possesses 'refinement of sentiment independent of elegant society; honourable pride of heart without dignity of blood; and genius destitute of art to render it conspicuous.'[14] Despite her moral strengths, this 'seduced maiden' must be a disarming victim rather than possessing an empowered voice, especially given Inchbald's concerns about the 'limitations that restrained

[13] Jennie Batchelor. "The Limits of Sympathy: *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*." *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations during the long eighteenth century,* edited by Carolyn D. Williams, Angela Escott and Louise Duckling. University of Delaware Press, 2010, pp. 117-136, 128.
[14] Elizabeth Inchbald. *Nature and Art.* Edited by Shawn Lisa Maurer, Broadview, 2004, pp. 80-1.

her presentation of a political agenda.'[15] Sheldon plays with these tropes in her memoirs, defining her own subjectivity and self-determination beyond them through her self-aware, mocking narration. But Hannah's voice is largely absent from Inchbald's novel. Her thoughts and feelings are predominantly defined by the text's narrator in ways that give her 'honorary middle-class status,' a key point of identification for the respectable female reader.[16] Extending *Vindication*'s botanical metaphor about flowers 'planted in too rich a soil,' in reference to women being corrupted by society, Inchbald contends that 'the wild herb of the forest, equally with the cultivated plant in the garden, claims the attention of the botanist.'[17] She thus implies that Hannah possesses natural moral sense, nurtured by her humble upbringing. 'Cultivation' does not necessarily lend refinement, Inchbald implies; it can also instil a kind of practiced, calculating artifice, like that acquired by her middle-class seducer, William.

Hannah is also mobilised to communicate Inchbald's ideals of moral development. This protagonist must learn to develop and control her passions; her 'wildness' is pure, but also perilously difficult to control. Her exquisite sensibility is not the feeble, sensory type condemned by Wollstonecraft, for she is capable of 'higher' *sentiments*, 'fated by the tenderest thrillings of the human soul, to inspire and to experience real love' (*N&A* pp. 81-2). She 'experienced the sentiment before she ever heard it named' and it 'possessed her as genuine love alone exists' (81). This signifies sincerity, not cunning. Her love emerges pure from its source, transcending William's 'falsified' language of sensibility, alongside the 'prevaricating sentences' and 'artificial bloom' on the cheeks of the middle-class woman he marries (*N&A* 81 and 99). The dynamic between seducer and seduced serves as a metaphor for the pernicious impact of *ancien régime* corruption. Inchbald tailors Hannah's characterisation according to this dynamic, polarising the 'artificial' with the 'natural,' especially in terms of what behaviour comes 'naturally' to an individual. Where the latter is defined as 'not forced; not farfetched; dictated by nature... unaffected; according to truth and reality,' the former is 'made by art; not natural, fictitious; not genuine, artful; contrived with skill.'[18] Artificial conduct is forced, and necessarily insincere. If an individual's actions are unnatural, they do not correlate with their

[15] Amy Garnai. *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 137.
[16] Vivien Jones. "Placing Jemima: women writers of the 1790s and the eighteenth-century prostitution narrative." *Women's Writing,* vol. 4, no. 2, 1997, pp. 201-220, 211.
[17] Mary Wollstonecraft. A *Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 71.
[18] Samuel Johnson. "Natural, adj.1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/natural_adj. Accessed 4 December 2023; Samuel Johnson. "Artificial, adj.1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/artificial_adj. Accessed 4 December 2023.

authentic thoughts, feelings, or intentions. Coghlan reconciles these ideals with her sex work, preferring 'natural' feelings and 'ingenuousness' amongst her clients, juxtaposed with aristocratic artifice (*Coghlan* 61). However, Inchbald deploys this ideological binary to express concerns about the suppression of women's authentic moral impulses in prostitution, magnified through Hannah's transformation into a reluctantly artful object of moral concern.

Inchbald laments Hannah's inevitable implication in a system which conflates fallen women with sex workers, a distinction which exposes the moral weight that this novelist applies to different kinds of female sexual conduct. She subtly reconfigures patriarchal standards of chastity by distinguishing her heroine's passionate mistake from unfeeling, mercenary sex. However, limiting the radical significance of her commentary, she defines Hannah's authenticity and subjectivity by denigrating women who willingly engage in this kind of intercourse. Inchbald deploys the inauthentic 'wanton' — an oppositional, abstracted symbol of moral corruption — as a standard against which to measure Hannah's genuine emotional sincerity towards William. Hannah is conscious of her social inferiority and dazzled by William's sophisticated language, but Inchbald criticises her naivety and 'ungoverned passion,' for he offers only the 'slender, affections which attach the rake to the wanton' (*N&A* 110). Hannah is enticed into a dynamic of exploitation which, for Inchbald, is already comparable to the heinous conflation of a lovestruck virgin with a 'lascivious... strumpet.'[19] Implicitly, sex workers like Sheldon and Coghlan are deployed as objects of corruption, estranged from Hannah's emotional authenticity, and dehumanised by men as a result — despite their representation of genuine love for long-term keepers and friends alongside the insincere demands of prostitution. For Inchbald, these two categories of feminine identity should not be conflated. 'Wantons' might expect this treatment, but Hannah does not deserve it. She was taught 'the full estimation of female virtue, and if her nature could have detested any one being in a state of wretchedness, it would have been the woman who had lost her honour; yet, for William, what would not Hannah forfeit?' (*N&A* 82). Inchbald's depiction of Hannah's suffering critiques the punishing conflation of female 'honour' with chastity, albeit more covertly than Coghlan and Wollstonecraft in *Vindication* (*Coghlan* 95; *Vindication* 216). Hannah's patriarchal education, which inculcates 'detestation' of other women, fails to fortify her against William's persuasion. Implicitly, she struggles with pre-existing, essentialised narratives about the fallen woman — the othered 'wanton' of eighteenth-century prostitute

[19] Samuel Johnson. "Wanton, n.s.1773," *Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1773/wanton_ns. Accessed 4 December 2023.

imaginaries, functioning as a crude warning sign in misogynistic discourses of the period — because she defines her situation differently. Sex would be a sincere expression of Hannah's true *love,* and this eventually eclipses concerns about the consequences of what she perceives as 'so precious a sacrifice to him' (*N&A* 82). Inchbald thus conveys the sexual sincerity of her heroine, at the expense of dehumanising women who apparently lack these emotional and moral capacities.

Inchbald's images of sexual sacrifice resonate with the moral weight attached to female chastity by conservative commentators in this period, interpreted as a 'treasure, which is so precious in the possession... so irrecoverable when lost.'[20] Mac and Smith identify similar discourses of worth and loss within modern feminist anti-prostitution commentaries, which suggest that sex is 'too special to be sold' (Mac and Smith 29). Inchbald polices female sexual expression by perpetuating the notion that sex must be 'controlled or legitimised' through sincere emotional attachment, anticipating the fear of women losing their 'essential selves' articulated in modern feminist anti-prostitution commentaries (Mac and Smith 29). While sympathetically contextualising Hannah's actions in terms of genuine love, a radical defence of a fallen woman for this period, Inchbald still encodes sex with transformative notions of moral loss. She suggests that 'the first time [Hannah] descended from the character of purity, [she] rushed imperceptibly on the blackest crimes' (*N&A* 110). This perpetuates conservative connections between female sexual conduct and moral worth, cemented through discourses of purity and corruption. We are reminded of the seduced women of *Histories,* who 'sacrifice all [they] did and ought to hold dear' for men they loved.[21] Inchbald does not extend this sentimental subjectivity to women who undermine the emotional and moral value of sex. Her 'ideological sympathy' has limits, only applicable to 'casualties' of the system.[22] She implicitly validates misogynistic criticisms of the impure, pragmatic negotiations of sex workers like Sheldon, and accepts their exploitation by men as par for the course (Pendleton 79). Inchbald mobilises oppositional figures of the prostitute imaginary to condemn a society in which Hannah, like many other innocent, labouring-class women, will be forced into mercenary sex. By representing Hannah's loving motivations, and foregrounding the injustice of her fate,

[20] Charles Allen. *The Polite Lady*. Newberry and Carnan, 1769, 191
[21] *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*. Edited by Jennie Batchelor and Megan Hiatt. Routledge, 2016, 30.
[22] Gail Pheterson. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Context,* no. 37, 1993, pp. 39-64, 58.

Inchbald critiques the demonisation of fallen women — but perpetuates moralistic judgements against sex workers.

Inchbald follows Hannah's moral decline in a linear fashion. By tracing her sentimental beginnings, she secures her status as an appropriate object of middle-class concern from the start of her novel. In contrast, Wollstonecraft tests the limits of her readership's sympathies through initially introducing Jemima, a wardress at the prison which houses the middle-class protagonist Maria, as a suspicious and misanthropic individual. She is unable to trust Maria, who has been wrongfully incarcerated by her abusive husband — let alone form a sympathetic connection with her. The roots of Jemima's hostility are not explored until the first-person account of her neglect, abuse and prostitution later in the novel, but Maria deduces that misery has not 'quite petrified the life's-blood of humanity' (*Wrongs* 10). Wollstonecraft subtly dismisses stereotypes of sex workers' innate moral depravity by hinting at the hardening impact of Jemima's past experiences. She is frozen, but slowly thawing; we are later told that her 'humanity had rather been benumbed than killed, by the keen frost she had to brave at her entrance into life' (54). As Johnson observes, this 'killing frost... is the brutality with which male culture severs women from each other (Johnson 68). 'Humanity' functions as a byword for compassion in this novel. Through this metaphor of freezing and thawing, it carries connotations of human warmth kindled by activity, defined by the 'active exertions of virtue [rather than] the vague declamation of sensibility' (Wollstonecraft, *Men* 53). Compassion involves advocacy and hands-on care. It involves risks that Jemima, assuming 'selfish independence' out of the need for self-preservation, particularly in a hostile sex trade, could not afford to take (*Wrongs* 10). This process of inevitable moral hardening borne from the demands of survival is challenged by the memoirists' representations of compassionate connections between women across social divides, even amongst abuse and poverty. While Wollstonecraft's portrait of a former sex worker seems nuanced for the period, reading it in conjunction with these memoirs reveals the intractability of certain conservative tropes surrounding prostitution. Echoing Inchbald's classist comment about Hannah's sentiments, Maria deduces that she is 'no fool, that is, she [is] superior to her class' (*Wrongs* 10). This portrait of a former sex worker cannot escape the 'class-based mechanisms of sentimentalism,' especially as the return of Jemima's natural capacity for feeling under the middle-class Maria's tutelage makes her 'recuperable for a middle-class ideal' (V. Jones 212). Reviewing Inchbald's novel, Wollstonecraft praised the 'affecting' story of Hannah, for giving 'point to a benevolent

system of morality.'[23] Jemima's tale is also mobilised to impact a middle-class sentimental readership, but her initially prickly, unreceptive characterisation forms a more nuanced subject than Inchbald's disarming heroine. Jemima's hostility bears a deeper, political significance, and lends her complexity which extends beyond the function of simply 'affecting' readers for moral purposes.

Through Jemima's first-person narrative, Wollstonecraft scrutinizes sociopolitical forces which stifle her moral development. This change of voice guides the reader to distinguish between Maria's judgemental thoughts, and Wollstonecraft's attempts to generate a fuller, more layered picture of Jemima's struggles — even as she is ventriloquised according to the author's agenda. We learn that she possessed a seemingly innate yearning to express and receive love during her childhood, stifled by her cruel upbringing. While Hannah develops 'nice taste [and] delicate thoughts' in a loving family home, abuse and neglect blight Jemima's moral impulses (*N&A* 82). She was driven to deceive, desperate to hide the errors she was condemned for, then blamed for a 'natural propensity to vice' supposedly inherited from her fallen mother (*Wrongs* 39). While she observes that her 'sentiments' are returning with 'full force,' she demands: 'what should induce me to be the champion for suffering humanity? Whoever risked any thing for me? Whoever acknowledged me to be a fellow creature?' (53). Subtly undermining the crude class-based assumptions of intellectual and moral inferiority that underpin Maria's expectations of 'foolishness,' and her surprise that Jemima has 'understanding above the common standard,' Wollstonecraft addresses the material concerns that shape Jemima's development — and understandably inhibit her compassion (10). Leeson insists that 'there are very few possessed of a greater portion of the milk of human kindness' than herself (*Leeson* 173), and like Coghlan develops 'active virtue' from her personal experiences of exploitation and neglect (135). Maria concludes that the 'milkiness of nature [is] turned into gall, by an intercourse with the world, if more generous juices do not sustain the vital source of virtue!' (*Wrongs* 76). All humans are capable of 'generous emotions,' which can 'lie for ever dormant; the circumstances never occurring, necessary to call them into action' (76). This image of poisoned, torpid feeling, contrasted with the gently flowing and feminised 'milk' of humanity (again, like the masculinised Lady Macbeth's rejection of 'the milk of human kindness') epitomises Jemima's stagnant state.[24] She is forced to 'witness... many

[23] Mary Wollstonecraft. "Review of *Nature and Art*." *Analytical Review* vol. 23, 1796, pp. 511-14. Appendix to Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art*. Edited by Shawn Lisa Maurer, Broadview, 2005, 219.
[24] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Bloomsbury, 2015, Act 1.5.17.

enormities' of human suffering, feel sympathy (*Wrongs* 53), but never have the moral agency to intervene (Halldenius 86). Unlike Leeson, she is wrenched away from her authentic impulses, and struggles to fulfil the standards of humane care that Wollstonecraft endorses.

Unlike the histories of Hannah and Jemima's moral struggles, the experiences of Mary in *The Victim of Prejudice* are first filtered through a male voice: that of Mr Raymond, the man who loved her before her descent into prostitution, and to whom she entrusted her daughter's care.[25] Raymond's epistolary recollections precede Mary's first-person letter-memoir, a strategy which invites the reader to critique his dehumanising representation. Like Wollstonecraft, Hays deploys different voices to destabilise misogynistic, class-based assumptions about sex workers' identities and experiences. Raymond is a benevolent parent, who provides his charge with a wide-ranging, liberal education. However, his narrative serves a similar purpose to those of conservative conduct book writers, in which sex workers were reduced to ciphers of moral corruption, plotted in a Harlot's Progress-style trajectory. Like the objectified 'wantons' deployed to warn Hannah about the moral significance of her chastity, Raymond uses Mary to warn his adoptive daughter against the perils of seduction, especially as her illegitimate parentage means she cannot marry the well-born man she loves, William Pelham. The middle-class Mary was 'formed [by Nature] in her most perfect mould' according to Raymond, but spoiled by 'fond, but weak, parents.'[26] Her 'bloom fades' as she rejects his proposal and becomes involved with a libertine (58). The lost 'blooms' of sex workers are similarly described in *Histories,* where jaded physical features reflect deeper moral disorder (*Histories* 129 and 144). Raymond casually glosses over his own 'years in the dissipations customary to young men of [his] age and rank' (*Victim* 58). *His* implied sexual indiscretions cause no devastating moral damage. Years later, he witnesses Mary's arrest following her involvement in a client's death. She is unrecognisable to Raymond, identified only as 'the wretched... accomplice' of a 'murderer' by a constable (*Victim* 59). He recalls a figure 'with a wan and haggard countenance, her clothes rent and her hair dishevelled... stained with blood, disordered by recent inebriation, disfigured by vice, and worn by disease' with 'wide and vacant eyes' (pp. 59-60). Her wild hair, blank eyes, drunken manner, ruined clothes and (venereal) disease-marked features are symbolic of internal moral disorder; this is the image of an undone woman, the 'rapacious female monster, criminal... diseased and alcoholic' that haunted misogynistic eighteenth-century imaginaries, her brutality even extending to complicity in

[25] The mother and daughter of *Victim* share the same name. To avoid confusion, I refer to the former as Mary, and the latter as either Mary Raymond or 'the protagonist.'
[26] Mary Hays. *The Victim of Prejudice*. Edited by Eleanor Ty, Broadview, 1998, 58.

murder.[27] Like patriarchal commentators of the period, including those who associated 'whoredom [with] homicide,' Hays situates sex workers within sinister criminal underworlds.[28] Raymond's monstrous vision cements this stereotype, while expressing his horror at the physical corruption of his once-chaste love. His representation is later complicated through Mary's politically charged commentary on the male forces that orchestrated her moral decline, but nevertheless epitomises the routine dehumanisation of sex workers. Mary is reduced to a monstrous rhetorical device, mobilised to conserve the chastity of her impressionable young daughter.

For Raymond, Mary's legacy spreads a moral contagion which could corrupt her daughter. Representing her in the most garish terms helps to warn his charge away from the same fate. He invokes the gothic trope of contagion for this purpose, dominant within eighteenth-century prostitute imaginaries. Sex workers were persistently connected with disease and destruction, particularly on the basis that 'sexually transmitted maladies could horribly disfigure their bodies.'[29] Mary's trajectory resonates with the rosy-cheeked subject of Richard Newton's *Progress of a Woman of Pleasure* (1794), who descends from keeping into absolute degradation: haggard, pale, hair undone, clothes dishevelled, and overcome by disease.[30] The sex worker of James Gillray's *The Whore's Last Shift* (1779) washes her symbolically dirty, once-white dress, venereal disease treatment pills scattered beside her.[31] These tropes were appropriated by revolutionary feminist writers of the early 1790s, who imagined sex workers 'infest[ing] the streets' (*Vindication* 100) like 'vermin.'[32] As Mac and Smith observe, anxieties about prostitution usually manifest in 'ideas of bodily degradation,' conveying the 'threat that sex workers pose as the vectors of such degradation… disease spreader[s], associated with putrefaction and death' (22). Hays later redeploys them when she ventriloquises Mary to highlight the catastrophic repercussions of patriarchal oppression. But at this juncture of Raymond's narration, he 'yields with anguish to the necessity and peril of [his charge's]

---

[27] Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. "Introduction: Venal Bodies – Prostitutes and Eighteenth-Century Culture." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. Routledge, 2012, pp.1-16, 10.
[28] *Satan's Harvest Home.* Publisher Unknown, 1749, 25.
[29] Miriam Borham-Puyal. "Jemima's Wrongs: Reading the female body in Mary Wollstonecraft's prostitute biography." *IJES*, vol 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 97-112, 103.
[30] Richard Newton. "Progress of a Woman of Pleasure." *The Whores of Yore.* Accessed 5 December 2023. thewhoresofyore.com/progress-of-a-woman-of-pleasure-by-8203richard-newton.html
[31] James Gillray. "The Whore's Last Shift." *National Portrait Gallery*. Accessed 11 October 2022. npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw63173/The-whores-last-shift
[32] Marie Madeleine Jodin. "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, eds. Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206, 189.

situation' — reducing Mary to a contagious curse upon her daughter, used to uphold patriarchal codes of sexual and moral purity (*Victim* 57).

Mary's epistolary narration adds layers to Raymond's one-dimensional image of sexual corruption, by blaming contextual pressures for her downfall. Hays grapples with the prostitute imaginary from different masculine and feminine / feminist narrative perspectives, and with different degrees of moral conservatism. Mary's memoir-letter contests Raymond's stereotypes, but also ventriloquises her as a political object to leverage broader arguments against a flawed female education system, pinpointed as the 'source of her calamities' (*Victim* 63). While Inchbald and Wollstonecraft trace the exploitation and abuse that underpin their labouring-class heroines' moral struggles, Hays examines the process of social conditioning that causes Mary to reject an 'honest' man's proposal, and fall into prostitution (63). She amplifies *Vindication's* anxieties about the moral degradation of middle-class women. Mary is raised to be inauthentic, 'fostered in artificial refinements [and] misled by specious, but false expectations' (63). Lacking reason, her 'vanity and her senses' lure her into a libertine's 'sophistical pretences' (63). This artificial context stifles the development of her sentiments beyond superficial concerns, and blinds her to the insincerity of others. Hays invokes the artificial 'hothouse' education that Wollstonecraft linked to prostitution, inspiring 'libertine notions of beauty,' and generating 'weak beings... only fit for the seraglio' (*Vindication* 204, 74). To advance her political arguments against the shallow system that breeds these flaws, Hays reinforces victim-blaming caricatures of women whose 'vanity [is] indulged' by predatory men, a trope reproduced within both conservative male-authored commentaries and the *Histories* (*Histories* 8).[33] While Sheldon leans into caricatures of naïve vanity, she subtly undermines the highly fictionalised tropes that Hays perpetuates, making similar points about middle-class inauthenticity but wryly critiquing the way she 'may now be supposed to speak' about her beauty.[34] For Hays, Mary struggles to access 'natural personhood,' the true source of morality, from the artificial social position she is forced into (Halldenius 86). Like Inchbald, Hays defines artifice and vanity in opposition to nature and authenticity. The latter values are inculcated through Mary Raymond's Wollstonecraftian education, whereby her 'infant sensibility' is bolstered by a 'cultivated understanding' while her heart is instilled with 'compassion' (*Victim* 5, 21). Her conduct correlates with her internal thoughts and feelings.

[33] "Art.13. Proposal to render effectual a Plan, to remove the nuisance of common prostitutes from the streets of this metropolis." *The Critical review,* vol. 5, 1758, pp. 526-528, 526. *ProQuest,* proquest.com/historical-periodicals/art-13-proposal-render-effectual-plan-remove/docview/4321840/se-2.

[34] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol I. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 7.

'Mechanical instinctive sensations,' are encouraged to 'deepen' through rational reflection into 'the feelings of humanity' (Wollstonecraft, *Men* 54). But Raymond is 'unnerved' by his charge sustaining this 'artless... affectionate innocence' in adulthood, especially with her beloved William; unaware of the consequences endured by honest, loving women like Hannah, she wonders why 'native sincerity' must be 'perplexed by false scruples and artificial distinctions' (*Victim* 28). Raymond is compelled by the dominant culture to encourage artifice, despite this being defined as a major cause of her mother's downfall. All women, regardless of their upbringing, are forced into gendered constraints. These are rejected by Coghlan, who never learned the 'secret to disguising her genuine feelings,' and longs to follow 'the bent of her inclinations' (*Coghlan* 19, 41). Hays thus reduces Mary to a cipher of her own moral messages about failures in female education, implying that women are systemically primed for the inauthenticity of prostitution.

II) Sexual Morality: The Impact of Inauthenticity

Hannah is forced to sacrifice her authentic moral principles — the natural sentiments that remain, despite her seduction — to an apathetic and artificial social system. Impoverished, and assailed by prejudice following the discovery of her illegitimate child to William, she is depicted as a sentimental object of pity. This characterisation hinges especially upon her emotional and moral conflict at the critical midway point between fallen womanhood and prostitution. Inchbald describes the 'throbs of [Hannah's] heart' and her 'agonising mind,' reinforcing the human suffering which is disregarded by those who refuse her support (*N&A* 122). People 'avoid [Hannah], or openly sneer' at her, leaving her 'degraded and friendless' (119, 122). Implicitly, her reputation is contagious amongst chaste women, who, like Leeson's judgemental sisters, must conserve themselves by 'sneering' on the sidelines. Female solidarity cannot thrive in this hostile context. Intelligence spreads of the heroine's transgression; she is dismissed from her job in service by a cruel mistress, which forces her to become a maid in a brothel. Inchbald suggests that inauthenticity is Hannah's only lifeline, when 'persons of honour and reputation would not employ her' (*N&A* 128). The heroine's 'feelings of rectitude submitted to those of hunger – Her principles of virtue (which the loss of virtue had not destroyed) received a shock when she engaged to be the abettor of vice, from which her delicacy, morality, and religion shrunk' (127). Leeson also represents principles as luxuries in her less sentimental, more pragmatic approach to prostitution: 'Were you ever on the point of starving? Who would have taken a servant without a character? (*Leeson* 32). Fundamentally, fallen women like Leeson

and Hannah are deprived of 'support from any industry they may be willing to try for bread' (*Leeson* 32). However, Inchbald strives to represent Hannah as a true 'casualty' of the system, who can easily be granted 'victim status and ideological sympathy' (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). She distinguishes between virtue in principle, untainted by her passionate mistake, and the corporeal definition of sexual virtue dictated by the dominant culture. Both are implicitly violated by the sources of vice Hannah begins to associate with. She stands in a liminal space, later described as the 'mid-way of guilt,' between fallen womanhood and prostitution (*N&A* 130). Her principles are compromised to satisfy basic, corporeal need. This conflict is highlighted within *Histories*, where one penitent states that 'the severe pains of hunger... got the better of the little delicacy [she] still had remaining' (*Histories* 49). By detailing this conflict between women's morality and their material conditions, Inchbald heightens the injustice of a cruel system that forces sentimental victims like Hannah — deserving of society's sympathy and support — to disavow their authentic feelings.

Inchbald reduces the nameless 'wretched inhabitants' of the brothel to their ostensibly artificial conduct (*N&A* 128). Prostitution becomes a 'stigmatised identifier' which defines their identity, estranged from Hannah's sincere passionate mistake.[35] Objects of Inchbald's moral concern, they inhabit a place 'where continual misery is dressed in continual smiles; where extreme of poverty is concealed by extreme of show; where wine dispenses mirth only by dispensing forgetfulness' (128). While the memoirists maintain subjectivity alongside and through their sexual performances, with Sheldon's giving rein to her authentic 'rambling self,' Inchbald attaches catastrophic moral weight to the brothel workers' theatricality (*Sheldon* III 107). The 'extreme[s] of show' involved in their performances of desire are lurid markers of loss: their lack of happiness, financial security, and virtue. Their representations resonate with the masquerading figures of Marten's misogynistic prostitute imaginary, but Inchbald complicates this with a more sympathetic interpretation of what this 'show' may conceal.[36] The image of misery 'dressed' in smiles is particularly striking; this verb meant not only to 'adorn, deck and embellish,' but also to 'cover a wound with medicaments.'[37] Inchbald suggests that the artifice of prostitution both conceals and inflicts profound psychic pain, but communicates her moralistic disdain towards the end product. Her poignant suggestion of emotional depth is accompanied by objectifying caricatures of 'inveigling,' alcoholic sex workers, and Allen-esque

[35] Rebecca Bromwich and Monique Marie Dejong. "Introduction." *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work* edited by Bromwich and DeJong, Demeter Press, 2015, pp. 9-42, 24.
[36] John Marten. *A Treatise of the Venereal Disease*. D. Leach, 1711, 388.
[37] Samuel Johnson. "Dress, n.s.1755," *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. Accessed 09/09/22. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/dress_ns

conservative interpretations of female sexual worth (Lewis and Ellis 10; Allen 191). She notes that 'female beauty is so cheap, so complying, that while it inveigles, it disgusts the man of pleasure' (*N&A* 128). Despite using these women as receptacles for their lust, these men are simultaneously disgusted by their failure to fulfil chaste feminine ideals. This contradiction resonates with one Magdalen's assertion that 'while a man courts our vice, his reason hates our impudence' (*Histories* 48). If 'female beauty' is so 'complying' to male desire, it can only ever be 'cheap' — in modern terms, becoming 'easy,' losing the precious, exclusive essence imposed upon it by misogynistic society (Mac and Smith 29). While arguing that the commodification of 'beauty' necessitates the loss of female sexual subjectivity, Inchbald also reinforces the patriarchal notion that female promiscuity diminishes women's 'essential selves' (Smith and Mac 29). She cannot imagine the impure sexual negotiations practiced by Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson as forms of feminist resistance (Pendleton 78). Through expressing moralistic disgust over these complying female bodies, Inchbald inadvertently aligns herself with the gaze of the misogynistic male clients she represents. She becomes complicit in this process of objectification.

Despite welcoming Hannah into their circle, the brothel workers are deployed to represent the extent of her moral degradation. She finds herself 'impressed with the superiority of others, and her own abject and disgustful state,' made to declare: 'Let me herd with those who won't despise me — let me only see faces whereon I can look without confusion and terror — let me associate with wretches like myself, rather than force my shame before those who are so good, they can but scorn and mock me' (*N&A* 128). Inchbald represents Hannah finding 'sympathy in disgrace' beyond the insincere, performative 'goodness' of exclusionary, moralistic societies (128). Unlike the genuine friendships and communities of care represented by the memoirists, Hannah's company of nameless 'wretches' is clearly a last resort, a reflection of how far she has fallen. Despite implications of a community dynamic — women sharing the same living space, bound by a sense of affinity in their identities and experiences — Inchbald represents sex workers 'herding' together. This zoomorphic term connotes the flocking together of beasts, invoking the description of Hannah 'herding with the brute creation' in her previous job tending farm animals, which she 'preferred to the society of human creatures' (*N&A* 122).[38] Inchbald's description resists any exploration of the human bonds that may exist

[38] Samuel Johnson. "Herd, n.s," *Dictionary of the English Language,* 1755. Accessed 12 September 2022. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/herd_ns

between the women, drawing upon a long-standing tradition of likening sex workers to animals which persists within anti-prostitution activism today (Mac and Smith 10). Their sympathy does not amount to the kind of benevolent care that may uplift and improve Hannah. For Inchbald, sex workers are morally incapable of the caring, supportive bonds described by the memoirists. The brothel workers are not sources of moral support in the face of social prejudice, but outlawed creatures driven together by an instinctive search for commonality.

Inchbald's depiction of Hannah's struggling virtue ultimately depends on the othering of these sex workers as a source of moral contagion, resonating with the dynamic of corruption established between Mary and her daughter in Raymond's narrative. Hannah initially condemns their actions, 'blessing herself that poverty, not inclination, had caused her to be a witness of such profligacy' (*N&A* 129). While the 'lusty whore' and 'impoverished victim' stereotypes both circulated within late eighteenth-century culture — challenged within Leeson's preface — Inchbald reproduces long-standing ideological divisions between women whose 'inclinations' ostensibly lead them to prostitution, versus those who are driven by 'poverty.'[39] This is central to the 'casualty' / 'collaborator' binary, circumscribing limits of identification and sympathy between women (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). Inchbald suggests that the 'horrors' of prostitution become 'softened' for Hannah, until 'self-defence, the fear of ridicule, and the hope of favour, induce her to adopt that very conduct from which her heart revolted' (*N&A* 129). Hannah is disillusioned by her company, deprived of any positive moral examples; she feels compelled to emulate the brothel workers' behaviour. She wonders why she should 'ungratefully persist to condemn women who alone are so kind as to accept [her] for a companion,' and 'refuse conformity to their customs, since none of [her] sex besides will admit [her] to their society a partaker of theirs' (*N&A* 129). This image of their kindness, cultivating a sense of belonging in the face of external prejudice, is offset by the observation that the 'pliant' Hannah disregards 'the fatal proverb against "evil communications"' by associating with these women (*N&A* 129). As Shawn Lisa Maurer notes, this argument that 'dealings with the profligate — rather than any innate human propensity towards wickedness would be at the core of corrupt behaviour, was fundamental to the philosophy of the English Jacobins' (Maurer 129n1). Adopting a similar strategy to the author of *Histories*, who elevates the 'moral subjectivity' of penitents above the 'unforgiving portraits' of other labouring-class women, Inchbald's depiction of Hannah's authenticity being corrupted by external pressures involves

[39] Jessica Steinberg. "For Lust or Gain: Perceptions of Prostitutes in Eighteenth-Century London." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2016, pp. 702-713, 702.

the demonisation of more experienced sex workers as collaborators within a misogynistic system (Batchelor, "Limits" 128). Images of such conscience-stricken women populated sympathetic-seeming prostitute imaginaries. One penitent in the *Histories* seeks a 'settled subsistence' amongst a company of sex workers, but also struggles with 'engaging in such a way of life [she] detested' (*Histories* 48). Still, any distinctions between Hannah and her companions are blurred in the eyes of the dominant culture. Her 'pliant disposition, which had yielded to the licentious love of William, stooped to still baser prostitution in company still more depraved' (*N&A* 129). Hannah is pushed further away from her original moral principles into increasingly insincere sexual conduct from 'which her heart revolted.' A desirable female trait according to patriarchal codes of wifely obedience, 'pliancy' is a moral weakness in Inchbald's view, which opens Hannah up to manipulation. Ultimately, other women — not only William, or the brothel clients — are condemned as major influences over this heroine's moral downfall.

Inchbald ventriloquises Hannah to articulate her moral concerns about female sexual insincerity in prostitution:

> she now submitted to the mercenary profanations of love; more odious, as her mind had been subdued by its most sacred, most endearing joys. While incessant regret whispered to her "that she ought to have endured every calamity rather than this," she thus questioned her nice sense of wrong, "Why, why respect myself, since no other respects me? Why set a value on my own feelings when no one else does?" Degraded in her own judgment, she doubted her own understanding when it sometimes told her she had deserved better treatment; for she felt herself a fool in comparison with her learned seducer and the rest who despised her (*N&A* 129).

Inchbald represents mercenary intercourse as the perversion of a sexual act that should be motivated by love, like Hannah's 'sacrifice' to William. Her clients are unconcerned by her 'sorrowful countenance,' implying their dismissal of her emotional subjectivity (129). For Hannah, prostitution profanes something special — even more degrading given her prior experience of what sex should mean, and why it should never be sold — with disastrous consequences for her 'essential self' (Mac and Smith 29). This narrative is reflected within Hannah's depleted self-worth, portrayed as an inevitable byproduct of loveless intercourse. Inchbald depicts a morally disillusioned woman, who now questions her feelings, her intellect, her sense of right and wrong conduct — the rational and emotional faculties implied to govern moral behaviour. She is capable of reflecting upon her errors at this stage, but steadily forgetting her identity. Hannah's 'incessant' inner voice, jarring with her submission to external

forces, implies the enduring presence of a moral sense which is tragically stifled by prostitution. As within the *Histories,* the 'extenuating circumstances' of prostitution are couched in suitable discourses of shame (*Histories* 10). The sex worker who deserves sympathy must accept her own degradation. Clearly, socioeconomic struggles like those experienced by Hannah caused many women to enter prostitution, and many were subjected to sexual exploitation. Many are likely to have experienced feelings of low self-esteem. Leeson's memoirs contain episodes of sadness and regret, as well as retrospective commentaries on the inevitable failures of sexual unions that are not rooted in 'Delicacy and Virtue' (*Leeson* 41). However, she documents the multiplicity of women's emotional experiences of prostitution, encompassing her own episodes of contentment alongside the 'distress' of impoverished women she befriends and supports (*Leeson* 103). Hannah is simply ventriloquised as a casualty of the system to expound Inchbald's arguments against prostitution. Through assuming that the absence of private emotional attachment in mercenary intercourse has a deeply transformative, damaging moral impact upon her, Inchbald indirectly reinforces misogynistic codes of female sexual worth. She appropriates a patriarchal narrative of loss and inevitable degradation, which frames women's sexual conduct as a determiner of identity.

Wollstonecraft, more so than Inchbald, defines prostitution as a form of misogynistic violence. Jemima is depicted as a suffering human subject, but her mental state is politicised; the reader is encouraged to reflect on the social forces that make an impressionable young woman 'detest mankind, and abhor [her]self' (*Wrongs* 42). Unlike Hannah, she is not a sentimental victim wrestling with her moral conscience in her first encounter with the sex trade. Jemima has been neglected and abused from birth, raped by her master, thrown out of employment, and forced into abortion. At that critical moral turning point between fallen womanhood and prostitution, we are simply compelled to 'behold [Jemima] utterly destitute,' and understand her miserable, hate-consumed disposition (42). Although she becomes capable of forming sincere, compassionate human bonds as a result of her contact with Maria, Wollstonecraft implies that this would have been impossible during her time in prostitution. Different forms of sex work, from streetwalking to kept womanhood, are represented as outlets of misogynistic exploitation which fuel her misanthropic rejection of human connections. In particular, streetwalking exposes her to some of the rawest manifestations of misogyny. She is 'abused' by 'drunkards,' and 'hunted' by watchmen (42), reflecting the vulnerability of street-level sex workers to such violence.[40] This form of sexual commerce involves the complete

[40] Anna Clark. *Women's Silence, Men's Violence.* Pandora Press, 1987, 121.

denial of Jemima's subjectivity. As in the brothel Hannah inhabits, the contagion of prostitution spreads between women. Jemima's impoverished 'wretch' of a companion teaches her to solicit for survival (42). But lustful performances are not required for the 'brutes' Jemima services on the streets; she only 'yields to [their] desire... with the same detestation [she] had felt for [her] still more brutal master' (42). She recalls 'read[ing] in novels of the blandishments of seduction, but... had not even the pleasure of being enticed into vice' (42). Her story contradicts the time-worn narratives of excess sensibility and seduction that even Inchbald's portrait partly upholds, and which Sheldon undermines at the point of her rape, when she is objectified 'in a 'conflict [which] was unequal' (*Sheldon* I 122). While Sheldon distinguishes between this dehumanising process and her subsequent experiences of prostitution, representing her comparable agency in elite sex work, Wollstonecraft suggests that prostitution is inherently violent — aligning it with the rape that marked Jemima's fall. Just as Jemima 'yields' to clients, Hannah 'submits' (*N&A* 129). These verbs compound their states of sexual passivity. Mercenary intercourse is defined as an expression of male sexual supremacy, involving the separation of Jemima's authentic emotions, her 'detestation' for these men, from the insincere actions of her 'yielding' body. It necessitates the brutal silencing, and denial, of her selfhood.

Wollstonecraft implicitly contrasts these transactions with the authentic emotional intimacy that should, in her view, motivate and accompany intercourse. She appropriates stereotypes of sex workers as criminals, with 'bodies to be enjoyed and used' and 'irretrievable... essentially disposable' reputations, to reinforce this binary (Lewis and Ellis 10). Jemima is perceived as a sexual object by male clients, and, through Wollstonecraft's dehumanising epithets, a degraded object of moral concern. In self-reflections which are shaped heavily by caricatures of the prostitute imaginary, Jemima is ventriloquised to describe herself as a 'slave, a bastard, a common property' (*Wrongs* 43). The adjective 'common,' meaning 'public; general; serving the use of all,' was typically applied to promiscuous women within misogynistic discourses of the period, bearing similar connotations to Inchbald's use of 'cheap' (*Harvest* 25).[41] Jemima recalls:

> Become familiar with vice... I picked the pockets of the drunkards who abused me, and proved by my conduct, that I deserved the epithets, with which they loaded me at moments when distrust ought to cease (43).

Jemima's prostitution is defined as an interchange of mutual hatred and suspicion. These brutal strangers profane sex, which Wollstonecraft implicitly defines as an act of vulnerability and trust

[41] Samuel Johnson. "Common, n.s. (1)1773," *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755. Accessed 5 December 2023. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/common_ns_

— resonating with Hannah's 'mercenary profanations of love' (*N&A* 129). While Jemima robs her clients, they use her as a receptacle for misogyny. The verb 'loaded' carries visceral physical and mental connotations of what society might sanction as suitable for release into sex workers, but never 'respectable' women. In turn, Jemima becomes entirely misanthropic. Like the self-fulfilling prophecies of her childhood, when her forehead is daubed with 'liar' and 'thief,' she *becomes* the epithets imposed upon her, internalising society's caricatured vision of who she is (*Wrongs* 40). Like Hannah, she is 'degraded in her own judgement' (N&A 129), believing that she 'deserves' this abuse. A supposedly intimate, exclusive act becomes public, and her very person becomes 'common property.' There is no regard for her private moral *self*, which is denied and distorted beyond recognition. In their arguments against prostitution, feminists have long expressed concern about what Elizabeth Bernstein describes as the 'quick, impersonal sexual release associated with the street-level sex trade,' raising anxieties about the dehumanisation of street-level sex workers.[42] Degrading epithets are frequently applied to women today, even by feminist campaigners, with similar connotations of sex workers as human waste to be used and abused by men (Mac and Smith 45). This illuminates the uncomfortable connections between discourses commonly deployed in feminist arguments against sexual objectification, and those used to perpetuate patriarchal codes of female sexual behaviour. As Wollstonecraft's disparaging portrait of Jemima's inauthenticity demonstrates, both result in the dehumanisation of sex workers.

To articulate broader feminist concerns about the institutional pressures that govern women's moral conduct and dictate their inauthenticity, Wollstonecraft embeds Jemima in a Harlot's Progress-style criminal underworld. Many moral commentators invoked misogynistic caricatures of predatory, pickpocketing sex workers, which cast men as victims of female duplicity.[43] Wollstonecraft appears to reproduce caricatures of women who 'press [men] in their arms, [while] they plunder [their] pockets,' but contextualises the socioeconomic circumstances behind these duplicitous actions.[44] Theft, practiced in various forms by all of the sex workers represented in these novels, highlights the desperation of many women in this position — who were often driven to pickpocketing — but also functions as a symbolic marker of their inauthenticity (Carter 41). This dynamic compounds the separation of women's actions from their thoughts, feelings, or moral impulses. Wollstonecraft subverts misogynistic stereotypes of

[42] Elizabeth Bernstein. "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex." *Intimate Labours*, edited by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Eileen Boris, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 148-165, 154.
[43] Sophie Carter. *Purchasing Power: Representing Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century English Popular Print Culture.* Ashgate, 2004, 41.
[44] *The Honest London Spy*. Edward Midwinter, 1725, 9.

predator and prey. Instead, she draws upon sentimental images of sex workers as 'pitiable victims of poverty,' to make Jemima a degraded object of political concern, warped by external patriarchal pressures (Steinberg 703). She is 'hunted' by watchmen, who 'receive from the 'outlaws of society (let other women talk of favours) a brutal gratification gratuitously as a privilege of office,' while 'extort[ing] a tithe of prostitution and harass[ing] with threats the poor creatures whose occupation affords not the means to silence the growl of avarice' (*Wrongs* 44). Jemima is made to describe herself as a pathetic 'creature,' whose crimes are tempered by her victimhood. These watchmen 'consider themselves... instruments of the very laws they violate,' and 'the pretext which steels their conscience, hardens their heart' (44). Like Coghlan, who attributes her socioeconomic struggles to powerful men who 'thrive on the misfortunes which the present system creates,' Wollstonecraft attacks the inauthenticity of a corrupt establishment (*Coghlan* viii). Those who are rights-bearing agents, freely disposing of their own bodies, rob this capacity from vulnerable women (Halldenius 86). Watchmen often extorted money from streetwalkers; one commentator notes that women with the 'prudence to whore with half a crown in her pocket... may sin on without danger,' while others exercised more 'caution' (*Spy* 266). Their 'brutal gratification' does not only violate Wollstonecraft's terms of emotional authenticity. This is sexual violence enacted by those who exploit their 'privilege of office,' not a reciprocal 'favour' between consenting people. Street-level sex workers are still generally perceived as 'immoral, victimised and exploited, which provides a convenient justification for ever harsher policing,' continuing to experience 'harassment, abuse, extortion and rape' at the hands of some law enforcers (Mac and Smith 91, 125). Wollstonecraft condemns this insidious, legally sanctioned web of male exploitation for the systemic eradication of women's sexual and moral agency: a political argument which depends upon condescending descriptions of the degraded 'poor creatures' it victimises.

