

Purging the Self: Entering the Object in Victorian Texts of Vaginal Exploration

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In the second half of the nineteenth century, a unique mixture of journalistic, sociomedical, and social reformist texts took shape and, in turn, shaped the ideological parameters of the female vagina. Ranging from newspaper articles to moralistic diatribes, these texts with their various manifestations and motivations all proposed what was essentially the same rhetorical and ideological journey. Thus within the span of four decades, American gynecologist J. Marion Sims visually entered the vaginal space by fashioning and utilizing a speculum that allowed him an unparalleled and problematic look into the vagina; surgeon William Acton anxiously wielded rhetoric and statistics to safely access the previously invisible and unspeakable subject of the prostitute's diseased vagina; Bracebridge Hemyng investigated the labyrinth of the London streets and their corollary in the female body; sensationalist journalist W.T. Stead risked both his liberty and his subjectivity to enter the domain of the child prostitute; and W.R. Greg, in attempting to map and reform the "social sickness" of prostitution, spatialized his rhetorical attempts at social reform. In doing so, Greg yoked the vagina and the London streets, ultimately suggesting how these two labyrinths act as a threatening abyss within which men, their supposedly stable subjectivities, and the meaning of their texts collapse.

Whether they took the form of a well-crafted argument, a gynecological examination, or a literal investigation of the London streets, these journeys all constituted an attempt to enter and expose the threatening center of the female sex organ. This article examines key texts by these authors to show how attempts to understand prostitution and the vagina offer powerful examples of the object in Victorian culture.

Though certainly unique and prominent examples of a type, during the mid to late Victorian period, the authors above were in no way unusual in their efforts to explore, categorize, and critically evaluate the "Great Social Evil" of prostitution. Indeed, at this time, prostitution was by no means the only object of interest that drew male spectators into the slums of Soho, the East End, Manchester, and Birmingham; this period also witnessed the rise of the social explorer, someone who deliberately traversed the London landscape while transgressing boundaries of geography, class, and race. As Judith Walkowitz notes, "Throughout the Victorian period, it had been the prerogative of privileged men to move speedily as urban explorers across the divided social spaces of the nineteenth-century city, to see the city whole, and thereby to construct their own identity in relation to that diversity" (11). This male flaneur or social explorer purposefully penetrated the sewers and slums of London in order to expel the figures of social disease, besides and including the prostitute that lurked there. Transgressing the borders between high/low and upper class/lower class, the urban spectator sought out beggars, thieves, pimps, prostitutes, criminals, and other social undesirables with the apparent intention of penetrating the previously invisible and uncategorizable mass of the London underworld. This group included journalists and social reformers like Charles and Henry Booth, Henry Mayhew, and James Greenwood. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest, this social exploration was the dominant mode by

which the high came to know and see the “Other”: “In Chadwick, in Mayhew, in countless Victorian reformers, the slum, the laboring poor, the prostitute, the sewer, were recreated for the bourgeois study and drawing-room as much as for the urban council chamber. Indeed, the reformers were central in the construction of the urban geography of the bourgeois Imaginary” (125-6). Using words like “recreated,” “Imaginary,” and “construction,” Stallybrass and White nicely juxtapose the psychological (“Imaginary”) and the social (“recreated” and “construction”) processes by which the “high” engages with the “low.”

Within the context of the growing social reform efforts of the mid-Victorian period and the ever-expanding territory of the social explorer, prostitution was one of many concerns that plagued the bourgeois consciousness most severely. Partially sparked by the French study of Parisian prostitutes undertaken by A.J.B. Parent-Duchatelet in 1836, social attention to and anxiety about English prostitution began in earnest as early as 1840 and lasted well beyond the end of the century. The present study, however, will be limited to the period between 1850 and 1885, during which time several social, medical, and legislative events such as the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866, 1869), the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1886), and the rise of the “social explorer” occurred to make the prostitute and her body a prime target for widespread attention. As the bourgeoisie attempted to secure its supremacy and physical control over the lower classes through these legislative and rhetorical pursuits, the prostitute remained a markedly ambivalent figure: considered both desirable and destructive, she signified a conflict within the foundations of society and more dangerously, within the male mind itself. Walkowitz points out that the prostitute is then a prime example of the paradoxical process by which “what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central” (*City* 21, Stallybrass and White 5). Borrowing further from Stallybrass and White, I suggest that the prostitute also exemplifies the symbolic binarisms of high/low, male/female, and good/evil, in that the prostitute acts as the “low” that is incorporated into the “high” and is in fact a necessary contingent of it. This is to say that the male spectator’s efforts to permeate, visualize, and classify the prostitute and her vagina are fundamentally part of the process by which that subject, or the culture at large, come to stabilize a supposedly secure identity. As Stallybrass and White put it, “the low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture” (5-6).

Working in part from Walkowitz’s work on W.T. Stead, the urban spectator, and Jack the Ripper, I will examine several medical, journalistic, and reform texts in order to suggest how the male flaneur and his penetration of the prostitute’s physiological and geographical sphere signify a deeper psychological crisis. These texts will include autobiographical and medical information on the father of modern gynecology, J. Marion Sims, William Acton’s *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects* (1870), Bracebridge Hemyng’s section on prostitution from Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861), W.T. Stead’s “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” (1885), and W.R. Greg’s article “Prostitution” (1850).¹ Though Walkowitz brilliantly chronicles the outward consequences and dangers that social explorers of prostitution such as W.T. Stead risked for his work, I argue that that risk is more accurately one of abjection. Thus, rather than merely risking a few months in prison, a black eye, or the public shame of discussing so evil a subject, the male spectator’s attraction for and repulsion from the prostitute, her vagina, and the London slums reveals that the real danger is one of being consumed within the abjection that the labyrinthine vagina represents. In the vagina’s invisible

