TOWN AND GOWN PROSTITUTION: CAMBRIDGE'S ARCHITECTURE OF CONTAINMENT OF SEXUAL DEVIANCE

Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz
Peter Lang, 2022.

<https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202511626>

MARÍA ÁNGELES TODA IGLESIA
Universidad de Sevilla
mtoda@us.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2115-428X>

Continuing in the same line of gender- and class- inflected archival research undertaken in her previous work, *The London Lock Hospital in the Nineteenth Century: Gender, Sexuality and Sexual Reform* (2014), Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz presents a study of the institutions that attempted to contain "sexually deviant" working-class women in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge. A lecturer at the University of Málaga, Romero Ruiz has published extensively on the history of sexuality in Victorian England and brings her specialisation and close reading of contemporary documents to produce a text that can contribute significantly to several areas of nineteenth-century studies, particularly those concerned with the interworking of gender, power and class.

These areas are outlined in the introduction, as the author explains how she builds on James Smith's 2008 term "architecture of containment", drawn from studies of Irish Magdalen Laundries, as well as on earlier studies on prostitution and reform such as Finnegan (1979) or Mahood (1990). The book centres both on the history of specific institutions in Cambridge, thus contributing to studies on Victorian reform legislation and regulation, and on the construction and reality of the figure of the "fallen woman" in the same period, an issue that has long been an object of interest for feminist and gender studies (since, for instance, Nead 1988). Additionally, close attention is paid to the oft underestimated element of class which is so crucial to understanding Victorian issues. This perspective is especially present in how Romero Ruiz reads both the women's lives and the attempts to

"contain" their behavior, partly in relation to the conflict between working-class and middle-class moralities. For this purpose, she draws on studies of the Victorian poor. A final —and to me very valuable— contribution of the volume is to the growing field of studies on Victorian and Edwardian material culture and its neo-Victorian representations, often through the lens of "thing theory" (Sattaur 2012; Arias and Pulham 2019; Maier et al 2022), as I will explain below.

The introduction sets up institutions, gender and class as centres of interest, providing a brief context to Cambridge in the nineteenth century and to the two jurisdictions —the town and the university— which will interact in the development of the institutions that will be discussed in each of the chapters: the university-run Spinning House; the Cambridge Poor-Law Union Workhouse, dependent on commissioners and parishes from the town; the Cambridge Gaols; and finally the Cambridge Female Refuge, where both town and gown were involved. A brief contextualisation of prostitution in Cambridge completes the introduction. However, what is missing is a definition of the concept of prostitution itself. It seems to me a concept too loaded to go unexamined, particularly as the essay applies a gender studies perspective; even the term (sex work or prostitution?) has been the object of heated argument and painful division within feminism. While it is crucial to insist, as the author does, that sex work was an intermittent, complementary source of income for many young female workers of the period, an analysis of the patriarchal power structures that give rise to the institution of prostitution, going beyond brief references to the "separate spheres" theory, would have been pertinent. Similarly, some problematic uses of language, such as frequent references to the objects of this "containment" as "girls" —even given the fact that many were teenagers— and the occasional fall into Victorian terminology, as in "hardened prostitutes" without quotation marks, might have benefited from revision.

The first chapter establishes the history and organisation of the Cambridge Spinning House, which came to be specialised in imprisoning, with a view to reformation, young women accused of soliciting students or of "riotous" or "scandalous" behavior. Romero Ruiz's thorough analysis of the regulations governing the Spinning House provides a fascinating glimpse of the material conditions of life in these institutions. Her study of the Committal books and of contemporary censuses does much toward individualising the conditions, ages, origins and jobs of the women who were subsumed under the category of "fallen". Of particular interest to me was the access to the voices of these women as witnesses in an inquest held after the death of one of the inmates "of rheumatic fever, caused by a violent cold caught at the spinning house" (2022: 39); the witnesses vividly describe the lack of fire, the dampness of the beds and the cells and the drafts

coming from the broken windows. Judith Butler's theories of precariousness and vulnerability are here appropriately applied to the relations of power which governed the inmates' lives, and the author emphasises the differences in the punishment applied to the undergraduates and to the women in cases of sexual misconduct, as well as the blurred lines between patrolling working-class women's behavior in general and prostitution in particular.

