

The Social Contract of the Sexes: The Prostituted Ladies in the Seventeenth-Century England

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The Ladies Dictionary (1694), published in London, can be useful as a text which shows how female sexuality is constructed in the seventeenth-century England. There exists categories of women by the sexual criterion: virgins, wives, and widows who are expected to stay in the private or domestic world; prostitutes who are usually seen in public. Prostitutes, in the term of "wantons," are divided into two kinds; common whores and private mistresses.

Among these, the category of private mistresses raises some questions to the system of marriage. Private mistresses are, in a sense, unusual in their sexual and social conditions, since they might love one man and have heirs, or they could acquire great power at court. They, though often called illegal wives, could get themselves out of the bottom of society into the upper class. On the contrary, women, unless they have the titles of virgins, wives, or widows, are soon labeled as prostitutes, the target of assault. By inquiring categories of women with the concepts of contract or vows, it can be said that female sexuality functions not only as the criterion for protecting the social order, but as the possibility of women's acquiring liberty and power.

I

Women who "are neither Wives, Maids, nor Widdows" are defined as prostitutes in *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694).¹⁾ Having "Being a General Entertainment For the Fair Sex" as its subtitle, this dictionary might be expected a conduct book for women in aristocratic or bourgeois families. To consider how female sexuality is represented in the fashionable society in the seventeenth-century England, it might be useful to examine in this dictionary the concepts of prostitutes as well as those of wives, virgins, or widows. This paper, by taking into account the definitions of the dictionary, is intended to make clear the differences between wife and prostitute, and to show the role of mistress as the intermediate category.

First, the idea of "wantons" will be examined, in which common prostitutes and private mistresses are taken up:

Of Wantons there be two sorts, Meretrices and Scorta, that is, Whores and common Women, such as either for Lust or Gain, prostitute themselves to many, or all. The second are Concubina or Pellices, Concubines to Kings and Princes, or such as we call the private Mistresses to great Men. (466)

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These two kinds of women are both defined as prostitutes, but the former is often regarded as the devil, while the latter as illegal wife. The term "Concubinage" is described as "the keeping a Whore for his own filthy use" or "an unlawful Use of another Woman instead of one's Wife" (108). Women who stay with one man, as their masters or husbands, cannot be said licentious, while being categorized in "wantons." Such a condition is unique to the women's categories divided between chaste and licentious, in other words, mistresses are faithful to their men under the name of prostitutes.

Prostitutes are usually attacked by the reasons of having unlawful, especially indiscriminate, sexual intercourse and getting money.²⁾ Then, the term "prostitutes" in the dictionary will be scanned, focusing on how they are assaulted:

[T]hey will for good Victuals, or for a very small piece of Money, prostitute their Bodies, and they protest they never did any such thing before, that it was pure necessity that now compell'd them to do what they have done, and the like; whereas the Jades will prove common Hacknies upon every slight occasion: they are dexterous in picking of pockets, which they mind most when they find the mans thoughts most imployed on somewhat else; they are destructive Queans, and oftentimes secret Murtheres of the Infants which are illegitimately begotten of their bodies. (421)

Indeed the dictionary mentions prostitutes' looseness by saying that they "prostitute their Bodies." But the words of "picking of pockets" emphasizes their sinfulness by using a metaphor of theft. Here prostitutes are assaulted as "mercenary whores," rather than as "wantons." What is more, their babies are estimated illegitimate. The problem of illegality in family lives should be inquired from the viewpoint of women's conditions at that time.

Before looking over the female state, to inquire the examples of marriage systems, or the legal relationships, could be valid in considering what is licentious or lawful.³⁾ Marriage systems are quite different "by the Customs of their Countries." In some Eastern Nations, they have "liberty to Marry as many Wives as they can maintain and live in common among them" (341). There are other countries where "the Bramins or Heathen Priests have always the Bride Maidenhead, of the Profit of it, by assigning her over to any one that will give Money for the first Nights Enjoyment." As the law in Scotland, "the Landlords should have that advantage over their Tenants Wives." On the contrary, "among the Romans, Marriage was kept inviolable." The most unfamiliar concept is the custom of "the Indians of the East," that is, "all the Brothers should have but one Wife in common" (342).

As the various forms of marriage show, the attitudes toward sexuality are so different that we cannot decide what is licentious or lawful. But one point is clear that most of the marriage systems seem to be based on male sexual desire. Having many wives is sometimes regarded as a substitution for buying prostitutes.⁴⁾ The purpose of marriage is not only for "the Increase of Posterity" but "to Bridle and bound Man's wandering Desires and Affections" (343). Therefore one of the errors in marriage is unlawful lusts, as loving a mercenary love, a harlot "who is the grand Enemy, and mischief to the happy state of Marriage" (344). On the other hand, there exists "a Care-Cloth, that it might allay the Excess of Joy in the married People" (348). The variety of marriage systems shown above indicates marriage is looked upon as a constitution for controlling male sexual desire.