and unsignifiably maze of indeterminacy, the male spectator risks and revels in the erosion of his stable subjectivity, his descent into the abyss of pre-symbolic feminine chaos, and his inability to clearly see, classify, and thus “other” the “Other” within himself.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva uses Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalysis as a basis for her model of psychosocial development. In this model, Kristeva explains how, prior to experiencing the mirror stage and entering the symbolic order, the child exists on a kind of threshold between the chora, which represents an excess of signifiers with no definite and stable meaning, and the symbolic order, or entry into language, where the secure subject is able to use the symbolic function of language to construct an identity. In this pre-Oedipal and marginal stage, the subject is as yet undefined and is wrought in a struggle to expel the mother and other objects of desire in an attempt to stabilize the ego. According to Kristeva, the child, “to save himself, rejects and throws up everything that is given to him--all gifts, all objects. [. . .] Even before things for him *are*--hence before they are signifiable--he drives them out, dominated by drive as he is, and constitutes his own territory, edged by the abject” (5-6). For Kristeva, this nauseating repression and the attempted extermination of the maternal semiotic is necessary for the child to undergo the mirror stage and enter the symbolic “Law of the Father.” Yet, crucial to Kristeva’s concept of this sickening state of abjection is the notion that included in the retching vomit that the child purges, is in fact, the child itself. Using the example of the skin that develops on milk, Kristeva writes, “I’ expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for ‘me,’ who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (3). In other words, because the child has not yet entered the symbolic order and thus lacks the stable subjectivity that is defined by clear, signifiable objects of desire, any attempt to expel an object inadvertently expels the subject along with it, forcing the child into a lifelong process whereby it remains both repulsed by this previous psychological indeterminacy and strangely beckoned by the preservation of this familiar pre-Oedipal condition. The abject therefore becomes what Elizabeth Grosz calls “a condition of symbolic subjectivity; [. . .] [it] is also its unpredictable, sporadic *accompaniment*. It is the underside of a stable subjective identity, an abyss at the borders of the subject’s existence, a hole into which the subject may fall when its identity is put into question [. . .]” (72). Thus, the abject isn’t relegated to a single, traumatizing experience of primary repression and retching. Instead, it returns repeatedly whenever the subject encounters objects that destabilize the binary oppositions that are so crucial to the symbolic order and the security of the subject’s identity. These objects induce abjection because their transgression of oppositions like life/death, inside/outside, and desire/repulsion confronts the subject with what is in reality a tenuous hold on stable subjectivity. Blood, sperm, sweat, pus: these things and their marginality trigger in the subject a recognition that the objects of desire that the child has excluded in order to fashion an identity are both inside and outside, subject and object, desired and reviled.

For my purposes, Kristeva is particularly useful for the simultaneous recognition and disavowal that the subject experiences upon abjection, especially because that process is underscored by a need to expel the feminine chaos that opposes language, order, and the binarisms that structure human life. As I have suggested, the abject is horrifying not just because it produces disgust. Rather, the abject is horrifying because the subject is on the one hand partially able to perceive the object as outside, and thus “Other” and repulsive, but it is simultaneously unable to differentiate that horrifying object from itself, making both the object

and the subject abject. In Kristeva's words, "[. . .] 'subject' and 'object' push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again--inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject" (18). Particularly interesting in this passage is Kristeva's use of the word "contaminated," which has a special resonance for any study on prostitution and the prostitute's vagina. As she suggests, the experience of abjection, or the recognition of the "other" within the self, is indeed one of contamination, as the word itself is a manifestation of the subject's attempt to re-expel what is finally unexpelable. In other words, the notion of contamination is still embedded in a sense of self versus "Other," as it ignores the fact that the "Other" is actually the self, and that the self is thus innately constituted of contamination and the marginality that it signifies. Therefore, the word contamination is also extremely important because it represents a desperate adherence to the supposed boundary between self and "Other," setting up the "Other" as a territory upon which the subject cannot enter without risking his/her subjectivity. As I hope to demonstrate in the body of the article, this process of abjection, though manifested in various ways and demonstrating different elements of Kristeva's theory, is exemplified in the literal and rhetorical journeys taken by Sims, Hemyng, Acton, Stead, and Greg. Obsessively consumed by a desire to see and know the prostitute's vagina, these men cross geographical and ideological borders in order to enter the liminal territory of the "Other," risking both their identities and the objective, descriptive rationalism of their texts.

Though not a social reformist per se, the American gynecologist J. Marion Sims provides a useful entrance into our discussion on prostitution, the vagina, and abjection. Sims is most commonly known as the father of modern gynecology, and his work serves as a fascinating link between Victorian texts of medicine, social medicine, and social reform. During the nineteenth century, when modern gynecology and obstetrics literally didn't exist outside the practice of midwifery, Sims and English physicians like Thomas Spencer Wells, Alfred Meadows, and John Baptiste Potter formulated what would become a very distinct branch of medicine. Quite controversial because of their intimate objects of study, gynecology and obstetrics at this time experienced an intense growth of interest and anxiety. Like all Victorian social movements, the effort to study the female sex organs was attended with the requisite effusion of societies, organizations, and clubs, including the Obstetrical Society of London (1859) and the British Gynaecological Society (1884). Not surprisingly, the tender subject matter and the nascent status of the profession often engendered public conflict that was based both in debates on medical practice as well as in ideological arguments concerning the problematic interaction between a male physician and his female patient.

More specifically, the possibility of seeing a woman's internal organs produced anxiety about medical ethics and social ideology, both of which Sims and Wells addressed in their individual work and in their public discourse on the subject. In a letter to the editor of *Lancet*, Wells, who, interestingly, was physician to Queen Victoria from 1863-1896, voiced his disapproval of Sims's inappropriate and scandalous medical tactics, which had been previously detailed in *Lancet*. For Wells, the speculum was an affront to the modesty and virtue of the patient, and, as Wells argued, "There is no such difficulty encountered in performing any operation on the uterus by the touch alone, and in the dark" (*Lancet* 578). In addition to his offence at Sims's speculum, Wells protests against the potentially "captivating" nature of Sims's techniques and the rhetorical strategies he uses to defend them, also remonstrating the American doctor for allowing women to lay on the physician's table for "eight or nine minutes (!)" during

examinations (*Lancet* 578). Ironically, Wells himself, physician to the most prominent and respected female (read: vagina) in the country, was one of the physicians who pioneered ovariectomies (removal of one or both ovaries), and yet even he objected to Sims's techniques. As Deborah Kuhn McGregor points out, to Wells, the view from an incision in the stomach rather than a vaginal examination was "no threat to the sensibilities of womanhood. In this latter practice, which involved abdominal surgery, he could see all of the organs involved, but from a different angle" (152). While I will address the male spatialization of the vagina in my discussions on W.T. Stead and W.R. Greg, it is intriguing that though Wells objects to a visual entrance into the female sex organs, and specifically entering the vaginal canal, he is comfortable with an abdominal incision that allows him to stand above and outside the female body. Unlike Sims, who eagerly enters the female cavity with his fingers and his crudely-fashioned tools, Wells expresses an anxiety that is only overcome by either extinguishing the lights or entirely avoiding the vaginal canal itself. Instead, Wells relegates himself to a position in which he stands as if viewing a maze from above, impervious to the potentially harmful ideological and psychological consequences inherent in entering the maze itself.