Jemima is driven, like Hannah, to become a servant in a brothel. This space becomes the locus of Wollstonecraft's concerns about women being groomed into artifice for the sake of survival. Beyond Inchbald's sentimental depiction of Hannah wrestling with her moral conscience, Jemima — having endured extreme hardship and abuse — has a comparably pragmatic approach to her situation. Here a 'life of regularity restored [her] health,' and her 'manners were improved, in a situation where vice sought to render itself alluring, and taste was cultivated to fashion the person, if not to refine the mind' (*Victim* 44). She welcomes the 'common civility of speech,' whereby she is not 'shut out from all intercourse of humanity' (44). Complicating *Vindication*'s caricatures of power-hungry, pleasure-seeking sex workers,

Wollstonecraft represents the fundamentals of health, manners and human contact secured by her heroine in this environment. Moral concerns seem inconsequential for Jemima. Where she was once 'hunted' like an animal, for the first time she feels part of 'civilisation.' Just as Hannah finds 'sympathy in disgrace,' she can now communicate with women who are willing associates. However, Wollstonecraft critiques the system that makes these inauthentic environments seem like preferable shelters for impoverished women. Like Inchbald, she represents brothel workers as performers, concealing vice beneath an 'alluring' façade to entertain a higher class of clientele. This false refinement conceals an absence of true 'taste' and education, echoing her assertion in *Vindication* that 'without a foundation of principles taste is superficial; and grace must arise from something deeper than imitation' (*Vindication* 138). The 'taste of men is vitiated,' and women 'naturally square their behaviour to gratify the taste by which they obtain pleasure and power' (*Vindication* 218). Bodies are valued over minds; sincere thoughts and feelings are silenced in favour of external artifice. By this method, 'strength... [is] sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty,' producing 'weak beings [who] are only fit for the seraglio' (*Vindication* 74). Similar to Sheldon's denial of black sex workers' subjectivity, Wollstonecraft's Orientalist image implicitly links sex workers' moral failures with those of Eastern women she considers subject to the worst kind of marital 'prostitution.' Furthermore, there is no real solidarity between Jemima and the other brothel workers. She is only 'galled by the yoke of service' under a mistress who 'flies into violent fits of passion,' making her fear dismissal (*Wrongs* 44). Wollstonecraft mobilises this anonymous, cruel sex worker to reinforce the true corruption of Jemima's situation. Like the 'evil communications' that advance Hannah's moral degradation, the artificial women who populate these environments cannot offer Jemima the uplifting support she needs (*N&A* 129). This is a far cry from the bond of mutual moral development she later forges with the middle-class protagonist Maria.

Wollstonecraft sends Jemima on a trajectory of social mobility through different kinds of prostitution, appearing to explore terrain beyond stereotypes of abject moral degradation. However, she stops short of this by labouring the dehumanising costs of any 'gains' that women may acquire through commodifying sex. Jemima's kept womanhood is initially depicted as a nuanced negotiation process, in a more intimate, personal exchange than her previous experiences of prostitution. She trades sex, housekeeping and literary inspiration for a middle-class intellectual's financial support and moral instruction. Having previously experienced 'horror of men,' she now articulates 'esteem' for this man of feeling, praising the 'native tenderness of his heart,' the 'generous humanity of his disposition,' and his 'keen perception of

the delicacies of sentiment' (*Wrongs* 44). Beyond the 'mechanical instinctive sensations' of sympathy, Wollstonecraft deploys sentimental discourses to suggest that a sincere emotional connection can flourish between mistress and keeper — even comparable to bonds represented by the memoirists (Wollstonecraft, *Men* 53). However, she undermines this prospect of Jemima's subjectivity being acknowledged and nurtured, by reinforcing her sexual insincerity. To gain this keeper's support, she must 'suppress her feelings of 'repugnance' over his 'disgusting libertinism, [which] daily becomes more painful' (*Wrongs* 46). This transaction is ultimately reducible to the 'grossness of sensuality,' the satiation of what she condemns as a sordid sexual appetite belonging to a 'worn-out votary of voluptuousness' (44). Any 'tenderness' he possesses is ultimately 'undermined by a vitiated imagination' (44). Wollstonecraft invokes *Vindication*'s trope of the 'worn out libertine,' whose health is jeopardised by his 'intemperate love of pleasure' — these 'vitiated' men are imagined 'flying for amusement to the wanton, from the unsophisticated charms of virtue' (*Vindication* 144, 274). Such categories of womanhood are reproduced within Maria's Inchbald-esque distinction between 'modest women,' and the 'wantons of the lowest class' whose 'vulgar mirth' entertains her husband (*Wrongs* 78). Complicating these classist categories, Jemima is no calculating wanton; she is a desperate, regretful woman. Wollstonecraft's moral disgust is reserved for this keeper. Whatever 'pleasure' his conversation brings, Jemima contends that 'being his mistress was purchasing it at a very dear rate' (*Wrongs* 45). We are reminded of Leeson's imagined readership condemning her for 'procuring sustenance at such a price as [she] has paid for it' (*Leeson* 32). No matter the reward for women, mercenary sex is inextricably bound to these notions of sacrifice. Coghlan expresses her dislike for her 'morose and capricious' keeper Fazakerly, but describes the 'graces and accomplishments' she acquires from him in candid terms (*Coghlan* 55). While Wollstonecraft acknowledges the benefits of women's impure negotiations with the dominant culture, she rails against a system that makes them necessary (Pendleton 79). Jemima functions as Wollstonecraft's moral mouthpiece in this cause, ventriloquised to describe the feelings of disgust and loss she associates with such insincere sexual acts. Her wish to 'pass over a subject which [she] recollects with pain' forms a textual silence filled with unspoken degradation, and shame over the moral compromises involved in this transaction (*Wrongs* 45). For Wollstonecraft, Jemima's kept womanhood is rooted in the same dehumanising dynamics as streetwalking. She still suppresses the dictates of her authentic self for survival, and thus continues to function as a sexual object for male exploitation.

While under this keeper's protection, Jemima learns to think for herself and critique the socioeconomic and cultural forces that oppress her. However, Wollstonecraft represents her moral enlightenment as a by-product of sexual degradation and exploitation, cementing her objectification at the intersection of misogynistic and hierarchical forces. She extends *Vindication*'s attack on a system that makes women insincerely 'square their behaviour, to gratify the taste' by which they obtain forms of social power (*Vindication* 218). Accustomed to deceiving male clients, Jemima initially embezzles her keeper's money, 'screening [her]self from detection by a system of falsehood' (*Wrongs* 45). But with time on her hands and access to his intellectual spaces, she — echoing Maria's earlier classist comment — develops 'sentiments and language above her station' (*Wrongs* 45). Again, this method of giving Jemima 'honorary middle-class status' provides a key point of identification for middle-class female readers (V. Jones 211). She 'acquires new principles' which fuel her hopes for a return to 'respectable' society (*Wrongs* 45). But to unfold her moral faculties, gleaning morsels of 'what might be deemed a moral sense' from libertines' conversation, Jemima has had to 'lose... the privileged respect' of virtuous women (45). Even as she develops her sentiments, she is excluded from their supposedly sympathetic communities. Wollstonecraft reinforces the power imbalance between Jemima and a manipulative, middle-class intellectual who is aware of 'his own powers,' but whose 'simplicity of manners' strengthen the 'illusion' of possible rehabilitation; he capitalises upon Jemima's 'untutored remarks' and 'unsophisticated feeling,' to produce writing which 'touch[es] the simple springs of the heart' (46). He therefore models her into another caricature, fuelled by condescending class-based assumptions and misogynistic exploitation. As Jean Fernandez observes, this 'Rousseauvian master' renders Jemima's contributions anonymous, 'assigning to her a childlike propensity for spontaneous insight frequently ascribed to members of oral cultures, rather than acknowledging her capacity for conscious deliberation.'[45] His 'textual and sexual oppression,' renders Jemima a 'debased, corrupted version of the female muse / amanuensis figure, so idealised in a patriarchal literary tradition' (Fernandez 36). The caricature of the 'whorish muse,' an inspiration for male philosophers, has classical roots — reflected through Rousseau's conflicted fetishization of his mistress's 'natural charms' in his *Confessions*.[46] Jemima becomes a tool in her keeper's hands. Her education is ultimately rooted in her objectification, used to cement Wollstonecraft's argument that there is no space for female subjectivity in prostitution.

[45] Jean Fernandez. *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy.* Routledge, 2010, 36.
[46] Laura McClure. *Courtesans at Table.* Routledge, 2013, 110; Christopher Kelly. *Rousseau's Exemplary Life.* Cornell University Press, 1987, 180.

Particularly in light of Jemima's development, which brings her to Maria's level of identification and sympathy, Wollstonecraft critiques the injustice of her exclusion at the hands of a supposedly virtuous woman who imposes a dehumanising caricature of moral depravity upon her after her keeper's death. With her newly developed sentiments, she now experiences 'grief... which at first had nothing selfish in it' (*Wrong*s 46). However, the wife of the cruel relative who takes control of her keeper's estate wishes to 'prevent... such a creature as she supposed [Jemima] to be, from purloining' his possessions (46). Jemima's feelings are dismissed, and she is once again dehumanised as a 'creature' — denied a 'character for honesty and economy' because it would 'go against [the wife's] conscience to recommend a kept mistress' (46). Jemima's occupation is again read as a 'stigmatised identifier' (Bromwich and DeJong 24). Her humanity is eclipsed by a covetous caricature of the prostitute imaginary. Once again, it is taken as a foregone conclusion that she is mercenary. However, Wollstonecraft elevates her authentic morality above the performative virtue of this 'pious' wife, who forces a tearful Jemima away, 'cutting [her] off from human converse' (*Wrongs* 47). This experience is all the more painful now that she is 'familiar with the graces of humanity' (*Wrongs* 47). Reminiscent of Hannah's hostile bystanders and the 'outrageous virtue' of Leeson's sisters, Wollstonecraft condemns a system that deprives fallen women of humane support (Leeson 33). She reinforces the divisive implications of this exclusion, undermining the conflation of feminine virtue with chastity, while emphasising the extreme cruelty of this treatment at the hands of another woman. While Coghlan and Leeson describe their shock at the 'utter disgrace' (*Coghlan* 94) of being betrayed by their 'own sex' (*Leeson* 94), Jemima also asks: 'why must I call her woman?' (*Wrongs* 47). This question destabilises dominant definitions of 'womanhood' and, by extension, 'humanity.' Wollstonecraft yokes both terms to compassion and solidarity, experienced between women who recognise their shared struggle in a misogynistic system — beyond categories of class and sexual identity imposed upon them. Indeed, Jemima later praises another lower-class woman for 'compassionating her state' of illness by sending her to hospital (*Wrongs* 51). 'Compassion' becomes a verb here, denoting dynamic, impactful activity. Maria endorses 'active compassion' for suffering women, 'feel[ing] more acutely the various ills [her] sex are fated to bear' (115), just as Coghlan reinforces the importance of 'doing good,' since 'active virtue is what the world... requires' (*Coghlan* 135). Compassion fuels acts of solidarity, critical to the care ethics endorsed by Wollstonecraft and the memoirists. But in this patriarchal system, the chaste wife is compelled to prioritise her own reputation over another woman's welfare. While it remains clear that Jemima's moral development is harnessed to render her a deserving object of feminist sympathy,

Wollstonecraft destabilises conventional moral binaries between sex workers and chaste women to argue that all women are dehumanised within this cruel, divisive system.

Consequently, Jemima remembers that compassion is inconducive to the demands of female survival in this divide and conquer system. For Wollstonecraft, prostitution magnifies these divisions between women by making them vie for male sexual attention and support. Jemima is now mobilised as a 'monster' of this system to represent these moral concerns. In a cycle of cruelty, she replicates the actions of this wife — and, prior to that, her rapist's wife — by turning another vulnerable woman out of doors. Having 'obtained such a power over' a tradesman that he asks her to become his mistress, Jemima persuades him to abandon the woman who is pregnant with his child; consequently, this woman commits suicide (*Wrongs* 50). Implicitly, Jemima learned to perform like the 'vicious' women who dominate Wollstonecraft's *Vindication,* obtaining 'illegitimate power,' by 'degrading themselves' (*Vindication* 87). When recalling this event, Jemima urges Maria to 'consider that [she] was famishing; wonder not that [she] became a wolf!' (*Wrongs* 50). She is dehumanised by her cruelty. However, this conduct stems from a Hobbesian system that forces labouring-class women to compete for food and shelter like wild animals (Borham-Puyal 104), depriving them of their moral agency (Halldenius 86). Wollstonecraft suggests that 'casualties' of this ruthless patriarchal system can also be 'collaborators' (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). Jemima complicates pre-existing categories of victimhood and complicity, now challenging conventional limits of sympathy towards reformed sex workers.

Jemima perceives 'the corpse' of this pregnant woman as just another female object, exploited and discarded by a patriarchal regime (*Wrongs* 50). She 'recognised her pale visage... listened to the tale told by the spectators, and [her] heart did not burst' (*Wrongs* 50). She 'thought of [her] own state, and wondered how [she] could be such a monster' (*Wrongs* 50). Jemima can identify with this woman's suffering. She knows how it feels to be sexually exploited, pregnant outside of marriage, homeless, and suicidal; she herself was nearly killed by this system. This makes her actions all the more 'monstrous' when she consigns this girl to her fate, and cannot muster compassion when witnessing the consequences. Her 'monstrosity' is defined by the absence of what Wollstonecraft posits as a specifically *human* feeling. Her heart is hardened beyond the point of supporting, or grieving for, another woman. Borham-Puyal also contends that Wollstonecraft defines 'monstrosity' in terms of her characters 'denying the natural sensibility that was attributed to women' (Borham-Puyal 104). I emphasise the political significance that she attaches to this concept; the rivalries generated by prostitution are

represented as a threat to the solidarity-inspired care ethics endorsed in this novel, thwarting the radical potential of female unity. Crucially, the memoirists document periods of comfort that are closed off to Jemima — privileges which may have facilitated many of their benevolent acts — but also represent themselves as nuanced moral subjects, capable of support and solidarity, even in the depths of poverty. While it is important to acknowledge connections between moral conduct and material context, Wollstonecraft makes broad assumptions about prostitution stifling the 'humanity' of women in *all* strata of the sex trade, from streetwalkers to kept women. In later confessing these actions to Maria, Jemima fears losing her 'esteem,' emphasising the value she now places upon connections with other women (*Wrongs* 50). However, she is defeminised and dehumanised while trapped in this system, and thus deemed incapable of participating in such moral and political action.

In articulating these anxieties about the catastrophic impact of prostitution upon female solidarity, Wollstonecraft appropriates misogynistic caricatures of 'monstrous' and 'destructive' sex workers (Borham-Puyal 103). Jemima is given a hybrid voice in this novel, one that simultaneously functions to verify stereotypes of sex workers, and communicate Wollstonecraft's feminist insights. Ventriloquising her in this way effectively supports the writer's moral and political agenda. Maria, who predominantly serves as Wollstonecraft's moral mouthpiece, echoes Jemima's self-description: 'by allowing women but one way of rising in the world, the fostering the libertinism of men, society makes monsters of them' (*Wrongs* 72). While Raymond deploys these discourses to represent the hideous corporeal impact of Mary's fall, the two heroines of *Wrongs* charge female 'monstrosity' with broader, political implications. They portray Jemima's extreme moral degradation, under external misogynistic pressures that force women to weaponize their sexualities against one another. Sheldon and Leeson also suggest that rivalries can rupture feminist bonds, with Leeson almost 'murdering' another woman for entertaining her keeper (*Leeson* 53), but such anecdotes coexist alongside acts of 'humane' care towards those in need (*Coghlan* xiii). As Sheldon candidly concludes: 'in our situation of life, friendships, as well as enmities, are soon made' (*Sheldon III* 91). The memoirists resist singular, reductive narratives of sex worker's identities and relationships. Wollstonecraft imagines that there is no space for female moral development in prostitution, and thus no opportunity for feminist solidarity to flourish. As Borham-Puyal adds, through demonstrating how Jemima is 'shaped by [a] lack of humanity and love' — particularly from other women — Wollstonecraft shows that a 'monstrous and unfeeling society... creates new monsters' (105). However, Jemima demonstrates a new self-awareness of her 'monstrosity,'

which motivates her to reject her keeper and thereby disavow the desperate, cruel act he has driven her to. Crucially, she wonders how she 'could *be*' such a monster: a phrase which implies she can recognise, and extricate her authentic selfhood from this conduct. Jemima's evolution stems from her startling alignment with pre-existing caricatures of ruthless, unfeeling sex workers, who prioritise personal security over the wellbeing of others. But this lapse in humanity does not define her. Significantly, her moral recovery begins at this stage, foreshadowing the fact that solidarity with another woman will fuel the development of her benevolence. She will assume a new moral and political role that can only be imagined beyond her dehumanised state in prostitution.

While sympathetically representing Jemima's moral struggles, Wollstonecraft sustains *Vindication*'s strategies of affording 'middle-class women's rights... legitimacy through a fetishistic invocation of the prostitute.'[47] Jemima's experiences of prostitution are problematically aligned with the middle-class Maria's commentary on sex with her abusive husband. Maria observes that 'personal intimacy without affection [is] the most degrading, as well as the most painful state in which a woman of any taste, not to speak of the peculiar delicacy of fostered sensibility, could be placed' (*Wrongs* 78). These qualities are lacking within the women her husband Venables prefers, mere 'wantons of the lowest class,' whose spiritual and physical corruption may be transferred to the chaste wife via his 'sullied arms' (78). In this sense, Venables' attempts to prostitute Maria reflect the heinous conflation of a virtuous woman with a 'wanton.' Mirroring Inchbald's polarisation of Hannah with the 'wanton,' Maria's subjectivity rests upon the delineation of sex workers as contagious objects of moral concern. Their perceived lack of sexual delicacy makes them a foil to Maria, deployed to legitimise her adulterous sex with Darnford — the Imlay-esque, ostensibly reformed libertine she falls in love with. This helps consolidate the feminist subject position represented by Wollstonecraft's semi-autobiographical protagonist. Maria's intercourse with her husband constitutes the 'sacrifice of her principles,' defined as a 'cruel act of self-denial' (*Wrongs* pp. 85-6). Sexual acts must honour the 'essential self'; loveless, passionless intercourse undermines this precious essence, dictating the heinous denial of a woman's personhood (Mac and Smith 29). While Inchbald still reprimands Hannah for 'descending from the character of purity' by having sex with a man she loves, Wollstonecraft yokes true moral and sexual purity to sincerity, explicitly elevating authentic emotional connections above patriarchal codes of feminine duty (*N&A* 110). In

[47] Julie McGonegal. "Of Harlots and Housewives: A Feminist Materialist Critique of the Writings of Wollstonecraft." *Women's Writing*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347-361, 350.

Hays' novel *Emma Courtney* (1796), Emma insists on the 'purity and... sincerity of [her] heart,' in confessing her love and desire for Augustus Harley outside of marriage.[48] Similarly, the memoirists apply these discourses to moral concerns about the institution of marriage, where 'sacred' (*Coghlan* 32) emotional connections are violated in forced unions that are 'repented' (*Sheldon II* 155) by abused wives. While sex work is a preferable alternative for these women, Wollstonecraft deems any kind of inauthentic sexual union, 'common and legal prostitution,' to be a source of moral degradation (*Vindication* 229).

Like Wollstonecraft herself, and reflecting Jemima's expulsion by her keeper's female relative, Maria is later expelled from communities of married women with 'whom she had formerly been intimate' (*Wrongs* 127).[49] Had she 'remained with her husband, practising insincerity,' we are told, 'she would still have been visited and respected' (127). As an alternative to 'openly living with her lover,' she could have 'called into play a thousand arts, which, degrading her own mind, might have allowed the people who were not deceived, to pretend to be so' (127). Wollstonecraft elevates sincere sexual relationships outside of the marriage contract above forms of mentally 'degrading' conjugal duplicity which are sanctioned by the establishment, and accepted amongst hypocritical married women who ignore one another's indiscretions. As Deborah Weiss contends, Maria 'never consults a standard other than her own inner sense of principles... built on the idea that her feelings and her own ideas of justice should be the primary factors motivating her sexual behaviour.'[50] Beyond misogynistic concerns about 'impure' female bodies, Wollstonecraft uses this language — dominant in radical discourses on morality during this period — to address her concerns about the 'purity' of women's minds. Sex workers are thus deployed as ciphers of moral corruption to fuel Wollstonecraft's broader arguments for female sexual agency, as opposed to objectification — with her moralistic proviso that love or passion should always underpin sex.

Maria's parallels are founded on classist generalisations about the thoughts and feelings of sex workers, undermining the subjectivity of those who apparently do not fulfil Wollstonecraft's standards of moral development. She implies that the 'pain' and 'disgust' of insincere intercourse is heightened within middle-class women who have managed to refine

[48] Mary Hays. *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney.* Edited by Marilyn L. Brooks, Broadview, 2000, 109.
[49] Inchbald was apparently one of those women who rejected Wollstonecraft after learning of her sexual relationships outside of marriage. Godwin condemned her 'cruel, base, insulting' behaviour towards his wife, referencing an episode which, mirroring Maria's exclusion from their company at the opera, unfolded publicly in a theatre. See Ildiko Csengei. *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 172-3.
[50] Deborah Weiss. *The Female Philosopher and her Afterlives.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 58.

their sensibility and develop their moral principles, but are prevented from acting upon them (*Wrongs* 78). As individuals with sophisticated thoughts and feelings, they are painfully aware of their inability to act as 'rights-bearing agents freely disposing of [their] own persons' (Halldenius 86). For Maria, women who 'yield' out of 'sheer compassion' for others or for the sake of 'future comfort' lack 'finely fashioned nerves which render the senses exquisite,' alongside '*active* sensibility, and *positive* virtue' (*Wrongs* 85). She is 'disgusted' at the reduction of women's sexuality to 'barter' (85). 'Is she not an object of pity or contempt, when thus sacrilegiously violating the purity of her own feelings?' Maria demands (85). Counted amongst those who value the sacred nature of their emotional subjectivity are middle-class women like Maria, with the time and educational opportunities that Jemima only acquires by chance in keeping. The love-struck Hannah is seemingly an exception to this stereotype, reflected through the constant 'whispering' of her 'incessant regret' about the moral cost of mercenary intercourse (*N&A* 129). Indeed, Jemima states earlier that impoverished women 'have not time to reason or reflect to any extent, or minds sufficiently exercised to adopt the principles of action' (*Wrongs* 48). As in Inchbald's narrative, subtle stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary emerge through this distinction, to foreground the sentimental minds and aspirations of authenticity shared by Wollstonecraft's heroines. They are contrasted with ostensibly compliant 'wantons,' such as the sex workers of *Harris' List* whose indiscriminate sexual exchanges 'protect the honour' of chaste women, and who, according to *Vindication,* 'never had any modesty to lose' (*Vindication* 100).[51] Wollstonecraft subtly urges her reader to critique Darnford's overtly misogynistic distinction between Maria's 'delicacy,' and the 'vulgar' sex workers he once associated with (*Wrongs* 28). He describes a 'creature [he is] ashamed to mention,' and 'other women [who] were of a class of which [she] can have no knowledge' (28). Notably, Jemima, who was previously of this 'class,' is silently privy to Maria and Darnford's disparaging remarks. As Johnson observes, his misogynistic ignorance is 'corrected by Jemima's story about being such a "creature",' which functions to 'explode the heterosexual proprieties' of the tales these characters tell about sex workers (Johnson 67). Darnford's forceful strategy of pitting women against one another foreshadows his failure to fulfil Maria's feminist ideals (Johnson 67). While Wollstonecraft encourages us to dissect these multiple voices and their different visions of the prostitute imaginary, the multidimensional moral subjectivities of the memoirists are still unimaginable in this novel: from the courtesans themselves, to labouring-class women like Leeson's 'intelligent, faithful, sober, discreet and honest' friend Peggy (*Leeson*

[51] *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies.* H. Ranger, 1787, iii.

247). Wollstonecraft attempts to examine the socioeconomic causes behind the 'bartering' of women, but her case relies on condescending assumptions about the emotional and moral experiences of sex workers. Implicitly, these women can only ever be treated as objects of moral concern in such political arguments, rather than allies in the endeavour to carry them forward.

At the pivotal moral turning point between fallen womanhood and prostitution, Hays represents Mary as a deserving object of pity, defined beyond the misogynistic tropes of Raymond's narrative. She emphasises that her heart is 'too weak for principle [but] not yet wholly corrupted' (*Victim* 64). Like Hannah, she is delineated as a casualty of the system who has made a passionate mistake. Her 'principles of virtue' are not 'destroyed' by the loss of chastity, and she could be recalled from the brink of ruin with compassion (*N&A* 127). When struggling at her most vulnerable ebb following the abandonment of her seducer, she 'requires sympathy, tenderness [and] assistance' for rehabilitation (*Victim* 65). Hays follows Inchbald in situating the absence of this emotional and physical support at the root of her heroine's corruption. But at this critical stage in Hays' narrative, Mary stands unfortified in her 'weakness.' She is a model of failed moral development who, in her impoverished, exposed situation, need only be nudged into a state of further decline. She is easily deceived and degraded by men who perceive her as a pliable sexual object. These men 'speak of tenderness and honour (prostituted names),' and 'prophane the names of humanity, friendship [and] virtue' (*Victim,* pp. 63-4). Hays implies that sex must be underpinned by these genuine moral sentiments. Echoing the discourses of profanity deployed by Inchbald and Wollstonecraft, she warns that they can be feigned through the empty words of predators to their 'too-credulous prey,' just as the sophist William manipulates Hannah (*Victim* 65). Indeed, Hays' use of the verb 'prostituted,' which connoted 'selling to wickedness,' magnifies her concerns about the inauthenticity of mercenary sex.[52] Mary is used on false terms, her body exploited in a crude, emotionless fashion. Without the foundations of a genuine attachment, her subjectivity is denied. Hays thus mobilises her heroine as an impressionable object of moral concern, at this stage deserving of understanding and sympathy. However, she hints at the diminishment of any remaining moral impulses, as she moves further away from her initial passionate mistake into a world of mercenary, meaningless sexual commerce.

[52] Samuel Johnson. "Prostitute, v.a.1755," *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 1755. Accessed 13/10/22. johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/1755/prostitute_va

More so than Inchbald and Wollstonecraft's portraits of women hardened into misanthropy, Hays appropriates misogynistic caricatures of the prostitute imaginary to articulate her concerns about how the 'victim of injustice [and] prejudice' can become a cruel 'collaborator' within this system (*Victim* 67). Such images of sex workers frequently spill into feminist commentary through processes of epistemic violence, where women's ways of 'understanding and describing the world [are] stifled, forcing [them] to use oppressors' concepts and language' (Mac and Smith 21). This strategy functions only to other Mary and undermine her subjectivity.[53] Despite the complexities that distinguish her narration from Raymond's thus far, Mary's recollections of prostitution converge with the monstrous caricature that he initially creates of her. Her account unexpectedly cycles backwards to these tropes, exemplifying the hybrid function of her ventriloquised voice as a medium of rational feminist reflection, and a validator of misogynistic stereotype. This section is perhaps the clearest indication of Hays tailoring this characterisation according to her volatile, anti-Wollstonecraftian political context. She advances the familiar radical argument that Mary's cruelty is not inherent, but instilled. Like Hannah, she is warped by male exploitation and 'evil communications,' where the 'libertine manners of those, of whom [she] was compelled to be the associate, rapidly advanced the corruption' (*Victim* 66). But while Inchbald deploys the same biblical image to distinguish Hannah's conflicted moral conscience from the profligate women that surround her, Mary becomes a ruthless predator:

> I grew sullen, desperate, hardened. I felt a malignant joy in retaliating upon mankind a part of the evils which I sustained. My mind became fiend-like, revelling in destruction, glorying in its shame. Abandoned to excessive and brutal licentiousness, I drowned returning reflection in inebriating potions. The injuries and insults to which my odious profession exposed me eradicated from my heart every remaining human feeling. I became a monster, cruel, relentless, ferocious; and contaminated alike, with a deadly poison, the health and principles of those unfortunate victims whom, with practiced allurements, I entangled in my snares (66).

Here, Hays' feminist concerns about the destructive moral impact of sexual exploitation are packaged in overtly conservative tropes. Unlike Hannah and Jemima, Mary gleans pleasure, not misery, from these cruel and duplicitous acts. She is dehumanised not as a 'famishing... wolf,' acting purely on survival instinct, but as a hypersexualised, demonic 'fiend' fixated upon revenge (*Wrongs* 50). The abuse she endures in prostitution does not merely 'freeze' her moral impulses (*Wrongs* 54), but 'eradicates' them completely (*Victim* 66). Given that the

[53] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea,* edited by Rosalind C. Morris. Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 21-80, 35.

sentiments of 'humanity' are repeatedly associated with sincerity and compassion in *Victim*, as displayed by the virtuous Raymond and his adopted daughter (22), Mary can only be described as a 'monster.' While Jemima 'wonder[s] how [she] could be such a monster' — the phrase 'could be' implying that she can recognise, and separate herself from this conduct — Mary 'becomes' this identity, with no apparent conflict between her internal conscience, and her external actions. Jemima inadvertently causes another woman's death, but Hays deploys this epithet to represent Mary deliberately and delightedly weaponizing her sexuality against her 'unfortunate victims.' She thus engages in the 'serpentine' sexual power play practiced by women in *Vindication*, divorcing sex from genuine emotional attachment (*Vindication* 260). Mary observes that 'man, however vicious, however cruel, reaches not the depravity of a shameless woman,' because he is not shut off from 'life's common charities' in a way that 'plunge[s] him into desperate, damned guilt' (*Victim* 67). While Hays makes the political point that men are never allowed to reach these depths — since they are granted the compassion that women are deprived of — her extreme portrait of a woman engaging in such 'depraved' activities without remorse contains misogynistic overtones. Mary is ventriloquised to paint herself as a horrifying object of moral disgust. Her new-found moral and political subjectivity in recounting these experiences hinges on her self-condemnation of qualities that once carried her far beyond the point of sentimental identification.

Hays' characterisation of Mary invokes a legacy of dehumanising literary tropes. It is shaped by the processes of epistemic violence that Mac and Smith identify in feminist discourses, through which sex workers are persistently framed as 'vectors of degradation' — ciphers of physical and moral corruption (Mac and Smith 149). Her depiction of a sex worker 'retaliating upon mankind a part of the evils which [she] sustained' resonates with Lillo's portrait of Sarah Millwood, who 'plagues mankind' only to 'avenge [her] sex's wrongs.'[54] Leeson also attempts to 'imitate [Millwood] in everything but her cruelty,' reworking the caricature of the coquet to her advantage after Lawless' abandonment (*Leeson* 61). While Mary's narration may examine the socioeconomic pressures and human suffering that motivates her actions, any trace of subjectivity is undermined by misogynistic stereotypes of ruthless moral contagion. Departing from Leeson's image of multidimensional moral subjectivity, Mary is prevented from pursuing a quest for sexual autonomy that does not involve engaging in such 'cruel' conduct, or make her a 'monster.' For Hays, the 'honest whore' is an ideological impossibility (*Leeson* 225). Instead, she invokes familiar misogynistic narratives of sex workers as sexual predators,

[54] George Lillo. *The London Merchant*. T. Lowndes, 1776, 47.

contaminating their victims' health and morality. A prime example is More's Sinful Sally, a dangerous object of moral corruption who 'roam[s] like a beast of prey or some hateful Imp of Hell,' while 'poisoning' her victims like a 'cruel spider.'[55] Mary is imagined practising the 'tricks and devices' of the 'inhuman' figures depicted within misogynistic pamphlet *Satan's Harvest Home*, of whom 'nothing in nature [is so] brutish and cruel' (*Harvest* 24). Such dehumanising caricatures helped to create a convenient, responsibility-shifting narrative of male victimhood (Carter 41). Hays attempts to leverage these stereotypes for feminist ends. But this patchwork of recycled tropes, deployed to attack the exploitation and ostracization of fallen women, lacks the subjectivity and emotional depth assigned to Jemima — or even Hannah, in her state of moral conflict. At this stage, Mary is a sex worker written in the tradition of pre-existing misogynistic pamphlets, a grotesque imagining of the depths to which women are degraded, and an object ventriloquised for Hays' political agenda.

III) Conditions for Redemption

Vanquishing any hope of rehabilitation, Inchbald sweeps her heroine into a familiar trajectory of criminality and death. This evokes the formulaic downfall followed by Hogarth's thieving, impoverished Moll. Hannah must be brought to a shocking end, conveying Inchbald's feminist warning that insincere sexual acts can only descend into more heinous moral crimes. Her capacity for self-reflection — suggested to be a critical component of moral development — is thwarted by her environment. With grave finality, Inchbald asserts that 'the time for flying was past' (*N&A* 130). Furthermore, 'all reflection was gone forever,' or 'only admitted on compulsion, when it imperiously forced its way amidst the scenes of tumultuous mirth, of licentious passion, of distracted riot, shameless effrontery, and wild intoxication — when it *would* force its way — even through the walls of a brothel' (*N&A* 130). The superficial noise and show of vice distracts Hannah from true moral reflection. Her external tumult prohibits this internal work. She cannot exist, think and feel as an individual, and any moral conflict is eclipsed by a numb resignation to her situation. While Leeson candidly admits that her 'natural good was frequently perverted by evil examples, by the love of pleasure, and from want of reflection,' a moral subject whose conduct is inevitably shaped by the ebbs and flows of human experience (*Leeson* 106), Hannah's moral impulses are completely stifled by her circumstances. She is stripped of the sentiments that made her identifiable to middle-class

[55] Hannah More. *The Story of Sinful Sally*, J. Marshall, 1796, 6.

readers, becoming a 'midnight wanderer through the streets of London, soliciting, or rudely demanding money' (*N&A* 134). Hunted by the watch, she ends up consumed by despair on the doorstep of her seducer's house, replicating the final stage in Newton's *Progress.* All doors of sympathy are symbolically closed against this dehumanised 'wanderer,' prohibiting her redemption. Inchbald acknowledges her self-conscious reproduction of this essentialised 'unhappy prostitute' narrative, which she defines as 'the customary history of thousands of [Hannah's] sex' (*N&A* pp. 134-5). However, she renders Hannah's destiny 'yet more fatal' with an image of extreme moral degradation, crafted to elicit moral panic from her readership (*N&A* 135). Her impressionable nature, 'liable to excess in passion' and 'perverted' to extremes, is forced further away from her authentic moral principles. She is taught by the 'dissolute poor' — another generalised group — that 'the art of stealing' is excusable in an unjust society (*N&A* 135). While Inchbald implicitly critiques the inequalities that allow the upper classes to harbour wealth while others suffer, she must also condemn Hannah's conduct given her fear of prosecution in Britain's oppressive political climate (Garnai 122). This heroine transitions from sentimental victim to a criminal caricature of the prostitute imaginary, synonymous with 'lying, perjury [and] fraud' in the criminal underworld (*Harvest* 25). Forgery is just a more extreme example of behaviour that involves the silencing of Hannah's authentic moral voice — escalating into duplicitous acts which now implicate the suffering of others. Hannah is enmeshed within this time-worn narrative, mobilised to launch Inchbald's political indictment of a hostile system that makes transgressive 'wanderers' out of virtuous women.

Inchbald hints at her heroine's potential for redemption, embedded in specific sentimental limits of sympathy for penitent sex workers. The final scenes of her life cement her status as the voiceless political object of this narrative. Through representing Hannah's doubtful feelings of 'dread' about her new-found misanthropic philosophies, Inchbald reminds us that artful behaviour does not come naturally to her; she 'bungles' her forgeries, culminating in arrest (*N&A* 135). In a dramatic twist, she is sentenced to death by William himself, judge of her trial. Hannah stands passive in the dock, 'petrified' and consumed by a 'flood of tears,' before being carried away 'in a swoon' (*N&A* 138). In *Histories,* penitents are pictured with 'tears trickling down [their] cheeks' as they discuss their experiences and articulate their shame, symbolising their processes of moral purification (*Histories* 10). But Hannah is not even given a voice with which to defend herself. In her final letter, she is ventriloquised as a sorrowful, repentant sinner, who simply accepts her status as a 'wicked and mean wretch' (*N&A* 141). Through this letter, Anjana Sharma argues, Inchbald shows that 'fallen women cannot be

erased and silenced as conduct books and patriarchy deem.'[56] However, a similar, indirect process of silencing unfolds through the reproduction of these tropes. Inchbald appropriates discourses of self-deprecating shame, reconciling Hannah to the readership as an object of pity. Sentimental lamentations of sorrow and shame are pre-requisites to middle-class sympathy, as in the *Histories* — where 'there [could] be no objects more miserable, consequently so deserving of compassion' (*Histories* 4). As Jones observes, Hannah 'never pleads her own cause publicly: she remains the passive victim of sexual injustice' (V. Jones 210). Inchbald provides another textual interpretation of Hannah's experiences in a cheap pamphlet that William reads, which incidentally documents the identity and confession of the woman he has condemned. This functions as a sensationalised 'popular version' of Inchbald's novel (V. Jones 210). Condemning the 'arts and flattery of seducing man,' it diminishes the radical import of Hannah's story to a symbolic, conduct-book style warning (*N&A* 139). Inchbald gestures towards the inevitable distortion of Hannah's character in other, more conservative genres, where she is conflated with the caricatured 'wanton' that she previously distinguished herself from. She is said to 'hope her death will be a warning to all young persons of her own sex, how they listen to the praises and courtship of young men' (139). The pamphlet crystallises her into a woman 'instilled [with] all their evil practices [which] at length brought her to this untimely end' (139). This final image reflects the persistent representation of sex workers as ciphers of moral corruption, even if this 'evil' is inculcated by external forces, and reinforces the inevitable 'end' these women must be brought to even in Inchbald's call for sympathetic feminist reform. We are reminded of their appropriation as malleable textual objects throughout the late eighteenth century, deployed to fuel a variety of moral and political agendas.

Wollstonecraft carves out a radically different moral and political role for Jemima, rejecting the conditions for redemption that Inchbald upholds. The Harlot's Progress trajectory is radically disrupted in *Wrongs.* Jemima is no passive, shame-consumed Magdalen, doomed to misery and death, but an imperfect, improving character — undergoing a process of moral development rooted within feminist solidarity. Just as Leeson makes her case for women's faults being 'pitied and forgiven,' so they learn not to 'commit a second' error (*Leeson* 33), Wollstonecraft stresses that they are not 'born immaculate... to act like goddesses of wisdom,' but should be allowed to become virtuous and wise by a 'train of events and circumstances' (*Wrongs* 5). However, she suggests that Jemima's shift from 'monstrosity' to moral subjectivity

[56] Anjana Sharma. *The Autobiography of Desire: English Jacobin Women Novelists of the 1790s.* Macmillan India, 2004, 132.

can only take place outside of prostitution, shaped by the example of her middle-class protagonist. It is said that 'compassion and respect seemed to make [Jemima] swerve' from her position as a frozen witness, into being an agent of practical support for Maria: listening to her story, bringing her books, allowing her to walk beyond her cell, pursuing intelligence about her daughter, and comforting her in grief (*Wrongs* 16). Moreover, Jemima is able to deploy her own experiences as a basis for her social criticism. She becomes a political advocate — a 'champion for suffering humanity,' on behalf of Maria and the many struggling people she represents in her narrative (*Wrongs* 53). Eventually, in one of the novel's potential endings, she engages in the most dynamic, selfless acts of all: 'restoring [Maria] to life' by saving her from suicide, as well as 'snatching [her daughter] from misery' by restoring her to the protagonist (*Wrongs* 137). *Histories*-style power dynamics between middle-class female saviours and sex workers as objects of moral concern are destabilised. Jemima follows a path of moral development that is terminated for both Hannah and Mary. She is allowed to join Maria as an active participant in feminist progress. Maria may be virtuous by Wollstonecraft's standards, but in embarking on an extramarital sexual relationship with Darnford, she too has transgressed morally according to the moral codes of 1790s England. This lays the foundations for the heroines' solidarity. Coghlan also represents herself as a social and political advocate of 'active virtue,' joined by Sheldon and Leeson in endorsing compassionate care work across social divides, throughout their careers — not just as retrospective narrators, retired from prostitution (*Coghlan* 135). Distinguished from the other novels' heroines, Jemima is able to move through prostitution to participate in Maria's vision of radical resistance founded on female solidarity.

Jemima and Maria's new household, established with Darnford after their departure from the asylum, is represented as an authentic alternative to the artificial, divide and conquer dynamics of 'common and legal prostitution' (*Vindication* 229). The 'faithful' Jemima's moral development unfolds to the extent of her being capable of true 'friendship' with Maria — but she still 'insists on being considered as her housekeeper, and to receive the customary stipend. On no other terms would she remain with her friend' (*Wrongs* 216). This mistress / maid dynamic somewhat undermines the intersectional significance of their bond. However, it also allows Jemima to strike a balance between preserving their emotional ties and establishing a clear financial contract for her personal security, beyond the prospect of relying on a middle-class woman's benevolent support. As Jones argues, her independence is cemented through a 'properly financial rather than merely a sentimental contract' (V. Jones 216). Wollstonecraft defines their 'friendship' as something more than a condescending act of charity on Maria's

behalf, further complicating the dynamics between middle-class women and their 'deserving' (*Histories* 4) objects of sympathy in *Histories* and *Vindication.*[57] This reflects Wollstonecraft's view that 'Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies' for women's struggles, because 'it is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world!' (*Vindication* 143). Maria fruitlessly seeks an 'eternal friend' in the unfaithful Darnford, a role that Jemima fulfils through her unwavering support for the protagonist (*Wrongs* 122). Maria can dispense with anxieties about her sexual reputation, because she has already lost it by leaving her husband and living with her lover. We are reminded of the enduring bond between Leeson and Peggy, her maid and 'trusty, faithful friend, who... sympathises in [Leeson's] uncommon and unheard-of misfortunes' (*Leeson* 24). Across the memoirs, friendship is similarly rooted in this spirit of affinity, flourishing between women who have endured similar hardships; but friends also navigate the sex trade together, or simply bond over their mutual 'love of dress and pleasure' (*Sheldon IV* 34). Such connections flourish beyond Wollstonecraft's conditions for moral development. One possible ending to *Wrongs* imagines an all-female domestic situation which mirrors the memoirists' 'communities of mutual aid' (Mac and Smith 6). As Sabar Bahar contends, Jemima and Maria establish a 'community of interest which is necessary for a politics of the future."[58] After preventing Maria's suicide and reuniting her with her daughter, Jemima demands: 'would you leave her alone in the world, to endure what I have endured?' (*Wrongs* 137). While their bond is situated on specific grounds of mutual moral improvement, Wollstonecraft is the only novelist to represent a (former) sex worker channelling female solidarity and rallying against the conditions that condemn fallen women to isolation and misery. Formulaic narratives of sex workers' irremediable corruption or sorrowful penitence ultimately prove insufficient for accommodating Jemima's moral and political progress. Together, these women find a new mode of 'rising' (*Wrongs* 72) — or at least *surviving* — beyond the divide and conquer strategies that would fracture their bond.