II

The awareness of controlling male sexual desire is certainly presented in the different systems of marriage, but female sexual desire is not mentioned in the term "marriage." At the beginning, women opposite to prostitutes are introduced as virgins, wives and widows, who are thought to be marriageable. Then I will scan how these three

sorts of women are represented, who are lawfully admitted in marriage, especially centering on their sexualities. Interestingly, common warnings to them appear in these three terms.

The term "virgin" expresses that she must be modest and obedient for protecting her virginity. The focus is inevitably on separating them from "a dangerous temptation" which leads to their corruption (443). The caution is that "every Impure Fancy or indecent Curiosity is a deflowering of Mind" (442). Attacking "Fancy" or "Curiosity" can be seen in a range of recreations:

Romances and Love Stories are by many counted harmless Recreations . . . but . . . those Amorous passions, which are there Painted to the Life. We are apt to conceive, may insinuate themselves into the breasts and good likeings, of the unwary Readers, and by an unhappy inversions, a Cobby may produce an original, when a Young Virgin shall read the Passages of some Triumphant Beauty, that captivates imaginary Knights, and makes them fall prostrate at her Feet, and have an exact obedience to all her commands. . . . (443)

To prohibit virgins from having "Amorous passions" contradictorily reveals their consciousness of female sexual desire. Divers "Recreations" are inevitable to the upper-class ladies, for they have a huge leisure to kill. "Music, Languages, Needle-Work, Writing" are most usual recreations, considered as a very feminine business (443). These feminine diversions usually play an effective part in weakening expression of female desire.

The similar caution can be seen in the concepts of wives and widows. Wives are instructed as follows:

As to what relates (then) to his Bed, she must be severely scrupulous, keeping even her Thoughts and Immaginations from wandering, much less she must not hold a parley or Treaty contrary to her plighted Faith and Loyalty to her Husband; for wantonness is one of the foulest Blotts that constrain any of the fair Sex, but it is more odious infinitely in the Marriage state. . . . (470)

Trying to keep "her Thoughts and Immaginations from wandering" is for the purpose of prohibiting women's "wantonness." Not only their thoughts but wives themselves are expected not to go about. Though "sometimes we ought to allow for Pleasure, and moderate Recreation, for Woman being so rare a Creature, ought not so to be kept under, as if she was in Sevility," wives should not be "over fond or desirous of going abroad, unless about necessary occasions" (472). Described as not being "kept under," wives are certainly expected not to go out but to stay at home. The space women are required to occupy is also the criterion that separates wives from prostitutes; the private world is for wives, the public space for prostitutes. In other words, female sexual desire has chances to wander in public, while, in private, it will not be expressed.⁵⁾

Widows, as well as wives, are cautioned thus; "Old Woman delight in, and doating on gaudy Trifles, more seemly for her Grand Children; to see her with Spectacles reading Romances, or Love-stories; to be at Masquerades and Dances" (487). How to control sexual desire is again related to reading, especially as an incentive to imagination. This suggests romances incite women to get out of the private world or to set free their natural desire.

Unless women should be virgins, wives or widows, they instantly are labeled as prostitutes, according to the definition of the dictionary, that is, the general concept in the female education of the time. "[I]f a man be once in with an harlot, he shall as hadly get out again, as a man that is plunged into a very deep and narrow pit, where he can hardly stir himself." Contrary to women, "he that is good before God, shall be delivered from her; but the sinner shall be taken by her" (420). While women who fall from the state of virgins, wives, or widows into prostitutes cannot recover from that position, men can return their former states.

By this strategy, women are required to be careful in their behaviour, which ironically disclose the fear men

have. Men are aware of female sexual desire and worry about its expression, because they depend on women's chastity for keeping their own honour and lineage. This is why women should be kept in the private world without revealing their sexual desire in spite of its being known. Men, consciously or unconsciously, notice that women have the same sexual desire as men. Therefore, by keeping their wives within the domestic space, husbands would like to control female sexual desire and to cancel their worries about the legitimacy of their lineage, fortune, or family honour. For example, "a part of a Woman," clitoris, is defined as "whose Use is Titillation," but simultaneously "like a Mans Yard" (110). Women are instructed to stay within, undertaking what is called "a very feminine business," or mentally and physically retiring from what is related to sexual desire. On the contrary, women, as the subjects and objects of sexual desire, are thought to be prostitutes in marriage system which protects family fortune and lineage.⁶⁾ In the system of lawful marriage, where women are divided into chaste wives and wanton prostitutes, the existence of mistresses, illegal wives to one man should be a key issue to reconsider power relation between the sexes.