Sims, on the other hand, most famous for his refinement of the speculum, operated in near strict defiance of the gender codes that deemed the female vagina necessarily and properly invisible. Indeed, in the creation of his curved speculum, which was really a refinement of a tool that had been used since the Greco-Roman period but had grown into disuse (Moscucci 112), Sims exhibits an obsession with *seeing* the female vagina that savors of the abject. For instance, in his autobiography, Sims details how he developed his curved speculum. After his disclaimer that "If there was anything I hated, it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis" (231), Sims describes his digital examination of a patient whose uterus has supposedly shifted, causing her pain and discomfort:

I commenced making strong efforts to push it back, and thus I turned my hand with the palm upward, and then downward, and pushing with all my might, when all at once, I could not feel the womb, or the walls of the vagina. I could touch nothing at all, and wondered what it all meant. It was as if I had put my two fingers into a hat, and worked them around, without touching the substance of it. While I was wondering what it all meant Mrs. Merrill said, "Why, doctor, I am relieved." My mission was ended, but what had brought the relief I could not understand. (233)

In this passage as well as in others, Sims's passion for his subject matter is undeniable. Despite all protestations, the quick addition of clause after clause mimicking his rapid attempts to "cure" his patient and the diction that he uses later to describe his own excitement at the discovery to come reveal that Sims is extremely invested in his subject matter, and more importantly, is consumed by the weight and intrigue of his "mission." Interestingly, in choosing the word "mission" to describe his efforts, Sims represents his task as a spatialized entrance into a kind of maze: pushing up, pulling down, shifting his fingers, Sims's language and its quick succession evoke imagery of someone lost in a maze, making turn after turn and yet getting nowhere. While Sims appears to succeed here in "healing" his female patient, it is significant that not only is he unsure about how he effects the cure, but in order to get it, he is forced to enter a sort of vortex that is invisible, undetectable, and yet the presumed cause of the illness and his mission. Using a phrase such as "all at once," Sims conveys a sense of sudden shock and horror at discovering that

the physiological and real material he had been feeling just a moment ago is now absent, subsumed within a pit of darkness and intangibility. It is in this space that Sims becomes eerily unsure of himself and his ability to treat and manage the female sex organ: he has “cured” the woman, and yet his entrance into her body sends into upheaval all of the truths and reality that his profession and his identity are based upon.

In an attempt to reconcile his uneasy and abject position, Sims’s autobiography then chronicles his frenzied attempts to fashion his now famous speculum. “Fired” with his growing idea about how to expose the dark, dangerous vaginal abyss, Sims neglects his patients, drives home “hurriedly,” desperately collects materials, and then recruits two male medical students to join him in the continuation of his “mission” (234). After obtaining the consent of his previous patient, Sims then positions her in the “genu-pectoral” position (on knees and elbows), throws a sheet over her entire body to protect her modesty (an extremely common, though counterintuitive practice at this time), and proceeds to note with surprise and wonder that “Before I could get the bent spoon-handle into the vagina, the air rushed in with a puffing noise, dilating the vagina to its fullest extent. Introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before” (234). Without a doubt, the most striking feature of this passage is the amazement that shakes Sims as he finally sees the thing that has both propelled his career and evaded his attempts of medical clarification. Described as a spiritual epiphany, the moment is marked by Sims’s sense of the discovery that he has made and the elusive, complicated, and threatening feminine element that he has seemingly conquered with his visual penetration of the vagina. Likewise, his use of the word “dilating” is telling in this respect, as it implies both an extreme widening or opening as well as a connotation of vision.

For my Kristevan reading of Sims’s epiphany, this moment is key in that not only does it convey Sims’s awe and desire for the female sex organ, but it is also underscored by an emphasis on vision as a method of knowing the abject “Other.” Suggesting that the abject is, of course, absent of any signified that might define or totalize its meaning, Kristeva similarly indicates that supreme abjection induces a visual cathexis in which “elusive, fleeting, and baffling as it is, that non-object can be grasped only as a sign. It is through the intermediary of a *representation*, hence a *seeing*, that it holds together. A visual hallucination that, in the final analysis, gathers up the others (those that are auditory, tactile, etc.) and, as it bursts into a symbolism that is normally calm and neutral, represents the subject’s desire” (46). First of all, it is worth reiterating that just as in Kristeva’s model of abjection, in which the abject lacks a definite signified, Sims’s autobiographical narrative similarly posits the vagina as lacking signification; it is the place where Sims’s usually dexterous digits lose their way and hover aimlessly in a sort of miraculous black hole that conspicuously and threateningly evades the clear definition that might allow the subject to finally label it “Other.” Second, Kristeva’s analysis of visual cathexis and abjection is especially useful for understanding Sims precisely because his attempts to see into depths of the vagina are so obsessive. After fashioning his newfound device, Sims wildly exaggerates the impact that his discovery will have, presuming that his speculum and its ability to see the “walls of the vagina [. . .] closing in every direction” (235) will essentially obviate the majority of obstetric and gynecological illnesses. Unfortunately for Sims and the slaves he often operated on, his momentary vision of the vagina does indeed prove an hallucination, as even complete visual access to the vagina didn’t necessarily produce cures for these women and in some cases actually exacerbated their bodily complaints. Thus, though he originally conceived

of his visual access to the vagina as that which could help him uncover the etiology and mystery of vaginal diseases, Sims fails to diagnose or signify the vagina, making it impossible for him to define himself and his work in opposition to the feminine "Other." While Sims's medical discourse warrants the concept of "diagnosing" the vagina, the pressing need for a diagnosis or signification is one that resurfaces in each of the journalistic, sociomedical, and social reform texts to be discussed next.

In contrast to Sims, Bracebridge Hemyng exhibits a much more subtle attraction for and repulsion from the prostitute's abject vagina. While I have characterized Sims as an obsessive and over-zealous investigator, Hemyng's text demonstrates a less violent state of abjection that is most noticeable in its narrative structure, its tone when describing the prostitute, and its level of engagement with the labyrinthine vagina. Admittedly, the autobiography that I have used to analyze Sims is quite distinct from Hemyng's voyeuristic, reformist text. Yet in spite of their different purposes, both texts exhibit the writer's anxiety for the vaginal abyss and are written by men who share a similar purpose of illuminating a difficult subject for the possible benefit of *mankind*. Thus, though their narratives take different forms, Sims and Hemyng, and indeed all the authors I investigate here, share a similar purpose and anxiety that transcends differences in discourse or genre. One such comparison and narrative feature of Hemyng's "Prostitution in London" is the range of informative sources that are used to convey the reality of prostitution. Incorporating statistics, melodramatic mini-narratives told by women, and authorial conclusions, Hemyng's text struggles for truth through the diversity of its sources, which are no doubt intended to give the most accurate portrayal of prostitution possible. Indeed, it is as if these three prongs of evidence (statistics, personal interviews and stories, and authorial comments) are an attempt to fully address and thus nullify the question of prostitution, which is nonetheless construed as a massive, geographically extensive, and long social narrative. Like Elizabeth Gaskell's "Condition of England" novel *Mary Barton* (1848), which agitates for labor and class reform, *London Labour and the London Poor* is characterized by an anxiety-ridden class consciousness, transgressive voyeurism between classes, and tension between a tangible social problem and the sometimes melodramatic narrative used to engender both fear and sympathy in the reader.