Hays' case for Mary's redemption still relies upon sentimental discourses of shame. She undergoes a shift in characterisation which is deeply inconsistent with her portrayal as a predator, just prior to the scene of her penitence. Her 'monstrosity' is eclipsed by regret after

[57] Batchelor highlights the hypocrisies of middle-class, sympathetic-seeming women writers like Sarah Scott, a likely candidate for the *Histories'* authorship ("Limits" 117). The 'imagined world of the *Histories* achieved what Bath society could not: the recuperation of the penitent woman as a valued member of society,' especially as Scott refused to employ a 'repentant sinner' seduced by her master ("Limits" p.121). These women did not practice what they preached, but Jemima and Maria's relationship extends beyond sentimental charitable concerns or anxieties about sexual reputation.

[58] Saba Bahar. *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy: 'An Eve to Please Me.'* Palgrave, 2002, 174.

she is condemned for being an accomplice to murder. This both 'completed [her] career of crime' — positioned on the same moral spectrum as prostitution, like Hannah's forgery and Jemima's pickpocketing — and 'roused [her] slumbering conscience' (*Victim* 68). Contrasted with the finality of her 'human feelings' being 'eradicated,' it is now suggested that her moral sense only lay dormant (50). Sliding from one extreme to another, Mary now becomes a sentimental figure consumed by self-loathing. While imprisoned and awaiting sentencing, she follows a script of 'regret... terror, contrition' and crucially 'shame,' resonating with Hannah's self-condemnation as a 'wicked and mean wretch' (*N&A* 141). Hays' focus upon Mary's corporeality in this scene compounds her representation as a morally corrupted object — again invoking misogynistic caricatures of sex workers' bodily impurity. During her imprisonment, 'contending passions rent [her] tortured spirit,' and she recalls: 'In the bitterness of despair I dashed my wretched body against the dungeon's floor, tore, with my nails, my hair, my flesh, my garments' (*Victim* 68). This episode of self-harm symbolises her sense of frustration and imprisonment in the impure body she now attempts to destroy, or perhaps transform. Hays provides a visceral representation of the conflict between her revived moral impulses and the body she cannot dispose of 'freely' in accordance with them, given the barriers imposed upon women's moral agency (Halldenius 86). Fundamentally, Mary's body has been a frame for the 'fetters of sex' imposed upon her (*Victim* 69). Mary is imagined with 'a stream of blood gush[ing] from [her] nose and lips... mingling with a flood of tears, a kindly and copious shower,' recalling her 'from the verge of insanity' (*Victim* 68). These physical functions mark returning 'humanity' and moral purification. However, like Hannah and the *Histories*' Magdalens before her, this tearful, shame-consumed character also qualifies as an 'object' which is deeply 'miserable [and] consequently so deserving of compassion' (*Histories* 4). This noun is key; sex workers must be rendered sentimental *objects* in such benevolent-seeming political discourses, represented, in Grant's words, as 'fantasies of absolute degradation... abandoned by all but those noble few who seek to rescue' them (Grant 15). They are moulded into suitable casualties for receiving the Magdalen House-esque 'coercive forms of care,' often sanctioned by patronising campaigners in today's world (Laura Agustin qtd. by Mac and Smith 9). Like Hannah, Mary must also be made shameful in order to signpost her dramatic process of moral purification — to be deemed capable of rehabilitation and worthy of sympathy, even amongst feminist circles.

Mary's transformation is rooted in her sudden ability to articulate Hays' arguments against patriarchal systems of female education, and their stifling impact upon female moral

development. She is also sentenced to death, but unlike Hannah, allowed to have a last word against her oppressors. Mary's moral and political subjectivity burgeons when she 'suddenly awakened... to a new existence,' her 'spirit [becoming] serene' as a result of 'indulging in the mournful retrospect' and committing it to paper (*Victim* 68). Her storytelling carries a didactic, morally purifying function. However, Mary strikes the balance of 'mournfully' acknowledging her personal culpability as an acceptable object of sentimental sympathy, while being ventriloquised to deliver feminist messages which bind her narrative to the broader political impetus of *Victim.* Although influenced by Wollstonecraft's personal struggles with sexual prejudice, Hays could not be seen to excuse a woman's sexual indiscretions in this hostile anti-feminist climate — particularly given the controversy surrounding her own reputation.[59] Mary feels 'dispositions springing and powers expanding, that, permitted to unfold themselves, might yet make reparation to the society [she has] injured, and on which [she has] but too well retaliated [her] wrongs' (*Victim* 68). The verb 'unfold' is central to Hays' political message. An individual's moral impulses must be nurtured by their environment, and allowed to expand. Levelling politically charged language against the social, legal, and economic forces that obstruct this process for middle-class women, Mary condemns the 'despotism' and 'prejudice' that rendered her weak and dependent; she attacks the 'sanguinary policy' which 'precludes reformation, defeating dear-bought lessons of experience' (*Victim* 68). This principle is endorsed within *Vindication, Wrongs* and *Emma Courtney*: both in personal life and print, Hays had 'optimistic ideas concerning human perfectibility and inevitable progress' whereby women were allowed to make mistakes, and learn from them as a mode of moral improvement.[60] Fundamentally, women are prohibited from following this process, a concern raised through the memoirists' representations of social ostracization following their falls, and the new moral wisdom they gain from their experiences (*Leeson* 33). Mary moves beyond her function as a corrupt object in Raymond's didactic tale, to becoming a moral subject who, via this letter, curates a Wollstonecraftian education for her child. She hopes that Raymond's heart can 'throb responsive to the voice of nature' in caring for her daughter, imploring him to 'yield to the claims of humanity' instead of the 'corruption of vaunted civilisation' (*Victim* 69). Mary shifts suddenly from 'monstrosity' to developing sensitivity to the demands of 'nature' and 'humanity,' which are the roots of radical progress for all the memoirists and novelists. Her focus on compassionate care signifies a return to the natural world, beyond the sexual

[59] Gina Luria Walker. *Mary Hays (1759 – 1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind.* Ashgate, 2006, 159.
[60] Marilyn L. Brooks. "Introduction." *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* by Mary Hays, edited by Marilyn L. Brooks, Broadview, 2000, pp. 7-29, 22.

corruption that eventually consumes both mother and daughter. It is only beyond prostitution that Mary can undergo this cleansing process, and be ventriloquised with an empowered moral and political voice through which to stage her intervention.

This degree of political subjectivity is still tethered to formulaic tropes of the prostitute imaginary, typically used to represent the inevitably premature end that sex workers' lives must reach in conservative narratives. A similar, objectifying strategy unfolds in Hays' biography of Wollstonecraft, in which she 'intentionally conflates' Wollstonecraft's personal experiences 'with the narrative of the harlot's progress, rather than that of the philosophical heroine.'[61] But according to Eberle, Hays 'replots' the typical narrative of the 'Harlot's Progress' in suggesting that 'pollution is not irrevocable' for Mary, showing that 'even... a diseased "monster" can return to virtue [and] like the sexualised heroines of *Wrongs of Woman*, the process of recounting her "infamous tale" transforms her' (84). Eberle argues that Mary adopts the 'conventional expressions of a guilt-stricken and repentant prostitute,' however 'she simultaneously adopts the voice of a social critic,' which gives her 'a renewed sense of personal worth' (84). However, I would argue that Hays' representation of a sex worker marks a clear departure from Jemima's radical social and political trajectory. Mary's sense of 'personal worth' is constantly bound up in her proximity to the Magdalen stereotype; shame is a pre-requisite to her position as a 'social critic.' She is repeatedly undermined by the discourses of degradation that punctuate her account, and Raymond's, even after this point of enlightenment. Mary is still referred to as 'abandoned and wretched,' and in objectifying shorthand, as a symbol of 'infamy and calamity' who corrupts her daughter throughout the novel (*Victim* 69). Moreover, she laments that this transformation comes 'too late' to save her from the 'Law [which] completes the triumph of injustice' (68) having warned Raymond not to 'avert [her] fate,' for in 'surviving virtue and fame, [she has] already lived but too long' (61). Like Hannah, she commits a crime that is punishable by death, passively accepts her role in this familiar narrative, and is forbidden the redemption arc that the imperfect but improving Jemima follows throughout *Wrongs* (68). Hays subtly critiques the one-dimensional visions of sex workers represented within Raymond's narration, instilling Mary with a new kind of radical wisdom and moral subjectivity. She explicitly critiques the social forces and discourses that dehumanise her. However, these concerns are circumscribed by particular parameters of sympathy and stereotypical interpretations of sex

[61] Roxane Eberle. *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792-1897: Interrupting the Harlot's Progress*. Palgrave, 2002, 67.

workers' moral degradation, still reliant upon well-worn, objectifying narratives of bodily corruption, and shame-consumed victimhood.

Conclusion

In these novels, sex workers become manifestations of Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays' anxieties about the suppression of women's authentic moral impulses in a misogynistic system. The sex trades that Hannah, Jemima, and Mary experience are fragmented and artificial worlds, microcosms for a broader patriarchal society, which thwart their moral potential and obstruct the sincere, compassionate bonds of 'humanity.' Unlike the multidimensional moral and political subjects represented within the memoirs of Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson, these heroines are forced into an inevitable trajectory of moral degradation. While sex workers appear to think, speak, and feel in these novels beyond the imaginings of misogynistic commentators, pre-existing caricatures of the prostitute imaginary are still appropriated within these portraits. They are crafted to harness feminist shock, terror, and sympathy, and spark radical activism against the forces that subject women to such misery. Moreover, these representations reveal the limitations of the novelists' radicalism, where women's characterisations are persistently weighted by moral judgements about the nature of their sexual expression. On this basis, the heroines' moral rehabilitation can only take place *beyond* what are represented as the dehumanising, morally destructive constraints of prostitution. The novelists imply that sex workers cannot possess the moral qualifications deemed necessary to participate in their visions of feminist progress. To this extent, they are still objectified, mobilised to bolster broader political causes within which they have no voice.

The novelists' depictions of sex workers' subjectivities and potential for rehabilitation remain rooted in classist assumptions about the thoughts, feelings and moral impulses of women actively working in the sex trade. Wollstonecraft does not break the moulds of these pre-existing prostitute imaginaries, but, out of all the novelists, she is the only one who subtly reshapes them. This is not only because Jemima is allowed to recover, and act upon, her 'frozen' sentiments — a concept which, despite marking a radical departure from the inevitable deaths of Hannah and Mary, still reproduces the misogynistic ideology that sex workers are morally degraded in the first place. Wollstonecraft attempts to portray an ever shifting, evolving individual, who is allowed to develop beyond fixed categories of 'monstrous' cruelty and grovelling penitence. The bond between Jemima and Maria provides a radical safe space in which their progress can continue, dismantling social divisions that would condemn fallen women to isolation and misery. To this extent, Wollstonecraft's arguments resonate with the

memoirists' cases for compassion across social divides. But in the shadow of severe backlash against Wollstonecraft, Hays cautiously couches her radical sentiments in conservative tropes. Her garish, inconsistent characterisation of Mary cycles back to caricatures of artifice, hypersexualised 'monstrosity' and Magdalen-esque penitence. Inchbald and Hays' texts thus mark the most decisive rejection of Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's bold, sexualised visions of feminist resistance. Published over three years of extreme political turbulence, these novels all magnify divisive feminist blind spots that persist in today's world. They reflect the struggle for feminist writers to condemn misogynistic power systems without demonising women for their methods of survival within them, and to construct an argument for female liberation — encompassing *all* women — beyond the discursive constraints of the dominant culture.

Section II: Maternal Virtue

Chapter 3. 'These illegitimate children gave me pleasure': Mother Work and Sex Work in the Memoirs of Ann Sheldon, Margaret Coghlan and Margaret Leeson

Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson grapple with patriarchal definitions of maternal virtue, restrictive cultural narratives that intensified during the late eighteenth century. I contend that they destabilise ideological divisions between maternity and prostitution — and female sexuality more broadly — in memoirs that document their wide-ranging, complex maternal experiences. Radicals of the revolutionary period were inspired by Rousseau to define the 'true essence' of motherhood.[1] These essentialist interpretations dictated what was 'irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive' of mothers (Fuss 2), fuelling caricatures of sex workers as unnatural mothers in the prostitute imaginary.[2] Feminist writers contextualised women's ostensible failures to fulfil natural maternal potential within their oppressive social circumstances. However, their treatises perpetuated the patriarchal belief that motherhood was a 'counter to sexual feeling, opposing alike individual expression, desire, and agency in favour of a mother-self at the service of the family and the state.'[3] Sex workers were defined in opposition to the self-sacrificing, modest maternal ideal endorsed by patriarchal revolutionaries, and to the rational mother-citizen advocated by feminists. Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson demonstrate their capacities for maternal feeling and care, while exposing the tensions between ideal maternal virtue and the actual struggles of undertaking mother work in a misogynistic system. They resist the construction of a maternal imaginary populated by selfless, instinctive nurturers; these standards are incompatible with the demands of survival, as well as their authentic desires and aspirations to autonomy. There is no straightforward vison of maternal identity in these texts; it is crucial to resist imposing any assumptions about motherly instinct and practice upon the memoirists, especially in their

[1] Mary Seidman Trouille. *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment.* State University of New York Press, 1997, 43; Diana Fuss. *Essentially Speaking.* Routledge, 1990, 2.
[2] Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore.* Verso, 2014, 4.
[3] Ruth Perry. "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol 2, no. 2, 1991, pp. 204-234, 209.

individual eighteenth-century contexts. Beyond Rousseau's ideals of 'natural' maternal tenderness, Elisabeth Badinter argues, 'a mother's behaviour is tightly bound to her own personal and cultural history.'[4] The memoirists negotiate with keepers to establish methods of support that are adapted to the needs of themselves as well as their children, striving to honour their authentic maternal attachments *and* their desires for sexual agency. Notably, essentialist stereotypes and traditional standards of maternal virtue are not completely absent from these texts. The memoirists often negotiate with these tropes, to define themselves beyond misogynistic caricature. However, they embed these images within nuanced portraits of their multidimensional maternal, sexual and political subjectivities, deploying the intimate workings of their domestic lives to construct a feminist resistance against the stigmatisation, neglect and abuse of (unchaste) working women. Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson portray sex workers as complex maternal subjects striving for autonomy in a hostile socioeconomic system, rather than objects of moral and political concern defined exclusively by their transgressive bodily functions.

Throughout the eighteenth century, conservative writers created 'maternal mythologies' of 'natural' motherly conduct, which prioritised chastity and ignored the multiple socioeconomic factors that impacted women's experiences.[5] Visions of chaste mothers engaging in 'natural' maternal feeling and practice were also present within feminist treatises of the early revolutionary period, which argued for women's involvement in public life as moral and political citizens. Two years before the publication of Coghlan's text, Wollstonecraft's mother-citizens of 'chastened dignity' were imagined nurturing children strictly within companionate, desexualised marital unions, excluding sex workers as corrupt objects from their middle-class domains of morally purifying mother work.[6] She suggested that the initial intensity of erotic love should fade in marriage, allowing husband and wife to redistribute their energies into more critical domestic and social duties. As Jennie Batchelor demonstrates, *Histories* posited a 'a model of acceptably sexual maternity that was as unthinkable in Defoe's fiction as it would be in Wollstonecraft's polemical works,' but the sexualities of its sentimental 'Magdalen-Madonna' heroines are limited to specific terms of romantic attachment.[7] Bromwich and DeJong observe

[4] Elisabeth Badinter. *The Conflict: Woman and Mother.* Text Publishing, 2012, 60.
[5] Toni Bowers. *The Politics of Motherhood.* Cambridge University Press, 1996, 100.
[6] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 223.
[7] Jennie Batchelor. "Mothers and Others: Sexuality and Maternity in *The Histories of Some of the Penitents of the Magdalen House* (1760)." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis, Routledge, 2012, pp. 157-170, 159-60.

that 'mother-work, birth giving, and sex work [have long been] ideologically constructed as very different, in which mothering and birth giving are valorised (but subordinated) activities... while sex work has been stigmatized as an illegitimate use of women's embodiment."[8] These long-standing categories attribute sex work and mother work to oppositional bodies and identities. Patriarchal culture persistently 'separates and obfuscates sex workers from themselves, their maternal roles and society as a whole' (Bromwich and DeJong 25). But in Nussbaum's words, the memoirists are 'irregular verbs' who 'defy universal typologies'; by engaging in multiple forms of labour, they are irreducible to the fixed noun of 'prostitute,' or essentialised definitions of 'Mother."[9] Their identities and priorities are ever shifting, shaped by their fluctuating socioeconomic circumstances.

Maternity has long been a motivation behind prostitution, and its occupational hazard (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Old Bailey records document the experiences of mistresses and streetwalkers who were raising children fathered by their keepers, or by previous partners.[10] The memoirists' accounts demonstrate that sexual labour and mothering are work, in a capitalist system which persistently denies this by reducing the latter to 'moral or affective characteristics,' and the former to a state of moral degradation.[11] Prostitution becomes a 'stigmatised identifier... defining the person so that [a] single dimension of what the individual does is read as who she is' (Bromwich and DeJong 24). This closes down the possibility of women operating as multidimensional maternal and sexual agents. Fundamentally, mother work and sex work do not 'count as work in traditional economic models' (Bromwich and DeJong 22). Resisting this idea, I refer to the memoirists' participation in 'sex work,' 'care work' and 'mother work' throughout my analysis. I follow Alexandra Shepard in deploying the term 'income-generating labour' to describe work that women are paid for; in this instance, the sexual labour that the memoirists exchange for money and material goods (Shepard 5). As discussed in Chapter One, the memoirists also form 'communities of mutual aid,' where care work constitutes a form of political resistance.[12] Here, I highlight the non-biological forms of

[8]Rebecca Bromwich and Monique Marie DeJong, "Introduction." *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work* edited by Bromwich and DeJong. Demeter Press, 2015, pp.9-42, 21.
[9] Felicity Nussbaum. *The Autobiographical Subject.* John Hopkins University Press, 1995, 195.
[10] "Ordinary's Account." Old Bailey Proceedings Online. File OA17410318, 18th March 1741. Par. 9. oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=OA17410318. Accessed 25 August 2022; "Ordinary's Account." *Old Bailey Proceedings Online.* File OA17511023, 23rd October 1751. Par. 8. oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=OA17511023. Accessed 25 August 2022.
[11] Alexandra Shepard. "Working Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London. " *History Workshop Journal.* dbad008, 2023, pp. 1-24, 1. doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbad008. Accessed 7 December 2023.
[12] Juno Mac and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018, 6.

mother work they undertake when supporting younger sex workers. In these texts, maternal care prompts radical reflections upon women's identities and social roles.

Part One of this chapter argues that Sheldon's memoirs refashion long-standing mother / bawd stereotypes, as well as essentialist visions of biological motherhood. She details complex negotiations with her fickle keeper, necessary for securing support during her pregnancy. Part Two examines Coghlan's strategies for supporting her children through prostitution, which dismantle ideological divisions between mother work and sex work. Her memoirs are a point of departure from desexualised maternal ideals. However, she also appropriates sentimental visions of maternal sentiment and practice, at points evocative of the patriotic mother-citizen determined to fulfil her civic duties, to leverage her sociopolitical arguments against patriarchal exploitation. In Part Three, I argue that Leeson represents a radical case for mothers' sexual agency beyond chaste ideals. She attacks the prejudices that govern unmarried women's maternal experiences, while pursuing the free expression of her authentic desires. Like Sheldon, she reimagines the brothel as a site of maternal care. Through examining these diverse experiences, I 'disaggregate maternalism from any particular embodied subject,' focusing 'not on static personal attributes but on themes characteristic of maternal thinking' (Bromwich and DeJong 12). The memoirists' self-representations are never static, but continually negotiating with conventional codes of maternal identity.

Part I: *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon*

After working some years in elite prostitution, Sheldon briefly manages a brothel. Her memoirs document her role as a protective surrogate mother to two young sex workers who reside there.[13] In this account, she redefines essentialist paradigms of biological maternity — and accompanying ideals of feminine mildness (Bowers 204). As discussed in Chapter One, she regularly forms sympathetic bonds with other women: remaining attuned to their feelings and experiences, and supporting them during difficult periods. Here, she positions herself at the head of this particular group, her caring role acquiring a new dimension of maternal authority. Finding herself between keepers, Sheldon secures board and lodging in exchange for 'managing the house, and receiving the profits of it for the benefit of [brothel owner] Mrs Wood' (*Sheldon III* 6). This involves 'taking the care of two young ladies' who inhabit it,

[13] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol III. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 8.

Misses Fortescue and Montague; leaning into a devoted maternal role, Sheldon 'pays them every attention when they are at home, and accompanies them to every place' (*Sheldon III* 5, 7). When they are provided with inadequate food, she declares herself 'too good a guardian mother to suffer... [her] flock to be ill fed,' describing them as her 'covey' (pp. 8-9). Sheldon depicts them as delicate birds, susceptible to exploitation. They are repeatedly described as 'young' (pp. 6-7, 9) with Miss Fortescue being portrayed as a 'poor' (12) and 'persecuted girl' (14) when the predatory Mrs Wood schemes to steal her wealth. While there is a playful tone to Sheldon's representation of her mother hen role, and a potential implication of bawd-like financial interest, she conveys an awareness of the dangers these women face and a determination to protect them.[14] She views mothering as a 'social responsibility,' as opposed to a purely biological role, in a way that 'reinvents normative motherhood, and undermines its individualism and essentialism.[15] When Mrs Wood sends bailiffs after Miss Fortescue, Sheldon's nurturing maternal role is toughened through the resurgence of her stereotypically masculine fighting spirit. She is 'active in frustrating [these] designs against that persecuted girl' through comic scenes of physical violence against male authorities (*Sheldon* III 14). She defines herself as 'an experienced general in this kind of attack, [who knows] how to arrange everything for an able defence' (10). Similar military tropes were deployed in Sheldon's portrait of her 'seduction' by Walsingham in volume I.[16] Now knowledgeable about these exploitative systems, she reclaims her power by becoming a general in defence of other vulnerable women, settling her charges safely in new lodgings, while she attacks their pursuers. Given Sheldon's reflections upon corrupt Mother Needham-esque madams and complicit mothers of procured daughters throughout her memoirs, she defines herself in opposition to these exploitative figures. She describes one as an 'unnatural woman' for pushing her daughter into prostitution, lacking the nurturing instincts that Sheldon encodes as intrinsically feminine (*Sheldon III* 43). Another exploits 'poor girls from thirteen to seventeen years of age... [for] her infamous trade' (*Sheldon III* 88-89). Like the madam who first ensnared Sheldon, they objectify girls as their 'stock in trade' rather than helping them navigate this system (*Sheldon I* 143). Like the *Histories*' author, she critiques the 'unsentimental economics' of perverted mothers and their unhomely brothels (Batchelor, "Mothers" 163). However, she deploys these caricatures to foreground her own combative, yet supportive subjectivity as a mother / bawd.

[14] *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*. Edited by Jennie Batchelor and Megan Hiatt, Routledge, 2016, 99.
[15] Andrea O'Reilly. *Matricentric Feminism.* Demeter Press, 2021, 146.
[16] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol I. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 122.

Sheldon modifies traditional models of maternal tenderness to generate a surrogate maternal identity which is well-suited to the demands of survival. Her care work cannot exist as a purely sentimental, affective ideal; she continually reinforces the financial foundations of this support. Counteracting caricatures of mercenary, money-grabbing courtesans, she suggests that her ability to provide this practical support is rooted in the wealth she accrues through elite prostitution. She enters into 'combat' with one exploitative bawd to 'restore [an] unfortunate girl to her mother,' supplying her with clothes, and giving her family money.[17] Sheldon reflects on her own situation; if 'one benignant hand had led [her] back to her parent's house, [she] might never have wanted... the comforts which, after all, are the only ones which wait on honourable life' (*Sheldon II* 219). Sheldon exposes the conflict that often exists between patriarchal codes of feminine virtue, and the material conditions of women's lives. She represents herself as a linchpin of domestic peace, able to mediate between families and implement financial support which extends to generous donations amongst communities of poor women (*Sheldon II* 20). While she acknowledges her lavishly materialistic 'love of dress and pleasure' in the upper echelons of the London sex trade, her earnings from prostitution are also deployed for philanthropic ends (*Sheldon II* 50). In this sense, her care work is inextricably connected to her sex work. One 1795 record of a donation to the Charity School of the Parish of St Pancras, London, attributes one hundred pounds 'to a benefaction of Mrs Ann Sheldon, of Windmill Street, Tottenham Court Road.'[18] The school trained 'female children of the industrious poor' for domestic service (*Charity* frontispiece). This benefactor's identity cannot be verified. However, given that Sheldon lived in the area, and repeatedly expresses concern about women's limited employment opportunities — she herself attempted to 'apply to her needle for support... for an honest and active industry' — she may well have deployed the earnings from her memoirs for these ends.[19] One 'catalogue of living English authors' acknowledges that Sheldon was alive and noted for her memoirs in 1799; new editions were published in 1788 and 1790, indicating a successful performance on the literary market.[20] Through her different money-making endeavours, Sheldon conveys the struggle for women in her position — as well as unchaste / unsupported women from a variety of backgrounds — to carve out an independent, sustainable livelihood for themselves without male support.

[17] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol II. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, pp. 218-219.
[18] *A Brief Account of the Charity School of St Pancras.* S. Low, 1796, 9.
[19] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol IV. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, pp. 184-185.
[20] *A New Catalogue of Living English Authors* vol I. C. Clark, 1799, pp. 97-98.

Sheldon's account of her only pregnancy, experienced during one period of loyalty to Walsingham, is defined by the struggle to secure the support of this inconsistent keeper. Her narrative incorporates correspondence to him, which reflects a self-conscious urge to align herself with his Rousseauvian ideals of a chaste, 'retired' wife-like mistress (*Sheldon I* 216). Despite spending most of her career evading Walsingham's jurisdiction to indulge her 'wayward truant self,' she must now perform according to his domestic standard for the sake of survival (*Sheldon II* 153). In one letter, she writes: 'I still have reason to suspect I am with child. You would laugh to see what an economist I am grown; for one guinea serves me a week... I have no amusement here, for I never go out of doors, and the chief of my employment is reading' (*Sheldon III* 147). Having once argued with him that 'staying constantly at home... will not at all suit my inclinations,' Sheldon assuages his previous concerns about her excessive spending and socialising (*Sheldon I* 215-6). She worries about his lack of response, especially given his previous volatility, and whether his claims of illness are an 'excuse to get rid of her' (*Sheldon III* 150). 'Far gone with child, and... very ill in consequence,' Sheldon struggles both mentally and physically during this uncertain period (*Sheldon III* 154). While she declares her genuine love for Walsingham, her panic can also be attributed to the prospect of losing his financial support. When they finally meet, she recalls:

> Never was a man of title, great estate, and family pride, more delighted at the birth of an heir than Mr Walsingham appeared to be at the account I now gave him; but, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he took me by the hand, and asked me, in the most serious manner, if I believed the child to be his? – My answer was, that I was well aware of the nature of an oath, and that, if it would give him the least satisfaction, I was ready to declare, in the most solemn manner, that I had been faithful to him ever since our meeting at Portsmouth. 'Well then,'' said he, ''My dear girl, take care of yourself... when I return I shall go to sea no more. You shall want for nothing, and when the young one comes, we shall be as happy as the day is long' (156).

Walsingham assumes the role of a proud father. He addresses Sheldon in affectionate terms, guarantees his child's wellbeing, and assures their happiness together as a united 'we.' However, tension exists between these sentimental images of emotional attachment, and his doubts about the child's paternity. He snaps from visions of a harmonious, middle-class domestic idyll into these cold practical concerns, 'as if suddenly recollecting himself' and remembering Sheldon's sex worker status. Implicitly, conniving caricatures of the prostitute imaginary — unnatural mothers using children only for 'whore-craft and pretences' in securing their keepers' property — persist in his mind.[21] Without marriage, 'paternity rested on a woman's word: untenable in a

[21] *Satan's Harvest Home.* Publisher Unknown, 1749, 47.

society which feared female sexual power.'[22] Therefore, Sheldon's epistolary performance of loyalty to Walsingham may also reflect her attempts to validate his paternity.[23] Her livelihood, and that of her child, hinges on Walsingham's belief in her oath, rather than pre-existing stereotypes of sex workers. In this precarious position, she seems increasingly aware of the financial pressure to conform to his ideals. Sheldon's maternal experiences are governed by misogynistic concerns about her transgressive sexual embodiment.

Walsingham demarcates boundaries between Sheldon and his public-facing, legitimate family unit, a binary that he weaponizes as a method of subordination and control. Despite her attempts to negotiate with his ideals of womanhood, he reaffirms the stigma and socioeconomic instability widely imposed upon unmarried mothers in this period. After Walsingham refuses to let Sheldon accompany him to sea for what he describes as a short naval voyage, she receives an anonymous letter which warns her from accompanying him. Justifiably, she later wonders whether he authored it himself. Appealing to Sheldon's good nature, this note initially appears to contest malevolent, homewrecking caricatures of the prostitute imaginary: 'There are women... who, amidst all the disgrace of an unchaste life, have more real virtue in their hearts than many of those who rest their honour upon the sanction of the altar' (*Sheldon III* 164). The writer alleges that such women cannot be tempted to form connections with married men:

> though they themselves are treated as the outcasts of society, [they] possess a principle of rectitude that will not suffer them to infringe upon the matrimonial happiness, by sowing the seeds of discord in that union which is so essential to the interests of society, and is sanctioned by the law of heaven (161).

While implying that sex workers can possess virtue beyond chastity, this passive aggressive remark ostracises Sheldon from the safe, respectable boundaries of middle-class domestic peace. She is perceived as a threat to the married couple's sanctified, legitimate union, and to the bonds of civilised society more broadly. While there is no explicit mention of Sheldon's pregnancy, this physical manifestation of her transgressive sexuality would only intensify her risk. The correspondent warns her to stay away for fear of 'creating a stigma upon [Walsingham's] character, and a ridicule upon his family,' defining her as a contagious source of shame (164). Sheldon later learns that he has deceived her, and is actually bound for a three-year stint in the West Indies leading British naval forces in the American Revolution. She

[22] Kate Gibson. *Illegitimacy Family and Stigma in England, 1660-1834.* Oxford University Press, 2022, 3.
[23] As Gibson notes, many children who 'received greater paternal provision were conceived in long-term kept mistress relationships,' and a keeper could 'more easily police a kept woman's chastity due to his financial control of her home and lifestyle, making paternity more secure and facilitating paternal contact with children' (92). This dynamic is reflected in Walsingham's domineering influence over Sheldon's life, and her sudden eagerness to conform to his wishes during her pregnancy.

declares that 'it is all over' for her, and soon 'miscarries of a boy' (168). Afterwards, Walsingham's 'tenderness' to Sheldon is offset by further warnings to keep away from Portsmouth, as 'his wife and many of his particular friends would [be seeing him depart] and therefore my appearance would tend to increase his distress' (170). This seemingly confirms the letter writer's identity; even while witnessing the harrowing sight of his child's body 'which lay in a little box' (169), Walsingham is most concerned about his reputation and peace of mind. Given the shame he attaches to Sheldon, his previous promises of paternal provision were likely to have been performed in secret and at a distance, like many fathers of illegitimate children in this period (Gibson, *Illegitimacy* 94). Reflecting his previous attempts to 'save his honour, and deceive his lady' by marrying Sheldon to an abusive man when his infidelities are exposed, he again forces her into a state of silence and compliance (*Sheldon I* 151-2). However, she now breaks this contract. His indiscretions are exposed to the public, including his family, through the writing of her memoirs. Sheldon retrospectively implodes these neat divisions between his respectable family structure, and their illicit union. She refuses to accept this diminishment of her worth through these misogynistic classifications of her identity.

Sheldon's account of her miscarriage demands a reading of her maternal experiences beyond contemporary ideals of natural maternal attachment and 'all-engrossing tenderness' (Bowers 28). She describes 'miscarrying of a fine boy in consequence of Mr Walsingham being ordered out to the West Indies' (*Sheldon III* 154), which reflects the common belief that miscarriage could be caused by 'violent passions or affections of the mind.[24] Indeed, the primary focus of her memoirs during this period is anxiety over Walsingham's loss — during her pregnancy, and after her miscarriage. Sheldon does not express any personal grief over this event. Instead, she focuses only on Walsingham's reaction, and her sorrow over his departure. Recalling his final visit, she notes that 'Nothing could equal his tenderness on the occasion, as he looked at the *child* which lay in a little box, he declared with tears in his eyes, that he sooner would have given a thousand pounds than such an accident should have happened' (169). From this poignant image of paternal grief, he brightly observes that, 'as the misfortune could not now be prevented,' she should 'have patience and 'sustain [her] spirits, for... he should shortly be called home' (169). This remark dismisses the extent of her distress. After he pays her, then departs, she 'faints away,' under a 'grief [which] was so outrageous, that it seemed to be a kind of omen, that he would return to me no more' (170). Sheldon's memoirs do not dwell on the miscarriage, but move swiftly onto sentimental expressions of her debilitating

[24] William Buchan. *Domestic Medicine.* A. Strahan, 1790, 532.

attachment to Walsingham, which culminates in a fever. This is intensified upon the news of his death, in the Atlantic hurricane of 1780. Her emotional discussions of her 'very sorrowful heart' are accompanied by practical financial concerns (171). While Sheldon's account does not reveal every detail of her mental state, it encourages us to contextualise her experiences within her specific socioeconomic circumstances. She expresses her wish to have died with Walsingham, which would have spared 'many a poignant heartache... [or being] impelled by necessity to relate the follies of [her] life (172). She laments being 'deprived forever of him, who, while he had lived, would have ensured to [her] a state of comfort... hastening [her] to that of hopeless penury' (184). His death signifies a critical loss of income-generating labour, which has continued (albeit inconsistently) since he 'seduced' her. Fundamentally, Sheldon must concentrate on her own survival; at a period when child mortality rates were high, the prospect of successfully bearing and raising an infant alone would have seemed impossible (Shepard 8). Maternal attachment could depend on the complexities of women's circumstances, 'tightly bound to her own personal and cultural history' (Badinter 60). Sheldon's account implicitly challenges essentialist narratives of natural maternal feeling flourishing in all circumstances, and, considering her previous rebellions against Walsingham's control, any temptation to suggest that her memoirs represent a constant adherence to principles of feminist empowerment. It demands a sensitivity to her circumstances, which are, like those of any other woman in this period, shaped by the whims of male influence. Her experiences of pregnancy under the jurisdiction of a capricious keeper illuminate the struggle for sex workers to assert their rights and subjectivity beyond social stigma, in a system upheld by misogynistic categories of female identity and worth.

Part II: *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan*

Coghlan represents prostitution as a method of facilitating mother work. Her account confounds ever-widening ideological binaries between ostensibly legitimate and illegitimate uses of female embodiment (Bromwich and DeJong 21) in the 1790s. Women's social roles were increasingly conceptualised in terms of maternal duty; Rousseau's devoted, retiring maternal ideal was exploited by patriarchal French republicans 'as a pretext for sexist discrimination and repression' (Trouille 69). Coghlan previously endorsed Wollstonecraftian ideals of 'progressive domesticity,' proclaiming that she was 'far better calculated for the purer joys of domestic life'

(*Coghlan* 18) with the man she loved.[25] Now, she insists that her authentic domestic virtues were thwarted by the forced marriage which precipitated her prostitution. She advances contemporary feminist concerns surrounding the moral damage wreaked by patriarchal control. After escaping her abusive husband, she enjoys a brief liaison with Charles James Fox. She is single and four months pregnant with this politician's child when she meets her next keeper, Mr Fazakerly. Describing her initial discussion with this 'rich' and 'generous' man, to whom she is drawn because he is 'adapted to [her] purpose,' she reflects:

> it was in my nature to be candid, I therefore frankly told him, that I was four months advanced in pregnancy, and concluded by saying, that he probably might deem this circumstance an obstacle to our connection. He waived, however, the objection, made the most liberal offers, insisted on my applying to no other quarter for protection and during four years, he supported me and my daughter, without permitting me to draw from Mr Fox, for the least supply whatever (53).

Contrasted with the sentimental discourses used to describe Fox, Coghlan uses pragmatic language to express her matter-of-fact approach to negotiating this deal — acknowledging her pregnancy as a potential 'obstacle' to be factored in. Like Sheldon, she counteracts duplicitous caricatures of sex workers who embroil children in 'whore-craft and pretences' to trap keepers (*Harvest* 47). Coghlan is candid about navigating the demands of survival through this business transaction, just as Sheldon focuses upon the financial repercussions of Walsingham's absence.

Coghlan represents the necessity of engaging in income-generating labour which was increasingly associated with moral impurity in political discourses. The companionate, desexualised 'matrimonial ties' envisaged as the foundations of domestic peace in *Vindication* do not account for the practical demands of mothering as a sex worker (*Vindication* 223). Fazakerly's decision to become Coghlan's keeper was unusual, implied by her presumption that her pregnancy would deter his interest, and confirmed by Fox's failure to support his daughter despite his public advocacy for the rights of single mothers and illegitimate children.[26] At a lower end of the economic scale, *Harris' List* describes one sex worker mother as being 'good game, but easily run down.'[27] This hunting metaphor implies that her desperation makes her prices negotiable; having a child works 'profoundly to [her] economic disadvantage.'[28] Other mistresses often managed to keep children secret from new keepers, settling them with

[25] Gary Kelly. *Women, Writing, and Revolution 1790-1827*. Clarendon Press, 1993, 101.
[26] George Otto Trevelyan. *The Early History of Charles James Fox.* Harper, 1880, 412.
[27] *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies.* H. Ranger, 1787, 64.
[28] Ellen Malenas Ledoux. *Labouring Mothers: Reproducing Women and Work in the Eighteenth Century.* University of Virginia Press, 2023, 191.

nurses or families for a weekly remittance.[29] Coghlan does not stipulate the circumstances of her daughter's care, but prostitution enables her to support the child, perhaps by retaining custody, hiring help, or, with Fazakerly's fortune, paying to outsource her care (Shepard 13). By temporarily taking his surname, Coghlan may have attempted to protect her child from the stigma of illegitimacy.[30] She admits her lack of 'real happiness' in this situation (*Coghlan* 68). However, as Bromwich and DeJong note, 'no hard threshold' can be set between the identities of a mother accepting payment for sex work to support her child versus a mother staying in a loveless marriage for the same need (25). While Wollstonecraft condemns both 'legal and common' sex work (*Vindication* 229), Coghlan deems the latter option preferable to the 'honourable prostitution' of her marriage (Coghlan 31). Distanced from a forced union which would compel her into performances of subservience and affection, the union with Fazakerly seems, for Coghlan, more authentic; she enters this situation with her eyes open, and as an active negotiator of her circumstances.

However, Coghlan soon leans into sentimental ideals of domesticated femininity when representing her union with British diplomat John Augustus Hervey. She observes:

> I cannot reflect on the virtues and splendid qualities, that distinguish the mind and person of his Lordship, without the most lively sensibility. With him, I enjoyed, for several months, all the comforts and delights of domestic life, and with him I continued until he was appointed, by his Britannic Majesty, Envoy at a foreign court... Nothing... can abate the lively gratitude and esteem which my heart feels for this valuable friend. His lordship had left me only a few months, when I brought forth a pledge of our union (a daughter) (*Coghlan* 56).

Coghlan deploys sentimental discourses to represent her affection for Hervey as genuine and enduring, to justify, and even legitimise, this union on the grounds of moral sentiment. She squares her female-centric libertinism, endorsing the 'free expression of emotion and sexuality' and the 'celebration of passion and honesty,' with domestic virtue.[31] Her fond recollections of the 'comforts and delights of domestic life' echo *Vindication*'s visions of the 'domestic affections' shared by a contented couple — but injected with attraction that contrasts the desexualised, companionate ideal Wollstonecraft endorses at this point (*Vindication* 223). Coghlan embraces what she defines as her authentic self, 'calculated for the purer joys of domestic life,' rather than public extravagance (18). Unlike her functional, superficial connection with Fazakerly, she admires Hervey's virtues rather than his wealth. Coghlan

[29] Julie Peakman. *Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore.* Quercus Editions, 2016, 27.
[30] Elizabeth Sarah Real Gooch. *The Life of Mrs Gooch* Vol II. C and G Kearsley, 1792, 136.
[31] Laura Linker. *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730.* Routledge, 2016, 98.

repeatedly reinforces her constancy 'with him,' exhibiting her wife-like loyalty. However, her identity is not irrevocably absorbed in Hervey. Reaffirming her moral and political authenticity in light of his opposition to the French revolution, Coghlan declares that she is not 'a friend to arbitrary principles,' nor is it because she 'admires the *man,* that [she is] to be considered a *convert* to his political notions' (*Coghlan* 56). She reinforces the point that her sexual 'impurity' has no bearing on the purity of her political convictions, continuing to counteract caricatures of politically corrupt, inauthentic courtesans. Coghlan's mesh of genuine feeling and financial interest reflects the indistinct boundaries between some mistress / keeper relationships, and 'cohabiting' arrangements motivated primarily by love and affection — 'blurring the lines between legitimacy and illegitimacy' (Gibson, *Illegitimacy* 4). Coghlan has reached the financial position to choose her lovers on the grounds of 'love or affection, or, at the very least, sexual attraction.'[32] Sheldon self-consciously performs according to Walsingham's domestic ideals, but Coghlan implies that her authentic desires for domestic peace flourish in a union that is naturally suited to her. This ideal is radically relocated beyond the chaste, middle-class conjugal ideal, and within the kept woman's household.

Both Sheldon and Coghlan recognise the instability of their situations as sex worker mothers, taking practical steps to improve their security. Implicitly, Coghlan strategizes to secure income from a man whose physical presence is fleeting. This is reflected within her description of their daughter as a 'pledge of [their] union,' signifying an enduring, solemn linkage between mistress and keeper which is comparable to the legal bonds of marriage. Analysing an anonymous eighteenth-century woman's correspondence to her lover, Kate Gibson observes that she describes her unborn child as a 'pledge of [his] love' in order to differentiate her identity from that of a 'kept woman' on the moral basis of sentiment.[33] A child is living evidence of their relationship's existence, even after its end. But in the context of Coghlan's situation 'pledge' also carries clear economic implications, signifying Hervey's financial obligation to support her and their child. As Gibson confirms, kept mistresses often 'claimed financial entitlement through a superior emotional connection and certain paternity' (Gibson, *Illegitimacy* 94). The daughter of 'Margaret Maria Coghlan' is officially registered as being fathered by 'the Right Honourable Lord Hervey' in a physical record of this 'pledge'; she was baptised Augusta Maria Hervey in October 1785, her name a bold exhibition of her

[32] Julie Peakman. *Lascivious Bodies: A Sexual History of the Eighteenth Century*. Atlantic Books, 2004, 74.
[33] Kate Gibson. "'I am Not on the Footing of Kept Women': Extra-Marital Love in Eighteenth-Century England." *Cultural and Social History,* vol. 17, no. 3, 2020, pp. 355-373, 364-5.

parentage.[34] This is filed under 'private book baptisms,' home christenings which increasingly happened for social reasons, perhaps suggesting their discretion in christening a politician's illegitimate child.[35] Regardless, this official record would have helped cement Hervey's biological and financial connection to Coghlan. Similarly, within the memoirs, her language blends sentimental ideals of authentic emotion with solemn, binding overtones which legitimise their union and their daughter. This strategy allows her to negotiate some control over her identity and socioeconomic situation in an otherwise precarious predicament.