III

As mentioned above, private mistresses are not sexually fallen as common prostitutes for staying with one man, nor socially admitted as wives or widows, that is to say, they are very ambiguous existence. What separates mistresses from wives or widows is just a lawful recognition, based on the social or public contract before marriage.⁷⁾ The concept of marriage contract is seriously and comically described as follows:

Marriage without a Pre-ingagement or Contract looks so odd, that it appears more liker the Coupling of Irrational than Rational Creatures; and it might be by a Miracle if a Marriage hurried and clapt up of Suddain almost, without the Consent of either Party, but as it were acted in a Comedy, only in Jest, to please or amuse the Spectators, ever proves happy or successful. . . . (349)

The importance of contract before marriage is shown as "it might be by a Miracle" to marry without it. Indeed, on the stage of comedies, it happens well that heroines marry her lovers of their own choices after resolving the problems which have blocked their marriages. But, needless to say, the audience just enjoy the feeling of the theatrical reality.⁸⁾

At the scene of contract, it must be done "with Caution and deliberation, first to consider the Fitness and Equality of the Person, in Years, Lineaments and Fortune" (485). "A solemn Contract" must be made "honestly" with "real and cordial Intentions," and, above all, it must be "lawful" (350). In some cases, "any passage of Expression between two, before Witness, falling from Parties in Rashness or Sport, or upon a Question demanded might carry the force of Contract," that is, private promise has the same force as a public contract (351). Even if the public contract has a power, believing the "Vows" before marriage requires prudence, because "there is extreme danger and disgrace in breaking or pretending a dispensation for them" (448). Breaking lovers' vows functions in labeling women, as the following passages show:

Too many credulous Females have been induced by solemn Vows and Protestations of Marriage, to yield up their Honour on trust . . . but afterward, they found, to their sorrow and shame, they have proved only Spiders Webbs and been easier broken than made. . . . (448)

As a result of contract lawfully insufficient, virgins who "yield up their Honour on trust" might make prostitutes,

because they "are neither Wives, Maids, nor Widdows." Whether the vows or contract be sufficiently lawful is fatal to the destiny of virgins.

Widows, considered to be the "second part of Virginity," behave themselves discreetly as well as virgins (481). They indeed are allowed marriage, after a certain period of time set by custom "between the Death of one Husband and the Marriage of another" (484). When a widow marry again, she "will take care for the Children she has already, before she signs the Contract" (482). Other advises for considerable disproportion are made "in respect of Fortune and Quality" or "the Humours of Age and Youth," because sometimes widows "Allure young Men to them with their Riches" (485). To be careful in the marriage contract is applied to widows, as for their children, since to produce legal children is a main purpose of the system of marriage. Then the honour of widows is protected by the lawful contract, then as wives.

Mistresses, in a sense, can be said to be outsiders to the social and sexual systems. Behaving themselves as wives or widows, sometimes as ladies, they cannot have rights provided with wives or widows. Nor they are regarded "as common as the Highway." They might have children who inherit the families, and could have great power socially or politically. Partly labeled as prostitutes, they might enter the fashionable society, with which they could never associated by their birth. A private mistress has the possibility to acquire unreasonable power, owing to her patron. On the other hand, prostitutes have chances to go upward as well as to fall.

IV

The general concept is questioned in taking private mistresses into consideration that marriageable women are forced into the private or domestic world, while prostitutes stand in public. Private mistresses are equal to wives sexually, and sometimes socially. They could have greater power and liberty than lawful wives have. One of the meanings of the word, mistress, is feminine of master. Similarly, courtesan originally means "woman attached to the court." Afterward, these two words are usually identified as prostitutes, but their nuances are changed from time to time. In the late seventeenth century, at the places for entertainment such as theatre, sometimes there is little distinction between prostitutes and the upper-class ladies in fashion.

Female sexuality functions as the criterion for protecting the social order, but, on the other hand, it offers the possibility of women's acquiring liberty and power. The distinction applied to women indicates fears of the male-dominant society, which ironically show its awareness of the unseen force of female sexuality. Therefore, it is actually impossible to separate wives from prostitutes, nor can private mistresses be alienated from sexual and social contract.

Notes

- 1) *The Ladies Dictionary: Being a General Entertainment For the Fair Sex* (London, 1694). All subsequent quotations from this work are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically by page.
- 2) The concept of prostitution is investigated from the viewpoints of female sexuality in Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York UP, 1995).
- 3) Antonia Fraser questions the patriarchal assumption that women are "the weaker vessel" to be protected, by offering anecdotes which show the state of women or marriage in *The Weaker Vessel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).
- 4) The ideas of various forms of marriage and prostitution also depend on Vern and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and*

Prostitution: A Social History (New York: Prometheus Books, 1987).

- 5) The problem of seeing/seen is taken up in Veronica Kelly and Dorothea E. Von Mucke eds. *Body & Text in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).
- 6) Felicity A. Nussbaum analyzes the domestication of female sexual desire in *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995).
- 7) For the concept of contract, see Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988).
- 8) The provisos in comedies are made by the heroine before marriage in William Congreve, *The Way of the World* (1700), and by the whore before being kept in William Wycherley, *The Gentleman Dancing Master* (1672).

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