One particularly interesting example of Hemyng's ambivalent tone occurs when he encounters a prostitute living in a boarding house near Langham Place. Significantly, Hemyng prefaces this scene with a momentary though relevant digression on the absence of statistics that continually hinders his efforts at accurate representation: "It is impossible to estimate the number of brothels in London, or even in particular parishes, not only because they are frequently moving from one district to another, but because our system so hates anything approaching to *espionage*, that the authorities do not think it worth their while to enter into any such computation" (220).² This excerpt is an important one because its sentiment is repeated again and again throughout the text. Though Hemyng is undoubtedly advocating more research on the subject to provide the elusive data that he lacks, his constant reiteration of its absence in turn magnifies and hystericizes the threat of the prostitute, especially heightening the threat of her statistical and geographical invisibility. The language of the passage is intriguing, not only in Hemyng's sense of "entering" an investigation, which has sexual and spatial connotations, but also in his use of the word "espionage," which underscores visual observation of what is usually a social or national "Other." In this case, however, the "Other" is not a French or Italian

revolutionary, but is instead part of the national self and the national body; in other words, the espionage has moved from concrete and external objects of fear to internal, abject, shadowy figures that are incorporated in and indistinguishable from national and individual subjectivity. Furthermore, rather than calmly supporting efforts at more investigation, Hemyng's petulant tone instead reveals his personal, and I would suggest, psychological anxiety at being unable to statistically categorize and immobilize the prostitute.

Hemyng's psychological anxiety and conflict over his work becomes even clearer as he interviews the prostitute that incites this agitation. In arguably one of the best segments of the text, Hemyng proceeds to ask the girl, who is about twenty-three, a series of questions about her origins, her geographical peregrinations, and her attitude towards her profession. Immediately upon describing how he makes her acquaintance, Hemyng distrustfully contradicts the girl's professed age, asserting that "statements of a similar nature, when made by this class, are never to be relied on" (220). Next, Hemyng draws forth the girl's "seduction" story with a series of questions that eventually irritate the prostitute. To soothe her irritation, Hemyng writes, "I really begged to apologize if I had wounded her sensibility; I wasn't inquiring from a religious point of view, or with any particular motive. I merely wished to know, to satisfy my own curiosity" (221). Because we know that Hemyng was in fact specifically commissioned by Henry Mayhew to perform these investigations and write this summary, regardless of his protestations, it is clear that Hemyng is lying to the girl in suggesting that he doesn't have a very specific purpose, religious or otherwise, in asking her questions and probing her past. Yet by pretending that it is the satisfaction of own personal curiosity that drives him into the London slums, Hemyng again places himself and his desires at the forefront of his narrative, even though they are ostensibly only vehicles by which he performs his social and moral duty.

Most important in this scene, however, is Hemyng's tone in conversing with the prostitute. In the quote above, Hemyng's language is markedly "high," and is in stark contrast to the "low" slang and colloquialisms that he otherwise uses in this girl's company. Noting that the girl's talent for "repartee" is often exercised at his expense, Hemyng admits near the close of this segment that "for many reasons I have adhered to her own vernacular" (221). Thus, in contrast to phrases like "begged to apologize" and "wounded sensibilities," most of this encounter is written wholly in the prostitute's tone, which we see when Hemyng writes,

Well, she thought me a very inquisitive old party, anyhow. At any rate, as I was so polite she did not mind answering my questions. Would she stick to it till she was a stiff un? She supposed she would; what else was there for her? Perhaps something might turn up; how was she to know? She never thought she would go mad; if she did, she lived in the present, and never went blubbering about as some did. She tried to be as jolly as she could; where was the fun of being miserable? (221)

In addition to demonstrating his effort to remain in the prostitute's "vernacular," the passage above is fascinating because in it, Hemyng doesn't convey, word for word, the exact testimony that the prostitute gives him. Instead, he comically dons her language as a kind of costume by which he is able to "perform" as the low-class, female "Other."³ Without a doubt, as the two excerpts that I have shown suggest, the effort is comical and absurd, and ultimately highlights the limitations and problematic nature of Hemyng's motives and written testimonial. No longer

a shrewd investigator who carefully enters and safely exits the vaginal labyrinth, Hemyng is coerced by the possibilities inherent in the girl's melodramatic story and captivating vernacular. As a result, his own narrative and distinct subjectivity become contaminated by the femininity that he fittingly characterizes through an excess of question marks.

Significantly, Hemyng's somewhat lengthy interaction with the girl also effects a change in an attitude that he expressed at the beginning of his encounter. While he originally suggests that she is not to be trusted, at the close of the segment Hemyng directly contradicts his earlier statement by averring: "That her answers were true, I have no reason to question, and that this is the fate of very many young girls in London, there is little doubt; indeed, the reports of the Society for the Protection of Young Females sufficiently prove it" (221). Though in the first case Hemyng refers to the girl's professed age and in the second to her representation of her life story, I think that this detail suggests a conflict of truth that is deeply embedded in the male ego and its relation to prostitution. On one hand, Hemyng is conditioned to perceive the prostitute as a dissembling, Circean monster that captivates and carries off her male prey, either by actual death from venereal disease or through psychological and social debasement. On the other hand, I think the evidence above demonstrates that Hemyng is clearly compelled, convinced, and fascinated by the melodramatic "sob story" that the prostitute relays. Combined, these two related impulses, to expel and calumniate the feminine "Other," and to enter it and try on its shifting and unrecognizable "costumes," become clearly manifest in Hemyng's text; struggling for statistical safety through geographical and visual data, Hemyng nonetheless exhibits a simultaneous anxiety and pleasure in the potentially fictionalized narratives of the prostitute, a fact that undermines the text's ability to resolutely define the prostitute and her vagina as geographically and psychologically "Other" from the self and the state.