As with Sheldon's brief account of her miscarriage, Coghlan's representation of her daughter's death counteracts expectations of hands-on maternal care and devotion that dominated revolutionary debates of the 1790s. She writes:

> death soon ravished [Augusta] from me: previous to which loss, a new and amiable connection called me back to Ireland, where I received the above fatal intelligence, which was a terrible drawback upon the happiness I then enjoyed. Captain B____, my new lover, was every way calculated to obliterate the impression I might have received from former admirers, and to soothe the affliction which I felt for the loss of my dear and beloved child (*Coghlan* 56-7).

Coghlan deploys sentimental language of tenderness and grief to represent her distress following this loss. The verb 'ravished' represents death as a violent, unexpected force, a profound shock to a loving mother. However, as she is in Ireland at the point of Augusta's death, it is implied that caring duties were being undertaken by a nurse. This would include breastfeeding, endorsed by Rousseau-inspired patriarchal commentators as an act of maternal devotion, and redefined by Wollstonecraft as a morally purifying civic 'duty' (*Vindication* 144).[36] Many mothers had to be separated from their children while engaging in income-generating labour, but the illicit nature of Coghlan's work and her emphasis upon personal happiness under the protection of a new keeper would certainly fuel conservative ire in this period (Shepard 5). Fundamentally, Coghlan pursues pleasure as well as new income, honouring her authentic sexual desires when, according to patriarchal codes of maternal conduct, she should be physically tending to her child. This act would be condemned

---

[34] "England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539-1988." *FamilySearch.* Film #8041076, Image 119. London Metropolitan Archives, England. familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSF7-3QFZ?cc=3734475. Accessed 26 May 2021.

[35] Jeremy Boulton and Romola Davenport. "Few deaths before baptism: clerical policy, private baptism and the registration of births in Georgian Westminster: a paradox resolved." *Local Population Studies*, vol. 94, 2015, pp. 28-47, 29.

[36] Mary Jacobus. *First Things*: *Reading the Maternal Imaginary.* Routledge, 1995, 219.

according to republican specifications for motherly conduct, at a period when maternal feeling was deemed antithetical to erotic desire (Perry 209). 'What sympathy does a mother exercise who sends her babe to a nurse?' Wollstonecraft demanded, worrying that women were sacrificing this office to humour male 'lasciviousness' (*Vindication* 234, 144). Contemporary medical treatises also accused non-breastfeeding women of 'sacrificing their children to the decadent pleasures of the social whirl' (Perry 227). These ideologies fuelled caricatures of selfish, careless sex worker mothers in the prostitute imaginary, imposed upon contemporary actress Dorothy Jordan for supposedly abandoning her children and 'selling her maternal duties' by becoming a mistress.[37] As Chelsea Phillips notes, 'being a mistress was deemed incompatible with good motherhood to her existing children — the sexual demands and financial allure of the former overriding the latter' (Phillips 179). But, as Coghlan demonstrates, her relationship with Barnard does not impede her emotional attachment to her child, or her ability to arrange the infant's care while she is away. The 'emotional work' of mothering continued when mothers and children were physically separated, especially for women who were 'unable to combine the care of their own child with making a living' (Shepard 6). Coghlan implies that the desiring, pleasure-seeking facets of her identity can coexist alongside her maternal instincts; her authentic self cannot be compartmentalised according to the dictates of the dominant culture.

Historian Phillip Young argues that, by leaving her baby in England while she pursued her lover to Ireland, Coghlan shows a complete lack of maternal instinct.[38] This critic reproduces caricatures of unnatural motherhood that persist within the modern prostitute imaginary, conflating Coghlan's experiences with eighteenth-century 'maternal mythologies' (Bowers 100). Young invokes Defoe's image in *Roxana* of a 'whore' trying to 'get rid of' her offspring, because 'she is certain to see them all hate her and be ashamed of her' to support his critique (Defoe, qtd. by Young 155). Similarly, Stephen Taylor describes Coghlan's memoirs as 'a picaresque romp, the adventures of a real-life Moll Flanders' who 'played hard and loose with fact' regarding her children's paternity.[39] These writers resort to misogynistic caricature rather than examining the complexities of Coghlan's maternal and political subjectivity, and the precarity of her socioeconomic situation. Hervey was absent, and there is no guarantee that he fulfilled his financial obligations to mother and child while abroad in Tuscany. Given her unstable situation

[37] *Public Advertiser*, October 1791. qtd. in Chelsea Phillips, *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage.* University of Delaware Press, 2022, 179.
[38] Phillip Young, *Revolutionary Ladies.* Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, 155.
[39] Stephen Taylor. *Defiance: The Life and Choices of Lady Anne Barnard.* Faber & Faber, 2016, 199.

outside of marital security, Coghlan had to secure future maintenance with another keeper. Many sex workers without keepers could only stop working for 'six weeks or so' after childbirth; the most impoverished women could not afford a break from income-generating work.[40] Moreover, just as it is important not to weigh Sheldon up against modern expectations of maternal attachment or grief, it is essential to remain cautious of imposing these affective ideals upon Coghlan. She may well have prioritised her new lover over her daughter, and not necessarily for financial reasons. As Young and Taylor's readings demonstrate, long-standing mythologies of natural maternal feeling and conduct can infiltrate modern readings of these memoirs. Recognising and rejecting these constructs paves the way for an intersectional feminist approach to researching historical women's lives, allowing us to scrutinize multidimensional textual subjectivities which extend beyond far fixed categorisations of feminine behaviour and identity. This perspective opens up different facets of Coghlan's identity and experiences, without defining her by restrictive standards of ideal maternal sentiment.

Coghlan uses her maternal status to gain a new form of socioeconomic leverage over another man, Captain B—, appropriating traditional discourses of domestic virtue to destabilise social codes which would exclude her and her sons from legitimate family life. She gave birth to two sons by this new keeper, who is named as Irish nobleman Andrew Barnard in another private baptism record from December 1786 for their first child, Henry Augustus.[41] Henry's middle name may have memorialised Coghlan's daughter, Augusta. While 'the roving habits of a military life did not admit any permanent attachment,' Coghlan praises Barnard for his 'tenderest affection' and fatherly commitment (*Coghlan* 56). Seeking his financial support, she writes:

> The fruits of our connections are two sons, both now living, and both happy under the protection of their worthy parent, who is himself lately united in marriage with a lady, who... possesses every virtue, and every necessary accomplishment to secure his happiness, and with whom, I ardently wish him a continuation of all the blessings and enjoyment which he so eminently deserves. Let me, however, indulge the hope, without wishing to strew the thorns of jealousy, or discontent, on her bridal pillow; that he will never utterly neglect his former

[40] F.A Kritzinger, qtd. in Robert Jütte. *Contraception: A History*. Translated by Vicky Russell, Polity, 2008, 73; *Harris' List* also documents that Miss V____ghan 'had a child by a coachman about nine months ago,' and 'is nevertheless as agreeable a companion in bed, as she is a pleasing one out of it.' *Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies*. H Ranger, 1793, 54.

[41] "England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539-1988, Parish Registers of Marylebone, Mr Lawrence's Private Book Baptisms." *Family Search*. Film #008041094, Image 186. London Metropolitan Archives, England. familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSF7-3QNJ?cc=3734475. Accessed 28 January 2022.

> friend – the *mother* of his *children!* Humanity, and friendship for others, are not uncongenial with conjugal felicity, and if I am rightly informed of Lady A____'s character, she is not the woman to encourage a dereliction of those duties. The honourable connection that Mr B has formed, is incompatible with the union that once subsisted between us (pp. 57-8).

Lady A____ is writer Lady Anne Barnard, whom Captain Barnard married in 1793 (Taylor 198). Acknowledging Anne Barnard's virtuous reputation, Coghlan carefully distinguishes this new legitimate connection from her past union with him. She professes to respect this woman's socially sanctioned 'bridal pillow,' without intention of inflicting emotional pain. This resonates with the correspondent's warnings against Sheldon 'infringing upon... [Walsingham's] matrimonial happiness, by sowing the seeds of discord in that union which is so essential to the interests of society' (*Sheldon III* 161). Coghlan self-consciously estranges herself from caricatures of homewrecking harlots luring husbands away from their family homes, challenging the kinds of restrictions that Walsingham imposes upon Sheldon, which had recently been reinscribed through Wollstonecraft's visions of sex workers destroying domestic peace (*Vindication* 68). Coghlan couches her petition within sentimental language of domestic harmony, expressing a heartfelt concern for universal happiness. Simultaneously, her interpretation of feminine virtue transcends concerns about sexual conduct, countering the prejudices that distinguish her illegitimate sexual embodiment from Anne Barnard's chaste wifehood. Coghlan asserts a clear sense of personal worth, cemented through her status as the '*mother* of [Barnard's] *children*.' She harnesses the parental bond that she shares with her ex-keeper, binding her identity to the social value placed upon biological motherhood in this period. She presents it as just as (or if not more) significant than this wife's marital ties, forming strong grounds for financial entitlement (Gibson 94). It is uncertain whether Anne Barnard knew of her husband's children with Coghlan, since 'protection' does not necessarily mean direct custody or care (Gibson 94).[42] Young suggests that, by directly addressing Anne Barnard, Coghlan is simply attempting to generate conflict (Young 151). Her agenda may be financially motivated, but I argue that it extends beyond scandal and spite. This call for support undermines divisive categories of womanhood which leave former mistresses like Coghlan and Sheldon isolated and impoverished, while keepers move on unscathed. Coghlan bridges misogynistic distinctions between mistresses and wives on the grounds of 'humanity, and friendship for others.' She articulates a feminist care ethic shared by all of the memoirists, which unites women across social divides. Therefore, she represents herself as a worthy

[42] Taylor deduces that she forgave his indiscretions, especially as there was 'nothing rare' about them (200).

recipient of support, not a pariah to the traditional family unit and the supposedly civilised social order it represents.

Coghlan implicitly rejects criticisms that would align her with neglectful, selfish mothers of the prostitute imaginary. She counteracts patriarchal social codes which would ostracise her on the basis of her 'illegitimate use of female embodiment' (Bromwich and DeJong 21) and compound the stigma of illegitimacy for her children, by asserting their right to support and happiness. While prejudice surrounding the boys' birth would have been heightened by Coghlan's sex-worker status, the prospect of 'publicly ostracising illegitimate individuals' was increasingly considered 'vulgar and as displaying a lack of virtuous feeling' in this period (Gibson 236). Coghlan taps into this compassionate focus upon 'moral worth under sensibility,' but extends it to her own identity as well as her children's (Gibson 48). She represents herself as a loving mother, with their wellbeing at heart, fondly describing them as 'happy under the protection of their worthy parent,' who is well-equipped to support them. Her sons appear to be cherished beyond stigma, as some illegitimate children of upper-middling fathers were in this period; Coghlan expresses no anxiety about their social status (Gibson 95). She thus deems herself deserving of the same compassionate treatment, as 'his former friend' as well as his children's mother. Coghlan encourages a sympathetic response from her readership, simultaneously distancing herself from caricatures of neglectful, unnatural mothers who 'get rid of' their children because they will only feel shame about their parentage.[43] Such images persisted within feminist writers' depictions of sex workers and other promiscuous women 'barbarously deserting' children, and 'sacrificing to lasciviousness the parental affection, that ennobles instinct,' by either 'destroying the embryo in the womb, or casting it off when born' (*Vindication* 218).[44] Coghlan suggests that she did not abandon her children, but wisely entrusted them to their father's protection. The separation of mothers and children in cases of mistress / keeper parental relationships was not always involuntary, 'but could be a calculated decision to improve their children's status' (Gibson 106). Especially if keepers offered more secure socioeconomic conditions for raising children, some mothers 'allowed almost complete separation in order to inculcate a beneficial father-child relationship' (Gibson 106). This dynamic appears to reflect Coghlan's situation; she seems to have handed over custody of her two-year-old son to Barnard when she was jailed for debt. Young asserts that, 'never having had

[43] Daniel Defoe. *Roxana: or, the Fortunate Mistress.* H. Slater, 1742, 141.
[44] Marie Madeleine Jodin. "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, eds. Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206, 178.

a childhood, she could not provide any for the babies she gave away like dolls (Captain B****** understood), or keep their fathers either... she distributed her children as she had been distributed; in their fathers she looked for the one she never had' (Young 171). This pseudo-psychological assessment reproduces misogynistic assumptions about Coghlan's single motherhood. She had little control over 'keeping' the romantic and sexual attentions of these men. Financially speaking, they kept *her*, and ultimately controlled her socioeconomic circumstances. Coghlan's expressions of love for her children contradicts the image of her flippantly 'giving' her children away like worthless objects. Moreover, Barnard was not necessarily a model of dutiful parenthood who 'understood' Coghlan's ineptitude. Many fathers of illegitimate children 'paid maintenance but avoided, or performed only at a distance, other ideal paternal duties' (Gibson 94). Coghlan's memoirs do not provide a straightforward narrative of maternal attachment; her children are not always her primary focus. However, she embeds her experiences in the messy socioeconomic reality of mothering beyond a traditional family unit in ways that counteract one-dimensional visions of sex workers' maternal failures, defining herself as a loving maternal subject rather than a careless source of social disorder.

Coghlan also politicises her maternal experiences. While documenting her stints in debtor's prison, she harnesses images of maternal suffering to form radical arguments against the legally sanctioned persecution of society's most vulnerable subjects. In 1788, she flees from her creditors to Paris, where she enjoys 'nocturnal orgies' at M. de Genlis' hotel, a luxurious 'temple of voluptuousness' (*Coghlan* 68). After her keeper Beckett leaves the country, *his* creditors pursue her instead. She is seven months pregnant when 'ordered in close confinement' within *La Force* debtors' prison; her narrative quickly shifts focus from her prior sexual activities to her maternal suffering (73). She launches a politically charged attack on this 'arbitrary act of power... exerted against a helpless woman' (73). As in numerous radical novels of the 1790s, Coghlan's memoirs also use imprisonment as a basis for political reflection.[45] She attacks both the patriarchal oppression of women, and the 'arbitrary' powers of imprisonment exercised in an unjust social order. Coghlan harnesses images of maternal embodiment to emphasise her vulnerability at the hands of ruthless men, while dismantling ideological divisions between maternity and prostitution. In 1793, imprisoned revolutionary writer Madame Roland noted that her daughter Eudora could not possibly reside alongside her in her cell; the conditions were dire for mothers and children, 'in the midst of murderers and women

[45] Eliza O'Brien. "The Tale never dies: Imprisonment, Trial and English Jacobin Fiction: 1788-1805." *Glasgow University PhD Theses,* 2010, 2. theses.gla.ac.uk/1909/1/2010o'brienPhD.pdf. Accessed 26/09/23.

of the town.'[46] In Roland's prostitute imaginary, sex workers are aligned with murderers. These women are rightful prisoners, unlike a chaste wife and her daughter. However, Coghlan represents a sex worker's victimhood and maternal distress. She recalls being taken to *La Force*, described as a 'mansion of slavery' with her 'infant son, then only two years old,' who is submitted to a friend's care (*Coghlan* 73). She adds that the 'innocence of this tender lamb, who seemed sensible that some misfortune had happened, overcame what resolution [she] possessed,' while 'he held up his little hands and cried out, 'Oh! You shall not hurt my mother!' (73). The innocence and terror of mother and child are described in overtly sentimental terms. Coghlan's helpless son becomes a mouthpiece for her stand against legal injustice, through this simple, poignant outcry. She represents herself as a devoted mother, wrenched away from her child by 'armed ruffians,' agents of a cruel male establishment (73). These power imbalances map onto broader social inequalities perpetuated by the *ancien regime,* notoriously symbolised in this period by the Bastille. Coghlan describes her shock at the 'wretchedness of [the] vile dungeon' she is subjected to in visceral scenes of gothic horror; the cell is overrun with vermin, containing a 'huge, tremendous padlock...to which was fastened an immense iron collar' (76). Coghlan heightens the contrast between her fragile body, especially as medics express concern about her going into labour, and these threatening surroundings. Upon admission, women were assessed to verify claims of pregnancy; Coghlan's late stage would have been obvious, but still grants her little mercy.[47] She leans into her maternal status as a peculiarly feminine form of vulnerability, but also as a method of strengthening her powerful political protest against this cruel and exploitative establishment.

Coghlan deploys her experience of childbirth in prison to construct an emotional case for reform. Debates surrounding prison conditions were high on the radical agenda in this period, led by figures like William Godwin.[48] Coghlan takes these concerns in a new intersectional feminist direction, condemning the abuse of impoverished female prisoners. She yokes her situation to broader political concerns about a system that values property over sentiment, and wealth over human life. Breashears argues that Coghlan's reflections 'resist the depiction of herself as a justly punished whore and instead insist on the universal, political relevance of her

[46] Madame Roland. *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity* vol I. Edited and translated by Bosc, J. Johnson, 1795, 60.
[47] Clive Emsley, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker. "Punishment Sentences at the Old Bailey – The Death Penalty and Mitigating Circumstances." *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey,* par 25. oldbaileyonline.org/static/Punishment.jsp. Accessed 9 February 2022.
[48] Gary Handwerk and Arnold A. Markley. "Introduction." William Godwin, *Caleb Williams,* edited by Handwerk and Markley. Broadview, 2000, pp. 9-46, 31.

experience.'[49] I would add that she deploys her maternal identity as a gateway into this political domain, while challenging the prostitute imaginaries of those who might perceive her as a morally corrupt object deserving of incarceration. During her imprisonment at the King's Bench in 1790, Coghlan goes into labour with her youngest son. The doctor pre-arranged to support her is forbidden from entering the prison gates, which close by ten at night. She describes this as a 'fatal practice' whereby 'many an innocent and valuable life has been lost' (*Coghlan* 98). She reflects:

> The life of a woman is not considered as worth preservation, at the expense of breaking through the established rules of a gaol. Nevertheless, humanity bleeds in reflecting on these abuses, sanctioned by law, which are still allowed to exist, without an effort from those in whom the power is vested to remove them' (98).

Coghlan contends that the blanket restrictions implemented by this male-orchestrated institution reflect no concern for the specific, embodied struggles of female prisoners. Their lives are devalued in this system. She juxtaposes the helplessness of an individual woman with the might of powers sanctioned by patriarchal law. Her political arguments are reinforced through the language of moral sentiment, appealing to the impulses of 'humanity' as a clarion call for any compassionate person who hears of such oppression. Experiencing extreme, prolonged suffering during the 'agonies of childbed,' she spends hours in a 'critical and lamentable state,' only being saved by a surgeon's intervention (99). Coghlan lends this vivid first-hand testimony to burgeoning discussions surrounding pregnant women's experiences in prison, which were generally sites of disease and starvation; Edward Farley condemned the fact that a 'woman [being] in labour pains' did not prevent the 'butchering warrant' of imprisonment for debt.'[50] Coghlan exposes the cruelty of a system which imposes discriminatory degrees of worth upon human lives. Her suffering is particularly striking given the comparative comfort of many 'respectable men' in debtors' prison, who occupied 'spacious furnished apartments.'[51] Struggling beyond the security of traditional family units, unmarried mothers and sex workers were more likely to be condemned to the worst conditions. Coghlan's text charges her experiences as a struggling maternal subject with radical significance. They represent top-down abuses of power, operating on much broader political stages.

---

[49] Caroline Breashears. *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir.* Palgrave, 2016, 97.
[50] Edward Farley Esq. *Imprisonment for Debt, Unconstitutional.* Printed for the Author, 1795, 46.
[51] Kevin Siena. *Rotten Bodies: Class and Contagion in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* Yale University Press, 2019, 77.

Coghlan deploys images of thwarted maternal care to intensify her polemical attack on this abuse. Her baby is 'suffered to remain naked for two days; for, alas! The unfortunate mother had not clothes, even for herself!' (*Coghlan* 99). 'The unfortunate mother' is deployed as a sentimental figure of human vulnerability, appealing to human sympathies beyond concerns about sexual reputation. Coghlan conveys her sheer desperation in the struggle to keep her child warm, and secure the basic necessities of survival when she herself is deprived of them — even following a complicated, life-threatening labour. She is 'left to bide the pelting of this pitiless storm in a horrid gaol, naked and pennyless, with a newborn infant at [her] breast, crying for the sustenance that famished nature refused!' (99). Coghlan's image of suffering maternal embodiment is articulated through King Lear's realisation of the pain endured by those in poverty, 'poor naked wretches who bide the pelt of this pitiless storm.'[52] This cements her politicised demand for awareness of others' socioeconomic struggles, and a compassionate response to her suffering. Her instinct to feed her child is stifled by external male forces which starve her of the necessary sustenance. Nature — closely intertwined with reason in radical discourses, and throughout Coghlan's memoirs — cannot flourish in these environs (*Vindication* 146). This natural, vital function of her maternal body is obstructed by irrational misogynistic cruelty. Coghlan's representation resonates with Wollstonecraft's depiction of an impoverished woman in *Original Stories* (1788), whose baby 'hangs at her breast, which did not seem to contain sufficient moisture to wet its parched lips.'[53] In this revolutionary feminist nightmare, a mother is prevented from fulfilling a civic duty which is rooted within the very foundations of a virtuous society; gender and class inequalities intersect in this system of social injustice, prohibiting her from existing in her 'natural state' (*Vindication* 234, 266). Wollstonecraft attempted to reclaim the breast from the male gaze as a locus of unique maternal power, condemning husbands who prefer women to perform 'artful wanton tricks' rather than experiencing 'delight at seeing [their] child suckled by their mother' (*Vindication* 142). She prioritised this civic duty over any male sexual demands (and indeed sex in general), but in this process, overlooked the possibility of women expressing their sexuality on their own terms. Complicating the icon of the chaste, nursing republican woman and her maternal milk — the cleansing, incorruptible 'nectar of the age of reason,' active in the discourses of patriarchal politicians and feminists alike in the 1790s — Coghlan assigns this politicised act of maternal care to a sex worker (Jacobus 215). Her milk is obstructed by male-orchestrated oppression, not spoiled or corrupted as per Rousseau-inspired doubts about sexually transgressive women

[52] William Shakespeare. *King Lear,* edited by Stanley Wells and George Hunter. Penguin, 2005, 3.4.28-29.
[53] Mary Wollstonecraft. *Original Stories from Real Life*. J. Johnson, 1796, 149.

reaching the moral standards required of breastfeeding mothers (Jacobus 207; Perry 226). Moreover, her breasts do not simply exist as sexualised objects of the male gaze. Instead, Coghlan confounds binaries between the legitimate and illegitimate bodily functions typically deployed to divide chaste women from sex workers (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Her breastmilk — or more precisely, its absence — symbolises how the intertwined forces of nature and reason are suppressed within this penal system. She further disrupts Rousseau's essentialist visons by emphasising the influence of women's socioeconomic contexts upon their capacities to breastfeed. Social and political change are needed to facilitate natural maternal duties. In representing her struggles to breastfeed a child born of prostitution, Coghlan takes Wollstonecraft's feminist concerns to a new radical level. She destabilases her categorisations of maternal subjectivity and sexual objectification, generating an alternative vision of multifunctional female embodiment, and multidimensional feminine identity.

Coghlan links her personal experiences to events unfolding on an international political stage; this suffering fuels her pro-revolutionary fervour. After a brief stint in French debtor's prison — where she is treated with greater kindness than in England — she returns to London 'ten days before that glorious epoch, the 14th of July, 1789, when Frenchmen threw off forever, the YOKE of SLAVERY' (*Coghlan* 81). Her unjust incarceration is implicitly mapped onto the suffering of individuals imprisoned in the Bastille. She binds herself to the revolutionary cause, articulating her zeal for sociopolitical upheaval which 'threatens destruction to long established systems' (81). Further associating maternal embodiment with this radical energy, Coghlan suggests that the revolution 'forms an era replete with events, still in the womb of time to produce' (81). She praises France's 'necessary and humane law, which prohibits the imprisonment of pregnant women for debt,' above England's draconian system (77). Coghlan wonders:

> If such laws were in full force under the most Despotic Government of Europe, how much more consistent were it in force under that which calls itself the most free? [...] Here our ears are forever stunned with the sound of liberty and humanity: women in the pangs of childbirth, men in the agonies of death...may be dragged to the most loathsome gaol; were it not then devoutly to be wished, that our legislators, instead of empty panegyric, would afford us a little of the substance? [...] At all events, policy, as well as mercy, requires – the national character demands – that the life of Freemen should not be exposed to the discretion, or depend on the pity, of a sheriff's officer (77).

Coghlan launches a radical attack on the English government's rejection of 'liberty and humanity,' a particularly bold challenge amidst tightening restrictions upon radical writers. These memoirs were completed in December 1793, and published the year of the Treason Trials (171). She condemns a hypocritical establishment which hides under the bluster of self-glorification, empty words with no substance for those who struggle under their jurisdiction. Having called for the importance of compassionate bonds — particularly between women — as the key to social progress, Coghlan now demands for government policy to be tempered by moral sentiment. She cites emotional portraits of human suffering, including dying men and labouring women, as compelling evidence for her cause. As Eliza O'Brien notes, Jacobin novelists 'joined sympathy to reason' in their representations of unjust incarceration, since we are 'moved emotionally by the plight of the Jacobin prisoner, and moved rationally to action. We must investigate the laws that govern us, for we are all confined by them' (O'Brien 2). In this case, life writing allows Coghlan to foreground her moral, maternal and political subjectivity beyond the bounds of the prostitute imaginary, while leveraging her individual experiences and emotions to launch this radical call for action. She illuminates the interlocking social and economic forces that combine to oppress labouring-class women, especially those navigating the stigma and insecurity that already accompany single motherhood and sex work. For her, the personal is inescapably political.

Part III: *The Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson*

In characteristically polemical terms, Leeson explicates the feminist sexual politics that are mostly implied in Sheldon and Coghlan's memoirs. She directly attacks the patriarchal notion that chastity is a critical component of maternal virtue, and destigmatises mothers' sexual expressions beyond the confines of marriage. As discussed in Chapter One, she and Wollstonecraft agree that chastity's presence should not excuse women who 'neglect every social duty' (*Vindication* 211), and its absence should not discount women's 'good qualities.'[54] Leeson grants that 'chastity is... one of the characteristic virtues of the female sex,' but broaches the radical question: 'is it the only one?' (5). Here, it is important to consider the reinterpretation of maternal virtue that her argument generates. Her examples of immoral conduct include a woman who 'sets an evil example to all her children — but arrogates to herself the character of a virtuous woman — truly, because she is chaste' (5). This is

[54] Margaret Leeson. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson* (1795-7), edited by Mary Lyons, Lilliput Press, 1995, 5.

accompanied by another 'who is a propagator of scandal, sets families together by the ears, destroys domestic peace, and breaks the nearest and dearest connections — but... she is chaste, and the most reputable and most pious will visit this virtuous woman' (5). Therefore, Leeson separates chastity from virtues that facilitate domestic peace. Where eighteenth-century prostitute imaginaries stereotyped sex workers as sources of social disorder, neglecting their own children or destroying respectable family units, Leeson fashions her own chaotic caricatures out of supposedly virtuous wives (Jodin 178; *Vindication* 68). As Eva Pendleton suggests, the 'good wife' as a social category cannot exist without the 'whore.'[55] But where Leeson would typically be deployed as a scandalous foil to the chaste, rational ideal of revolutionary (feminist) discourses, she now exposes the performative virtue of those whose bodies are supposedly engaged in 'legitimate' social behaviours (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Leeson's virtuous ideal is a responsible, caring, and sincere individual, who values family bonds. She rejects any malicious, duplicitous, and selfish habits that may damage these connections, setting a strong moral example to her children. Chastity's absence has no bearing on her ability to fulfil these practices. Her redefinition of maternal virtue resonates with Wollstonecraft's concerns about those who 'plume themselves on their unsullied reputation, as if the whole compass of their duty as wives and mothers was only to preserve it,' while 'neglecting every social duty' and 'ruining [their] family by gaming and extravagance' (*Vindication* 216). Leeson takes this argument against sexual double standards to radical new heights by presenting an experienced sex worker's capacity for domestic virtue, something which is unimaginable in *Vindication.* She encourages her readership to rethink these prejudices, in a preface that builds the ideological foundations for her memoirs' refashioning of maternal identity.

Leeson highlights the tensions between ideals of maternal care and the demands of survival for unmarried mothers in late eighteenth-century Ireland. As the only memoirist discussed in this thesis whose career in prostitution is precipitated by illegitimate pregnancy, she condemns the destructive impact of cruelty and prejudice upon the prospects of herself and her child. Just as Coghlan's father and husband disrupt her destiny of 'domestic life' (*Coghlan* 18), Leeson initially insists that her struggle to be 'settled in life' with a 'deserving man' results from her brother's abuse, which pushes her out of the family home and into the arms of her seducer, Dardis (*Leeson* 15). While she 'look[s] upon [Dardis] as [her] future husband,' he

[55] Eva Pendleton. "'Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-82, 73.

fails to fulfil his promise of marriage when Leeson becomes pregnant (*Leeson* 18). He compels her to move to the countryside alone to give birth in secret; afterwards, he recalls her to Dublin to resume their cohabitation, 'professing the greatest fondness for the little innocent' and hiring a nurse (24). These details demonstrate his absolute control over Leeson's maternal experiences. She represents a scene of tainted domestic peace, 'happy and delighted with the... continued tenderness of my undoer, and charmed with the opening sweetness of my child,' but homesick, and lacking 'tranquillity of mind' (25). The idyllic image of a loving couple witnessing their infant flourish in middle-class comfort is offset by the description of Dardis as an 'undoer,' not a husband. He is a force of destruction, and their union can only ever be a temporary arrangement. Leeson leaves him, and seeks her family's support. Ironically, she is still condemned — even as she refuses to be his kept woman — by the 'outrageous virtue' of her sisters (33). One declares that 'if a morsel of bread would save [her] from death and destruction, she would refuse it' (29). This epitomises the translation of social prejudice into literal starvation for unmarried mothers like Leeson, who were subjected to 'opprobrium and ostracism' and sometimes driven to suicide, abandonment or infanticide.[56] Leeson is left with a single guinea, which constitutes 'the whole fund on which a young girl with a child, had to build her future maintenance through life' (27). She emphasises her extreme youth, with a poignant vision of human vulnerability that transcends concerns about sexual reputation. For a while, Leeson supports her daughter independently in lodgings 'perfectly secluded from the world,' but implies that the pressures of this world will soon close in (27). Beyond this present state of living hand-to-mouth, their future prospects are marred by prejudice. As Leeson notes, her family's rejection 'rendered [her] wretched and desperate' and therefore 'hurled [her] down the descent of Vice,' especially as nobody 'would have taken a servant without a character' (33). When Leeson's first keeper, Caulfield, propositions her, she notes that she had 'resisted every incitement to evil, whilst any the most homely and penurious means of life remained, [but] became desperate when every resource seemed to be cut off' (30). Principles are conditional, she implies; they are incompatible with the demands of survival for herself and her child, and must be sacrificed for the sake of this stigmatised, yet income-generating labour.

Leeson portrays the impact of women's socioeconomic situations upon their experiences of mothering. The textual absence of her daughter after she enters into Caulfield's keeping, like Sheldon and Coghlan's brief references to their children, demands a sensitivity to

[56] James Kelly. "Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Ireland." *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol.19, no.1, 1992, pp. 5-26, 9.

her circumstances beyond ideals of hands-on, 'all-engrossing tenderness' (Bowers 28) which were endorsed in England and Ireland.[57] If this child survived, she was possibly placed in custody of a nurse or another family, with payment of a weekly remittance (Peakman, *Peg* 37). Either way, Leeson's income-generating labour may have prevented her from directly caring for her child as per Wollstonecraft's middle-class ideal, even if she could provide for her financially (Shepard 6). Children often drop out of Leeson's memoirs with little or no discussion of their disappearance, implying the influence that keepers wield over her experiences. Her first son's death of 'an inward complaint' is only mentioned briefly when Leeson describes the circumstances in which Caulfield stops paying his annuity, leaving her 'destitute' (*Leeson* 35). Other infants — particularly those born to her long-term keeper Lawless, one of whom is described as 'dearer to her than all of the children [she] had borne' — are given more narrative space, and her grief over their deaths is conveyed in more detail (55). In this sense, the presence of Leeson's children in her memoirs and her degree of attachment to them seems shaped by the nature of her relationship with their fathers, and her fluctuating circumstances under their inconsistent protection. While working as a successful madam in her Drogheda Street brothel, she implies that her ability to retain custody of her children and become involved in their care rests upon economic independence and stability. Here, she is single, pregnant, and supporting another young daughter who is cared for by a live-in nurse. Her elite sex work facilitates her mother work; both forms of labour unfold in a space that she owns and controls (70). Especially given the range of socioeconomic circumstances in which Leeson mothers, it is important, as with the other memoirists, to maintain a feminist reading of her text which avoids imposing expectations of maternal feeling or behaviour upon her. The multiplicity of her experiences supports the idea that 'environment, social pressures [and]... psychological experiences, all seem to have more weight' than Rousseauvian notions of natural maternal instinct (Badinter 60). Leeson's account counteracts caricatures of unnatural motherhood, but also resists any other simplistic narratives of thwarted maternal instinct. While counteracting caricatures of the prostitute imaginary, she also dispels a *maternal* imaginary which is populated by perpetually selfless, instinctive nurturers.

Before Leeson's committed relationship with Lawless, she pursues sexual freedoms outside of marriage and the categories of legitimacy and illegitimacy it enforces. As discussed in

[57] Rachel Wilson. *Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745: Imitation and Innovation*. Boydell and Brewer, 2015, 46; Wetenhall Wilkes. *A letter of genteel and moral advice to a young lady.* Oli Nelson, 1751, 5.

Chapter One, she contends that 'polygamy was not wrong in its own nature,' in order to justify her pursuit of authentic sexual unions (*Leeson* 40). By making this argument, she implicitly defends the principles of women who mother beyond socially sanctioned but superficial conjugal unions. Leeson describes marriage in cynical terms of strategy, as 'calculated chiefly to fix the legitimation of children, and oblige their parents to breed them up and provide for them; to ascertain the descent of property; and also to bind two persons together, even after they might be disgusted with, and heartily tired of each other' (40). Leeson condemns the custom of forcing women to mother in miserable marriages of convenience under the threat of social stigma, when they could — like her — be pursuing sexual pleasure with a 'plurality of gallants' (40). Crucially, the legitimation of children shaped the identities of the mothers who bore them, a harsh lesson she learns during her first pregnancy. Social norms made marriage 'the only means to economic viability for women, while placing it permanently out of reach for women with sexual experience' (Bowers 184). Leeson critiques the division of women and children into crude moralistic signs by the dominant culture: legitimate and illegitimate, pure and impure. Concerns about mothers' rights were high on revolutionary feminist agendas in the 1790s, reflected in Gouges' campaigning against 'ancient and inhuman laws' which forbid an unmarried mother's 'right to the name or wealth of the father of her children.'[58] Wollstonecraft declared that a seducer should be 'legally obliged to maintain the woman and her children' while critiquing such 'weak' mothers for their 'want of principle' in 'depending on man for a subsistence, instead of earning it by the exercise of their own hands or heads' (*Vindication* 142). She concludes that 'the woman who is faithful to the father of her children demands respect, and should not be treated like a prostitute' (142). While the mother she references is not necessarily a wife, Wollstonecraft still reproduces patriarchal polarisations of female identity in *Vindication* — persistently upholding false binaries between promiscuity and maternity. But by condemning the power of patriarchal institutions over women's sexual freedoms, particularly when they become mothers, Leeson continues to define her maternal and sexual subjectivity beyond socially circumscribed categories of feminine identity.

Despite rejecting marriage as a 'human institution,' Leeson deploys sentimental images of marital bliss to legitimise her free pursuit a of a loving, non-conjugal union with Lawless. Resonating with the 'comforts and delights' of Coghlan's relationship with Hervey, Leeson

[58] Olympe de Gouges, "Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne." Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts*. olympedegouges.eu/docs/declaration-des-droits-de-la-femme.pdf. Accessed 28/11/23.

squares female-centric libertine expressions of emotion and sexuality — a 'celebration of passion and honesty' — with domestic virtue (Linker 98). Leeson insists that she 'really loved' Lawless, embracing her authentic desires by 'living in uninterrupted felicity with the man of [her] heart' (*Leeson* 42). She embeds this progressive concept within traditional ideals of feminine conduct, writing:

> we passed five years and a half together, during which no wife was ever more fond, virtuous and faithful than I was to him; and to give him his due, no man ever treated his wife for the first three years, with more attention than Mr. Lawless showed to me. In those five years I bore him five children, each of which appeared as a new link of a chain to secure our mutual affections; and my care of them filled up every vacant hour of time (43).

Domestic virtues flourish in the household of this middle-class keeper, apparently stronger than those contained within a socially and legally sanctioned conjugal unit. Leeson expresses genuine joy in assuming the role of a devoted wife and mother. She directs her energies towards what was perceived as legitimate mother work, supported by the ostensibly illegitimate work of kept womanhood (Browmich and DeJong 21). Lawless' wealth enables her to fulfil standards of maternal care typically unavailable to mothers without the leisure time born of middle-class social privilege (Bowers 98). Dedicating 'every vacant hour of time' to raising her children, Leeson resembles the Rousseauvian hands-on mother valorised within republican discourses of the 1790s, reflected in Wollstonecraft's visions of women as morally purifying domestic agents 'discharging the duties of [their] station' (*Vindication* 223). The couple's 'mutual affections' also resonate with Wollstonecraft's focus on 'mutual affection, supported by mutual respect' as the firm foundation for a successful union, which allows women to concentrate on their childrearing duties (*Vindication* 281). For Leeson, this ideal need not be desexualised; she infuses it with authentic passion and love. Mothering is reinforced as work in her account of maternal care, replacing fixed understandings of 'mother' as a static noun, bound to a sexless feminine identity (Bromwich and DeJong 12).

While dependent on Lawless' income to support herself and her children, she distinguishes their genuine union from all 'common and legal prostitution' (*Vindication* 229). Catholic diocesan records categorise those living outside of religiously sanctioned marriage in Ireland, including those with children: cohabitating unmarried couples, and women who are 'kept,' 'concubine,' 'mistress,' 'idle,' or 'ladies of pleasure.'[59] Given her sexual history, these

[59] Maria Luddy and Mary O'Dowd. *Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1925*. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 263.

latter definitions may have been applied to Leeson. However, her focus on emotional authenticity undermines the mercenary, frivolous connotations they invoke. Leeson taps into the notion that extramarital love could be superior to any marital connection, being based on 'genuine and spontaneous feeling, unrestricted by artificial legal institutions or mercenary motivations' (Gibson, "Extra-Marital" 367). But this idea still hinged upon monogamy. Unmarried mother Ann Catley (aforementioned adversary of Leeson, mocked in her memoirs) was condemned as a mistress 'destitute of sentiment... attached to the whole sex without harbouring a particular fondness to any individual,' while Dorothy Jordan's long-lasting, committed union was thought to be sanctified by children (Gibson, "Extra-Marital" 363). While describing their feud, Leeson refers to Catley's children as 'bastards,' reflecting her continued, problematic attempts to distinguish the moral worth of herself and her family from those of other women (*Leeson* 73). Here, she foregrounds her 'virtuous and faithful' conduct to imply that her relationship is legitimised by an authentic, devoted emotional connection (*Leeson* 43). While aligning herself with traditional standards of maternal and wifely conduct, she subtly undermines the institution of marriage as superfluous to this vision of domestic virtue. Leeson couches the radical notion of a woman honouring her emotional and sexual desires beyond the confines of marriage in familiar sentimental tropes, thus working to encourage the tolerance and understanding of her readership in regards to her unmarried motherhood.

Leeson also deploys sentimental language to legitimise the children borne of this union, and to destigmatise her unmarried motherhood, by describing her children as 'links of a chain' between herself and Lawless (*Leeson* 43). Although Coghlan's 'pledge' carries clearer financial implications, both memoirists suggest that parental connections can supersede the significance of marital vows; maternity does not signify shame, but the validation of their authentic emotional connections. The noun 'link' carries affective and moral weight which is reminiscent of Wollstonecraft's ideal companionate union: when 'a child... gently twists the relaxing cord, and a mutual care produces a new mutual sympathy' (*Vindication* 234). This image legitimises Leeson's children as evidence of their parents' deep-rooted emotional bond. Through this language, she taps into 'a culture of sensibility that idealised romantic love as an unbreakable marital union' (Gibson, "Extra-Marital" 361). Children born of extra-marital, yet monogamous and loving relationships were often interpreted as being 'worthy of compassion and love from their families and society as a whole,' unlike those resulting from 'casual, supposedly lustful relationships' (Gibson, "Extra-Marital" 366). Indeed, Leeson later declares that one 'fine girl,' her final child to Lawless, 'was dearer to [her] than all the children [she] had borne, as it was

the last pledge of [her] dear Lawless, and his image was minutely traced on the countenance of the new-born innocent' (*Leeson* 55). Batchelor analyses a similar image in the *Histories*; one character's child to her keeper generates an 'increase of fondness' between them, her love transposed onto the baby in a way that 'casts the maternal tie as a consequence of the child's resemblance to, and biological connection with, the object of the woman's sexual desire' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 165). This helps posit a 'model of acceptably sexual maternity' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 159). Leeson's enduring love for Lawless is imprinted upon her child, whose status is emotionally legitimated on the grounds of her parents' authentic connection. This trope of paternal resemblance is charged with radical new import in her memoirs, helping Leeson negotiate new terms of feminine virtue which appropriate traditional standards of wifely and maternal sentiment — but ultimately liberate herself and her children beyond the identity-defining bounds of institutional authority.