The second chapter, "'Fallen Women's' Makeshift Economy: The Cambridge Poor-Law Union Workhouse" develops this conflation of prostitutes and working-class women, emphasising the theme of poverty and its stigma. It provides a full account of the British Poor Law's origins and the workhouse system to frame the specific institution whose archives are analysed. Once more, the wealth of specific detail can be invaluable to students of Victorian and Edwardian material culture — and to authors of neo-Victorian novels: "the inmate's diet was based mainly on bread and gruel, potatoes, and suet or rice puddings. To these, soup, cheese and broth were added, depending on the day of the week" (2022: 63). Attention is returned to the specific issue of "deviant" women in the workhouse at the end of the chapter, in which the related issue of single or abandoned mothers is developed through a careful study of the Cambridge register of births and the proceedings against the fathers of these "illegitimate" children. Chapter 3, briefer than the rest, similarly discusses the Victorian prison system in general and Cambridge Gaols specifically, and centers on the petty crimes for which women defined as prostitutes came to be imprisoned —since prostitution itself did not constitute an offence since 1824 (2022: 43)— as well as providing significant data such as the very young age of many of the offenders.

It is in the last chapter, "Domesticating the 'Fallen': The Cambridge Female Refuge" where the central themes of the study, which occasionally compete for attention, are most clearly and successfully brought together. Romero Ruiz here discusses institutions whose objective, beyond spatial containment, is to reform and recycle women involved in prostitution, bringing them within the domestic scene "in a place of confinement with characteristics like those of a middle-class home with the values of protection and isolation from peril" (2022: 104). Framing the analysis within Foucauldian theory, the author reads the Cambridge Refuge as an example of the exercise of power to create "docile bodies" (2022: 111) and emphasises the ideas of vulnerability and precarity in the situation of the inmates, particularly through the institution's emphasis on isolating and policing them as sources of possible contamination for both the university and the city. The medical examinations (also present in other institutions discussed), as well as the physical separation between the premises and the city, between the women and their friends or relatives, and between the women themselves, are read as elements in exerting

this power. Through the meticulous analysis of the Annual Reports, the chapter not only presents the day-to-day patterns of regulation and discipline, but contributes a wealth of material detail. Readers may find the list of prices paid for the different items washed, ironed and starched, or sewn by the inmates, which even specifies, "Cotton or thread will be charged if not sent" (2022: 121). Such tasks are presented as part of the attempt to guide the women toward traditional female (and heavily underpaid) working-class occupations that would be beneficial to the middle-class economy: building on theories of resistance and resilience such as Sarah Bracke's (2016), Romero reflects on the destinations and further life choices of those who left the Refuge, both the "successes" —whose letters from outside she quotes with due caution— and those who chose to break away from the control and dependency of the center. The changes brought on in the last years of the nineteenth century by the growing involvement of middle-class women with the Social Purity Movement, and by the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which raised the age of consent, are also analysed in terms of how they led to a less punitive, more reformist treatment. The final emphasis is on the persistent clash of values between working-class and middle-class attitudes on sexual work or prostitution.

The volume thus provides valuable information as to the internal history of Victorian institutions and how they shape, and are shaped by, Victorian middle-class ideologies of gender and class. Its exhaustive archival work gives further specificity and nuance to the growing understanding of women's history in the mid and late nineteenth century, as well as to the history of the institutions employed to control and police working-class bodies.

Works Cited

Arias, Rosario and Patricia Pulham. (eds.) 2019. *Tracing the Victorians: Material Uses of the Past in Neo-Victorianism*. Special Issue of *Victoriographies* 9 (3).

Bracke, Sarah. 2016. "Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience". In Butler, Judith, Zeynet Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (eds.) *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Duke U.P.: 52-75.

Butler, Judith. 2006. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso.

Finnegan, Frances. 1979. *Poverty and Prostitution: A Study of Victorian Prostitutes in York*. Cambridge U.P.

Mahood, Linda. 1990. *The Magdalens: Prostitution in the Nineteenth Century*. Routledge.

Maier, Sarah E., Brenda Ayres and Danielle Mariann Dove. (eds.) 2022. *Neo-Victorian Things: Reimagining Nineteenth Century Material Cultures*. Palgrave Macmillan.

NEAD, Lynda. 1988. *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*. Blackwell.

SATTAUR, Jennifer. 2012. "Thinking Objectively: An Overview of 'Thing Theory' in Victorian Studies". *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40 (1): 347-357. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150311000428>.

SMITH, James M. 2008. *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Manchester U.P.

Received: 05/03/2025
Accepted: 01/09/2025

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.