Though he is largely more successful in distancing himself from the prostitute, William Acton anxiously wields statistics in *Prostitution* in order to signify the prostitute's vagina, which is otherwise represented as dangerously devoid of meaning. To be sure, there is scarcely a topic in Acton's text that is not fundamentally constituted by copious statistical data, as is evidenced when he chronicles the various hospitals that take in prostitutes and those with venereal disease. Acton writes that St. Bartholomew's Hospital "contains 75 beds given up to venereal cases. There are 25 devoted to males and 50 to females, 597 cases were treated in the hospital for syphilis and other specific complaints in the year 1868, and as we have seen at page 52, more than half the out-patients are sufferers from venereal affections" (81). Acton goes on *ad nauseam*, reporting that "In 1867, 169 ordinary patients were admitted [to the Lock Hospital], with an average stay in hospital of 50 days each. The daily average, therefore, of ordinary patients present throughout the year was 23.15. [. . .] Nominally there are now 30 beds for ordinary patients, but as four of these are reserved as extras for special cases, the regular number may be considered to be 26" (78). Amazingly, this level of statistical detail remains consistently high throughout the entire text, and seems like an overcompensation that ironically highlights the artificiality of the numerical data. It is as if Acton clings to discrete numerical entities and mathematical processes like adding and averaging as a way to anxiously manage what is monstrously indiscrete and intangible. And though he certainly never approaches Hemyng's level of personal involvement, Acton's past research into prostitution and his pre-eminence in the field interestingly make him a character in the supposedly factual account he creates. Constantly referring to repeated data as information that "I wrote in 1857," material that has been sent to

him by other doctors, and copies of reports that “I have before me,” Acton dramatizes his manipulation of the information, emphasizing how the facts have been channeled through and transmuted by him, which ultimately reveals the intense effort for control that is everywhere present in his text.

We see this control throughout the text, but especially when Acton relates with minute precision the gynecological examinations and neighborhood “round-ups” that prostitutes were subject to under the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. In his treatment of these two preventative measures, we are able to glimpse Acton’s underlying desire to see, “cure,” and nullify the prostitute’s dangerous genitalia. For example, while he doesn’t write the detailed accounts of the gynecological treatments used in the Lock Hospital, he does repeatedly turn to the testimonies of other surgeons, in this case, “Mr. J. Lane,” who writes the somewhat sensational section that discusses the vaginal treatments forced upon infected prostitutes. The medical ideology in these sections, which was wholly advocated and championed by Acton, is noteworthy for the depiction of the vagina as an unending canal that requires a monstrously enlarged syringe. Acton, himself an advocate of liberally using the speculum in all venereal cases, also includes Lane’s testimony on the difficulty of ascertaining vaginal disease without a complete examination. Lane states that “An external examination alone is quite insufficient for the discovery of these complaints. Purulent secretions from the vulva or lower part of the vagina are, of course, evident enough; but a profuse uterine discharge may be present, and no trace of it be visible until the speculum is employed” (Acton 86). While I don’t think we can unequivocally attribute Lane’s sentiments to Acton, one must note that Acton does include Lane’s material as rhetorical support for his own argument and was, as I stated above, a known advocate for using the speculum. Thus, I think we can assume that Acton was likely in agreement with Lane’s treatment and conception of the female genitals. What is most intriguing about Lane/Acton’s delineation of the vagina as a canal or deep labyrinth that complicates an instant visual or medical “mapping” is Acton’s inclusion of a statement made by “Dr. Barr.” Barr writes that “*Periodical examinations* of the prostitutes living within the Aldershot district were established in April last. [. . .] A few months since every effort was made by at least half the women, and often with success, to evade these inspections. Aided by their companions, they were hidden during the daytime in various places [. . .] [or] they would leave the district for a few days, secretly returning at night” (Acton 92). Juxtaposed against each other, these two excerpts from *Prostitution* demonstrate a very strong corollary between the labyrinth of the vagina and the labyrinth of the London streets. In *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, Walkowitz illustrates how visualization and geography were key for Acton, as his work repeatedly emphasized the “recognition” of the prostitute as a fundamental part of curing this “social evil.” Walkowitz writes, “Recognition entailed a social identification of the prostitute. Acton tried to place her within her environment and to catalogue the causes of her move into prostitution” (44). In other words, “curing” prostitution, for Acton, was a matter of visualizing both the prostitute’s vagina as well as her dubious location within the London streets. Just as in the latter you could lose your way and stumble into a slum where you might face violence or defilement at the hands of the low “Other,” in the former, the male social reformist, doctor, or urban explorer risks contamination from the prostitute’s abject vagina, which is portrayed, like the prostitute’s themselves, as elusive, “secret,” and threatening.

Another tool that Acton uses to deny the threat of the vagina is his metonymy of the female sex organs. In part because he lacks any of Hemyng's sympathy for the prostitute and is much more concerned with her male "victims," Acton portrays the prostitute not through any emotional or subjective register, but through his metonymical magnification of the prostitute's infected vagina. We see this throughout the text, but it occurs most significantly when Acton tours several wards that hold venereal patients and literally obliterates the patient's subjectivity in his obsession with the diseased vagina. For instance, after Acton visits The Lock Hospital and observes the gynecological techniques used there, he finishes this section of his testimony by stating, "I have little to say about the patients; in appearance they are not generally prepossessing; a few among those whom I saw were young, and looked middle-aged and plain. The primary syphilitic affections were few, but the diseases of the uterus numerous [. . .]" (89). In this passage, Acton moves very quickly from observing the women, whom he medically sterilizes with the name "patient" rather than "woman," to classifying the nature of their diseases. In doing so, Acton equates the former (woman/patient) to the latter (infected vagina), and ultimately suggests that the diseased prostitute is in fact only signifiable by her threatening and infectious vagina. For my purposes, Acton's metonymical fragmentation of female identity and embodiment is intriguing because it masks and sublimates a deeper psychological fear. Acton is unable to see the prostitute as an integrated, complete, and therefore formidable entity, and instead documents, fragments, and medicalizes her as a way of deconstructing the threat that she represents. Ultimately, this metonymy manifests Acton's attempt to signify the prostitute: because she is statistically and geographically difficult to define, Acton, with his surgical training, turns to the body and the diseased vagina itself as a way of literally, psychologically, and ideologically paralyzing the prostitute within a definite system of meaning and difference. By defining her through her diseased sex organs, Acton is at least partially able to "Other" the prostitute through categories of sexual difference and genital purity, an "achievement" that distinguishes his text from those of Sims, Hemyng, and, as I will demonstrate shortly, Stead and Greg.