However, Leeson highlights the tension between her authentic devotion to Lawless, and her ability to support her children. Her experience of domestic bliss is tethered to his middle-class income; amidst his financial struggles and infidelities, their relationship descends into jealousy and violence. Leeson insists upon the maintenance of her own maternal and wifely attachment during this period. The 'sight and caresses of her children [give her] some consolation,' and while they 'lived an unhappy life... in the midst of it all [she] continued true and faithful to him' (*Leeson* 49). The disintegration of domestic peace is linked to the physical dismantling of the household, as they 'subsist on the sale of... watches, rings, clothes, and ornaments,' then 'most of [their] household furniture' (49). Despite Leeson's precarious material conditions, she counteracts mercenary, money-grabbing caricatures of the prostitute imaginary. She emphasises the conflict between her authentic emotions and the demands of survival, declining a wealthy suitor's marriage proposal since she 'preferred the society of Mr Lawless to any other connection, although it might be sanctioned by law' and the 'company of [her] little children, for whom, if compelled by necessity,' she would 'have sought to gain some support by labour, rather than have married the first peer of the realm' (47). Leeson would prefer to engage in income-generating labour, than disavow her authentic feelings through a superficial marriage of convenience. Again, she refuses to classify her union with Lawless as work. However, her loyalty to him ultimately clashes with her instinct to support her children. Leeson's vision of self-sufficiency beyond the legitimate family unit seems unrealistic, especially given her previous struggle to gain employment outside of prostitution as a single mother. While the independent wealth she later accrues through brothel keeping makes this possible,

she is left destitute under the influence of keepers' whims. A similar struggle is endured by her friend, who has three children with a politician, but becomes a boarder at Leeson's brothel after he falls into 'embarrassed circumstances' (149). Another woman is 'basely deserted' by her keeper after bearing his children (171).[60] As demonstrated through Coghlan's pragmatic decision to enter a convenient arrangement with Fazakerly to support her daughter, mothers' authentic desires or aspirations of autonomy were generally inconducive to the demands of survival in a misogynistic socioeconomic system, within or beyond marriage.

Leeson's representation of her miscarriage, caused by Lawless' violence after she accuses him of flirting with another woman, is accompanied by her sudden endorsement of patriarchal expectations of who women and mothers should be. Here, she grapples with conservative perceptions of natural feminine conduct. As I have argued, these retrospective condemnations encourage readers to differentiate between her own, sympathy-inducing self-portrait during such harrowing episodes, and the harsh stereotypes imposed upon her. Lawless 'cuts the strings of her clothes, and throws her into bed,' and is 'enraged at her obstinacy' when she tries to escape; amidst this 'struggle he hurts [her] so much' that the surgeon is called (*Leeson* 49). Leeson experiences 'the loss of her child, of which [she] was above four months gone' (49). She reflects on the 'fatal effects of jealousy, rage and contention':

> '[I had] drawn on myself ill-usage; subjected myself to a long and dangerous illness... to crown all, had been the death of the child I carried — and what was the mighty cause of all this train of calamities — because Mr. Lawless behaved with politeness to a lady in company... Reflect on this, ye Females of turbulent tempers. See what ye gain by being, what is too frequently your boast, women of spirit.... Think that mildness is the true distinguishing characteristic of woman; and that a rage, and what is called spirit — which is the child of Pride and Folly — degrades the sex below its real dignity, nay, it defeats its own purpose; for reproaches and revilings tend more to disgust a man, than to establish or recall his love (49).

Leeson's self-representation as a multidimensional human subject now sways into fixed interpretations of femininity. 'Woman' becomes an essentialised singular noun, a rigid identity determined by the absence of turbulent passions, echoing conservative conduct book ideals of 'winning mildness' rather than 'the revengeful disposition, of which [women] have been accused.'[61] Leeson reproduces these patriarchal modes of classification, sorting the qualities of

---

[60] Leeson's account implies that raising children in brothels gave some unmarried mothers support and security that they were otherwise deprived of. Charlotte Hayes was raised in her mother's brothel, and later took over her business in the mid-eighteenth century. Ledoux, 201.

[61] James Fordyce. *Sermons to Young Women Vol II.* A. Miller and T. Cadell, 1768, 231.

this serene, passive feminine paradigm from those displayed by 'women of spirit.' Implicitly, she who possesses the 'true distinguishing characteristic of woman' is natural, untainted by the excesses of 'Pride and Folly.' Such qualities define how pleasing women are to men, whether they fall into categories of 'love' or 'disgust.' Leeson assumes the tone of an imperious conduct book writer to command 'Females of turbulent tempers,' to reflect on this example of transgressive behaviour. She blames her perceived failure in feminine virtue for her child's loss, describing herself as an active instigator who draws abuse on herself, and positioning her own emotional dysregulation at the start of a catastrophic chain reaction. The contemporary belief that miscarriage could be caused by women's 'violent passions,' their behavioural shortcomings, fuelled the idea that they had considerable control over the success or failure of their pregnancies (Buchan 532; Wilson 38). These beliefs meant that women were often held 'personally responsible' for miscarriage.[62] While Sheldon implicitly blames Walsingham's actions for the loss of her child, Leeson makes explicitly gendered connections between biology and behaviour. She is led by the dominant culture to weaponize essentialist components of femininity against herself, modes of thinking which have always reinforced exclusionary classifications of 'real' womanhood.[63]

This self-condemnation triggers Leeson's startling reassessment of her relationship, her identity, and her children. External, male-orchestrated pressures jeopardise the affective maternal bonds she once celebrated. Leeson expresses desperate grief when describing her children's deaths, captured through the moving image of her running 'screaming through the street' with the body of her last 'darling' wrapped in her gown (*Leeson* 49). Nevertheless, she reflects:

> I did not then behold the hand of Providence, which foreknowing the calamities that were soon to follow, wisely and mercifully took my children from me, ere they lighted upon us. Besides, these illegitimate children gave me pleasure, and were taken from me to punish me; and it seemed like the sentence that Nathan pronounced against King David, "How be it, because by this deed (the unlawful begetting them) thou has given great occasion for the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die" (50).

Placing a patriarchal religious lens over her experiences, Leeson suggests that her children's deaths were just. On a practical level, she suggests, divine providence intervened before

[62] Jennifer Buckley. *Gender, Pregnancy and Power in Eighteenth-Century Literature.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 13.
[63] Julia Serano. *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive.* Seal Press, 2013, 214.

Lawless' finances worsened, and the entire family was plunged into poverty. But having deployed sentimental discourses to represent her offspring as 'links of a chain,' evidence of bonds that supersede any legally sanctioned union, she now uses the language of social stigma to describe 'these illegitimate children' — evocative of her internalised blame and intense distress. According to religious doctrine and social custom, their existence could only be short-lived. They symbolise the broken 'chain' of their parents' unstable union (*Leeson* 43). Leeson's children now appear to her as a moral lesson, 'visible testaments of failure to adhere to the socio-sexual norm,' rather than embodiments of love (J. Kelly 8). Just as Bathsheba's child born of adultery is condemned due to its 'unlawful begetting,' Leeson implies that her offspring are tainted by their mother's illegitimate sexual embodiment. They are fatally bound up in her 'pleasure,' a concept that bears illicit sexual undertones in this context, estranged from the joy a chaste mother gleans from her legitimate children. The complex emotional connections Leeson previously described are broken down into simplistic categories. She no longer represents mothering as a verb performed by chaste or unchaste human subjects, but reinforces 'mother' as a noun: a fixed identity, defined exclusively by misogynistic constraints upon female sexuality. Gibson contends that shame was 'more often a response to a woman's immediate and material circumstances,' rather than being attached to the sexual transgression itself (Gibson, "Extra-Marital" 368). Leeson's changing views may result from her altered socioeconomic circumstances, and an exposure to the realities of social stigma beyond Lawless' protection. She later laments that if she had obeyed custom and 'married young to some worthy man,' she 'might now have been blessed with a smiling happy progeny, whereas [she] shall leave nothing behind [her] but the traces of [her] infamy, to hand down [her] abandoned name to posterity' (*Leeson* 222). Any surviving offspring are defined not as healthy, happy children, but as miserable remnants of their mother's sexual shame. While this religious self-condemnation may indicate the priest's editorial intervention, this unsettling combination of misogynistic judgement with poignant images of maternal suffering also exposes the absurd, ill applied cruelty of these ideologies. Her account exposes, and implicitly interrogates, the influence of male-defined material conditions — and socially dictated interpretations of human worth — upon a mother's perception of herself and her children.

Leeson's motivation to destabilise such misogynistic prejudices is soon clarified through a very different vision of maternal grief, which instead provokes her radical articulation of self-worth in the face of male violence. Like Coghlan's recollections of imprisonment, Leeson's maternal status becomes a gateway into broader criticisms of social injustice. As a

Catholic sex worker, Leeson navigates intersecting forms of oppression in late eighteenth-century Dublin — a society where patriarchal, hierarchical, and colonising forces collided. When a gang of aristocratic men, The Pinking Dindies, ransack her house, attack her while she is 'very big with child,' and cause the death of her two children, her grief fuels a quest for social justice (*Leeson* 70). Throughout her memoirs, Leeson is subtly critical of the Protestant Ascendancy to which this gang, 'deemed gentlemen by birth,' belong (70). They benefit from what she describes as the 'disgraceful' sociopolitical oppression of Irish Catholics (202), by 'merciless, sanguinary villains' (208). Leeson's contempt reflects rising radical tensions ahead of the Irish rebellion, which began in the year following her memoirs' publication. She condemns this gang's routine abuse of 'unfortunate girls,' whose residences they invade and ransack (70). By describing these men 'infesting' the streets, she subverts discourses of pestilence typically applied to women like herself, and foregrounds her own suffering humanity (70). In harrowing detail, she describes being 'delivered... of a dead child, with one of its legs broke,' while her 'little girl... who was laying with her nurse in the two-pair of stairs floor,' was so frightened that 'she took a fit of screeching, and never recovered of her terror, but died in consequence of the fright' (70). Leeson experiences all-consuming grief, 'the greatest affliction with which [she] had ever been attacked,' which leaves her 'really frantic for some weeks'; she is constantly, inescapably 'reminded of [her] dear child' (75). Documenting these painful, long-term emotional repercussions, she condemns the 'magnanimous warriors [who] actually murdered two helpless infants, bruised and maltreated their defenceless mother... for FUN' (70). Just as Coghlan foregrounds her fragile embodiment in a merciless, male-dominated prison, Leeson foregrounds the defenceless bodies of a mother and her young children, plights which warrant universal compassion. However, these visions of vulnerability underpin a fierce conviction about her right to justice:

> good, quiet, peaceable and inoffensive persons, [should never] suffer themselves to be beaten or wounded by the wicked: to expose their lives to the hazard of losing them, or their property to be spoiled, rather than make their complaints to the magistrates. If that were to be the case, there would be an end to all civil society... I was bound to avenge them by the laws, out of my duty to the community at large... had they gone unpunished, that would have served only to embolden the perpetrators, to have extended their insolence and riotous abuse to others' (*Leeson* 71).

Leeson outlines her clear, logical application of legal rights to all members of civil society, herself included. Challenging contemporary prejudices against sex workers, Catholics and labouring class women, she contends that there should be no social, economic or legal barrier

to the pursuit of justice. She insists on her status as a law-abiding human subject, deserving of its protection. Leeson rejects the dominant belief that victims of male violence should fulfil strict codes of chastity to receive sympathy and gain justice, asserting the value of her body, and the lives of her children.[64] Leeson positions herself as a public servant, willing to oppose the formidable Pinking Dindies out of 'duty to the community.' Contradicting dominant perceptions of Catholics and sex workers as uncivilised others, threats to civic wellbeing and stability, *she* is the respectable bastion of social order.[65] She boldly takes her attacker to court in a period when women's characters were used against them in this setting, leveraging her unique position as a wealthy woman with no sexual reputation to preserve (Peakman, *Peg* 81). While Wollstonecraft advocated for women experiencing the 'protection of civil laws,' she justified this on the grounds of them 'fulfilling the duties of a citizen' by conforming to her vision of domestic virtue; Leeson extends this right to all (*Vindication* 227). She deploys her maternal status to contest discriminatory limits of victimhood and sympathy, reinforcing her status as a multidimensional maternal, moral and political subject, while building a powerful case against violence fuelled by misogynistic entitlement.

Beyond this political framing of Leeson's maternal body, she once again reinforces her sexual subjectivity by pursuing a sexual relationship with an illicit lover — whilst pregnant with another keeper's child. Peakman suggests that many elite sex workers were 'full of contradictions: they had sex freely with whom they chose in return for money or goods, but aspired to the feminine ideal of domesticated womanhood' (Peakman, *Lascivious* 74). Leeson does not merely oscillate between promiscuity and settled domesticity, but actively blurs different classifications of feminine identity. After Lawless, she lives with Mr L___, a generous man who is 'not a little proud' to discover her pregnancy (*Leeson* 62). However, Leeson retrospectively confesses that 'love, the sole bond of fidelity, was wanting,' warning that no 'permanent connection between the two sexes [flourishes], unless Virtue is the cement' (62). She continues to associate true virtue with love, as reflected within the sentimental and libertine philosophies she merges to justify her union with Lawless. But at this stage in her career, she had 'gone so far in the road of variety, [that she] could not be confined to one man' (62). The verb 'confined' suggests once again that Leeson finds the custom of monogamy restrictive, whereas the 'road of variety' represents all kinds of sexual possibility. She favours the attractive

[64] Anna Clark. *Women's Silence, Men's Violence.* Pandora Press, 1987, 33.
[65] Diane Long Hoeveler. "Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2012, pp. 137-158, 139.

yet penniless Mr Cashel, since 'affection at that time prevailed with [her] more than financial interest' (62). Conflicted between authentic sexual desire and the demands of sex work, lust eventually overwhelms any practical financial concerns. Leeson uses her pregnancy to avoid sleeping with her keeper, while ushering this illicit lover into her bed:

> As I was then very big with child, I pretended indisposition; and made that my excuse for entreating Mr. L——not to sleep with me that night.... He acquiesced with my desire, totally unsuspicious of my real motive; and departed, leaving Mr. Cashel master of the field. The next night, Mr. L—— met me at the theatre. Here the same infatuation possessed me, and hurried me to act a part .... I told him that my present condition would render it very improper for a time to come, to admit him to my bed, to which I could not agree till after my lying-in, I therefore, strongly recommended him to fill up that chasm with some other woman.... What inconsistent creatures are women, when under the influence of their passions! Here, although it was in my interest to keep well with Mr L, who was my sole support; yet, my passion for my other Spark, who was almost pennyless, prompted me giddily to estrange him from me, and even to turn a procuress for his pleasure (63).

In a culture marked by 'discomfort with a definition of maternal virtue that include[d] active female sexuality,' Leeson describes a subversive lust which transcends patriarchal circumscriptions (Bowers 184). By creating the illusion of maternal virtue, she secretly facilitates her own libertine 'erotic self-expression' and asserts a 'subjective authenticity tied to [her] desire.'[66] Now, discourses of 'passion' and 'infatuation' dominate her account. She is 'possessed' with desires that govern her actions, to the extent of her orchestrating this deceptive scheme. Leeson's self-representation assimilates two traditionally polarised states: that of being 'big with child,' and consumed by uncontrollable sexual passion (Perry 229). This irresponsible 'giddiness' defies Wollstonecraft's modest, restrained and rational maternal paragon, who is dedicated to the serious civic duties of motherhood. Leeson represents a restless sexual desire which compels her to transgress beyond the settled state she is expected to assume. Wollstonecraft condemned fathers who sexualised mothers beyond their natural mothering practices, by 'refusing to let [them] suckle their children... [since] they are only to dress and live to please them' (*Vindication* 144). But Leeson acknowledges no external pressures, or strategies of objectification. As a multidimensional maternal and sexual subject, she satiates her own authentic desires. According to patriarchal conservative codes of feminine virtue, her 'illegitimate use of female embodiment' is not only defined by her state of pregnancy as a result of prostitution (Bromwich and DeJong 21), but also her participation in transgressive sexual

[66] Kathleen Lubey. *What pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest Since the Eighteenth Century.* Stanford University Press, 2022, 10.

behaviours beyond this mistress / keeper union. While she certainly does not frame her conduct as virtuous, she embraces sexuality on her own terms, beyond the establishment's constrictions and the anxieties of contemporary feminist writers.

Libertines typically developed an in-depth knowledge of social customs in order to operate outside of them; Leeson performs according to contemporary biological and social expectations of pregnant women.[67] As discussed in Chapter One, she harnesses performances of feminine virtue to conceal and facilitate her subversive pursuit of authentic erotic pleasures beyond these norms. Here, she invokes theatrical discourses to describe herself 'acting a part' which involves her 'pretending' indisposition, claiming that sex would be 'very improper' in late pregnancy. She comically invokes discourses of maternal propriety to disguise her transgressions. Midwife John Grigg encouraged men to express 'fidelity and honour' to their wives during pregnancy and lying-in; he contends that 'much more regard and tenderness ought to be shown to them in the critical period of pregnancy.'[68] Implicit in these warnings is the assumption — reflected in Wollstonecraft's concerns about husbands enforcing their own erotic agendas upon mothers — that male loyalty may be tested during this period, due to a wife's sexual unavailability. Especially given the physical toll of pregnancy and childbirth, and the discouragement of intercourse during breastfeeding, all advice pointed to the desexualisation of mothers (Perry 229). By these standards, Leeson's act of blending the roles of expectant mother and 'procuress for [Mr L's] pleasure' in actively encouraging his infidelity, is deeply subversive. Amongst Grigg and Wollstonecraft's concerns, the prospect of a woman experiencing sexual desire in pregnancy is unmentioned, let alone the notion of having sex with a man who is not her child's father. While women's sexualities were persistently weaponised against them, a social reality that led to the formation of Wollstonecraft's desexualised maternal ideal in *Vindication,* Leeson articulates desire on her own terms. She negotiates with her keeper's appetites to covertly satisfy her own, managing to fulfil her financial and libidinal needs. In contrast with the ideal 'mother-self at the service of the family and the state,' erased of all sexual expression, Leeson's lust is profoundly selfish (Perry 209). She deploys natural self-sacrificing maternal concerns to disguise the true violation of these social codes.

Just as Sheldon represents her status as a fierce 'guardian mother' of two young sex workers (*Sheldon III* pp.8-9), Leeson defines herself beyond misogynistic caricatures of

[67] Antoinette Marie Sol. *Textual Promiscuities*. Bucknell University Press, 2002, 188.
[68] John Grigg. *Advice to the Female Sex in General, particularly those in a State of Pregnancy and Lying-in*. S. Hazard, 1789, 178.

merciless bawds in the prostitute imaginary, who abuse their power by masquerading as mother figures while actually violating codes of maternal care. She also takes on mothering as a 'social responsibility,' thereby undermining patriarchal strategies of 'individualism and essentialism' (O'Reilly 146). Leeson reinforces her adherence to the care ethics endorsed throughout her memoirs, by deploying her position of relative privilege to support those deprived of parental support. She assumes this role herself, 'animadverting on the ill-conduct of many parents' who alienate their children, and representing her true understanding of the responsibilities involved in raising young women (*Leeson* 103). Parents must be 'moved by kindness,' she instructs; those with temperaments 'perverted by cruelty' are ill-suited to this task (103). Leeson portrays her Pitt Street brothel as a site of physical and emotional support. While providing the necessities of survival, Leeson protects young women from lecherous men and 'resolves every effort to prevent' them from following her trajectory (103). She repeatedly stresses that she 'never in [her] life was accessory or instrumental to the corruption of any girl; nor ever received in [her] house anyone who had not already been deluded' (103). One fifteen-year-old arrives at Leeson's house seeking support amidst her family's abuse. Thinking that she is tempted by prostitution, Leeson 'strongly remonstrates' with her, while 'pointedly as well as humanely' educating her on the experiences of those who have died miserable and impoverished despite her efforts to relieve them (103). She reflects:

> a young girl was driven from her home by ill-treatment; and in my own self, I have bitterly experienced the fatal consequences of my inhuman brother's cruelty, that first exposed me to miseries, that led to the way of life I had embraced. But for him I should not have erred. Nay, had I had only a friend, who would have given me the advice that I cordially gave this unhappy girl, I might have been as virtuous a woman as she is now (103).

While Leeson describes herself as a 'friend' to this girl, the differences in age and experience she highlights, her stern and authoritative manner, alongside her awareness of the need for parental aid, help frame this moral guidance and support as a form of mothering. She implies that maternal educators need not be chaste, or from an ideal domestic setting; indeed, her first-hand experiences of abuse and the precarity of prostitution make her better equipped to deliver this guidance than those who ostracise their children. As Rebecca Davies notes, 'the womanly work of education was considered maternal. Just to be woman was to have the potential to be a 'maternal' educator.'[69] Leeson's bond with this girl is based on their similar experiences of suffering, amidst systemic patriarchal cruelty. Like Coghlan, she places male

[69] Rebecca Davies. *Written Maternal Authority and Eighteenth-Century Education in Britain*. Routledge, 2014, 5.

abuse at the root of women's failures to fulfil virtuous ideals, and self-consciously becomes the source of support that so many lack in the traditional family household.

Leeson represents her own brothel as a multifunctional space of care work and sex work. Like Sheldon and Coghlan, she demonstrates the instability of 'home' for eighteenth-century women in hostile domestic spaces. Mothers' caring duties were frequently associated with the creation of home comforts, as reflected within Wollstonecraft's Rousseauvian musings on the 'domestic affections' and 'maternal solicitude of a reasonable affectionate woman,' nursing her children and awaiting her husband's arrival home to 'smiling babes and a clean hearth' (*Vindication* 223). The concept of comfort helped define the eighteenth-century home.[70] This was contrasted with imaginings of mother-bawds and their brothels in the prostitute imaginary, for example Richardson's vision of Miss Sinclair's as a place of 'shame, exposure to violence, and lack of protection' for his protagonist Clarissa, with genteel rooms hiding illicit spaces and morally depraved sex workers waiting to trap her.[71] As Batchelor notes, the 'mother-madam-bawd analogy' was used to signal 'the erosion of familial affection by the economics of modern life,' with unhomely brothels manifesting these 'unsentimental economics' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 161, 163). Leeson associates her brothel and her role as madam with an alternative, homely spirit of comfort and protection. However, she is aware of the stigma her residence invokes to prejudiced eyes, and thus offers to lodge the fifteen-year-old with a neighbour, before visiting her father to condemn his behaviour and warn him that she will pay future visits to monitor his conduct. Meanwhile, Leeson shields her from two predatory men who enter the parlour of her brothel, waiting to ensnare her. She disguises the girl in a cloak, accompanies her into a coach, and directs the coachman to drive to a different place from her intended destination — after instructing her servants to lock them in the parlour. When Leeson returns, she is confronted by a larger group of men who are 'always on the look out to ensnare young birds,' demanding to know where the girl lives (104). Leeson 'constantly refuses' them, emphatically reminding her reader that she was never 'instrumental in deluding any young female' (104). Sheldon also describes young women as 'birds' when representing her duty to protect her charges; both writers are conscious of how fragile female bodies are in this system, and use their expertise as 'covey' mothers to conserve these vulnerable girls (*Sheldon* III pp. 8-9). Leeson's method of confining male predators to the parlour, outside the private

[70] Stephen G. Hague and Karen Lipsedge. "Introduction." *At Home in the Eighteenth Century: Interrogating Domestic Space,* edited by Hague and Lipsedge, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-18, 4.

[71] Kristin M. Distel. "'I Will Not Be Thus Constrained': Domestic Power, Shame, and the Role of the Staircase in Richardson's *Clarissa 1.* " *At Home in the Eighteenth Century: Interrogating Domestic Space,* edited by Stephen G. Hague and Karen Lipsedge. Routledge, 2022, pp. 58-81, 69-70.

space in which she conceals the girl, demarcates her business's boundaries; she emphasises that a woman's presence in her household does not define her sexual availability. She defines this space, and her identity, beyond male-centric pornographic fantasy. In *Fanny Hill* for example, bawds offer men unlimited access to vulnerable women, while relationships between older sex workers and young girls are filtered through the male gaze — exhibited through Phoebe's sexual assault on Fanny when she arrives at Mrs Brown's brothel, coded as an initiation into intercourse with men.[72] In contrast to these imaginings, Leeson's household is a site of safety, comfort and care for women in need, constituting resistance against an exploitative male establishment; it reflects her multidimensional subjectivity. Care work is not only compatible with sex work in Leeson's memoirs, but far more important than the libidinal demands of predatory men.

Throughout her life, Leeson herself benefits from the support of other sex workers. These networks help facilitate maternal care, beyond the traditional family unit. As Mac and Smith demonstrate, sex workers' 'communities of mutual aid' have often involved 'sharing income and childcare,' and 'raising... children collectively' (Mac and Smith 6). During Leeson's period of destitution and sickness after Lawless' departure, and when facing the prospect of childbirth in poverty, her friends in the sex trade become a critical source of support for mother and baby. Alongside her physicians, these friends rally round to prevent her becoming an 'accessory to [her] own destruction' (*Leeson* 57). They help her 'banish... all gloomy ideas,' warning that while Leeson's thoughts were 'incessantly bent on subjects of melancholy, [she] could not expect any re-establishment of [her] health' (57). This concern for her emotional and physical welfare contrasts with the cruelty of her biological sisters, who prioritise their own reputations over supporting her. Compassion, critical to Leeson's revised framework of feminine virtue, coexists alongside their transgressive sexualities. As with Sheldon's account of the hands-on support shared by women in her context, critical to navigating the demands of survival, this network redefines care as a 'social responsibility rather than an exclusive maternal duty' (O'Reilly 146). Leeson recalls being 'sunk in poverty' and 'scarce able to afford the comforts necessary for my sick situation, and my lying-in,' with 'no prospect... by which my circumstances might be amended' (56). Her hopeless situation is improved by Miss Fleetwood, who, while under a lord's protection, offers to buy one of Leeson's houses; this payment 'was highly welcome... providing a sufficient maintenance for myself and my child, under my sickness and adversity' (56). Letting another property to Sally Hayes, 'for whom [she] had a

[72] John Cleland. *Fanny Hill* vol II. G. Fenton, 1749, 30.

very strong friendship,' provides Leeson's 'sole support, in [her] illness and lying-in' (57). Given their closeness, and the fact that Leeson cohabits with her after settling her child with a nurse, Sally may also have supported her during her lying-in. During this typically weeks-long period, mothers were confined to their beds, while a nurse, relative or friend ran their household.[73] Postpartum maternity was perceived as a peculiarly feminine state of vulnerability, requiring the empathy and delicacy of a female companion. Grigg acknowledged that poor mothers were more at risk of infection (Grigg 178), advising 'repose of body [and] tranquillity of mind' (174), soothed by a husband's support, 'fidelity and honour' (2). The material comforts involved within this middle-class conjugal ideal were clearly less accessible to Leeson. Thus, the financial, emotional, and implicitly physical support of her friends during this period are critical for the restoration of her wellbeing. Across Leeson's wide-ranging accounts of maternal care, female solidarity emerges as a powerful strategy for navigating a misogynistic system, especially for women managing the challenging, often conflicting demands of mother work and sex work in the late eighteenth century.

Conclusion

Through their portraits of multidimensional maternal subjects, the memoirs of Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson compel readers to investigate 'aspects of women's lives and identities that are generally constructed as opposite to one another,' allowing us to understand them 'in new and potentially more emancipatory ways' (Bromwich and DeJong 14). They generate plural interpretations of maternal identity and practice which counteract monolithic middle-class ideals of motherhood. These writers lean into traditional visons of maternal virtue, but also expose the tensions between them and their unstable socioeconomic situations — a dynamic that becomes apparent through their constant interweaving of idyllic domestic situations with grave financial concerns. These memoirs help us truly understand both mothering and prostitution as demanding forms of work, a reality that is persistently disputed by patriarchal society (Bromwich and DeJong 22). Particularly for Coghlan and Leeson, mother work becomes a gateway into broader sociopolitical concerns about the stigmatisation and exploitation of unchaste maternal bodies. Moreover, Sheldon and Leeson illuminate communities of care as a solution to, and ultimately a form of resistance against, male-orchestrated socioeconomic pressures.

[73] Adrian Wilson. *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England 1660-1770.* Harvard University Press, 1995, 27.

Crucially, the memoirists represent the struggle for women to honour their instincts and desires — whether maternal or sexual — in a system that simultaneously condemns unmarried mothers to poverty, and castigates them for establishing a distinct identity beyond chaste, self-sacrificing ideals. While representing spells of loyalty to long-term keepers, the memoirists ultimately decouple maternity from chastity; such harsh standards of sexual conduct are inconsistent with the demands of survival, as well as the fulfilment of their authentic desires. Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson rewrite strict codes of desexualised maternity, which were slightly modified (to accommodate chaste, monogamous expressions of desire) but fundamentally reinscribed within *Histories* and even Wollstonecraft's revolutionary *Vindication.* Contextualising these memoirs against a backdrop of conservative views on prostitution and maternity helps to foreground the radical nature of their multidimensional self-portraits. These writers read between the lines of contemporary maternal ideals: testing their limits, negotiating new space for women's subjectivities, and ultimately reinvigorating them with fresh, feminist redefinitions of who mothers could be.

Section II: Maternal Virtue

Chapter 4. Defining Natural Motherhood: The Incompatibility of Maternal Virtue and Prostitution in *Nature and Art, Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman,* and *The Victim of Prejudice*

Introduction

In their novels *Nature and Art, Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman,* and *The Victim of Prejudice*, Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays represent sex workers' failures to fulfil their natural maternal potential. These novelists extend *Vindication*'s commentary on the morally purifying civic roles that women could establish as chaste, nurturing, selfless mother-citizens, condemning the patriarchal socioeconomic pressures that disrupt this vision of 'progressive domesticity.'[1] By representing the struggles of Hannah, Jemima and Mary to develop their authentic maternal instincts in hostile material conditions, they provide new visions of maternal experience which seemingly accommodate sex workers. From Hannah's decision to support her son through prostitution following her initial, shame-driven attempt at infanticide, to Jemima's reluctant abortion following her rape and her refashioning as a surrogate mother, and the seduced Mary's attempts to protect her daughter after being forced to substitute her maternal duties for prostitution — all of these portraits counteract misogynistic caricatures of sex workers as unnatural mothers.[2] The novelists appear to perceive maternal altruism as evidence of an inherently sympathetic, benevolent human nature, often drawing upon Rousseau-esque visions of 'natural' maternal feeling and practice which were increasingly appropriated by patriarchal revolutionaries in the 1790s.[3] However, they demonstrate that social and political change is necessary for these impulses to flourish. The novelists reject the notion that sex workers are inherently devoid of maternal feeling, but still deploy Hannah, Jemima and Mary as examples of damaged femininity or thwarted maternal instinct. For the novelists, prostitution's threat to motherhood is not only tethered to material concerns, but also filtered through the lens of profound moral discomfort surrounding maternal sexuality. This chapter

[1] Gary Kelly. *Women, Writing and Revolution.* Oxford University Press, 1993, 101.
[2] The mother and daughter of *Victim* share the same name. To avoid confusion, I refer to the former as Mary, and the latter as either Mary Raymond or 'the protagonist.'
[3] Mary Seidman Trouille. *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment.* State University of New York Press, 1997, 69.

argues that they perpetuate ideological divisions between what they perceive as morally *purifying* mother work, and morally *corrupting* sexual labour. The novelists' sympathetic portraits of maternal characters are shaped by the limits they impose on female sexual expression. These women must either be desexualised, or have their sexualities tethered to romantic love for their children's fathers. Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays extend their argument that prostitution disrupts developing moral sentiments, to condemning the obstruction of women's maternal virtues. While working in the sex trade, Hannah, Jemima and Mary are unable to become morally purifying maternal citizens. To varying degrees, these characters must function as objects of moral concern; the multidimensional maternal and sexual subjectivities portrayed by the memoirists are incompatible with the novelists' political agendas.

The novelists strategically draw upon essentialist notions of maternal feeling and practice which, at points, brings them into unlikely alliances with patriarchal commentators of the period.[4] Women actively working in the sex trade fall short of these standards; as in *Histories,* motherhood is 'exalted into a heroic status' from which sex workers 'must... be eventually excluded.'[5] While Ledoux investigates how 'literary forms can play an active role in policing textual representations of motherhood' in mid-century Magdalen House literature, I demonstrate how this dynamic unfolds in a period defined by urgent political debates surrounding maternity and sexuality (Ledoux 192). In Batchelor's analysis of the *Histories*' 'Magdalen-Madonnas,' she argues that the 'mother-prostitute [is] a rare yet disquieting and significant presence in eighteenth-century literature [with] much to contribute to our understanding of the prostitute's cultural functions and the challenge she posed to emerging constructions of gender and sexuality.'[6] I argue that these disruptive functions are charged with new political significance in the revolutionary-era novels of Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays. Sex worker mothers are sympathetically portrayed as victims of a misogynistic system; Jemima and Mary are even instilled with maternal wisdom, post-prostitution. However, they are portrayed as unsettling figures, struggling with irreconcilable aspects of their identity. Their sexual corruption inevitably overwhelms the civic duties of maternal care. The memoirists represent women striving to honour their maternal instincts and authentic sexual desires, but,

[4] Diana Fuss. *Essentially Speaking*. Routledge, 1990, 2, xii.
[5] Ellen Malenas Ledoux. *Labouring Mothers: Reproducing Women and Work in the Eighteenth Century.* University of Virginia Press, 2023, 192.
[6] Jennie Batchelor. "Mothers and Others: Sexuality and Maternity in *The Histories of Some of the Penitents of the Magdalen House* (1760)." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis, Routledge, 2012, pp. 157-170, 158 and 159.

for the novelists' rhetorical purposes, sex workers must ultimately fail to fulfil their potential as mothers.

I plot these novels on a chronological revolutionary timeline according to their changing sociopolitical contexts, and trace the cycling backwards to misogynistic tropes identified within Chapter Two. Section One examines Hannah's struggle to support her illegitimate son in poverty, beyond the middle-class security enjoyed by her seducer. I argue that Inchbald leverages Hannah's maternal status to affirm her status as a disarming, Magdalen-esque 'seduced maiden'; this conservative trope perhaps reflects Inchbald's experience of having 'Newgate before [her] eyes' when writing this novel, amid political restrictions imposed upon radical writers.[7] Hannah is a sentimental object, mobilised to represent the tension between women's maternal instincts and their hostile socioeconomic circumstances. In Section Two, I demonstrate that Jemima reconnects with her natural maternal impulses — stifled when she is forced into abortion — as a method of fuelling her moral recovery from prostitution. But even when making 'radical claims for women's right to defend their political and sexual feelings,' Wollstonecraft is 'unable to unite women's parental and erotic desires' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 158). I contend that she invokes morally purifying ideals of republican motherhood to reinforce divisions between maternity and prostitution, suggesting that Jemima must relearn feminine sentiment with the support of the middle-class heroine Maria. Finally, Section Three contends that Hays — responding to her hostile anti-Wollstonecraftian context — invokes misogynistic tropes surrounding sex workers' physical and sentimental impurities to represent Mary's posthumous corruption of her daughter. My analysis of Hays' novel forms the longest section of this chapter, since it traces these moral debates over two generations of women. Hays illustrates the catastrophic, long-lasting impact of social stigma upon their mother-daughter bond. Interwoven with comparisons to the memoirs, I demonstrate that the possibilities Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson generate for multidimensional maternal and sexual subjectivities are essentially closed down within the novels. The novelists struggle to frame women's supposedly natural maternal virtues as forms of resistance against patriarchal control, without weaponizing exclusionary ideals of maternal sentiment and embodiment against sex workers.

[7] Amy Garnai. *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 122.

Part I: *Nature and Art*

Inchbald's representation of Hannah's emotional distress when she discovers her pregnancy bolsters her attack on the class-based patriarchal forces that stigmatise fallen women. However, she also suggests that Hannah, abandoned by her middle-class seducer William, deserves sympathy *because* she experiences shame over the sexual transgression that produces her child. This sentimental characterisation partly reinscribes the prejudices *Nature and Art* purports to condemn. Having kept her seduction secret, Hannah's pregnancy causes her to 'forebode an informer who would defy all caution; who would stigmatise her with a name — dear and desired by every virtuous female — abhorrent to the blushing harlot — the name of mother.'[8] A chaste wife joyfully anticipates the birth of her legitimate, beloved offspring, but prejudice immediately disrupts Hannah's maternal attachment, forcing her to perceive this prospective child only as a threatening manifestation of her illicit sexuality. Inchbald modifies caricatures of sexually transgressive women as unnatural mothers; patriarchal binaries of female identity are inadequate for capturing Hannah's complex position. The act of blushing implies that socially imposed shame forces 'harlots' to revile their maternal status, thereby revealing that they are not inherently devoid of maternal instinct. Moreover, Hannah is subtly defined beyond this harsh label 'harlot,' since she only '*felt* herself a harlot and a murderer [emphasis my own]' after almost murdering, and then abandoning her child (*N&A* 110). Inchbald invites her readership to probe the contrast between the epithets falsely imposed upon Hannah, which she internalises, and the agony she experiences while William evades responsibility for his exploitation of her innocence. Even in the few late eighteenth-century institutions which supported unmarried mothers, women were expected to be 'overwhelmed with shame and remorse' upon admission.[9] Inchbald implicitly reinforces these specifications of sympathy. Henry, the benevolent discoverer of Hannah's abandoned baby, declares that if the anonymous mother 'had been accustomed to disgrace, she would have gloried in calling [the child] hers!' (95). Inchbald suggests that shameless, experienced sex workers — such as Sheldon, Coghlan or Leeson — are more likely to be proud of her children, because they are desensitised to social stigma. But Hannah is barely given a voice in which to declare her maternal status. She is even 'ashamed to tell' William (93). She 'prevaricates in all that she utters,' refusing to identify his paternity while sobbing and 'supplicating' at his father's knees; her only coherent declaration is

[8] Elizabeth Inchbald. *Nature and Art*. Edited by Shawn Lisa Maurer, Broadview, 2004, 86.
[9] Samantha Williams. *Unmarried Motherhood in the Metropolis*. Palgrave, 2018, 54.

of her 'shame and uneasiness' (116-17). Inchbald's narrator deploys the language of shame to describe Hannah as a 'sinner,' who in 'permitting indecorous familiarity... descended from the character of purity,' but adds that 'the more sincerely [she] loved, the more [she] plunged in danger' (110). Inchbald implicitly laments the conflation of the shame-consumed with the shameless, suggesting that social judgements are disproportionately imposed upon remorseful women whose pregnancies result from love. Rebecca, who initially cares for the infant in Hannah's absence, is condemned as a 'vile prostitute' by her father when he wrongly assumes that she is an unmarried mother (102). Inchbald critiques the absurd and inconsistent imposition of such labels upon women who she perceives to be genuinely virtuous. In her view, other 'harlots' and 'prostitutes,' who do not experience an appropriate amount of shame over children conceived in loveless unions, must be defined beyond the bounds of sentimental sympathy. While destabilising some conservative categories of feminine identity through Hannah's sentimental characterisation, Inchbald reinscribes others.

Inchbald's sympathetic representation of Hannah's failed infanticide attempt enables this heroine to be defined beyond caricatures of unnatural motherhood in the prostitute imaginary. By giving Hannah this backstory before she enters prostitution, Inchbald emphasises the existence of her authentic maternal impulses. Henry finds her baby abandoned in the woods, with an untied noose around its neck. He believes that his presence prevented the anonymous 'murderer' from completing their act, since Hannah flees before he discovers her (*N&A* 94). As Inchbald's moral mouthpiece, Henry compels the chaste Rebecca, who reviles the mother as an 'inhuman creature,' to contextualise these actions within her socioeconomic circumstances (95). He surmises that she 'must have loved,' the baby and 'certainly had suffered,' only lacking the material resources to care for it (95). Inchbald confirms his theory by exploring Hannah's anguished psychological state, observing that 'reflection was torture... she never slept but her racking dreams told her — "she had slain her infant" (98). Inchbald forcefully requires her reader to sympathise: 'Reader... bless Heaven for its beneficent influence, so that you are not tortured with the anguish of—*remorse*' (98). Hannah is not an 'inhuman creature,' but a maternal and moral subject experiencing profound emotional pain. Weeks later, she returns to the woods where she abandoned her child. She intends to commit suicide, haunted by visions of 'the naked innocent whom she had longed to press to her bosom, while she lifted up her hand against its life... whom her eyeballs strained to behold once more, while her feet hurried her away' (112). Inchbald captures the tension between Hannah's natural maternal impulses, manifested in the urge to hold and protect her child, and the

oppositional act of harm she is driven to by external pressures. She feels 'all the mother rising in her soul,' her authentic maternal instincts resurging when she envisages her child's suffering (112). When Henry stumbles across Hannah and reunites mother and child, she declares:

> I am the mother and the murderer — I fixed the cord... while my heart was bursting with despair and horror! But I stopped short — I did not draw the noose — I had a moment of strength, and I ran away. I left him living — he is living now — escaped from my hands — and I am no longer ashamed, but overcome with joy that he is mine! (113).

The 'mother and the murderer' coexist in Hannah's confession. Inchbald demonstrates the possibility of a loving maternal figure being driven by 'despair and horror' to this desperate act. Moreover, she clarifies that 'a moment of strength' prevented Hannah from drawing the noose, rather than being disturbed by Henry. This was not cold-blooded attempted murder, but the deed of a woman wrestling with her authentic maternal impulses and external socioeconomic pressures. Hannah is briefly empowered by her maternal status, and even temporarily substitutes her shame for pride in Henry's compassionate company. Inchbald reaffirms this fallen woman's potential for maternal sentiment. In Wollstonecraft's travel writing *A Short Residence in Sweden* (1796), she noted that 'a desperate act is not always a proof of an incorrigible depravity of character' when describing an unmarried Norwegian mother being pardoned rather than condemned to death for infanticide.[10] She praised this sympathetic treatment, reporting that she had gone on to become 'the careful mother of a family' (*Residence* 104). Inchbald similarly shifts focus onto Hannah's environment, rather than narratives of unnatural motherhood, as the determiner of whether maternal potential can flourish.

Hannah is secretly instructed to part with her child by William's father, but her overwhelming maternal attachment leads her to brave prejudice and keep him. Isolated, impoverished, and rejected by prospective employers, Hannah is recruited by a kindly farmer. With a view to foregrounding the corruption of the brothel Hannah is forced to join later in the novel, Inchbald suggests that her maternal instinct can only flourish in natural, morally purifying environments:

> By herding with the brute creation, she and her child were allowed to live together; and this was a state she preferred to the society of human creatures, who would have separated her from what she loved so tenderly. Anxious to retain a service in which she possessed such a

[10] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Short Residence in Sweden,* edited by Richard Holmes, Penguin Classics, 1987, 104.

> blessing, care and attention to her humble office caused her master to prolong her stay through all the winter; then, during the spring, she tended his yeaning sheep... thus season after season passed, till her young son could afford her assistance in her daily work. He now could charm her with his conversation as well as with his looks: a thousand times in the transports of parental love she has pressed him to her bosom, and thought, with an agony of horror, upon her criminal, her mad intent to destroy what was now so dear, so necessary to her existence (122).