While I argue that Stead is both psychologically and socially less successful in expelling the threat of the abject vagina, his text is nonetheless fascinating because of its explicit rhetoric that links the vagina with threatening images of labyrinths, the Eastern "Other," and the destruction of a stable reality. Unlike any of the other texts I am examining, Stead's "Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" is also unique in its conscious embodiment of a simultaneous geographical, physiological, and ideological journey. This is to say that from the beginning of the text, Stead deliberately characterizes his "crusade" as one that will traverse the city, the prostitute's body, and Victorian ideological codes of gender and sexuality. Thus, the premise of Stead's text rests on the vagina as the object of this geographical, physiological, and rhetorical journey. The geographical element of this journey is made apparent immediately in Stead's text, when, on July 6, 1885, he invokes the mythical Labyrinth of Daedalus where a Minotaur greedily devoured the maidens that were sacrificed by the Greeks. Stead writes, "The labyrinth was cunningly wrought like a house; says Ovid, with many rooms and winding passages, that so the shameful creature of lust whose abode it was to be should be far removed from sight" (Stead 2). Stead's comparison to the Labyrinth of Daedalus is relevant for my reading of abjection because the Greek labyrinth, and by extension, the London labyrinth, is construed as "cunningly wrought," a center of "lust," and "far removed from sight," all of which are directly related to the attraction and repulsion associated with abjection and also are characteristics that I have

identified in the male author's relationship to female bodies and the diseased vagina. Stead also premises his text with a declaration that the “eyes of the public” will no doubt “read to-day with a shuddering horror that will thrill throughout the world” (1). He also writes that a plan for reform that is “blinding bright for human eyes,” will prevent the English public from daring “to sit down any longer with folded hands in the presence of so great a wrong” (1). While I will address the “horror” and “thrill” of Stead’s text shortly, it is important to recognize that like J. Marion Sims and William Acton’s insistence on seeing and identifying the vagina, here we see Stead engaged in a similar kind of rhetoric. In Stead’s case, however, it is not only the vagina of the prostitute that must be seen, but it is the practice of prostitution, especially in minors, on which Stead focuses his crusade. As I will illustrate, Stead is interested in exposing both the physical body of the prostitute and the larger social problem of prostitution as a whole, which is here and elsewhere demonstrated by continued references to the necessity of the movement, the political processes hindering the reform, and the light/dark rhetoric that implies both a physical and ideological inspection for truth in the face of an obscure, feminine darkness.

Indeed, from the very first pages of the “Maiden Tribute,” Stead’s use of the singular pronoun and his sense of his own private journey suggest that the text itself is a way for the reader to accompany Stead in his geographical, physiological, and ideological investigations. One effect of this conscious rhetorical strategy is that the reader becomes enmeshed in the labyrinth of Stead’s text just as Stead becomes entangled in the labyrinth of the London streets and the prostitute’s vagina. Central to the reader’s participation in Stead’s journey is the type of journalism that Stead utilizes to attract and capture his audience’s attention. As a founding father of the “New Journalism,” Stead’s “Maiden Tribute” and his tenure at the *The Pall Mall Gazette* were controversial because he used these venues to introduce new journalistic techniques that were often denounced as inferior, “Americanized” versions of English journalistic traditions.⁴ Some of Stead’s innovations include articles signed by their authors, maps, diagrams, and illustrations, attention-grabbing headlines, and the interview. Interestingly, one concern of the outcry against interviewing rested in the possibility that it could erode one’s objectivity and ability to convey the truth. Henry Fox Bourne confirms this fear when he condemns how the editors of *The Pall Mall Gazette* apply New Journalism to “national and individual, political and social ends, dressing out their interviews with dramatic or melodramatic, minutely accurate or judiciously imagined details” (Bourne 243). As this complaint reveals, New Journalism and interviewing, which were associated mainly with *The Pall Mall Gazette* and W.T. Stead in particular (Schults 30)⁵, were the focus of social anxiety because they were the vehicles by which social barriers of class, gender, and race were degraded as a result of the journalist’s supposed lack of distanced, objective reporting.

Even more important, however, is the potential disintegration of truth that is associated with New Journalism, which I argue is also an anxiety present in the “Maiden Tribute.” Though Stead invoked elements of New Journalism in several of his other “crusades,”⁶ his protest against the sacrifice of English girls was the climax of his sensationalist journalism, as some of the subtitles were purposefully salacious, including titles such as “The Violator of Virgins,” “You Want a Maid Do You?” and “I Order Five Virgins.” Without a doubt, these subtitles were a blatant effort to capture the reader’s attention so that they might enter the irresistibly compelling narrative journey that Stead embarks upon. Preying on his reader’s “base” interest in women’s bodies, sexuality, and crime, Stead consequently eradicates the respectability of his crusade and

simultaneously transforms what seems like a factual account into a melodramatic and fictionalized adventure story. Of course, the most noted example of Stead's fictionalization occurs when he describes his purchase of "Lily," who later turns out to be the Eliza Armstrong that he is convicted of abducting.⁷

Just as Stead fictionalizes sections of the "Maiden Tribute," he also dramatizes every aspect of the text, from elevating the significance of his crusade to describing the conditions of London prostitutes with a heightened sensuality that causes both "thrills" and "horror" in his audience. Like the sensational fiction that had reached its apex just two decades earlier, Stead deliberately appeals to the senses and emotions of his readers, assuming that outrage and/or tears were the most effective way to cause action and banish the silence surrounding prostitution. We can see this very clearly when Stead delineates his entrance into the abyss of London prostitution:

After a time the eye grows familiar with the foul and poisonous air, but at the best you wander in a Circe's isle, where the victims of the foul enchantress's wand meet you at every turn. But with a difference, for whereas the enchanted in old time had the heads and the voices and the bristles of swine, while the heart of a man was in them still, these have not put on in outward form "the inglorious likeness of a beast," but are in semblance as other men, while within there is only the heart of a beast--bestial, ferocious, and filthy beyond the imagination of decent men. (Stead 2)

Not only does Stead hyperbolically dramatize the moral threats associated with prostitution, but the fact that he does it with allusions to the admixture of human and animal, the monstrous Greek myth of Circe, and the penetrability of the human body indicates that what is at stake here is more than just a single "Maiden" prostitute. Instead, Stead's picture of London prostitution and the London slums is founded upon the instability of truth and reality, as Stead figuratively corrupts the "truth" in a melodramatic effort to persuade his readers. This tactic equates his entry into the labyrinth of the vagina to a virtual destruction of traditional systems of meaning and difference. Walkowitz agrees, noting Stead's "mélange" of "cultural forms" that included literature of urban exploration, late-Victorian pornography, fantasy, and the Gothic fairy tale: "Through this mélange, he produced an unstable text and a contradictory, obsessive discourse around sexuality" (*City* 85). With these multiple forms or genres in mind, it is not surprising that in this climax of drama, sensationalism, and what Stead calls an "inverted" reality, we also see the abject indeterminacy of humanity and the human body. In this "enchanted" place, a detail that in itself traditionally carries connotations of fantasy and the feminine, Stead triumphantly notes the interchangeability between man and beast that is otherwise considered highly inviolable. Like the masculine fear for the abject female sex organs, the process of abjection similarly "confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (Kristeva 13). As we can see, then, Stead's journey and the product of it are extremely controversial and problematic because he knowingly transgresses implied boundaries of gender, criminality, and humanity. And, as I intimated above, the fact that Stead does it with such a sense of relish and intrigue demonstrates that, like Hemyng and Sims, he too has become lured in by his attraction to the abject vagina.

While he asserts and perhaps believes that his only motive in undertaking the work is philanthropic, I think the zeal that we see in his writing suggests otherwise, and ultimately conveys how Stead is deeply and personally involved in the maze of unreality that he represents through his fictionalized journalism.

The final example of Stead's abjection that I will offer stems from a comparison between the earlier and later sections of the "Maiden Tribute." For example, Stead follows the portrait of prostitution above by writing, "For days and nights it is as if I had suffered the penalties inflicted upon the lost souls in the Moslem hell, for I seemed to have to drink of the purulent matter that flows from the bodies of the damned" (Stead 2). In addition to evoking the abject "purulence" of the prostitute's "flowing" and "damned" body, this statement is remarkable because it exposes Stead's pivotal role in the drama that he unfolds. As if he were a parodic male counterpart to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, facing dreadful assaults to his virtue at every turn, Stead makes himself and the attacks to his moral sensibility the primary centre of the text. However, as the furor over the documents spreads, the emphasis on Stead as the sole actor in the "Maiden Tribute" becomes markedly diminished even as early as the July 8, 1885 article, "A Flame Which Shall Never Be Extinguished." Though Stead vociferously championed his personal role in the investigation just two days earlier in the first publication of the series, the July 8th segment of the text is both already protesting against threats of possible prosecution as well as reverting to plural pronouns such as "us" and "we." In the space of two days, Stead clearly recognizes at least the social and legal consequences from the crusade, which are, of course, only magnified in the coming months, during which time he is tried and prosecuted under the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which ironically he helped pass into law.

What proves to be an obstacle in his trial and in some ways secures his guilty verdict is, as Walkowitz confirms, the lingering of questions "about exactly what he was trying to prove in buying Eliza and the manner in which he undertook to 'save' her" (*City* 112). In other words, Stead's lofty goal of ending childhood prostitution is compromised and overshadowed by the somewhat reckless methods he uses to attain that goal. Pushing his "purchase" of Eliza Armstrong closer and closer to the moment of sexual compensation, Stead risks not only his physical liberty and social respectability, but more significantly, he gambles with the stability of his identity. Condemned because of his obsessive and monomaniacal interest in his crusade, Stead's text and its melodrama, shifting pronouns, and abject imagery is undoubtedly a representation of the psychological journey that he takes in order to examine the "truth" of the prostitute's body. According to Walkowitz, Stead "seems to have gone over the edge in his attempt to authenticate and document criminal vice. Two eerie features of his narrative soon become apparent: the readers were shown London's inferno through Stead's elite gaze, and exploration led Stead into actual impersonation of a Minotaur" (*City* 101). While men like Sims, Hemyng, and Acton escape from their investigations of the abject vagina relatively unscathed, Stead, unable to fully disentangle himself from his cause, is imprisoned by the abject vagina and the social ideologies that he was so intent on abolishing.

As opposed to Stead's demonstrable enthusiasm for his subject matter, W.R. Greg begins his inquest into prostitution with the typical protestations of reluctance and pained sensibility, lamenting that statesmen "act like the timid patient, who, fearing and feeling the existence of a terrible disease, dares not examine its symptoms or probe its depth, lest he should realise it too

clearly, and possibly aggravate its intensity by the mere investigation” (448). What’s interesting here is that by likening the social body to a patient with a suspected illness, Greg designates prostitution as inherently a part of the social body; just as the patient inspects himself for a sickness that is buried within his own body, so too is prostitution necessarily an integral part of the social body at large. Thus, as Kristeva would suggest, the abject is indeed not distinct from the subject, but rather wholly incorporated and indistinguishable from it. Greg’s technique is also intriguing in its geographical and spatial rendering of the vagina and the issue of prostitution as a whole. Throughout “Prostitution,” Greg continually links the prostitute’s diseased vagina to the London streets by using spatial metaphors to describe his rhetorical entrance into the subject. For example, Greg considers all the “obstacles” inherent in the task, asserts that he won’t shy away from “penetrating” the “dens of filth and pollution” (449), and laments that, for the prostitute, “Every door is shut upon her, every avenue of escape is closed. A sort of fate environs her” (471). For Greg, both his difficult task of reform and the concept of prostitution itself are deeply embedded in a physicality that is evident when he implies that there are literal and figurative “obstacles” blocking his entrance to the abject female’s “truth.” This spatialization is made even more clear when Greg repeatedly refers to the prostitute’s loss of virtue as a precipice over which none return: “But the prostitute may *not* pause--*may* NOT *recover*: at the very first halting, timid step she may make to the right or to the left, with a view to flight from her appalling doom, the whole resistless influences of the surrounding world, the good as well as the bad, close around her to hunt her back into perdition” (455). Using physical metaphors of “timid stepping,” turning directions, and a “flight” to describe the prostitute’s moral degradation, Greg underscores how the path leading to that degradation is akin to journeying into the London slums: not only is the prostitute morally “lost,” but she is also lost within the maze of London’s urban sprawl, within which it is impossible to finally locate her. These slums and the abject vaginal abyss, according to Greg, therefore equate to a boundary, upon which one teeters on the “verge of madness,” risking “perdition” and the irrevocable destruction of identity; to this effect, Greg explicitly refers to prostitution as an abyss, and repeatedly asserts that once the maze has been entered, it is absolutely inescapable. Thus, the prostitute’s vagina is that which perpetually beckons and imprisons: it is the male spectator’s object of desire and their simultaneous demise, since the vagina in these texts can only signify a loss of the symbolic code upon which masculinity and phallogentrism depend so heavily.

In addition to his figurative spatialization of the prostitute’s moral journey, Greg’s text invokes elements of thematic mapping, which reached a “Golden Age” from roughly 1830 to 1855. Thematic mapping, as Pamela K. Gilbert points out, “is essentially a statistical argument presented visually,” which “comes into being as a result of the spatialized understanding of social problems in this period [. . .]” (13). More specifically, Gilbert attends to the thematic maps created by social reformers like Edwin Chadwick, Charles Booth, and John Snow, who confront sanitation by mapping outbreaks of general filthiness, poverty, and cholera, respectively. Though each of these social reformers and cartographers certainly exhibited some of the same rhetorical strategies in their work, for my purpose, John Snow’s groundbreaking maps of the St. James cholera outbreak of 1855 are particularly intriguing. Though they post-date Greg’s article by five years, they are, as I mentioned above, representative of the larger social interest in thematic mapping, with which an influential critic like W.R. Greg would no doubt have been familiar. In his maps, Snow visually diagrams the origins of the St. James cholera outbreak, arguing that the Broad Street water pump is the locus of the disease and what

he calls the “cholera field” (Gilbert 18). In this map and in others, Snow evaluates the geographical location and conditions of the outbreak, ultimately constructing maps that consist of centres of disease around which shading is used to represent the number of deaths.