This scene reaffirms Inchbald's thematic contrast between nature and artifice. Here, the natural connection between mother and son unfolds beyond the prejudices of human society; procreation and childrearing flourish beyond these constraints, symbolised through the breeding sheep that Hannah tends. Hannah supports her child through humble but honest income-generating labour. Inchbald implies that her devoted, hands-on care is superior to those of 'women of quality [who] part with their children' because they have 'other things to love' (*N&A* 117). This echoes Wollstonecraft's caricatures of women who 'take [their] dogs to bed, and nurse them with a parade of sensibility... [but] suffer [their] babes to grow up crooked in a nursery.'[11] Like Rousseau, she favours women grounding themselves in the simple, domestic offices of 'nursing [their] children,' embracing the 'refreshing green everywhere scattered by nature' which cleanses the moral palate of 'insipid grandeur, slavish ceremonies [and] cumbrous pomp' (*Vindication* 223). Inchbald associates Hannah with these hands-on mothering practices, but positions her beyond Wollstonecraft's middle-class ideal; no servant is on hand to help Hannah with the 'servile part of the household business' (*Vindication* 223). In these sentimental scenes, Hannah's maternal attachment thrives on the foundations of her sufficient economic stability, leading her to condemn her desperate act of attempted infanticide.

In this process of moral regeneration, Hannah's lack of concern about the diminishment of her physical beauty — the foundation of her desirability to William — reflects Inchbald's attempts to cleanse her of her sexual transgression, or at least tether her sexuality to her seducer. This dynamic reflects the dominant perception of mothering as 'one of the ways a culture purifies itself of the sexuality' that typically brings motherhood about.[12] Her 'tender hands became hard and rough, her fair skin burnt and yellow,' but this 'loss of beauty gave her no regret — while William did not see her, it was indifferent to her, whether she were beautiful or hideous' (*N&A* 123). This respectable bodily labour does not necessitate vain concerns about her desirability; regardless, Hannah would only be concerned about her appeal to

[11] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 259.
[12] Jacqueline Rose. *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. Faber & Faber, 2018, 64.

William. But in her child's features, 'she fancied she saw William at every glance, and... felt at times every happiness short of seeing him' (123). The *Histories'* author similarly 'casts the 'maternal "tie" as a consequence of the male child's resemblance to, and biological connection with, the object of the woman's sexual desire,' amounting to a form of 'sexual subjectivity that reveals parental affection to be a natural extension of women's passion for their lovers' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 164). This is reflected within Leeson's representation of paternal resemblance with her beloved last baby to Lawless.[13] However, Inchbald's strategy reinforces moral binaries between the mercenary, promiscuous intercourse typically associated with prostitution, and Hannah's loving, passionate mistake. Hannah's maternal sentiments are deployed to cast her remaining virtues in this sympathetic light, representing the purifying influence of maternity on her tainted sexuality.

The brothel wrenches Hannah away from these ideal maternal practices. Inchbald's concerns about material circumstances become overtly moralistic, as she intertwines Hannah's declining maternal virtue with her dwindling sexual morality. Inchbald parallels this setting with the farm, participating in the familiar misogynistic practice of likening sex workers to animals by suggesting that this location also allows Hannah to 'herd with those who won't despise' her (*N&A* 128).[14] Hannah's decision to defy her 'delicacy, morality and religion' by entering the brothel is initially represented as an act of maternal self-sacrifice: 'persons of honour and of reputation would not employ her: was she then to perish? That, perhaps, was easy to resolve; but she had a child to leave behind! a child, from whom to part for a day was a torment' (128). Reinforcing Hannah's authentic moral impulses, the narrator implies that — were it not for her son — she would prefer death to the degradation of prostitution. However, Leeson defends her right to survive *alongside* her child, condemning those who would criticise her entry into prostitution as an unmarried mother. She demands: 'who would have taken a servant without a character?' and exposes the irrational cruelty of those who believe she 'should have really died for want, rather than have procured sustenance at such a price' (*Leeson* 32). For the sex worker-mothers of *Histories,* 'delicacy is a middle-class luxury' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 164). In a 'relentlessly brutalising economy... "squeamishness" is mere indulgence, incompatible with true maternal love' (Batchelor, "Mothers" 164). Like the *Histories* penitents, Hannah's maternal 'heroism' means that she is 'ready to sacrifice everything' for her child (Ledoux 208). However, according to *Nature and Art*'s moral codes, this heroine's exemplary maternal sentiment drives

[13] Margaret Leeson. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson*, edited by Mary Lyons, Lilliput Press, 1995, 55.
[14] Juno Mac and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018, 10.

her to violate the mother-citizen's standards of sexual purity. Inchbald critiques the economic pressures that create these tensions for women.

As Hannah is steadily corrupted by prostitution, her maternal attachment appears to dwindle. Where her sexuality was acceptably bound to William during her previous, morally purifying bodily labour, it is now exposed to public consumption. In her 'sorrowful countenance and fading charms there yet remained an attraction for many visitors,' who engage with her in 'the mercenary profanations of love' (*N&A* 129). Her body's desirability now matters, to men who are not her child's father. A catastrophic moral shift occurs, when 'all reflection is gone forever' (130). Inchbald's narrator declares that 'she had gone too far to recede. Could she now have recalled her innocence... experience would have taught her to have given up her child, lived apart from him, and once more with the brute creation, rather than to have mingled with her present society' (*N&A* 130). In her previous natural environs, Hannah questioned how she could ever have rejected her maternal duties. However, the narrator surmises that she would have preferred to give up her child, rather than be reduced to prostitution amongst women who are apparently lowlier than animals. References to mother work entirely fall away from the narrative; it is implied that the ideals of maternal instinct and care Hannah previously fulfilled are incompatible with this site of female artifice. Inchbald's narrative does not accommodate the prospect of unmarried mothers devotedly raising their children amongst communities of women in brothels, as in Leeson's non-judgemental representations (*Leeson* 149). When she enters the criminal phase of her Harlot's Progress, the narrator implies that another shift in Hannah's maternal practice has occurred. Having previously worked in close proximity to her son, she now strays from his side as a 'midnight wanderer through the streets of London' (*N&A* 130). The narrator suggests that Hannah's 'illegitimate use of female embodiment' eclipses the 'legitimate' work of mothering (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Inchbald ultimately concludes that Hannah's morally purifying maternal instincts and practices cannot flourish in prostitution; they are incompatible with the moral corruption precipitated by her prostitution.

Inchbald slightly modifies the terms of Hannah's Harlot's Progress by reaffirming her maternal virtue at the end of her life, when she is arrested for the crime of forgery and condemned to execution. However, this process can only unfold beyond prostitution, when she is cleansed of the transgressive sexuality it entails. She must be consolidated as a sentimental penitent, emotionally bound to her child's father — who also happens to be judge of her trial on charges of forgery. In the pamphlet which supposedly contains Hannah's 'dying words, speech and confession,' she 'acknowledges the justice of her sentence,' not only for her crime, but

'other heinous sins... especially that of once attempting to commit a murder upon her own helpless child, for which guilt she now considers the vengeance of God has overtaken her, of which she is patiently resigned' (*N&A* 140). The nuance of her previously represented maternal sentiments, which went some way to mitigate her guilt, falls away from this simplistic narrative of unnatural motherhood. Inchbald demonstrates the dominant culture's reductive interpretation of Hannah's identity. Moreover, she is never given an empowered voice with which to condemn William for his role in these circumstances; she refuses to incriminate him, and persistently mistakes his guilt for her own. In sentimental scenes that reaffirm her maternal bonds, her sixteen-year-old son 'never forsake[s] his mother during all the time of her imprisonment, but wait[s] on her with true filial duty' (140). But when 'her fatal sentence [was] passed he began to droop, and now lies dangerously ill near the prison from which she is released by death' (140). Hannah's child is implicated in her Harlot's Progress. He must be brought to the same end as his transgressive, yet victimised mother. She is cast as a madwoman within this pamphlet. Following her sentimental swooning at the trial, she 'raves continually on this child... writing an incoherent petition to the judge recommending the youth to his protection and mercy' (140). This final attempt to assert her maternal authority and resist her passive role is dismissed as insanity; therefore, William does not read this petition until after both mother and son have died. Hannah's voice is finally heard in his belated reading of the petition, but she is only ventriloquised to confirm the shame-consumed, powerless portrait of the pamphlet. She writes:

> I know it is presumption in me to dare to apply to you, such a wicked and mean wretch as I am; but, my lord, you once condescended to take notice of me... if you think it proper I should die, I will be resigned... [but] pray, my lord, if you cannot pardon me, be merciful to the child I leave behind – what he will do when I am gone I don't know – for I have been the only friend he has ever had since he was born – He was born, my lord, about sixteen years ago at Anfield... I swore whose child he was, before the dean, and I did not take a false oath (141).

Hannah's self-sacrificial maternal instincts are reinforced, but couched in the language of subordination; she insists upon William's moral superiority. She only obliquely references his paternal status, refusing to expound his role in her suffering. Hannah's sustained attempts to cushion her seducer from responsibility reflect her emotional attachment to him, hinted at through her forlorn note that he 'once condescended to take notice' of her. This devotion helps facilitate her process of moral purification. Beyond prostitution, Inchbald once again links Hannah's sexual transgression to genuine feeling for her seducer, which persists — even at the point of death — in her attempts to defend him. By suggesting that her maternal virtue can

only be restored on these terms, and embedded in discourses of shame and self-condemnation, Inchbald tailors Hannah's moral and maternal subjectivity to sentimental specifications of sympathy.

Part II: *Maria; or The Wrongs of Woman*

Jemima, the former sex worker of *Wrongs,* is instilled with a dynamic maternal subjectivity, ranging far beyond the limits of penitence and passivity that form the basis of Hannah's characterisation. As discussed in Chapter Two, Jemima's virtues gradually flourish under the tuition of Wollstonecraft's protagonist Maria, while she works in the institution that this middle-class heroine has been forced into by her abusive husband. Jemima's ability to reconnect with her own authentic maternal feeling — closely intertwined with moral sentiment — is critical to her redemption. However, it can only be revived beyond what Wollstonecraft interprets as the moral corruption of prostitution, and under the exemplary Maria's tuition. Maria strives towards a balance of loving attachment and rational duty, the author's previously specified ideals for mother-citizens (*Vindication* 231). She is desperate both to nurture her kidnapped infant daughter, and educate her to navigate the perils of a misogynistic system. She seeks to achieve this in the 'purified and permanent form' of memoirs addressed to her daughter.[15] Crucially, Maria's longing for this child provokes our first glimpse of Jemima's virtuous potential, beyond her initially hostile characterisation: 'when told that her child, only four months old, had been torn from her, even while she was discharging the tenderest maternal office, the woman awoke in a bosom long estranged from feminine emotions.'[16] This gendered emotional connection is yoked to sympathy with Maria's suffering, but also to the maternal roots of her own pain. Jemima's capacity for these feelings have been stifled by the hardening impact of her experiences. Wollstonecraft implicitly contrasts this essentialist image of 'feminine' sympathy with caricatures of defeminised, dehumanised sex workers — suggesting that, beyond prostitution, Jemima is now morally capable of feminist resistance.[17] We soon learn that she was complicit in the patriarchal dehumanisation and disposal of vulnerable

[15] Rebecca Davies. *Written Maternal Authority and Eighteenth-Century Education in Britain.* Routledge, 2014, 82.
[16] Mary Wollstonecraft. *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman.* Edited by Anne K. Mellor, Norton, 1994, 12.
[17] Jennifer Frangos. "The Woman in Man's Clothes and the Pleasures of Delarivier Manley's 'New Cabal." *Sexual Perversions, 1670-1890,* edited by Julie Peakman, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 95-116, 106; Marie Madeleine Jodin, "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, eds. Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206, 179.

mothers, while working in prostitution. She previously schemed to force her keeper's pregnant lover out of his house, leading to the death of mother and unborn child; however, she is now in a position of sufficient socioeconomic stability to disavow this divide and conquer system by following Maria's example. Despite attending to the material conditions that stifled Jemima's moral development, Wollstonecraft also implies that the specific sexual rivalries generated by prostitution have a catastrophic impact upon women's maternal sentiments, stripping them of the ability to encounter these feelings first-hand, and causing them to thwart other women's maternal experiences.

When reflecting upon her suffering at the hands of her husband, Maria reinforces clear boundaries between the roles of mothers and sex workers. She condemns the fact that 'the tender mother' cannot assert her own financial independence from an exploitative husband who, 'unmindful of her offspring,' can 'rob her with impunity, even to waste publicly on a courtesan' (*Wrongs* 92). This image invokes *Vindication*'s imaginings of fathers 'debasing [their] sentiments, by visiting the harlot,' who is portrayed as a homewrecking outsider to the family unit (68). While primarily blaming men for this destruction, Wollstonecraft continues to imply that sex workers — seemingly unable to experience or respect maternal sentiment — are complicit in disrupting a chaste mother's domestic peace. They are associated with extravagant waste, estranged from the serious moral and fiscal responsibilities of family life. This polarisation of respectable wives and illicit mistresses resonates with the memoirists' exclusion from their keepers' public-facing family units, challenged by Coghlan and Sheldon when they assert their rights to financial support from keepers. As Pendleton argues, the 'good wife as a social category cannot exist without the whore' in dominant patriarchal discourses; I contend that this binary also informs Wollstonecraft's depictions of mother-citizens and sex workers.[18] Indeed, Maria's outrage about her husband's attempts to prostitute her is articulated in terms of her maternal status, when he 'dared sacrilegiously to barter the honour of the mother of [his] child' (*Wrongs* 95). By expressing concerns about the venereal infections that are implicitly passed to her via his intercourse with 'wantons of the lowest class,' she implies that her body is worth more than those (labouring-class) women who are routinely exchanged and exploited through prostitution (78). Her 'health suffers,' and she wonders how she could have 'returned to his sullied arms' (78). Wollstonecraft implies that Venables' failure to differentiate his chaste

[18] Eva Pendleton. "'Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73- 82, 73.

wife Maria from these sex workers is his most 'unpardonable offence.'[19] She invokes images of bodily contagion which were interpreted as signs of sex workers' infertility in the eighteenth century, distinguished from Maria's chaste, soon to be childbearing body.[20] It is important, however, to note Maria's distinction between the socially-mobile 'courtesan,' and lower-ranking sex workers who act out of necessity, often to support children. She pities the seduced mother of her husband's illegitimate daughter, who, like Hannah, is 'thrown on the town' after childbirth; indeed 'the state of the [sick] child affects' Maria so much, that she provides her with additional financial support (82). Despite Wollstonecraft's greater scrutiny of women's socioeconomic circumstances in *Wrongs,* she still implies that Jemima's experiences of prostitution have suppressed her capacity for such exemplary maternal sentiments.

Wollstonecraft's depiction of Jemima's abortion following a pregnancy that results from rape is deployed to compound her natural maternal instincts and embodiment, thwarted by a brutal misogynistic system. This cements her solidarity with Maria, who is mourning the infant wrenched away by her husband. Her pregnancy is initially unwanted, but Jemima experiences a kind of burgeoning maternal attachment before being pressured into abortion by the father. Her 'mixed sensation of despair and tenderness' for the foetus, and her 'wishing to die' as the abortion drug 'stopped the sensations of new-born life, which [she] felt with indescribable emotion,' mark the harrowing conflict between these feelings, and her hostile socioeconomic circumstances (*Wrongs* 43). While she is at first undecided about the abortion, her 'rage... gives place to despair' when she hears of her rapist's schemes of getting a nurse for the stigmatised 'brat [she] had laid to him,' so she resolves on taking the drug he has supplied to precipitate it (43). Julie Kipp argues that Jemima 'longs for release' from pregnancy, which she experiences as 'a state of self-imprisonment,' perceiving her 'abortion as an act of desperation born of suicidal despair.'[21] However, I argue that this act is framed as an alternative, bleak vision of maternal compassion, undertaken to break the familiar cycle of maternal absence and patriarchal control that is outlined for this prospective child. As with Inchbald's nuanced portrait of Hannah acting against her natural instincts, Wollstonecraft contextualises abortion within an unmarried mother's specific socioeconomic circumstances. Maternal care is inconducive to the demands of survival.

[19] Julie McGonegal. "Of Harlots and Housewives: A Feminist Materialist Critique of the Writings of Wollstonecraft." *Women's Writing*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347-361, 355-356.
[20] Tony Henderson. *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London.* Routledge, 2013, 168.
[21] Julie Kipp. *Romanticism, Maternity and the Body Politic.* Cambridge University Press, 2003, 80.

Jemima's experiences counteract stereotypes of unnatural motherhood in the prostitute imaginary, which inform *Vindication*'s images of ruthless female libertines 'sacrificing to lasciviousness the parental affection, that ennobles instinct, either [by] destroying the embryo in the womb, or casting it off when born' (*Vindication* 218). With her first-hand experiences of mothering her own illegitimate child by the time of writing *Wrongs,* Wollstonecraft's new sensitivity to the destructive impact of social stigma upon unmarried mothers is reflected in Jemima's characterisation.[22] If Maria's polarisation of sex workers and mothers is aligned with *Vindication*'s elitist perspectives, Jemima's narrative captures the development of Wollstonecraft's intersectional feminism at the point of producing *Wrongs.* Like both of her heroines, Wollstonecraft had privately lamented the injustice of mothers lacking legal rights over their children: 'considering the care and anxiety a woman must have about a child before it comes into the world, it seems to me, by a natural right, to belong to her... [but] it is sufficient for man to condescend to get a child, in order to claim it.'[23] She refused to 'lie under obligations of a pecuniary kind' to Imlay and longed to stay in Paris, where altered illegitimacy laws meant that '[her] girl would be freer' (*Letters* 281, 285). Wollstonecraft was later forced to compromise her philosophical principles by marrying Godwin, since 'the appearance of another illegitimate child would have placed her clearly outside the confines of social acceptability.'[24] Jemima and her child would be subjugated under the jurisdiction of a cruel father, sanctioned by England's patriarchal laws. Wollstonecraft implies that Jemima's abortion must take place before her entry into prostitution, signalling a critical turning point at which she is completely disconnected from her maternal status. However, this episode represents the struggles of women from all social strata to exercise control over their bodies and their maternal experiences in a stifling misogynistic system.

Maria and Jemima are therefore united on the grounds of their maternal embodiment, which is suppressed and controlled by external patriarchal forces. The image of Jemima's womb quickening with the 'sensations of newborn life' before her abortion, which she experiences with 'indescribable emotion' (*Wrongs* 43), is comparable to the grieving Maria's 'burning bosom' while she is locked in prison, lactating in her child's absence (7). Coghlan is also incarcerated by cruel patriarchal forces, her ambition to breastfeed similarly thwarted as

[22] E.J. Clery. "Mary Wollstonecraft: A Feminist Exile in Paris." *Litteraria Pragensia,* vol. 30, no. 60, 2019, pp. 29-46, 42

[23] Mary Wollstonecraft. *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd, Allen Lane, 2003, 239.

[24] Shelley King. "Introduction." Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray.* Edited By Shelley King and John B. Pierce. Oxford University Press, 1999, p.ix.

she describes her baby 'crying for the sustenance that famished nature refused!'[25] In all cases, the female body is frustrated, prevented from fulfilling the mother's drive to carry and nurture her child. Regardless of class distinctions, and Jemima's subsequent experiences of prostitution, these women's bodies are — or have been — maternal. Just as Coghlan suggests that she was 'far better calculated for the purer joys of domestic life' in a position of autonomy and happiness with the man she loved, thwarted when she is instead forced into 'honourable prostitution,' Wollstonecraft demonstrates the catastrophic impact of patriarchal control upon women's maternal potential (*Coghlan* 18). While Maria is 'bastilled... for life' by her abusive husband, and Jemima struggles under the influence of her abusive master, there is no liberating space for these virtues to develop; women's vital contributions to civic life are thwarted (*Wrongs* 87). All of these women are literally or figuratively 'bastilled' within a misogynistic system. Coghlan and Wollstonecraft reinforce the necessity of revolution for women, who should be liberated according to its principles of freedom and equality. Kipp suggests that the characters feel imprisoned by their maternal bodies and identities, but I argue that their incarceration symbolises how their misogynistic context forcibly *prevents* them from unfolding their authentic instincts and aspirations of maternal care (Kipp 80). Just as Coghlan looks to the fall of the Bastille with hope for 'destruction to long established systems... an era replete with events, still in the womb of time to produce' (81), Wollstonecraft situates women's radical potential within their maternal embodiment, unleashed upon their escape from patriarchal imprisonment. By 1797, she realised that the walls of this bastille had not been levelled by democratic politics, either in France or Britain. Robespierre perpetuated the systemic misogyny that incarcerated women (Trouille 69), while English women remained unprotected by their nation. Women were rendered 'nationless, homeless,' alienated from the rights of citizenship in their countries (Kipp 85). The struggles of Coghlan, Maria and Jemima reflect the ways in which mothers, and indeed all women, were yet to be liberated by the supposedly transformative power of revolution. Coghlan asserts her status as a multidimensional sexual and political subject, whose maternal virtues are unhindered by sexual labour; unlike Wollstonecraft, she invests a woman actively working in the sex trade with the radical energies of a mother-citizen.

Wollstonecraft's use of strategic essentialism, combined with an emphasis upon Jemima's dire material circumstances, allows this character to be depicted as a true casualty of the system.[26] She is worthy, alongside Maria, of her readership's sympathies. Wollstonecraft

[25] Margaret Coghlan, *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794, 99.
[26] Gail Pheterson. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Context*, no. 37, 1993, pp. 39-64, 58.

stresses that Jemima is not a lascivious, careless caricature of the prostitute imaginary, inherently devoid of maternal instinct. Mirroring Hannah's failed attempt at infanticide, her instincts are thwarted by external patriarchal pressures. Wollstonecraft confirms that Jemima 'had not even the pleasure of being enticed into vice' (*Wrongs* 43). Implicitly, the memoirists' shameless, prosperous hedonism and self-determination lies beyond the bounds of ideological sympathy (Pheterson, "Stigma" 58). While Hannah is persistently ventriloquised with sentimental expressions of shame, Jemima discusses her situation in pragmatic terms — and is even given a political voice to condemn the system that creates it. The image of her 'crawling' from her sickbed to ask herself 'the cruel question, "whither shall I go?"' emphasises the absolute necessity of her next step into prostitution (*Wrongs* 43). This practical reasoning signals the impossibility of dwelling on her suffering, and an abrupt disconnection from her natural, developing maternal instincts. Jemima and Maria are situated together on the common ground of maternal instinct stifled by male abuse, operating both within and beyond the traditional marital unit. As modern feminist critics, it is important to consider the exclusionary potential of Wollstonecraft's attempts to unite women on the basis of these supposedly shared biological and emotional functions. Her vision of feminist solidarity rests upon strategies of pinning down the 'real, true essence' of womanhood (Fuss xi), which are routinely weaponised in a patriarchal system against women who are 'delegitimized for failing to conform' to supposedly feminine characteristics.[27] Crucially, in comparison to other revolutionary feminist texts of this period, Wollstonecraft's strategy serves a progressive purpose: helping to rehabilitate a former sex worker within the domain of natural womanhood, and thus set her on a track of political enlightenment beyond the conventional Harlot's Progress.

While Jemima's sentiments flourish under the tuition of Maria, Jemima also educates Maria about the maternal experiences of labouring class women. This further reflects the developing intersectionality of Wollstonecraft's feminism at the point of writing *Wrongs.* As discussed in Chapter Two, Maria initially makes prejudiced assumptions about Jemima being unusually 'superior to her class' because she is 'no fool' (*Wrongs* 10). When Jemima enquires what other reason there is, besides madness, for Maria's refusal to eat, she states her motivation as 'grief,' adding that she 'would not ask the question if [she] knew what it was' (10). Jemima's 'forcible reply' of shaking her head, with a 'ghastly smile of desperate fortitude,' immediately undermines Maria's diminishment of her emotional subjectivity on this score (10). Wollstonecraft gives Jemima a powerful, politically informed voice, with which she not only

[27] Julia Serano. *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive.* Seal Press, 2013, 214.

educates the middle-class protagonist about her personal suffering, tethered strongly to her own thwarted maternal experiences, but also about those of other labouring class mothers. Jemima's response to Maria's grief-fuelled loss of appetite implicitly signals the remembrance of her own suffering. She may also recall the struggles of her seduced mother, who also, as she discusses later, 'resolved to famish herself and injured her health by the attempt' while pregnant, because she was so 'grieved to the soul by [the] neglect, and unkind treatment' of Jemima's father (36). Wollstonecraft suggests that Jemima's understanding of the suffering experienced by mothers in a misogynistic system is broader and deeper than Maria can imagine. Where the protagonist may have struggled to sympathise with women, including wetnurses, who seemingly lack 'a mother's tenderness, a mother's self-denial,' Jemima carefully contextualises their conduct within their hostile socioeconomic environments (7). As a result of hearing Jemima's story, Maria is guided to a new state of enlightenment, which 'makes her thoughts take a wider range' about the intersectionality of women's suffering (55).

In one of the novel's potential endings, Jemima is allowed to fulfil her radical potential as a secondary mother-figure to Maria's child. She is represented as a maternal educator, well-equipped to guide both the protagonist and her daughter to a state of enlightenment. Maria realises that Jemima can fulfil this role, after hearing about her life experiences. Appealing to Jemima for help in finding her child, she begs: 'assist me to snatch her from destruction!' (*Wrongs* 55). With her help, Maria realises that she can 'give [her daughter] an education... prepare her body and mind to encounter the ills which await her sex' (55). On these terms, Maria vows to 'teach' the infant to consider Jemima 'as her second mother' (55). As Rebecca Davies notes, 'just to be a woman was to have the potential to be a maternal educator' in this period, where individuals could embrace 'their biological determinism to some extent,' and thus 'rewrite women's position in society' (Davies 5). Wollstonecraft implies that Maria and Jemima will embark on a 'united partnership of shared parenting,' but I would add that Jemima's life experiences give her a unique didactic role which extends beyond biological mothering (Davies 79). While Maria lies in despair, Jemima is a steering force of feminist progress. She has secretly taken back Maria's daughter — who, previously suspected dead, was actually being concealed by Venables. She brings the little girl to a semi-conscious Maria, who has attempted suicide in her absence, and forcefully urges her back to life with the command: 'behold your child!' (*Wrongs,* 137). In this tone of educational authority, Jemima declares: 'I have snatched her from misery — and (now she is alive again) would you leave her alone in the world, to endure what I have endured?' (137). Sympathetically connecting her own

experiences, of losing her mother and suffering in isolation, to the case of Maria's daughter, Jemima drives home the feminist lesson that Maria has lost sight of: female solidarity can now sustain her, and enable her to mother beyond male influence. Having been driven to abortion in the absence of this support, Jemima now prevents another woman from effectively undertaking the same act, since Maria is at this point pregnant with Darnford's baby. Jemima has been 'tutoring [Maria's daughter] all the journey' about the identity of her biological mother, an education which is vital to the restoration of their bond (137). This is reminiscent of the critical roles that Sheldon and Leeson play in reconnecting parents and children, and becoming surrogate mothers themselves to vulnerable young girls. As Leeson observes, 'in [her] own self, [she] has bitterly experienced the fatal consequences' of cruelty, which drives her to proactively support other young women (*Leeson* 103). Like these memoirists, Wollstonecraft now depicts mothering as a 'social responsibility,' as opposed to a purely biological role.[28] While she draws strategically on visions of essential maternal feeling throughout this novel, giving Jemima a second chance at maternal care has the impact of 'reinventing normative motherhood, and undermining its individualism and essentialism' (O' Reilly 146).

Jemima and Maria must still be relocated to a desexualised household that is insulated from male interference. Unlike Sheldon and Leeson's representations of mother work unfolding within brothels or kept women's households — facilitated by their influential roles as madams, and negotiations with keepers — Wollstonecraft suggests that Jemima's mothering can only unfold outside of prostitution. The memoirists' 'forms of opposition are necessarily impure and draw from the very systems of oppression [they] wish to overthrow' (Pendleton 78), but Wollstonecraft envisages a space in which women can mother independently beyond these sexual negotiations. She also suggests that the sexual and maternal dimensions of women's identities cannot afford to coexist, in a misogynistic climate where female sexuality is open to exploitation. Amongst most of *Wrongs*' potential endings, Maria's Imlay-esque lover Darnford proves to be a disloyal distraction. This is hinted at earlier in the novel, when he is described 'flatteringly' speaking of her child 'as if it had been his own' (*Wrongs* 122). During their first interactions, Darnford leads Maria to 'think of nothing else' but him, and she proves responsive: 'if she thought of her daughter, it was to wish she had a father who her mother could respect and love' (*Wrongs* 23). Maria demonstrates a strong fixation upon this traditional

[28] Andrea O'Reilly. *Matricentric Feminism.* Demeter Press, 2021, 146.

family unit, and, understandably, cannot imagine raising her daughter without male support. It is implied that Darnford plays deceptively upon this need. While reflecting Wollstonecraft's personal belief in this period that a 'free union can be as authentic and enduring as legalised marriage,' Maria's desire for Darnford, her emotional fantasy of devoted fatherhood, also seems tethered to practical concerns (Clery 44). But having lived her life beyond these structures, Jemima can envision a fresh alternative. She grounds her friend in a new, radical reality: *she* will be the second parent that Maria's child can 'respect and love.' As Batchelor observes, this child returns to a 'a community in which heterosexual love has been abandoned for the more enduring solace of female companionship,' suggesting that Wollstonecraft is ultimately unable to 'unite women's parental and erotic desires' ("Mothers" 158). While women's sexualities are weaponised against them as instruments of patriarchal control, this is the only viable alternative. Jemima is given a dynamic role as a feminist cycle breaker, trailblazing new ways to mother beyond patriarchal restrictions. But her solutions are rooted within this desexualised, morally purifying household, where both women can recover from the moral impact of male sexual exploitation, and raise a daughter who is untainted by its influence. Women cannot truly develop their maternal virtues while engaging in 'common and legal prostitution,' Wollstonecraft suggests (*Vindication* 229). Implicitly, she defines sex workers, and their sexually corrupt spaces, in opposition to this radical family of mother-citizens.

Part III: *The Victim of Prejudice*

Hays tailors her representation of Mary's maternal struggles to the volatile climate of 1799, amid the exposure of Wollstonecraft's illegitimate motherhood in Godwin's biography of his late wife, and mounting backlash against her sexual politics.[29] *Victim*'s portrait of a sex worker's failure to care for her illegitimate daughter — and the legacy of corruption she imprints upon her — reflects Hays' reliance upon misogynistic tropes to represent not only the failures in moral sentiment that arise from prostitution, but also the shocking destruction of maternal virtue. Mr Raymond, the man who once wished to marry Mary, and who became an adoptive father to her daughter (named Mary Raymond) after her death, writes his charge a letter revealing her illegitimate origins. This portrait of Mary's physical and moral disorder defines her in opposition to patriarchal visons of maternal virtue *and* feminist ideals of the morally purifying mother-citizen, reinforced by tropes of contagion and unnatural motherhood from

[29] Claudia L. Johnson. *Equivocal Beings*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, xxii; Andrew McInnes. *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period*. Routledge, 2017, 4.

the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary. Raymond warns his adopted daughter that she cannot marry the respectable man she loves, William, and cautions her against following her mother's legacy of sexual transgression. He also provides a separate account of events, written by Mary herself. But before the protagonist reads this, he encourages her to perceive her mother through his own misogynistic rhetorical lens. His depiction of a woman 'with a wan and haggard countenance, her clothes rent and her hair dishevelled... stained with blood, disordered by recent inebriation, disfigured by vice, and worn by disease' is a horrifying foil to morally purifying maternal ideals.[30] There is no trace of maternal identity in his representation, let alone of the multidimensional human subjects represented in the memoirs. Mary's corruption defies the paradigm of 'chastened dignity' outlined in *Vindication*, and Maria's aspirations to morally purifying maternal care (*Vindication* 223). Prior to this point in the narrative, Mary Raymond is presented with the example of Mrs Neville, the curate's wife, who is 'tender, chaste and dignified,' raising children who are 'objects of her tender solicitude' (*Victim* 44). Her mother is a caricatured foil to this modest, doting paradigm. Raymond's implications of venereal disease also invoke contemporary associations — active even within feminist treatises of the 1790s — between sex workers and fertility-destroying infections (Henderson 168). Mary is persistently defined by Raymond's degrading epithets in this letter, as 'unfortunate, self-abandoned,' and the 'wretched victim of sensuality and vice' (*Victim* pp. 60-61). In both conservative and liberal discourses, sex workers are persistently reviled for their 'unnatural deeds and unnatural bodies' (Mac and Smith 27). By reducing Mary to a cipher of physical and moral corruption, Raymond is complicit in the prejudice that disrupts any kind of imaginative bond between a daughter and the mother she has lost. These distorted, fragmented remains of Mary's existence jar with her own nuanced account of thwarted maternal instinct, which follows Raymond's letter within Hays' strategically sequenced group of voices.

Through Mary's account, which takes the form of a confessional letter to Raymond, Hays counteracts his caricature by demonstrating that contemporary standards of devoted, self-sacrificing motherhood are rendered impossible by women's dependence on men. However, she still ventriloquises Mary to imply that she lacks the moral foundations to successfully mother her child. After being seduced and abandoned, she finds, 'to fill up the measure of her distress,' that she is 'about to become a mother' (*Victim* 63). Echoing Hannah and Jemima's horror upon discovering their pregnancies, Hays begins to explore the uncomfortable connections between natural maternal feeling and the material conditions of women's lives.

[30] Mary Hays. *The Victim of Prejudice.* Edited by Eleanor Ty, Broadview, 1998, pp. 59-60.

Those idealised 'feelings of peculiar and overwhelming tenderness,' which were 'standard prescriptions for maternal excellence,' are actually governed by external circumstances.[31] Thus, Hays sympathetically contextualises Mary's entry into keeping with another man, who promises to support her during this vulnerable period. Her 'declining virtue [is] assailed by affected sympathy, by imprecations on the wretch who had deserted [her], and an offer of asylum and protection' (*Victim* 64). However, Hays' moral criticisms are clear in this description. Reproducing *Vindication*'s theories about women being conditioned to develop internal moral weaknesses which make them vulnerable to male duplicity, Mary observes that her 'heart [was] too weak for principle' (64). She was 'educated in the lap of indolence [and] enervated by pernicious indulgence,' and therefore her 'weak judgement was dazzled and [her] virtue overpowered' by this keeper (64). If she had married the principled Raymond, she regretfully suggests, she may have 'enjoyed the endearing relations, fulfilled the respectable duties of mistress, wife, and mother' (63). Beyond this stable, chaste middle-class family unit, Mary's maternal sentiments cannot truly flourish. As discussed in Chapter Two, Raymond casually references his own 'years in the dissipations customary to young men of [his] age and rank,' after which, 'wearied with a heartless intercourse' he simply decides to 'marry, and cultivate domestic endearments' (58). These past debaucheries do not irrevocably damage his moral faculties, or make him an unfit father. While Hays subtly references the double standards of men being allowed to learn and evolve from their sexual mistakes, she also inserts her commentaries upon women's educational failings into Mary's story, repeatedly attributing her maternal struggles to her moral weaknesses.

Still, Hays condemns the socioeconomic pressures that drive unmarried mothers to prostitution. At a point where her heart was 'not yet wholly corrupted' (*Victim* 64), Mary is deprived of what Hays would perceive as respectable income-generating labour — like Hannah's humble work on the farm — and instead seduced into keeping. Mary's account particularly resonates with Leeson's polemical attack on those who might have 'pitied [her] first transgression' on the grounds of her 'youth, inexperience, and affection,' but judge that she had 'no excuse' for her subsequent sexual errors (*Leeson* 32). Mary writes:

> Unable to labour, ashamed to solicit charity, helpless, pennyless, feeble, delicate, thrown out with reproach from society, borne down with a consciousness of irretrievable error, exposed to insult, to want, to contumely, to every species of aggravated distress, in a situation requiring

[31] Toni Bowers. "A Point of Conscience: Breastfeeding and Maternal Authority in *Pamela* 2." *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1995, pp. 259-278, 265.

> sympathy, tenderness, assistance – from whence was I to draw fortitude to combat these accumulated evils? By what magical power or supernatural aid was a being, rendered, by all the previous habits of life and education, systematically weak and helpless, at once to assume a courage thus daring and heroic? (65)

This description echoes Leeson's commentary on her impossible situation:

> Were you ever on the point of starving? Did you ever experience real want... for not till I had endured all this misery, and felt the severe pangs of hunger, did I err again: Perhaps you utter your censures in a decent, comfortable room, after a plentiful meal, and surrounded by your relations and friends... How could I have gone to service? Bred up as I had been, for what service was I fit? Who would have taken a servant without a character... Instead of holding out a hand to raise me up and support me; instead of alluring me back to the paths of Virtue, by gentleness and compassion, [my sisters] plunged me into sorrow and distress' (32).

Hays and Leeson list a succession of socioeconomic struggles which interlock to create an inescapable trap. Both authors are also concerned with processes of cultural conditioning, exploring the ways in which patriarchal culture shapes women to be helpless without male support. They are set up to fail, especially when this support depends upon conforming to patriarchal rules of female conduct. All of these writers, Inchbald and Wollstonecraft included, pay special attention to the struggles unmarried mothers face while attempting to raise their children independently within this system. They expose the hypocritical forces which deprive women of the means to fulfil these duties, but condemn them for the income-generating labour they are compelled to engage in for this reason. Both Hays and Leeson encourage their readerships to form sympathetic connections with women in these predicaments. Hays' suggestion that Mary would require magic to overcome these pressures demonstrates the mystifying impenetrability of the customs that oppress women — only supernatural powers could overcome these barriers (*Victim* 44). Hays uses this metaphor to address the cultural constraints imposed upon women in her polemical *Appeal,* arguing that they are enclosed in a kind of magic circle, out of which they cannot move, but to contempt or destruction.'[32] Similarly, Emma Courtney questions why she was not 'educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour,' and why women are 'rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint... confined within a magic circle, without daring by magnanimous effort, to dissolve

[32] Mary Hays. *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women.* J. Johnson, 1798, 111.

the barbarous spell.'[33] In *Victim,* Hays follows Leeson and Wollstonecraft by examining the interaction of cultural constraints with socioeconomic pressures, interrogating the ideological double bind that confines unmarried mothers to prejudice and poverty. It is implied that, even if Mary had received the virtuous education that Hays endorses — and did not even fall in the first place — she still would not be able to establish her autonomy beyond these patriarchal pressures.

Representing the period in which Mary gives birth, Hays portrays the formation of the bond between mother and child as a process of moral purification. As with Hannah and Jemima's burgeoning maternal attachments, Hays suggests that sexually transgressive women are entirely capable of such natural sentiments:

> I received, as the tribute of humanity and friendship, that assistance, without which I had not the means of existence, and was delivered, in due time, of a lovely female infant. While bedewing it with my tears (delicious tears! Tears that shed a balm into my lacerated spirit!) I forgot for a while its barbarous father, the world's scorn, and my blasted prospects: the sensations of the injured woman, of the insulted wife, were absorbed for a time in the stronger sympathies of the delighted mother (65).

Mary's maternal emotions are associated with the morning dew of a new day, reviving and healing her spirit, and apparently cleansing her of the father's sexual corruption. This natural imagery recalls Hannah's process of moral purification while mothering on the farm. Mary is similarly cocooned by her powerful instincts, which make her temporarily forget her previous distress and the external pressures that threaten to disrupt this idyllic experience. As the primary carer of her daughter, Mary implicitly undertakes the purifying maternal offices that were endorsed by Rousseau and revolutionary feminist writers as the basis of women's citizenship, particularly breastfeeding. Here, Hays appears to counteract Wollstonecraft's argument in *Vindication* that 'weak enervated women who catch the attention of libertines' are 'unfit to be mothers' (*Vindication* 218). It is implied that these maternal offices can purify Mary of the sexuality that brought her motherhood about in the first place (Rose 64). However, the verb 'absorbed' suggests that maternity and sexuality cannot coexist; one identity inevitably consumes the other, in line with *Vindication*'s desexualised maternal ideal (a dignified companion, rather than a degraded servant to her husband), and Maria's final reconciliation to a household without male sexual distractions. While contending that they should be able to prioritise their maternal duties above any perceived obligations to men, as a unique source of

[33] Mary Hays. *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney.* Edited by Marilyn L. Brooks, Broadview, 2000, 66.

moral strength in a patriarchal system, Hays ultimately splinters female identities into separate categories. Since Mary remains under the influence of a corrupting sexual contract, the narrator suggests that her maternal idyll cannot last. Rousseau's ideal of the morally purifying breastfeeding mother with her 'incorruptible milk,' at the centre of an 'imaginary natural family immune to social forces and cemented by the bonds of mutual love,' is incompatible with the demands of survival.[34]

Later in the narrative, this binary is even applied to Mrs Neville, who turns out to be so dependent on her husband that she cannot continue living for her children when he dies. 'I had no individual existence; my very being was absorbed in that of my husband,' she confesses to Mary on her deathbed (*Victim* 173). In this case, 'absorbed' implies that Mrs Neville is lost in her marital commitments with no sense of her authentic or autonomous selfhood. Hays suggests that women are consumed by one role or the other; as the institution of marriage stood, the two could not coexist. Under contemporary coverture laws, husband and wife were 'one person in law,' as 'the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.'[35] These legal discourses of 'incorporation' and 'consolidation' resonate with Hays' image of 'absorption.' In this state of dependence, women cannot entirely commit themselves to their authentic maternal sentiments. Hays suggests that even in the legitimate confines of marriage and with the most benevolent husbands, women can be drawn into a similar state, to the detriment of their maternal virtues. Wollstonecraft expresses concern about the marriage contract enabling men to disrupt women's maternal experiences on a more extreme level in *Wrongs,* through Maria having her child 'torn from her' by her husband, 'even while she was discharging the tenderest maternal office' (*Wrongs* 12). Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson all highlight the volatile, unstable socioeconomic situations created by fickle keepers during their pregnancies, with Lawless' violence even culminating in Leeson's miscarriage (*Leeson* 49). However, *Vindication* focuses on the insidious processes of cultural conditioning experienced by wives like Hays' Mrs Neville. Wollstonecraft argues: 'to be a good mother — a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands' (*Vindication* 233). Women who are concerned with building their moral strength never become 'desolate' widows, because their 'heart[s] turn to [their] children with redoubled fondness... anxious to

[34] Mary Jacobus. *First Things: Reading the Maternal Imaginary*. Routledge, 1995, 207 and 211.
[35] William Blackstone. *Commentaries on the Laws of England* vol I. Edited by David Lemmings, Oxford University Press, 2016, 284.

provide for them, affection gives a sacred heroic cast to [their] maternal duties' (*Vindication* 118). Similarly, Hays deploys subordinated mistresses and wives like Mary and Mrs Neville to reinforce the social and political importance of women being able to fulfil empowered domestic positions in a more equitable society. She excludes those deemed to be morally weak from her visions for feminist progress.

Hays broaches territory that Wollstonecraft stops short of exploring: a woman's experience of relying on prostitution to support her child. But in contrast to the varied, nuanced experiences communicated by the memoirists — who represent the loving, passionate, and in Coghlan's case pragmatic mistress / keeper arrangements in which they raise children — Hays suggests that this experience can only ever be futile and ill-fated. Mary's arrangement is a source of inevitable moral degradation, cementing her downfall through helping to 'stifle the declining struggles of virtue' (*Victim* 65). Hays cannot imagine what she defines as the morally purifying work of maternal care being facilitated by the impure sexual labour of kept womanhood. Mary's state of dependence is reinforced through the observation that she 'had not the means of existence' without his supposed 'humanity and friendship' (65). Her sentiments rest upon male-orchestrated material conditions, reflected through her suggestion that this 'new friend, to whose tender cares [she] seemed indebted for the sweet emotions which now engrossed [her] heart, appeared entitled to [her] grateful esteem,' meaning that her 'confidence in him became every hour more unbounded' (65). This language of obligation hints at unwritten sexual exchanges, implying that Mary's natural maternal feeling is commodified and controlled within a corrupt business contract that is covertly orchestrated by this duplicitous keeper. Fundamentally, her sentiments rest on the ephemeral 'licentious revels' of a man who soon becomes 'wearied of his conquest' and withdraws his support accordingly (65). They cannot thrive in this context of sexual exploitation.

Mary's maternal failings are rooted in Hays' moral concerns about failings of sexual virtue. This character is ventriloquised to suggest that mother work and sex work are oppositional and incompatible; they cannot be performed by the same body (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Mary is distracted from her maternal duties by sexual excess, alluded to as 'habits of voluptuous extravagance,' while the 'libertine manners' of those whom she is 'now compelled to be the associate, rapidly advance the corruption' (*Victim* 66). As discussed in Chapter One, Hays endorsed female sexual expression on terms of sincere emotional attachment, and felt 'too great stress' was placed upon chastity (1). Echoing the author's personal experiences of unrequited passion, Emma Courtney vows that she 'would give [her]self' to Augustus Harley as

a wife or a mistress; however, she is only allowed to become an adoptive mother after her sexual passion for him proves impossible to consummate (*Emma* 155). Mary is altogether deprived of sexual subjectivity. The forces that 'stifle the declining struggles of [her] virtue' emerge from corruption, not from the liberated expression of passionate love (*Victim* 66). This verb 'stifle' is repeated, now in specific reference to the suppression of Mary's maternal attachment:

> In a mind unfortified by principle, modesty is a blossom fragile as lovely. Every hour, whirled in a giddy round of dissipation, sunk me deeper in shameless vice. The mother became stifled in my heart; my visits to my infant, which I had been reluctantly prevailed upon to place with a hireling, were less and less frequent (66).

As she moves further through her Harlot's Progress, Mary becomes physically and emotionally disconnected from her daughter. Her reluctant decision to place the baby with a nurse signals — as in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* — a critical turning point of failure to fulfil the morally purifying duties of maternal care. According to the mutual concerns of patriarchal commentators and revolutionary feminists, Mary is guilty of 'sacrificing' her child to the 'decadent pleasures of the social whirl' (Perry 227). She is also incapable of sustaining her child with the pure 'incorruptible milk' of the ideal republican mother, because her body is marred by impure sexual negotiations (Jacobus 207, 214). The wetnurse's milk was also thought to signify corruption, maternal alienation and neglect, a marker of *ancien régime* immorality (Jacobus 207). This is Wollstonecraft's nightmare; the threat of the wetnurse contributes to Jemima's abortion, having herself endured the trauma of being raised by one who lacked the 'tenderness of a woman' (*Victim* 37). For Coghlan and Leeson, and indeed many working women of the late eighteenth century, outsourcing maternal care is a practical step which allows them to engage in their income-generating labour.[36] In the specific, politically fraught context of 1799, Hays' focus upon Mary's licentious behaviour carries an overtly conservative moral message about the incompatibility of her stigmatised sexual conduct with the devoted mother-citizen's caring practices — reinforcing the long-standing patriarchal nexus of maternity and chastity.

Hays' efforts to represent Mary's thoughts and feelings draw heavily upon tropes of corruption from the prostitute imaginary. This character's internalisation of patriarchal ideology

[36] Alexandra Shepard. "Working Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London. " *History Workshop Journal*. dbad008, 2023, pp. 1-24, 11. doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbad008. Accessed 7 December 2023.

disrupts the bond between mother and child by making her perceive the relationship between her own identity, and that of her 'lovely female infant,' in a different light (*Victim* 65). She recalls:

> Its innocence contrasted with my guilt, it revived too powerfully in my heart the remembrance of what I was, the reflection on what I might have been, and the terrible conviction, which I dared not dwell upon, of the fate which yet menaced me. I abstained from this soul-harrowing indulgence, and the ruin of my mind became complete (66).

The child's purity becomes a foil to Mary's socially inscribed shame. The complex emotional ties of this maternal bond are reduced to crude moralistic signs, dominant in both conservative and radical discourses during this period: innocence versus guilt, purity versus corruption. The only escape from her mental torture is complete disconnection. The *Histories* author suggests that penitents who 'truly love their children give them up as proof of that devotion,' reflecting the way 'stigmatised women are denied the cultural capital associated within the eighteenth-century cult of motherhood,' even in such sentimental depictions of thwarted maternal care (Ledoux 219). Mary's decision to reject her maternal duties results from intense socioeconomic pressures. However, this decision also signals the complete ruin of her mind, her descent into a state of abject corruption which is entirely estranged from the morally purifying mother-citizen. Invoking tropes of contagion from the prostitute imaginary, Hays makes Mary express anxieties about her corruptive influence over her daughter. She claims to omit 'disgusting details' of her guilt and infamy, to avoid 'staining the youthful purity of [her] unfortunate offspring, into whose hands these sheets may fall' (66). This episode recalls Leeson's self-condemnation following the deaths of children who are apparently tainted by her own illegitimate sexual embodiment (*Leeson* 49-50; Bromwich and DeJong 20), her fixation upon 'what' she is according to the categorisations of a patriarchal culture. Hays may also subtly critique women's forced internalisation of these ideologies, by sympathetically representing the catastrophic impact of this process. Writing within her hostile cultural context, Hays couches these concerns in self-castigating, misogynistic discourses of corruption and guilt, embedding radical commentary in conservative tropes.

However, Hays suddenly switches from reproducing misogynistic tropes of monstrosity and contagion to representing Mary experiencing a different kind of moral feminist enlightenment in her prison cell, depicting her transformation from a 'fiend-like' (*Victim* 66) caricature to a devoted mother. Hays ventriloquises this character; the discursive patterns of a revolutionary feminist text can be heard from her mouth. Mary is newly purified as a

Magdalen, accepting her 'regret, shame... [and] contrition,' but simultaneously instilled, like Jemima, with the voice of a feminist maternal educator (67). Mary entrusts the principled Raymond with these guidelines for her daughter's upbringing:

> If, amidst the corruption of vaunted civilisation, thy heart can yet throb responsive to the voice of nature, and yield to the claims of humanity, snatch from destruction the child of an illicit commerce, shelter her infant purity from contagion, guard her helpless youth from a pitiless world, cultivate her reason, make her feel her nature's worth, strengthen her faculties, inure her to suffer hardship, rouse her to independence, inspire her with fortitude, with energy, with self-respect, and teach her to condemn the tyranny that would impose fetters of sex upon her mind (69).

This plea for Mary Raymond's welfare suggests that her mother is newly attuned to the intertwined callings of nature and compassion, and thus to the civic duties of motherhood. Anticipating the 'aggravated ills of life that her sex renders almost inevitable' (*Wrongs* 8), Mary's own experience makes her aware of the risks posed to a young woman in a misogynistic society, redoubled by her daughter's illegitimacy. From beyond the grave, Mary produces a Maria-esque 'written, theoretical conception of mothering in a purified and permanent form' (Davies 82). Her defence against patriarchal pressures is to instil her daughter with the rational education she never had, focused on building strength and fortitude — rather than being rendered 'systematically weak and helpless' by 'mistaken notions of beauty' (65). Like Wollstonecraft, Mary takes a feminist stand against Rousseauvian arguments that girls are 'inclined' towards vanity and aspire to be their 'own doll' in adulthood.[37] Indeed, she directly replicates the language of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication:* 'Were it not for *mistaken notions of beauty,* women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence' and to bear 'those bodily inconveniences and exertions that are requisite to strengthen the mind' (*Vindication* 158). Mary blames these superficial concerns as the root cause of her own seduction. She is fixated on her child remaining authentic to her moral principles in a corrupt world, rejecting the mental 'fetters of sex' that Raymond himself reluctantly imposes upon her daughter, through his warnings to heed her mother's fate and suppress her genuine feelings for William. Hays takes the radical step of placing these plans for a feminist education in the mouth of a former sex worker, suggesting that — had she thrived in the necessary material conditions, and been preserved from prostitution — Mary was capable of raising her child with this ideal mix of affection and reason.

[37] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; Or On Education.* Translated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom, Dartmouth College Press, 2010, 77.

Despite the loving concern that she articulates in this letter, Mary is still ventriloquised to deny her own maternal virtues. Shame is a pre-requisite for her position as a 'social critic,' as I discuss in Chapter Two, but also to her revived motherly sentiments.[38] Hays cannot allow her protagonist to transcend these conditions for sympathy. She describes her daughter as 'the child of an illicit commerce' (*Victim* 69), identifying her maternal status purely with her prostitution. Sex work becomes a 'stigmatised identifier,' overwhelming any other dimension of her identity (Bromwich and DeJong 24). Absorbing social stigma, Mary does not recognise herself as a legitimate parent. While her anxieties about her daughter's future prospects echo Jemima's perception of her unborn child as an 'object of the greatest compassion in creation' on account of its identity as a 'bastard,' they also reveal her inability to move past her own sexual transgressions (*Wrongs* 41). She describes herself as 'abandoned and wretched mother,' even amid the feminist guidance she delivers (*Victim* 69). This conflict between the epithets she imposes upon herself and her compelling, compassionate expressions of maternal care reveals the tensions in Hays' characterisation of a woman who must function as a mouthpiece for her radical arguments, but also conform to conservative imaginings of sex workers. This tension, as discussed earlier, indicates Hays' inability to be fully cognisant of sex workers' subject positions. This is symptomatic of the ideological conflict experienced by revolutionary writers co-opting patriarchal tropes for feminist ends. Like Inchbald and, to a lesser extent Wollstonecraft, Hays struggles to tread the line between condemning the system, and objectifying its victims.

Raymond's voice is heard again in an ominous endnote to this letter, reflecting the inevitable distortion of a sex worker mother's maternal experiences in a patriarchal system. This performs a similar function to the pamphlet that crudely summarises Hannah's unnatural motherhood, her 'heinous sin' of attempted infanticide (*N&A* 140). Despite the maternal love and moral guidance contained within Mary's account, Raymond only encourages her daughter to perceive her influence as dangerously corruptive. While he critiques the 'barbarous prejudices' which dictate that, 'in the eyes of the world, the misfortunes of [his daughter's] birth stain [her] unsullied youth,' his language only compounds the stigma surrounding Mary's prostitution (*Victim* 69). He addresses Mary Raymond as 'the child of infamy and calamity! Whom I rescued from the hovel of poverty and disgrace!' (69). Raymond validates the guilt that Mary feels over her child's origins by replicating her substitution of the noun 'mother' for

[38] Roxanne Eberle. *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792-1897: Interrupting the Harlot's Progress*. Palgrave, 2002, 84.

epithets of social shame, and positioning himself as the noble, principled saviour — a status made possible by his privilege. He suggests that this sex worker, in her inevitable state of moral degradation and destitution, was incapable of raising her own child. Mary's identity is reduced to her stigmatised work; her daughter is irrevocably marked as the offspring of illegitimate female embodiment in a non-conjugal sexual transaction, not a baby born of a chaste female body in the confines of marriage (Bromwich and DeJong 21). Raymond's endnote transforms Mary's 'behaviour... into an identity,' allowing her to be marked and identified according to the dictates of the dominant culture (Grant 15). His fatal acknowledgment that the 'critical period [has] arrived on which hangs the destiny of the child' closes the manuscript with a note of forceful urgency; Mary Raymond must now adhere to the codes of feminine conduct that her mother rejected (69). He later instructs her to 'preserve the manuscript which contains the fate of [her] unfortunate mother,' for he can give 'no stronger lesson... when tempted to deviate from beaten paths, beware that passion be not your guide' (102). Mary's manuscript is interpreted merely as a moralistic fable for her daughter to consult in times of temptation, rather than a testament to maternal devotion and concern in the face of social stigma.

Raymond therefore shifts the onus for Mary's downfall onto female error, rather than male exploitation and patriarchal prejudice. The very judgements he condemns are implicit within his framing of this story. As Marilyn Brooks contends, Raymond's 'stoical, rational resignation' to the necessity of his adoptive daughter obeying social custom demonstrates that he is not only 'colluding with the very prejudices' he raised her to reject, but also 'mislead[ing] her, as society refuses to allow a lesson to be learned.'[39] I argue that he also 'misleads' her on the subject of her mother's legacy, by even suggesting that there *is* a lesson to be learned. He misrepresents Mary to her daughter, boiling down her human suffering, thwarted maternal devotion and feminist moral instruction to a misogynistic cautionary tale. Mary Raymond internalises her adoptive father's interpretation of events, and fixates upon his visions of his prostitute imaginary. She too describes herself as the 'child of infamy' — the verbal echoes between these characters demonstrate the extent of her internalisation (*Victim* 77). Maternal bonds are destroyed by patriarchal ideologies which condition the protagonist to condemn her mother, and fear her example.

[39] Marilyn L. Brooks. "Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*: Chastity Renegotiated." *Women's Writing,* vol. 15, no.1, 2008, pp. 13-31, 25.

After the protagonist reads Raymond's account of her mother, followed by Mary's first-hand narration, and finally Raymond's portentous endnote to both manuscripts, she experiences visions which emanate directly from his own caricatured representations. She writes: 'I called to remembrance the image of my wretched mother: I beheld her, in idea, abandoned to infamy, cast out of society, stained with blood, expiring on a scaffold, unpitied and unwept... terrors assailed me... a shuddering horror crept through my heart' (*Victim* 72). Later, after she is raped, she again beholds 'the visionary form of [her] wretched mother' (123). The phrase 'in idea,' and the adjective 'visionary' are crucial here. Fundamentally, all Mary Raymond has are mental images, governed by patriarchal understandings of prostitution and motherhood. She has no personal, first-hand memories of her mother. In all the novels discussed in this chapter, sex workers appear as ideas, projections of the beholders' anxieties (Grant 15). These visceral images of Mary Raymond's terror demonstrate that she has been conditioned to fear a gothic spectre, the antithesis of maternal comfort, rather than the patriarchal forces that orchestrated her mother's downfall. The 'haggard, intoxicated, self-abandoned' figure she sees 'covered in blood' (123), emerges from Raymond's depiction of a woman with a 'haggard countenance, her clothes rent and her hair dishevelled... stained with blood, disordered by recent inebriation, disfigured by vice, and worn by disease' (59-60). Mary Raymond reproduces his language, and his simplistic Harlot's Progress-style imagery. She imagines her mother 'in the arms of her seducer, revelling in licentious pleasure,' then 'as the fantastic scene shifted,' descending from scenes of debauchery into being 'covered with blood, accused' of complicity in murder (123). This is epistemic violence in process — functioning only to other Mary and undermine her subjectivity, rendering her daughter unable to articulate her oppression. The complex, emotionally rich language of Mary's letter is substituted for a degraded caricature in Mary Raymond's vision, 'all pallid and ghastly, with clasped hands, streaming eyes, and agonizing earnestness... urging [her daughter] to take example from her fate' (*Victim* 123). Mary can only utter 'dying groans and reiterated warnings, in low, tremulous accents' (123). She is reduced to a voiceless rhetorical device who performs the function Raymond, and society at large, wants her to perform. She is no longer a loving mother, but a warning that haunts her vulnerable daughter. Mary Raymond's vision of 'rushing forward to clasp [her] hapless parent in a last embrace,' then quickly losing her to 'the distortions of death' represents the severing of their bond (123). Mary's legacy has indeed been 'distorted' after her death. Hays' decision to provide both Mary and Raymond's perspective prompts the reader to distinguish between her account of maternal love, and the misogynistic discourses that warp it.

Despite her first-hand experiences of male sexual exploitation and misogynistic prejudice, Mary Raymond consistently apportions blame to her mother for an imagined, fatalistic involvement in her suffering — thus fulfilling Raymond's didactic mission. She condemns her 'wretched and ill-fated mother,' declaring that she feels 'all the horror of [her] destiny' (*Victim* 137). The protagonist completely rejects her mother's intended maternal legacy, instead reproducing Raymond's earlier warnings about her miserable 'destiny' (69), triggered by Mary's selfish, thoughtless moral weakness. By exclaiming 'what calamities has thy frailty entailed upon thy miserable offspring!' (137), Mary Raymond suggests that it is not misogynistic abuse and prejudice, but her mother's sexual transgressions which have prevented her from marrying the man she loves, rendered her vulnerable to predators, and subjected her to poverty. Imposing patriarchal codes of shame upon Mary, the protagonist wishes that her mother had submitted to stigma by 'strangling [her] at [her] birth' rather than caring for her and carefully placing her in a situation where she was more likely to thrive (137). But Mary is an example of thwarted maternal sentiment written in Hannah's tradition, not a caricature of unnatural motherhood. Mary Raymond's lamentations are rooted in misogynistic judgements on female sexuality, and delivered in the style of a conservative conduct writer: 'Daughters of levity, reflect ere you give the reins to voluptuousness, reflect on the consequences in which ye are about to involve your innocent, devoted offspring!' (137). This is reminiscent of Leeson's formal warnings, seemingly tailored to patriarchal ideologies: 'Reflect on this, ye Females of turbulent tempers' (*Leeson* 49). Mary can only see her mother as a frivolous, careless sinner, who has no concern for her child's future. She shifts agency onto a woman who has actively and decisively '*given* the reins to voluptuousness,' rather than being preyed upon by exploitative men [emphasis my own]. Just as Leeson implies the gap between her actual suffering and the draconian judgements imposed upon her, Hays subtly exposes the injustice of a system that drives a child to condemn her own mother for giving her life — a conflict that is explored through Jemima's determination to prevent her child from living with the stigma she has endured. Hays invites us to compare the protagonist's view of her mother's 'levity,' with Mary's belief in her seducer's honour and the account of her maternal struggles. Hays, like Wollstonecraft, had represented female characters who were 'liable to the mistakes and weaknesses of our fragile nature' (*Emma* 36). However, her condemnation of this conduct in *Victim* may be influenced by the public ridicule she experienced after the publication of *Emma Courtney,* followed by the anti-Wollstonecraft backlash of 1798 (McInnes 36). The protagonist's voice outwardly endorses this conservative moral message, but Hays' inclusion of Mary's narrative covertly invites radical speculation and sympathy beyond these stereotypes.

Hays subtly confirms the futility of Mary Raymond's moralistic judgements, particularly her attempts to distinguish her own principled nature from her mother's perceived state of weakness. By the end of *Victim,* the protagonist has been raped by the misogynistic aristocrat Peter Osborne, propositioned by William who attempts to make her his mistress, and prevented from gaining respectable employment through constant prejudice and sexual harassment. Mary Raymond is left impoverished and isolated, but remains morally righteous. Seemingly at the point of death, she reflects:

> Involved, as by a fatal mechanism, in the infamy of my wretched mother, thrown into similar circumstances, and looking to a catastrophe little less fearful, I have still the consolation of remembering that I suffered not despair to plunge my soul in crime, that I braved the shocks of fortune, eluded the snares of vice, and struggled in the trammels of prejudice with dauntless intrepidity. But it avails me not! I sink beneath a torrent, whose resistless waves, overwhelm alike in a common ruin the guiltless and the guilty (168).

Despite facing similar difficulties to her mother, Mary Raymond insists that she did not turn to prostitution for the sake of survival. Instead, she prides herself on having fought more intrepidly for honest employment, possessing what she perceives as greater moral strength. She draws upon discourses of attack and resistance to vividly represent the struggles for authenticity that all of these novelists represent: the image of a woman's internal sense of self, buffeted and assailed by a sea of external patriarchal pressures. For Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays, sex workers inevitably sink beneath these currents. Meanwhile, the memoirists' negotiations with the dominant culture keep them afloat, reflected through Coghlan's ability to distinguish her authentic feelings from the business transaction which enables her to support herself and her daughter (*Coghlan* 53). But Mary Raymond upholds the Casualty / Collaborator binary, primarily affording ideological sympathy to those fallen women, like Jemima, who are raped (Pheterson, "Stigma" 51, 58) — or 'degraded without [their] own consent,' in Wollstonecraft's words (*Vindication* 143). This degree of sympathy is not extended to women whose apparent moral weakness leads them into extramarital sex and prostitution. The protagonist implies that a greater amount of moral strength would have prevented her mother from resorting to sexual labour. Mary Raymond overlooks the specific socioeconomic concerns that distinguish their situations, particularly her mother's maternal struggles. Instead, she condemns the indiscriminate application of social prejudice to these ostensibly 'guiltless' and 'guilty' groups of women, a binary that Hays implicitly undermines.

Hays thus unites mother and daughter in a common gendered struggle. Brooks argues that the protagonist is 'threatened by the inevitability which traps her into the victim figure,' therefore she has to be 'made into more than just the daughter of the mother' (18). Hays insists

on the need for Mary Raymond to be perceived as an 'individual... in her own time and space,' who is rid of the casually limiting influence of parentage' (Brooks 18). But in the process of trying to be more than 'just' her mother's daughter, attempting to extricate herself from the prejudice surrounding her origins, Mary Raymond also internalises this prejudice, perceiving her mother as an object of shame from which she must distinguish her own character and reputation. While appearing to endorse the protagonist's ideologies, Hays also exposes their catastrophic impact on bonds between women; the divide and conquer mechanisms of a misogynistic system even rupture ties between mothers and daughters. Hays subtly concludes that the protagonist is the victim of misogynistic prejudice, which she herself internalises — not the victim of her mother. Mary Raymond becomes her mother's double following her rape, an image which represents the intimate linkage between them. She is depicted in 'loose undress, [her] head uncovered... long dishevelled hair floating over [her] shoulders in wild disorder... looks wan and haggard... eyes unsettled and frenzied' (*Victim* 121). This clearly echoes Raymond's description of Mary, with her 'wan and haggard countenance, clothes rent, and her hair dishevelled... [with] wide and vacant eyes' (pp. 59-60), and Mary Raymond's nightmarish visions of this 'haggard' spectre (123). Hays suggests that, regardless of their different upbringings, characters, and situations — the mother's supposed moral weakness versus the daughter's principled moral strength, the mother's seduction-to-prostitution trajectory versus the daughter's rape and refusal to become a mistress — both women are victims of systemic sexual exploitation, and the social stigma that accompanies it. Having previously drawn on misogynistic tropes regarding sex workers' moral contagion, Hays implicitly challenges the protagonist's projection of misogynistic blame upon her mother. She shifts focus onto the material conditions of women's lives, starting with the chain reaction of Mary's maternal struggles. Women's forced conditions of dependence on men prevent them from establishing independent livelihoods, then condemn those who engage in prostitution for survival. There is no opportunity for women to live authentically as moral and maternal subjects in this misogynistic system, and ultimately no form of high ground.

Conclusion

Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays scrutinize the disruption of women's maternal virtues in a misogynistic socioeconomic system, opening up the radical possibility of sex workers possessing natural maternal instincts which are stifled by these external pressures. By aligning sexually transgressive women with poignant visions of maternal feeling and embodiment, these writers

move beyond caricatures of unnatural womanhood in the eighteenth-century prostitute imaginary. They generate more sympathetic visions of individuals struggling with their authentic impulses and hostile contexts. Like the memoirists — Leeson in particular — they expose and critique the social forces that disrupt the maternal experiences of mothers living beyond traditional, chaste conjugal units. In the novels, prostitution is a manifestation of patriarchal control which suppresses maternal virtues, disturbing not only the material circumstances of mothering, but also the moral foundations of maternal care. Reproducing patriarchal ideology on this score, all of the novelists define prostitution as the 'illegitimate use of female embodiment,' and juxtapose it with the 'legitimate,' morally purifying essence of mother work (Bromwich and DeJong 21). The women of these novels are fundamentally unable to balance sex work with mother work, or indeed exercise much sexual expression alongside their maternal duties. Hannah the shame-consumed penitent can only mother when her passive sexuality is tethered to her seducer. Wollstonecraft and Hays give former sex workers the voices of radical feminist educators, which can only be activated beyond the ostensible moral corruption of prostitution. Reflecting the turbulent contexts in which these novels were produced, the transgressive sexualities and maternal failures of Hannah and Mary are rooted in Magdalen-esque discourses of shame and self-castigation. This reflects Inchbald's political fears when creating this character, and the increasing need for Hays, as a disciple of Wollstonecraft, to condemn unchaste sexual conduct at the end of the century. Mary Raymond must be made to condemn her mother's transgressions; however, Hays details the complex socioeconomic backdrop to Mary's maternal experiences. Progressive ideologies are couched in conservative tropes surrounding prostitution, female sexuality and ideal motherhood. Only Jemima is granted a radical voice of defiance, with which to place blame squarely on the misogynistic forces that thwarted her maternal instincts, and potentially break this cycle for another vulnerable female infant.

Even the progressive portrait of Jemima's rehabilitation via Wollstonecraft's deployment of strategic essentialism closes down the coexistence of maternity and sexuality. In *Wrongs,* reflecting Wollstonecraft's increasingly pessimistic outlook on women's struggles to express their authentic sexual and maternal selves, female desire can be too easily exploited by male predators. As a result of these concerns, Jemima and Maria are complex, but not entirely multidimensional female characters. The memoirists represent the possibility of these dimensions coexisting, through purely transactional arrangements with keepers, passionate mistress / keeper relationships, communities of care between sex workers, or the financial

independence of brothel keeping. The women represented in these memoirs reach positions of wealth that are closed off to Hannah, Jemima and Mary, which help facilitate the material circumstances for their care work. However, the novelists estrange sex workers of all social strata from maternal virtue. Sex worker mothers are troubling, unresolvable figures of moral and political concern for these writers, throwing into relief the tensions and limits of revolutionary feminism in this increasingly hostile period.

Coda

A Different kind of Sex Worker: Redefining Prostitution in *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* (1801)

This thesis has demonstrated how, in novels and memoirs published between 1787 and 1799, the topic of prostitution became a focus of feminist debate about the influence of external socioeconomic pressures upon women's authentic desires and moral impulses. From the burgeoning radical energy of the late 1780s to the volatile, anti-Wollstonecraftian political terrain of 1799, these writers scrutinize the complex, often conflicted interplay between women's authentic selves and their actions in the world. In this fraught political landscape, feminist writers map concerns about *ancien régime* corruption onto their fictional representations of sex workers. While contextualising women's insincere behaviours within their hostile socioeconomic situations, they draw frequently upon tropes of the prostitute imaginary to construct their political arguments.[1] These writers portray sex workers as ciphers of female inauthenticity who are inevitably detached from their natural potential for moral sentiment and maternal virtue — attributes perceived by revolutionary feminists as the cornerstones of women's citizenship in a progressive society. Sex workers are used to represent the moral faults of womankind, everything that holds women back from moral and political progress. Their promiscuous sexual activities, condemned as a source of social disorder by patriarchal and feminists commentators alike in the late eighteenth century, undermine the moral significance that Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays attribute to sex as a sincere act of passion or love. By extension, sex workers go against the grain of their political projects; while actively working in the sex trade, they cannot be incorporated within the novelists' visions of liberated womanhood, and are excluded from the terms of revolutionary citizenship. These novels thus epitomise the divisions that arise when feminist writers, in the words of Mac and Smith, 'claim ownership of sex worker experiences in order to make sense of their own.'[2]

The memoirists also confront women's struggles to remain authentic in a misogynistic system, highlighting the difficulty of acting sincerely according to their inner dictates, and of asserting their human subjectivity. However, Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson rework and disrupt stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary, both through the life experiences they portray in their texts, and their methods of textual self-representation. Grappling with mechanisms of

[1] Melissa Gira Grant. *Playing the Whore.* Verso, 2014, 4.
[2] Juno Mac and Molly Smith, *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018, 11.

dehumanisation levelled against sex workers in this period, their 'impure' negotiations with men are represented as new forms of feminist resistance.[3] From their positions on society's margins, they destabilise traditional paradigms of feminine virtue, asserting their identities as multidimensional moral, sexual, maternal and political subjects who are well-qualified participants in these radical discussions. While advancing social and political arguments against class-based mechanisms of misogyny, particularly in Coghlan's case, they refuse to be instrumentalised as political objects in these discussions. Their life writings redefine debates about women's identities and social roles, testing the moral boundaries that were partly reinscribed by Wollstonecraft, Hays and Inchbald in this period. The memoirists offer new visions of female virtue that coexist alongside, and even depend upon, the free expression of women's authentic sexual desires. This authenticity, they contend, transcends the moralistic hypocrisies of a patriarchal society. They are frank about fulfilling their desires as well as their financial needs through engaging in sexual labour. Contributing new understandings of women's work in the late eighteenth century, my analysis has shown how different forms of female labour were valorised or devalued according to contemporary standards of moral purity. I have demonstrated that the accounts of women who 'labour on the frontlines of patriarchy' push sex workers' perspectives to the forefront of political debates surrounding gender and sexuality.[4] These memoirists demonstrate that the 'connections between feminism and commercial sex are deep, complex and transformative,' allowing them to map out new opportunities for female empowerment in this era of radical possibility.[5]

Feminists writing during the early revolutionary period had been swept up in radical hope, seizing upon the promise of fresh democratic politics to argue for equality and women's citizenship. But towards the end of the 1790s, France's misogynistic Jacobin regime had dispelled any potential for meaningful change to the female condition. By the point of Napoleon's rise to power in 1799, women were definitely denied citizenship rights, and the window of feminist opportunity was effectively closed.[6] A reactionary atmosphere prevailed in British society; radical writers were widely condemned, and feminists were prime targets for misogynistic ridicule. Wollstonecraft died in 1798. Her reputation was destroyed amid Godwin's revelations about her sexual history in his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication*

---

[3] Eva Pendleton. "Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-82, 78.
[4] Carol Queen. "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 125–135, 132.
[5] Jill Nagle. "Introduction." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, 1.
[6] Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History 1780-1920*. Continuum, 2004, 15.

of the Rights of Woman (1798).[7] Patriarchal critics drew upon the 'existing misogynistic discourse of the prostitute,' classifying her as a sex worker 'in order to defuse her radical critique of the contemporary treatment of women' (McInnes 23). Their charges of sexual excess, resting on familiar, objectifying mechanisms of sexual objectification, were used to undermine her political subjectivity. Thus, her followers were driven to different, more discreet methods of endorsing feminist sentiments. From Hays' repackaged conservative tropes in *Victim of Prejudice* — which cycle back to pre-existing stereotypes of corruption and disease that had long defined sex workers' presences in print — I move to the end of this revolutionary feminist timeline, arriving at the memoirs of a figure who occupies a curiously hybrid position in these debates.

Mary Robinson's posthumously published life writing, *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* (1801), is a fitting way to conclude this thesis; it is the account of a woman who endeavours to square her role as a mistress with feminist political concerns about female authenticity. She makes a last-ditch attempt to defend Wollstonecraft's sexual politics, through a covert approach which is suited to the volatile anti-feminist atmosphere that prevailed at the turn of the century. A radical writer who explicitly positions herself as a 'literary descendant of Wollstonecraft,' but who had previously been one of England's most high-profile actresses and mistresses, Robinson was doubly constrained by the backlash against revolutionary feminism and the infamy attached to her sex work.[8] She occupied both worlds of public indecency, grappling with a complex blend of the judgements imposed upon the other writers I have discussed, all while navigating the pressures of a much higher celebrity profile. Robinson had managed to carve out a new reputation as a successful poet, novelist and critic. Like her memoirs, her texts *The Natural Daughter* (1799) and *Letter to the Women of England* (1799) confronted Wollstonecraftian concerns surrounding 'the struggles faced by working women, the necessity for women to be able to escape abusive or unhappy marriages, and the ways in which women are educated into submissiveness or sexual manipulation' (Russo and O'Brien 40). However, writing her memoirs required her to navigate the sensitive topic of her courtesanship, previously deemed incompatible with the principles of revolutionary feminists,

[7] Andrew McInnes. *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period*. Routledge, 2017, 6.
[8] S. Russo and L. O'Brien. "Sex, Sisters and Work: Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* and Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*." *Women's Writing,* vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 27-58, 40.

alongside her history of sexual objectification in misogynistic caricatures, mock-memoirs and pamphlets that reduced her to a 'brazen prostitute.'[9]

Leeson, Coghlan and Sheldon openly capitalised upon their sexual reputations while representing their prostitution as a basis for sociopolitical commentary, but there was much more at stake for Robinson in terms of image rehabilitation. She could not afford to be so explicit about her sexual transgressions, or entertain stereotypes that the memoirists lean into, because she wanted to be taken seriously as a moral, maternal and political subject. These dimensions of her identity could not coexist in print; she had to 'reconstruct her biography in a socially palatable form.'[10] Robinson thus engages in a different, more tactical form of self-representation to the earlier memoirists, which might more aptly be described as damage control. I contend that she attempts to redefine her sex work beyond stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary, without explicitly *discussing* her sex work. Through depicting sentimental images of her authentic emotional and maternal attachments, denigrating the mercenary ways of other mistresses, and embedding chastity in a particular set of emotional and material conditions, she defines herself as a different kind of courtesan. Fawcett observes that Robinson's memoirs contain 'conspicuous absences,' which function as an alternative to the reputation-damaging 'overexpression' of earlier theatrical memoirists such as actresses Charlotte Charke and George Ann Bellamy.[11] I contend that they are also an alternative to Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's 'overexpressions... [which] enhance or exaggerate the features through which they might be recognized and evaluated by their spectators,' playing with stereotypes of sex workers to entertain their readership, while representing forms of feminist resistance indicative of their complex subjectivities beyond these tropes (Fawcett 3). However, Fawcett contends that Robinson's memoirs end 'just as she is about to describe the most salacious details of her lives and loves,' and such absences ultimately give her 'some control of her life story' (Fawcett pp. 194-5). This project is assisted by the strategic editorial interventions of her daughter, Maria Elizabeth, who completes the story of Robinson's life and provides carefully selected correspondence from her mother. The interplay between the competing voices in the text, Robinson-as-memoirist, Robinson-the-letter-writer, and Maria Elizabeth, creates gaps in this autobiographical narrative. By focusing mainly on her sincerity, benevolence

[9] Sharon M. Setzer. "Introduction." *A Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter,* by Mary Robinson. Edited by Sharon M. Setzer, Broadview, 2003, pp. 9-32, 14.
[10] Anne Close. "Notorious: Mary Robinson and The Gothic." *Gothic Studies,* vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, pp. 172-191, 181.
[11] Julia H. Fawcett. *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1691-1801.* University of Michigan Press, 2016, 175.

and maternal devotion *before* her experiences of prostitution, she strives to overwrite these narrative gaps (full of unwritten sexual transgressions) with the image of a moral, maternal and literary subject. This pre-prostitution self is crystallised as her authentic identity, defined beyond sexual stigma, and elevated above caricatures of mercenary, duplicitous courtesans. Simultaneously, Robinson's narration defines her as a virtuous commentator reporting on these past events, representing a steadfast moral core which is undiminished by her sexual experiences. These strategies capture the struggle for such a publicly objectified woman to assert her multidimensional subjecthood in this hostile literary climate.

Robinson's moral, political and literary subjectivity was undermined by the misogynistic standards of a patriarchal establishment, and the exclusionary dynamics of the feminist writers whose politics she identified with. 'Anti-Jacobin literary paranoia' ran high during the late 1790s and early 1800s, around the point that Robinson's memoirs were written and published.[12] Conservative critic T.J Mathias declared that the 'time for [literary] discrimination seems to be come,' explicitly targeting Robinson, Smith and Inchbald for turning 'girls' heads... wild with impossible adventures,' and 'tainting [them] with democracy' in their novels.[13] Robinson had articulated high hopes for the French revolution in her celebratory verse *Ainsi va le Monde* (1790). As the Reign of Terror began, she authored numerous poems lamenting the fate of Marie Antoinette, and novels critiquing the violence unfolding in France; however, she still found herself 'the constant butt of many anti-Jacobins' crusades' in England (Grenby 19). She featured in Polwhele's *Unsex'd Females* (1798) as one of Wollstonecraft's disciples, condemned for Francophilia. As Polwhele demonstrated through his association of 'liberty's sublimer views' with 'unhallow'd lust,' revolutionary ideals of liberty were frequently conflated with libertinism, especially where women radicals were concerned.[14] Robinson was a prime target for such charges. Demonstrating her cautionary response to this backlash, she published her *Letter to the Women of England* under the pseudonym Anne Francis Randall. Despite Robinson's ardent support of Wollstonecraftian gender politics, Wollstonecraft apparently dissociated herself from Robinson due to her 'increasing concern for respectability,' while Smith and Inchbald (who also later refused to be associated with Wollstonecraft) were 'keen to distance themselves from Robinson's notoriety as Perdita,' since 'social reputations had to be maintained' (Setzer 19). As Charlotte Smith remarked in one letter, she had 'no passion for

[12] M.O. Grenby. *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, 19.
[13] T.J. Mathius. *The Pursuits of Literature*. T Beckett, 1803, 60, 56.
[14] Richard Polwhele. *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem*. W.M Cobbett, 1800, ll.11-12.

being confounded with Mrs Robinson and other mistresses.'[15] It appears that the feminist tensions which inflected portraits of sex workers in the novels of Inchbald, Wollstonecraft and Hays played out in real life. Within the divide and conquer dynamics of a misogynistic system, Robinson was objectified and conflated with 'other mistresses' by fellow feminist writers; her moral, literary and political dimensions were still eclipsed by concerns about her sexual reputation.

In turn, it seems that Robinson was determined to distinguish herself from 'other mistresses' through the writing of her memoirs. She represents her fierce drive for an authentic and autonomous existence, as a woman who can 'support [her]self with éclat and reputation.'[16] From the point of her premature marriage to an exploitative and unfaithful husband, to her abandonment at the hands of her first keeper, the Prince of Wales, she expresses the difficulty of remaining authentic in a society that dictates women's dependence on men — often forcing them to act insincerely, against their true feelings and principles. She stresses that her supposedly 'advantageous marriage' did not amount to a genuine, loving bond, the 'warm and powerful union of soul' that she expected (*Robinson I* 72). It also compels her to 'relinquish [her] theatrical prospects,' obstructing her happiness and self-sufficiency (72). This is an interesting paradox: theatrical performance is associated with authenticity in Robinson's memoirs. It is forced marriage that leads her into an inauthentic life. While Sheldon represents her raucous rejection of wifely subservience, Robinson the adolescent bride finds herself 'overwhelmed with... confusion' by her new status (*Robinson* 71).[17] She nevertheless 'considered chastity as the brightest ornament that could embellish the female mind... regulating [her] conduct to that tenor which has principle more than affection to strengthen its progress' (79). This subtle use of the past tense verb 'considered' is significant; implicitly, she has since realised the moral cost of chastity performed out of duty rather than love. As Wollstonecraft and Leeson demonstrate, chastity is not truly virtuous if it rests predominantly on concerns about public reputation — the mere 'respect for the opinion of the world' described in *Vindication*.[18] Reflecting her ambition to counteract duplicitous, morally disillusioned caricatures of the prostitute imaginary, Robinson implies that leading an authentic

[15] Charlotte Smith, qtd. in Amy Garnai, *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s.* Palgrave, 2006, 185.
[16] Mary Robinson. *Memoirs of the Late Mary Robinson* vol I. Richard Phillips, 1803, 69.
[17] Ann Sheldon. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol II. Printed for the Authoress, 1787, 155.
[18] Mary Wollstonecraft. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* Edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008, 202.
Margaret Leeson. *The Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson.* Lilliput Press, 1995, 3.

life is the highest, most important ambition. She elevates this sense of self above the libertine corruption that surrounds her, her hapless state of dependence on a husband whose 'infidelities were as public as the ruin of his finances was inevitable' (*Robinson I* 119). This narrative is also played out through the experiences of Martha Morley, in Robinson's novel *The Natural Daughter*. An abandoned wife pressured by financial necessity to pursue careers as an actress, novelist, and poet, this character represents 'a spirited defence of [Robinson's] own acting and writing careers.'[19] Martha, Robinson's 'fictional double,' as Setzer describes her, is differentiated from her sister, Julia, who becomes Robespierre's mistress; the writer distances herself from this character's impure sexual negotiations ("Romancing" 532). Robinson lends her voice to the causes of Sheldon, Coghlan, Leeson, and Wollstonecraft's Maria. She contrasts the emotional inauthenticity demanded of women who are bound to cruel, unfaithful husbands and keepers, with her aspirations of independence — and her desire to forge a more genuine connection with a man she loves.

Robinson reinforces her dutiful sense of chastity in her marriage, but subtly undermines this standard in the name of female authenticity. While the memoirists frequently document their unions with keepers in terms of financial convenience as well as romantic / erotic attraction, open about their negotiations, Robinson cannot afford to be conflated with stereotypes of mercenary, money-driven sex workers. Her union with the prince must be defined purely as an authentic emotional connection. Without delving into the details of their relationship, she carefully represents its emotional roots, noting that her husband's 'indifference naturally produced an alienation of esteem on my side, and the increasing adoration of the most enchanting of mortals hourly reconciled my mind to the idea of a separation.'[20] This blossoming connection is only 'natural,' much like Coghlan's celebration of her 'natural affections' for the man she loved.[21] Robinson implies, but cannot explicitly describe, the 'free expression of [her] emotion and sexuality' and the 'celebration of passion and honesty' — juxtaposed with the forms of deceit endorsed by patriarchal society.[22] She insists that her responses to the prince's attention are devoid of any financial interests: 'I disclaimed every sordid and interested thought' (*Robinson II* 47). Robinson's images of emotional sincerity are cemented through her daughter Maria Elizabeth's editorial addition of her 1783

[19] Sharon M. Setzer. "Romancing the reign of terror: Sexual politics in Mary Robinson's *Natural Daughter*." *Criticism,* vol. 39, no. 4, 1997, pp. 531-555, 532.
[20] Mary Robinson. *Memoirs of the Late Mrs Robinson* Vol II. Richard Phillips, 1803, 51.
[21] Margaret Coghlan, *Memoirs of Mrs Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794, 17.
[22] Laura Linker. *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730.* Routledge, 2016, 98.

letter to a friend, which confesses that 'the exquisite sensibility which breathed through every line, his ardent professions of adoration, had combined to shake my feeble resolution,' and expresses her initial 'mortification' at his proposal of a pecuniary arrangement (60). Robinson's sexual and financial connection with the prince was public knowledge. But by sidestepping any mention of this, she cleanses this union of the sordid libidinal discourses and caricatures attached to it. Essentially, she desexualises and demonetises her motivations for their union, filling the gap with images of genuine romantic attachment. Through this process, she salvages her own moral and emotional subjectivity from the wreckage of public condemnation.

Without explicitly discussing her own prostitution, Robinson subtly redefines her identity by condemning the insincerity of a high-profile mistress whose situation mirrors her own, but whose motivations are aligned with mercenary, social-climbing caricatures of the prostitute imaginary. As a young wife, Robinson is 'obliged to receive' the visits of a high-status but promiscuous woman called Angelina Albanesi, 'however repugnant such an associate was to [her] feelings' (*Robinson I* 178). Having 'previously attracted considerable attention in the hemisphere of gallantry' before her marriage, involved with a prince and a count, she is 'devoted to a life of unrestrained impropriety... a striking sample of beauty and of profligacy' (pp. 177-8). Albanesi 'obtrudes herself on [Robinson's] seclusion,' a repugnant outsider to the private, domestic space that she has carefully maintained (178). She recalls that Albanesi

> ridicule[d] my romantic domestic attachment; laughed at my folly in wasting my youth (for I was not then eighteen years of age) in such a disgraceful obscurity; and pictured, in all the glow of fanciful scenery, the splendid life into which I might enter, if I would but know my own power, and break the fetters of matrimonial restriction (pp. 178-9).

This woman is described in the tradition of *Vindication's ancien régime* mistresses with their boudoir politics, who resort to serpentine 'wrigglings of cunning' in order to 'obtain indirectly a little of that power of which they are unjustly denied a share' (*Vindication* 260). However, she fails to persuade Robinson to escape 'humiliating captivity with her husband' through being supported by Lord Pembroke (*Robinson I* 179). Robinson retrospectively condemns Albanesi as a woman who, 'having sacrificed every personal feeling for the gratification of her vanity... now sought to build a gaudy transient fabric on the destruction of another' (*Robinson* 67). She contrasts this public woman, who favours infamy over what she ironically dismisses as 'disgraceful obscurity,' with her own love of retired, domestic life.

Albanesi's unions are motivated purely by vanity, defined in the terms of sacrifice and loss that Wollstonecraft applies to passionless, loveless intercourse. In contrast, Robinson honours authentic, loyal connections, covertly referring to her own genuine love for the prince.

Likewise, in *The Natural Daughter*, Martha the desiring woman is allowed to thrive, distinguished from her sister's 'craven fortune hunting' (Russo and O'Brien 45). Like Albanesi, Julia has 'no authentic sexual desires because she never has any authentic emotions... brandishing her sexuality as a weapon' through becoming 'a mistress to notorious men, simply because it suits her to do so' (Russo and O'Brien 45). While Albanesi's maternal status goes unmentioned, Robinson emphasises that *she* 'toiled honourably for [her husband's] comfort; and that [her] attentions were exclusively dedicated to him and to [her] infant (*Robinson I* 182). On these grounds, she refuses to entertain this woman's proposal. Robinson regularly condemns her husband's lovers: the 'most abandoned women' (*Robinson I* 106), those who lead 'low licentious lives' (*Robinson I* 174), and who are of 'professed libertinism' (*Robinson II* 17). This is reminiscent of Maria's distinction between her own moral purity and the 'wantons of the lowest class,' her husband prefers.[23] Robinson implicitly differentiates her own deep-rooted emotional attachments from those who, like Leeson and Sheldon, pursue sexual pleasure or mercenary arrangements motivated by desires for power and money. Sexually desiring women can be virtuous, she implies, but on specific Wollstonecraftian terms of moral and political authenticity. As in her novel, Robinson implicitly endorses the example of a 'sexually experienced, morally virtuous woman' (Russo and O'Brien 45). She extricates herself from stereotypes of the prostitute imaginary, joining Coghlan in suggesting that she is not 'a friend to arbitrary principles' who unquestioningly absorbs men's moral and 'political notions' (*Coghlan* pp. 69-70). Appropriating the divide and conquer dynamics that she herself suffered under, Robinson implicitly defines herself as a different kind of sex worker, whose sentimental ideals are elevated above Albanesi's ruthless, power-hungry threat to domestic peace.

Without explicitly discussing the coexistence of sex work and mother work in her life, Robinson subtly strives to reconcile her identity as a mistress with her maternal devotion. While Coghlan and Leeson represent their love for their children in sentimental terms, they also destabilise chaste, self-sacrificing maternal ideals through the open pursuit of their personal sexual desires. In Leeson's case, this sometimes entails a refusal to 'be confined to one man' (*Leeson* 62). However, Robinson is initially fixated on performing a sentimental paradigm of motherhood as a parent 'whose heart is ennobled by sensibility' (*Robinson I* 170), in the privileged position to practice a hands-on, devoted parenting style that is endorsed by Wollstonecraft and aspired to by her protagonist Maria in *Wrongs.* However, as Robinson's memoirs progress, she situates her middle-class maternal ideal in specific, precarious

[23] Mary Wollstonecraft. *Maria; or the Wrongs of Woman.* Edited by Anne K. Mellor, Norton, 1994, 78.

socioeconomic conditions. She portrays herself 'shivering with horror' when she is advised to 'tie [her child to her] back and work for it' amidst her husband's early struggles with debt (*Robinson I* 147). This scene foreshadows the compromises in feminine virtue she will soon make to support herself and her daughter. She subtly undermines the patriarchal nexus between maternity, chastity and modesty by linking the public work she pursues as an actress, a writer, and a high-profile sex worker to her unwavering sense of maternal responsibility. Counteracting Hays' vision of the 'mother becoming stifled in [Mary's] heart' as she enters into prostitution, a result of moral fault as well as socioeconomic pressures, Robinson instead focuses on condemning the external pressures that single mothers grappled with in this period.[24] Amid her husband's financial strife, Robinson quickly turns to the practical demands of survival; she juggles maternal care with 'literary labour... by which [she] hoped to obtain at least a decent independence' (*Robinson I* pp. 184-5). Of her theatrical career, she emphasises her initial concern about performing in an 'increasing state of domestic solicitude,' pregnant with one daughter while nursing another (189). Nevertheless, she feels that she can 'support [her]self honourably' through acting (*Robinson II* 18). In the 1783 letter, her major concern about the breakdown of her relationship with the prince is her child's welfare: 'I was thus fatally induced to relinquish what would have proved an ample and honourable resource for myself and my child' (*Robinson II* 81). Alongside the sentimental discourses that dominate her images of maternal tenderness, she exposes the precarity of life beyond a conjugal family unit.

The editor's narrative is silent regarding Robinson's subsequent relationships with high profile men like Charles James Fox, also the father of Coghlan's daughter, and Banastre Tarleton. Reflecting Maria Elizabeth's devotion to her mother, there is only discussion of how, amid Robinson's increasing illness and literary success, 'maternal solicitude for a beloved and only child now wholly engaged her attention; her assiduities were incessant and exemplary' (*Robinson II* 114). This helps consolidate Robinson's status as a paradigm of maternal care, but these textual gaps also remind us of the forms of work — 'honourable' or otherwise — that helped to support her daughter after the prince's abandonment. As Russo and O'Brien note of *The Natural Daughter,* Martha contemplates the offer of a man to become his mistress, a 'bold move... that is inflected with Robinson's very knowledge of the plight faced by women without the protection of a husband' (Russo and O'Brien 41). This heroine is distinguished from Wollstonecraft's *Maria* by her active willingness to labour for survival; her reputation is 'tarnished' by the man's offer, even though she refuses it (Russo and O'Brien 41). This may

[24] Mary Hays. *The Victim of Prejudice.* Edited by Eleanor Ty, Broadview, 1998, 66.

fictionalise Robinson's own moral wranglings, helping to justify a more pragmatic approach to sexual labour. In a final summary of Robinson's character, the editor leaves us with the poignant image of her 'maternal tenderness' (*Robinson II* 169). There is no mention of her involvement with other men after the prince. The sexual and maternal dimensions of her character could not explicitly coexist in these memoirs, particularly in a system that divided the identities of mothers from those of sexually transgressive public women. Robinson's sexuality is ultimately overwritten by this consistent emphasis upon the extent of her devotion to her child.

Robinson emphasises the importance of solidarity between women throughout her memoirs, by discussing the prejudice she has been subjected to over the years. Like Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson, she compels her readers to witness her suffering, recognise the pressures she had endured, and perceive that she 'has been the most severely subjugated by circumstances more than by inclination' (*Robinson I* 122). Counteracting narratives of female culpability in the prostitute imaginary, she stresses that her errors arise from external pressures, not from inherent moral faults. From the point of her self-imposed seclusion amidst her husband's infidelities, she observes:

> I never felt the affection for my own sex which perhaps some women feel; I have never taught my heart to cherish their friendship, or to depend on their attentions beyond the short perspective of a prosperous day. Indeed I have almost uniformly found my own sex my most inveterate enemies; I have experienced little kindness from them, though my bosom has often ached with the pang inflicted by their envy, slander, and malevolence (*Robinson I* 176).

Robinson notes that, for her, female friendship has been conditional and ephemeral. It is only accessible on a 'prosperous day,' when her socioeconomic situation has been relatively stable, and she has at least been publicly *perceived* as a content, devoted wife. She represents herself as a suffering sentimental subject, experiencing emotional and physical pain as a result of abuse and exclusion from other women, but ever willing to support others in need. Robinson suggests that women spread rumours about her being unfaithful to her husband, and, as she states in the 1783 letter, attempted to destroy her relationship with the prince. She deploys a military metaphor to represent 'all the artillery of slander' being levelled against her, portraying the deadly nature of these attacks on her reputation (*Robinson II* 78). Despite her own attempts to distinguish herself from her husband's mistresses, Robinson exposes the exclusionary dynamics of ostensibly virtuous female communities, just as Leeson condemns the 'outrageous virtue' of those who ostracise her (Leeson 33). Leeson also 'affirms... that the real cause of the multitude of unhappy women, is the harshness of their own sex,' because they attempt to 'elevate their own real, or pretended virtue, by condemning the failures of others' (*Leeson* 33). Implicitly,

their conduct is dictated by internalised misogyny, and the need to conserve themselves in a patriarchal system poised to shun any woman who strays from the chaste ideal. In this impossible game of conformity, Leeson and Robinson are driven to critique other women for their struggles; blame is shunted from one female subject to the next. Unlike Leeson and the other memoirists, Robinson could not necessarily access the non-judgmental, compassionate spaces that may have been offered by other unchaste women, because even in the writing of her memoirs she is attempting to assimilate herself with a respectable feminine ideal.

While repeatedly insisting upon her chastity in marriage, Robinson also subtly undermines its importance through such portraits of her suffering amid this harsh judgement, and insinuates the impossibility of maintaining it in a misogynistic system that dooms her to fail. Having stressed that chastity must be reinforced by a genuine emotional connection through her reflections on her inauthentic relationship with her husband, Robinson also describes her 'mind, the purity of [her] virtue,' being 'uncontaminated' (Robinson *I* 108). True virtue extends beyond superficial corporeal concerns. This echoes Maria's concerns about women 'violating the purity of [their] own feelings' in a state of dependence upon cruel, faithless men (*Wrongs* 85). Robinson also subtly reframes chastity in more pragmatic terms, embedded within particular emotional and material conditions. This is further illuminated in her *Letter,* when she evokes the double standards imposed upon sex workers:

> Man first degrades, and then deserts her. Yet, if driven by famine, insult, shame, and persecution, she rushes forth like the wolf for prey; if, like Milwood, she finds it "necessary to be rich" in this sordid, selfish world, she is shunned, abhorred, condemned to the very lowest scenes of vile debasement; to exist in misery, or to perish unlamented... she rushes into the arms of death, as her last, her only asylum from the monsters who have destroyed her.'[25]

Robinson offers sympathy to different social groups of sex workers: those who work for survival, and higher-ranking, wealthier women like herself. She argues that the former are dehumanised as predatory 'wolves,' much like the 'famished,' wolf-like Jemima, for transgressing patriarchal codes of feminine conduct out of sheer necessity (*Wrongs* 50). The reference to Lillo's caricature of a vengeful sex worker is evocative of Leeson being inspired by 'the words of Milwood, who [she] sought to imitate in everything but her cruelty' (*Leeson* 61). Without explicitly aligning herself with this persona, Robinson modifies it to represent the injustice of demonising sex workers for accruing wealth in a misogynistic system through the same artful conduct that hypocritical men display. Rather than suggesting, like Wollstonecraft

[25] Mary Robinson. *A Letter to the Women of England,* edited by Sharon M. Setzer. Broadview, 2003, pp. 77-78.

and Hays, that prostitution makes women behave like 'monsters,' (*Wrongs* 50; *Victim* 66), Robinson follows Coghlan, Sheldon and Leeson in condemning the monstrous system that oppresses them. Without explicitly discussing her own lapses in chastity, Robinson manages to extricate her sexual conduct from notions of inherent moral fault and dehumanising stereotypes of the misogynistic prostitute imaginary. Close notes that Robinson refuses to 'absent herself from the text by joining a convent or dying of shame' at the end of her memoirs (Close 183). In this process, I would add, she modifies the final stages of the Harlot's Progress that are reinscribed by Inchbald and Hays; the absence of chastity does not necessitate Robinson's descent into abject moral corruption.

While Robinson adapts to her cultural climate in redefining her identity as a mistress, developing a subtler approach to Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's overexpressive, playful courting of stereotypes, all of these memoirists develop particular textual strategies to resist the objectifying narratives imposed upon them. These women operated in a particular set of social, historical and economic circumstances, but many of the issues they grappled with persist in the present day. As Mac and Smith have shown, sex workers have played major roles in many liberation struggles, but feminist movements are still fractured by the dehumanising, exclusionary discourses levelled against them (Mac and Smith 5). These discourses continue to have extensive, catastrophic consequences for women operating in the British sex trade. Rendering sex workers as symbolic objects of misogynistic disgust or feminist concern enables anti-prostitution campaigners to 'treat themselves and their concerns as interchangeable with those of sex workers, re-inscribing these concerns as representational rather than asking more granular questions of labour rights' (Mac and Smith 38). The widespread refusal to recognise sex work as work — to understand prostitution as anything other than exploitation and degradation — prevents feminists from addressing urgent concerns surrounding women's safety and wellbeing in the sex industry. Sex workers are still criminalised, and remain unprotected by the law. This most severely impacts street-level sex workers, and those from marginalised social and ethnic groups. As Alison Phipps demonstrates, 'reactionary feminisms, which coalesce around debates about sex workers' rights and transgender equality, magnify the political whiteness of the mainstream.'[26] These mechanisms 'deliberately withhold womanhood and personhood from marginalised Others,' while 'sex workers' rights are juxtaposed with "women's safety," a manoeuvre in which the womanhood of sex workers is implicitly denied' (Phipps 88).

[26] Alison Phipps. "White tears, white rage: Victimhood and (as) violence in mainstream feminism." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2021, pp. 81-93, 88.

Mirroring the ideological alliances inadvertently forged between revolutionary feminists and patriarchal commentators in the 1790s, unsettling connections persist between anti-prostitution feminists and the far-right. Amid these dehumanising discourses, activists continue the struggle for sex workers to be recognised as multidimensional human subjects, especially as mothers, working to support their children in an escalating cost of living crisis (Mac and Smith 46).[27] While these issues are inflected with specific shades of meaning in the context of late eighteenth-century Britain, my intervention into the study of revolutionary feminism and women's life writing is defined by the recognition of sex workers' innovative contributions to critical, and increasingly urgent debates surrounding women's experiences in a misogynistic socioeconomic system.

Finally, there is much more work to be done in expanding our focus from white feminist perspectives on prostitution in the eighteenth century. Through an intersectional lens, more research must be conducted into the experiences and accounts of sex workers from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds, beyond the white British, cisgendered, predominantly middle-class voices I could access for this project. The experiences of black sex workers, apparently only mediated within male-authored pornography, a few court records of the period, and in Sheldon's racist depictions, require much more space for in-depth scrutiny. Racial stereotypes add new, complex dimensions to the forms of objectification they endured. Eighteenth-century sex workers' maternal experiences and domestic situations warrant further investigation, particularly where glimpses of their lives arise in the Old Bailey archives. Despite the insights offered by Sheldon, Coghlan and Leeson's texts, our knowledge of sex workers' experiences in the eighteenth century is inevitably — like Robinson's narrative — full of gaps. These memoirs nevertheless depict multidimensional human subjects whose polymorphic, ever-shifting self-representations are a powerful antidote to any neat categorisations of feminine identity. These texts constitute feminist resistance in action, led by women who draw power from their perceived impurities.

[27] English Collective of Prostitutes. "Prostitution: What you need to know." *Prostitutescollective.net.* prostitutescollective.net/prostitution-what-you-need-to-know-briefing/. Accessed 3 August 2023.

Works Cited

"Account of New Books and Pamphlets." *Town and Country Magazine*, 20, 1788.

"Advertisements and Notices." *World,* 27 March, 1788. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/Z2001503878/BBCN?u=new_itw&sid=bookmark-BBCN&xid=a827e879. Accessed 29 November 2023.

"Art.13. Proposal to render effectual a Plan, to remove the nuisance of common prostitutes from the streets of this metropolis." *The Critical review,* vol. 5, 1758, pp. 526-528. *ProQuest,* proquest.com/historical-periodicals/art-13-proposal-render-effectual-plan-remove/docview/4321840/se-2. Accessed 29 November 2023.

A Brief Account of the Charity School of St Pancras. S. Low, 1796.

A New Catalogue of Living English Authors vol. I. C. Clark, 1799.

Allen, Charles. *The Polite Lady.* Newberry and Carnan, 1769.

Bahar, Saba. *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy: 'An Eve to Please Me.'* Palgrave, 2002.

Badinter, Elisabeth. *The Conflict: Woman and Mother.* Text Publishing, 2012.

Bailey, Moya. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance.* New York University Press, 2021.

Barnes, Alan, and Stephen Leach. "'Sylvia' (1778) by the Revd Matthew William Peters." *The British Art Journal*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 68-71.

Batchelor, Jennie. "Mothers and Others: Sexuality and Maternity in *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House* (1760)." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture,* edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis, Routledge, 2012, pp. 157-170.

---. "The Limits of Sympathy: *The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House*." *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations during the long eighteenth century*, edited by Carolyn D. Williams, Angela Escott and Louise Duckling, University of Delaware Press, 2010, pp. 117-136.

Bernstein, Elizabeth. "Bounded Authenticity and the Commerce of Sex." *Intimate Labours,* edited by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Eileen Boris, University of Chicago Press, 2010, pp. 148-165.

Blackstone, William. *Commentaries on the Laws of England* vol I. Edited by David Lemmings, Oxford University Press, 2016.

Blackwell, Bonnie. "Corkscrews and Courtesans: Sex and Death in Circulation Novels." *Sex and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature,* edited by Jolene Zigarovich. Routledge, 2013, pp. 49-75.

Borham-Puyal, Miriam. "Jemima's Wrongs: Reading the female body in Mary Wollstonecraft's prostitute biography." *IJES,* vol 19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 97-112.

Boulton, Jeremy, and Romola Davenport. "Few deaths before baptism: clerical policy, private baptism and the registration of births in Georgian Westminster: a paradox resolved." *Local Population Studies*, vol. 94, 2015, pp. 28-47.

Bowers, Toni. "A Point of Conscience: Breastfeeding and Maternal Authority in *Pamela* 2." *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1995, pp. 259-278.

Bowers, Toni. *The Politics of Motherhood.* Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Breashears, Caroline. "Scandalous Categories: Classifying the Memoirs of Unconventional Women." *Philological Quarterly,* vol. 82, no. 2, 2003, pp. 187-212

---. *Eighteenth-Century Women's Writing and the 'Scandalous Memoir.'* Palgrave, 2016.

Brissenden, R.F. *Virtue in Distress.* Macmillan, 1974.

Bromwich, Rebecca, and Monique Marie Dejong, editors. *Mothers, Mothering and Sex Work.* Demeter Press, 2015.

Brooks, Marilyn L. "Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*: Chastity Renegotiated." *Women's Writing,* vol. 15, no.1, 2008, pp. 13-31.

Buchan, William. *Domestic Medicine.* A. Strahan, 1790.

Buckley, Jennifer. *Gender, Pregnancy and Power in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Caine, Barbara, and Glenda Sluga. *Gendering European History 1780-1920.* Continuum, 2004.

Cardwell, John M. "The Rake as Military Strategist: *Clarissa* and Eighteenth-Century Warfare." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol 19, no. 1, 2006, pp. 153-180.

Carter, Sophie. *Purchasing Power: Representing Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century English Popular Print Culture.* Ashgate, 2004.

Clark, Anna. *Women's Silence, Men's Violence*. Pandora Press, 1987.

Cleland, John. *Fanny Hill* vol II. G. Fenton, 1749.

Clery, E.J. "Mary Wollstonecraft: A Feminist Exile in Paris." *Litteraria Pragensia*, vol. 30, no. 60, 2019, pp. 29-46.

Close, Anne. "Notorious: Mary Robinson and The Gothic." *Gothic Studies,* vol. 6, no. 2, 2004, pp. 172-191.

Coghlan, Margaret. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Coghlan.* J. Lane, 1794.

Csengei, Ildiko. *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Dart, Greg. *Rousseau, Robespierre, and English Romanticism.* Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Davies, Rebecca. *Written Maternal Authority and Eighteenth-Century Education in Britain* Routledge, 2014.

Defoe, Daniel. *The Life of Moll Flanders*. J. Brotherton, 1741.

---. *Roxana: or, the Fortunate Mistress*. H. Slater, 1742.

Despentes, Virginie. *King Kong Theory.* Translated by Frank Wynne. Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020.

Distel, Kirsten M. "'I Will Not Be Thus Constrained': Domestic Power, Shame, and the Role of the Staircase in Richardson's *Clarissa 1.*" *At Home in the Eighteenth Century: Interrogating Domestic Space,* edited by Stephen G. Hague and Karen Lipsedge. Routledge, 2022, pp. 58-81.

Eberle, Roxanne. *Chastity and Transgression in Women's Writing, 1792-1897: Interrupting the Harlot's Progress*. Palgrave, 2002.

Ellis, Markman. *The Politics of Sensibility.* Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Emsley, Clive, Tim Hitchcock and Robert Shoemaker. "Punishment Sentences at the Old Bailey – The Death Penalty and Mitigating Circumstances." *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey,* oldbaileyonline.org/static/Punishment.jsp. Accessed 9 February 2022.

"England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539-1988." *FamilySearch.* Film #8041076, Image 119. London Metropolitan Archives, England. familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSF7-3QFZ?cc=3734475. Accessed 26 May 2021.

"England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539-1988, Parish Registers of Marylebone, Mr Lawrence's Private Book Baptisms." *Family Search.* Film #008041094, Image 186. London Metropolitan Archives, England. familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSF7-3QNJ?cc=3734475. Accessed 28 January 2022.

English Collective of Prostitutes. "Prostitution: What you need to know." *Prostitutescollective.net.* prostitutescollective.net/prostitution-what-you-need-to-know-briefing/ Accessed 3 August 2023.

Farley, Edward. *Imprisonment for Debt, Unconstitutional*. Printed for the Author, 1795.

Fawcett, Julia H. *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1691-1801*. University of Michigan Press, 2016.

Fernandez, Jean. *Victorian Servants, Class, and the Politics of Literacy.* Routledge, 2010.

Fielding, Henry. *The Masquerade*. J. Roberts, 1728.

Fissell, Mary. "Remaking the Maternal Body in England, 1680–1730." *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* vol. 26, no.1, 2017, pp. 114-139.

Fordyce, James. *Sermons to Young Women Vol II*. A. Miller and T. Cadell, 1768.

Francus, Marilyn. "Trying to Set the Record Straight: Alicia LeFanu, Frances Burney D'Arblay, and the Limits of Family Biography." *Writing Lives in the Eighteenth Century,* edited by Tanya Caldwell, Bucknell University Press, 2020, pp. 77-107

Frangos, Jennifer. "The Woman in Man's Clothes and the Pleasures of Delarivier Manley's 'New Cabal." *Sexual Perversions, 1670-1890,* edited by Julie Peakman, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 95-116, 106.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking.* Routledge, 1990.

Gallagher, Noelle. *Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal Disease in the Eighteenth-Century Imagination.* Yale University Press, 2018.

Garnai, Amy. *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s.* Palgrave, 2006.

Garrett, Aaron. "Human Nature." *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-century Philosophy,* edited by Knud Haakonssen, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 160-233, 207.

Gibson, Kate. "'I am Not on the Footing of Kept Women': Extra-Marital Love in Eighteenth-Century England." *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2020, pp. 355-373.

---. *Illegitimacy, Family, and Stigma in England, 1660-1834.* Oxford University Press, 2022.

Gillray, James. "The Whore's Last Shift." *National Portrait Gallery.* npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw63173/The-whores-last-shift. Accessed 11 October 2022.

Godwin, William. *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness,* vol II. C. and J. Robinson, 1793.

Gooch, Elizabeth Sarah Real. *The Life of Mrs Gooch* Vol II. C and G Kearsley, 1792.

Gouges, Olympe de. *Déclaration des Droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne.* Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts.* https://olympedegouges.eu/docs/declaration-des-droits-de-la-femme.pdf. Accessed 28 November 2023.

---. *Le Cri du Sage, Par une Femme.* Translated by Clarissa Palmer, *Olympe de Gouges: English Translations of the Original French Texts.* olympedegouges.eu/docs/d.cri-du-sage.pdf. Accessed 28 November 2023.

Grant, Melissa Gira. *Playing the Whore*. Verso, 2014.

Graves, Richard. "The Heroines; or Modern Memoirs." *A Collection of Poems in Six Volumes by Several Hands* vol. IV, J. Hughes, 1782.

Green, Karen. "The Passions and the Imagination in Wollstonecraft's Theory of Moral Judgement." Utilitas, vol. 9, no. 3, 1997, pp. 271–290.

Grenby, M.O. *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution.* Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Grigg, John. *Advice to the Female Sex in General, particularly those in a State of Pregnancy and lying-in.* S. Hazard, 1789.

Hague, Stephen G., and Karen Lipsedge. "Introduction." *At Home in the Eighteenth Century: Interrogating Domestic Space,* edited by Hague and Lipsedge, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-18.

Hall, Kim F. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England.* Cornell University Press, 1995.

Halldenius, Lena. *Mary Wollstonecraft and Feminist Republicanism.* Pickering and Chatto, 2015.

Hallett, Mark. "Reynolds, Celebrity and the Exhibition Space." *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity,* edited by Martin Postle. Tate Publishing, 2005, pp. 35-49.

Handwerk, Gary, and Arnold A. Markley. "Introduction." William Godwin, *Caleb Williams,* edited by Handwerk and Markley. Broadview, 2000, pp. 9-46.

Hanway, Jonas, *Thoughts on the plan for a Magdalen-House for repentant prostitutes.* James Waugh, 1758.

Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies. H. Ranger, 1787.

Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies. H. Ranger, 1789.

Harris' List of Covent Garden Ladies. H Ranger, 1793.

Hartman, Geoffrey. *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Inauthenticity.* St Martin's Press, 2002.

Hays, Mary. *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain in Behalf of Women.* J. Johnson, 1798.

---. *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney,* edited by Marilyn L. Brooks, Broadview, 2000.

----. *The Victim of Prejudice,* edited by Eleanor Ty, Broadview, 1998.

Henderson, Tony. *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London.* Routledge, 2013.

Hobson, Janell. *Venus in the Dark.* Routledge, 2018.

Hoeveler, Diane Long. "Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2012, pp. 137-158.

Hogarth, William. "A Harlot's Progress (1732)." *Royal Collection Trust.* Accessed 5 December 2023. www.rct.uk/collection/811512/a-harlots-progress

Hunt, Lynn. "The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution." *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen,* edited by Dena Goodman, Routledge, 2003, 117-138.

Imlay, Gilbert. *The Emigrants.* Penguin, 1998.

Inchbald, Elizabeth. *Nature and Art.* Edited by Shawn Lisa Maurer, Broadview, 2004.

Jacobus, Mary. *First Things: Reading the Maternal Imaginary.* Routledge, 1995.

Jodin, Marie Madeleine. "Vues Législatives Pour les Femmes." Translated by Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, *Marie Madeleine Jodin 1741-1790: Actress, Philosophe and Feminist*, Felicia Gordon and P.N. Furbank, Routledge, 2016, pp. 176-206.

Johnson, Claudia L. *Equivocal Beings*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Johnson, Samuel. *A Dictionary of the English Language*. 1755, 1773. Edited by Beth Rapp Young, Jack Lynch, William Dorner, Amy Larner Giroux, Carmen Faye Mathes, and Abigail Moreshead. 2021. https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com.

Jones, Chris. *Radical Sensibility*. Routledge, 1993.

Jones, Vivien. "Placing Jemima: women writers of the 1790s and the eighteenth-century prostitution narrative." *Women's Writing,* vol. 4, no. 2, 1997, pp. 201-220, 206.

Jütte, Robert. *Contraception: A History*. Translated by Vicky Russell, Polity, 2008.

Kelly, Christopher. *Rousseau's Exemplary Life.* Cornell University Press, 1987.

Kelly, Gary. *Revolutionary Feminism: The Mind and Career of Mary Wollstonecraft.* Palgrave Macmillan, 1992.

---. *Women, Writing and Revolution*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

Kelly, James. "Infanticide in Eighteenth-Century Ireland." *Irish Economic and Social History*, vol.19, no.1, 1992, pp. 5-26.

King, Shelley. "Introduction." Amelia Opie, *Adeline Mowbray.* Edited by Shelley King and John B. Pierce. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Kipp, Julie. *Romanticism, Maternity and the Body Politic.* Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Knott, Sarah. "Female Liberty? Sentimental Gallantry, Republican Womanhood, and Rights Feminism in the Age of Revolutions." *The William and Mary Quarterly,* vol. 71, no. 3, 2014, pp. 425- 456.

Landes, Joan. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution.* Cornell University Press, 1988.

Ledoux, Ellen Malenas. *Labouring Mothers: Reproducing Women and Work in the Eighteenth Century.* University of Virginia Press, 2023.

Leeson, Margaret. *Memoirs of Mrs Margaret Leeson*, edited by Mary Lyons, Lilliput Press, 1995.

Leigh, Carol. "Inventing Sex Work." *Whores and Other Feminists,* edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 223-231.

Lewis, Ann, and Markman Ellis. "Introduction: Venal Bodies – Prostitutes and Eighteenth-Century Culture." *Prostitution and Eighteenth-Century Culture*, edited by Ann Lewis and Markman Ellis. Routledge, 2012. pp. 1-16.

Lillo, George. *The London Merchant*. T. Lowndes, 1776.

Linker, Laura. *Dangerous Women, Libertine Epicures, and the Rise of Sensibility, 1670-1730.* Routledge, 2016.

Linton, Marisa. *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution.* Oxford University Press, 2013.

Lubey, Kathleen. *What pornography Knows: Sex and Social Protest Since the Eighteenth Century*. Stanford University Press, 2022.

Luddy, Maria, and Mary O'Dowd. *Marriage in Ireland, 1660-1925.* Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Mac, Juno, and Molly Smith. *Revolting Prostitutes.* Verso, 2018.

Marten, John. *A Treatise of the Venereal Disease*. D. Leach, 1711.

Mathius, T.J. *The Pursuits of Literature*. T Beckett, 1803.

McClure, Laura. *Courtesans at Table*. Routledge, 2013.

McGonegal, Julie. "Of Harlots and Housewives: A Feminist Materialist Critique of the Writings of Wollstonecraft." *Women's Writing,* vol. 11, no. 3, 2004, pp. 347-361.

McInnes, Andrew. *Wollstonecraft's Ghost: The Fate of the Female Philosopher in the Romantic Period.* Routledge, 2017.

Meaney, Geraldine, Mary O'Dowd and Bernadette Whelan. *Reading the Irish Woman: Studies in Cultural Encounters and Exchange, 1714–1960.* Liverpool University Press, 2013.

Mechant, Maja. "The Social Profiles of Prostitutes." *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s,* edited by Magaly Rodriguez Garcia et al, Brill Publishers, 2017, pp. 833-860.

More, Hannah. *The Story of Sinful Sally*. J. Marshall, 1796.

Nagle, Jill. "Introduction." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997.

Newton, Richard. "Progress of a Woman of Pleasure." *The Whores of Yore.* Accessed thewhoresofyore.com/progress-of-a-woman-of-pleasure-by-8203richard-newton.html. Accessed 5 December 2023.

Nocturnal Revels vol. II. M. Goadby, 1779.

Nussbaum, Felicity. *The Autobiographical Subject.* John Hopkins University Press, 1995.

O'Brien, Eliza. "The Tale never dies: Imprisonment, Trial and English Jacobin Fiction: 1788-1805." *Glasgow University PhD Thesis,* 2010. theses.gla.ac.uk/1909/1/2010o'brienPhD.pdf. Accessed 26 September 2023.

O'Reilly, Andrea. *Matricentric Feminism*. Demeter Press, 2021.

"Ordinary's Account." *Old Bailey Proceedings Online.* File OA17410318, 18th March 1741. Par. 9. oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=OA17410318. Accessed 25 August 2022.

"Ordinary's Account." *Old Bailey Proceedings Online.* File OA17511023, 23rd October 1751. Par. 8. oldbaileyonline.org/browse.jsp?div=OA17511023. Accessed 25 August 2022.

Paine, Thomas. *The Rights of Man,* edited by Claire Grogan, Broadview, 2011.

Parker, David. *A Charitable Morsel of Unleavened Bread.* J. Matthews, 1793.

Peakman, Julie. *Amatory Pleasures.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Peakman, Julie. *Lascivious Bodies: A Sexual History of the Eighteenth Century.* Atlantic Books, 2004.

Peakman, Julie. *Peg Plunkett: Memoirs of a Whore.* Quercus Editions, 2015.

Pendleton, Eva. "Love for Sale': Queering Heterosexuality." *Whores and other Feminists,* edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 73-82.

Perry, Ruth. "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England." *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* vol 2, no. 2, 1991, pp. 204-234.

Peters, Matthew William. *"Sylvia, A Courtesan.* C.1777." *National Gallery of Ireland.* http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/8175/sylvia-a-courtesan?ctx=122a46dc-4692-4995-8aba-6d73d4f4e95d&idx=8. Accessed 1 December 2023.

Pheterson, Gail. "The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonor and Male Unworthiness." *Social Context*, no. 37, 1993, pp. 39-64.

---. "Not Repeating History." *Vindication of the Rights of Whores,* edited by Gail Pheterson, Da Capo Press, 1993, pp. 3-32.

Phillips, Chelsea. *Carrying All Before Her: Celebrity Pregnancy and the London Stage.* University of Delaware Press, 2022.

Phillips, Teresia Constantia. *An Apology for the Conduct of Mrs T.C. Phillips.* Printed for the author, 1748.

Phipps, Alison. "White tears, white rage: Victimhood and (as) violence in mainstream feminism." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2021, pp. 81-93.

"Piece 141: King's Bench Prison: List of Prisoners, 1797." King's Bench and Fleet Prison Discharge Books and Prisoner Lists 1734-1862, *Ancestry.* ancestry.co.uk/ image viewer/ collections/9158/images /42479_635001_11685 00012?usePUB=true&_phsrc=yeb1&_phstart=successSource. Accessed 5 June 2022.

Polwhele, Richard. *The Unsex'd Females: A Poem.* W.M Cobbett, 1800.

Pullen, Kirsten. *Actresses and Whores.* Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Prévost, Abbé. *Manon L'Escaut, or the Fatal Attachment.* Translated by Charlotte Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith* edited by Judith Stanton, Taylor and Francis, 2022, pp. 1-124.

Queen, Carol. "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma." *Whores and other Feminists*, edited by Jill Nagle, Routledge, 1997, pp. 125-135.

Rajan, Tilottama. "Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*." *Studies in Romanticism,* vol. 32, no. 2, 1993, pp. 149-176.

Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Towards a Politics of Location." *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader,* edited by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, Routledge, 2003, pp. 29-42.

Richards, Cynthia. "History Without Trauma: Recovering Bodily Loss in the Eighteenth Century." *The Future of Feminist Scholarship: Beyond Recovery,* edited by Robin Runia, Routledge, 2018, pp. 13-30.

Rights of Swine: An Address to the Poor. Publisher Unknown, 1794.

Robinson, Mary. *A Letter to the Women of England* and *The Natural Daughter*. Edited by Sharon M. Setzer, Broadview, 2003.

---. *Memoirs of the Late Mary Robinson* vol I. Richard Phillips, 1803.

---. *Memoirs of the Late Mary Robinson* vol II. Richard Phillips, 1803.

Roland, Madame. *An Appeal to Impartial Posterity* vol I. Edited and translated by Bosc, J. Johnson, 1795.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty*. Faber & Faber, 2018.

Rosenthal, Laura. "Introduction." *Nightwalkers: Prostitute Narratives from the Eighteenth Century,* edited by Laura Rosenthal, Broadview, 2008.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile; Or On Education.* Translated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom, Dartmouth College Press, 2010.

---. *Letter to D'Alembert and Writings for the Theatre*. Edited and translated by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom and Christopher Kelly, University Press of New England, 2004.

---. *The Confessions.* Translated by Angela Scholar, Oxford World Classics, 2000.

Runia, Robin. "Introduction." *The Future of Feminist Eighteenth Century Scholarship*, edited by Robin Runia, Routledge, 2018, pp. 1-9.

Russo, S, and L. O'Brien. "Sex, Sisters and Work: Mary Robinson's *The Natural Daughter* and Amy Levy's *The Romance of a Shop*." Women's Writing, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 27-58.

Satan's Harvest Home. Publisher Unknown, 1749.

Serano, Julia. *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive.* Seal Press, 2013.

Setzer, Sharon M. "Introduction." *A Letter to the Women of England and The Natural Daughter,* by Mary Robinson. Edited by Sharon M. Setzer, Broadview, 2003, pp. 9-32.

---. "Romancing the reign of terror: Sexual politics in Mary Robinson's *Natural Daughter*." *Criticism,* vol. 39, no. 4, 1997, pp. 531-555.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It.* Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Washington Square Press, 1997.

---. *King Lear*. Edited by Stanley Wells and George Hunter, Penguin, 2005.

---. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Bloomsbury, 2015.

Sharma, Anjana. *The Autobiography of Desire: English Jacobin Women Novelists of the 1790s.* Macmillan India, 2004.

Sheldon, Ann. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol I. Printed for the Authoress, 1787.

---. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol II. Printed for the Authoress, 1787.

---. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol III. Printed for the Authoress, 1787.

---. *Authentic and Interesting Memoirs of Miss Ann Sheldon* vol IV. Printed for the Authoress, 1787.

Shepard, Alexandra. "Working Mothers in Eighteenth-Century London." *History Workshop Journal.* dbad008, 2023, pp. 1-24. doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbad008. Accessed 7 Dec 2023.

Siena, Kevin. *Rotten Bodies: Class and Contagion in Eighteenth-Century Britain.* Yale University Press, 2019.

Sinanan, Kerry, and Tim Milnes. "Introduction." *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity,* edited by Kerry Sinanan and Tim Milnes, Palgrave, 2010, pp. 1- 30.

Smith, Adam. *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* JJ. Tourneisen, 1793.

Smith, Hugh. *Letters to Married Women, on Nursing and the Management of Children.* G. Kearsley, 1792.

Smyth, Jim. "Introduction: The 1798 Rebellion in its Eighteenth-Century Contexts." *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union: Ireland in the 1790s,* edited by Jim Smyth, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Sol, Antoinette Marie. *Textual Promiscuities*. Bucknell University Press, 2002.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?." *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea,* edited by Rosalind C. Morris. Columbia University Press, 2010, pp. 21-80

Steinberg, Jessica. "For Lust or Gain: Perceptions of Prostitutes in Eighteenth-Century London." *Journal of Gender Studies,* vol. 26, no. 6, 2016, pp. 702-713

Steintrager, James. *The Autonomy of Pleasure*. Colombia University Press, 2016.

Swaminathan, Srividhya and Adam R. Beach. "Introduction: Invoking Slavery in Literature and Scholarship." *Invoking Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Imagination,* edited by Swaminathan and Beach, Routledge, 2016, pp. 21-26.

Tallent, Alistaire. "Listening to the Prostitute's Body: Subjectivity and Subversion in the Erotic Memoir Novels of Eighteenth-Century France." *Journal of The Western Society for French History,* vol. 33, 2005, pp. 211-233.

Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, 1991.

Taylor, Stephen. *Defiance: The Life and Choices of Lady Anne Barnard.* Faber & Faber, 2016.

The British critic and quarterly theological review Vol 3. F. and C. Rivington, 1794.

The Honest London Spy. Edward Midwinter, 1725.

The Histories of Some of the Penitents in the Magdalen House. Edited by Jennie Batchelor and Megan Hiatt, Routledge, 2016.

Trevelyan, George Otto. *The Early History of Charles James Fox.* Harper, 1880.

Trouille, Mary Seidman. *Sexual Politics in the Enlightenment: Women Writers Read Rousseau.* State University of New York Press, 1997.

Walker, Gina Luria. *Mary Hays (1759 – 1843): The Growth of a Woman's Mind.* Ashgate, 2006.

Weiss, Deborah. *The Female Philosopher and her Afterlives.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford University Press, 1975.

Williams, Samantha. *Unmarried Motherhood in the Metropolis.* Palgrave, 2018.

Wilkes, Wetenhall. *A letter of genteel and moral advice to a young lady.* Oli Nelson, 1751.

Wilson, Adrian. *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England 1660-1770.* Harvard University Press, 1995.

Wilson, Rachel. *Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745: Imitation and Innovation.* Boydell and Brewer, 2015.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Short Residence in Sweden,* edited by Richard Holmes, Penguin Classics, 1987.

---. *A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution,* edited by Janet Todd, Oxford University Press, 2008.

---. *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, edited by Janet Todd, Allen Lane, 2003.

---. *Maria; Or the Wrongs of Woman,* edited by Anne K. Mellor, Norton, 1975.

---. *Original Stories from Real Life.* J. Johnson, 1796.

---. "Review of *Nature and Art.*" *Analytical Review* vol. 23, 1796, pp. 511-14. Included in appendix to Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art.* Edited by Shawn Lisa Maurer, Broadview, 2005.

Young, Phillip. *Revolutionary Ladies.* Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.