I am not arguing that Greg’s text is a literal map with symbols or legends, but he nonetheless evokes elements of thematic mapping that we also see in Snow. For example, not only does Greg refer to the infected prostitute as akin to a “plague-stricken sufferer who breaks through a *cordon sanitaire*” and deserves to be shot (491), but he also maps the prostitute’s dreaded contamination when he writes that “we do know that the disease prevails to an extent that is perfectly appalling; and that where there are 50,000 prostitutes scattered over the country (a vast majority of whom are, or have been diseased), spreading infection *on every side of them*, quarantines against the plague, and costly precautions against cholera, seem very like straining at gnats and swallowing camels” (477, my emphasis). This passage is telling because it conveys the depth of Greg’s anxiety. In likening the nation’s containment efforts to something as absurd as swallowing a camel, Greg intimates that the prostitute both confounds and excessively outnumbers the national efforts to stop the spread of venereal disease. Therefore, when he suggests that prostitutes spread disease “on every side of them,” he not only draws forth an image of a battle that is being lost to an unending army, but his language is also very much reminiscent of thematic mapping: Like Snow’s contagious water pump handle, Greg spatializes the threat of the abject and infected vagina as if it were a map by which one could easily see how the disease spreads out from the starting place of the prostitute’s body.

This is crucial to my reading of abjection, because, as I stated above, it is indicative of another coping mechanism by which the male author attempts to sublimate or negate the very thing that he abhors and desires. Not surprisingly, Gilbert’s notion that thematic maps “redefine a space, usually an urban space, by relating a certain human experience--vulnerability to disease--to some hidden or non-obvious feature of the landscape” (19) is especially relevant to my Kristevan reading of Greg. Gilbert also notes that, “In this way, thematic maps were very like anatomy ‘atlases’ or pathology texts--they laid bare the ‘invisible’ relationships between seemingly different things that only the medic/scientist’s gaze could discern” (19). This is exactly what I have illustrated with my account of Greg. Like the other eminent surgeons, social reformists, and journalists investigated here, all of which coincide with Gilbert’s notion of an elevated professional male gaze, Greg’s “Prostitution” is undoubtedly an effort to render visible what is otherwise invisible. In Greg’s case, this process takes the form of linguistic mapping, as his use of spatial metaphors and thematic mapping motifs indicates an effort to “redefine” the ideological and geographical “space” of the prostitute’s abject vagina. Just as Acton resorts to medicine as a method of expelling abjection, so too Greg spatializes and maps the prostitute in order to eject her and contain her in a “space” that is clearly recognizable as a detested “Other.” Ultimately, this effort to fix the prostitute’s abject vagina in a kind of thematic map is somewhat lost in Greg’s text. Instead, he continually reiterates the danger of becoming consumed by the topic itself. Often consciously referring to his duty to the public, the potential for readers to become “deterred” by extraneous information, and the exclusion of details that are tantalizingly “curious,” Greg confirms rather than undermines the prostitute’s threatening ability to enchant men. Instead of remaining immobilized as a mapped “Other,” the attraction and indeterminacy of the prostitute’s body instead permeates Greg’s text, rendering it a rhetorical maze through which Greg and his reader face the possibility of entrapment within the abject feminine abyss.

In many ways, it is not surprising that mid to late Victorians were plagued with a terror of the prostitute and the abject vagina. Predicated on rigid gender ideologies, Victorian society was deeply invested in binarisms that excluded the racial, economic, and gendered “Other” as a method of negatively defining the English male’s subjectivity. Indeed, the ideology of separate spheres, one of the Victorians’ strongest legacies, relies on the exclusion of abject undesirables in order to ideologically construct the insulated, healthy, and prosperous Victorian home. In his famous lecture on feminine duty, John Ruskin accordingly declares that through the woman’s “office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial: --to him, therefore, the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued, often misled, and *always* hardened. But he guards the woman from all this; [. . .] This is the true nature of home--it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division” (77). Several things here are notable for my purposes. Firstly, Ruskin’s ideology is founded on a sense of the home and the female as insular, immobile, and safe from the abject wilderness that exists in the “open world.” The “closed” home and the woman who keeps it are then necessarily defined as the site where men aren’t “misled” onto confusing paths or journeys and are free from the “terror,” “doubt,” and, I would argue, psychological “division” that no doubt arises from the subject’s encounter with the reviled and desired “Other.” Because the middle and upper-class Victorian male came perilously close to the economic and racial “Other” in his daily business, the home was ideologically fashioned as the place where the male subject could escape the abjection and attendant fear of psychological destruction that he encountered through all other social contact. Within this context, it is apparent why the figure of the prostitute created so much hysterical social anxiety during the latter half of the nineteenth century. While the texts I have analyzed discuss medical patients and prostitutes, lurking in the background of each text is always the figure of the “Angel in the House,” against whom sexually transgressive women are themselves always defined. Metonymically associated with the home that she creates, the Victorian woman, her physiological likeness to the prostitute, and the possibility that she too possesses the labyrinthine vagina all indicate why the prostitute’s abject and diseased sex organs engendered the extreme anxiety that has been highlighted in the texts by Sims, Acton, Hemyng, Stead, and Greg. Unable to psychologically differentiate and expel the vagina and the prostitute, these men and Victorian culture at large consequently face the possibility that the “Angel in the House” to whom they reach for comfort and safety, is in fact merely another horrifying, mutated version of the abject self that they cannot finally accept or repulse.

Notes

¹ In order to best suit my argument, I have chosen not to discuss these authors chronologically, instead ordering the texts in terms of their varying degrees of abjection and their different techniques of psychological coping.

² The personal liberties of the individual were often cited as an argument against legislating how private individuals behaved sexually. Hemyng confirms this himself at the beginning of “Prostitution in London,” and goes on cite it as one of many factors inhibiting proper research and the collection of adequate statistics on prostitution.

³ This seems like an intriguing inversion of the social hierarchy exhibited in the Carnavalesque. Ironically, Hemyng's attempts to master the language of the low "Other" are remarkably funny, though his effort is markedly superficial and quite distinct from the truly "vulgar," "earthy" language of the Carnival (Stallybrass and White 8).

⁴ For details on how the English press circumvented this troublesome "Americanization" with an attitude of English improvement on inferior American techniques, see C.E. Morland, "The Art of Interviewing." (*Great Thoughts*, June 11, 1892): 373.

⁵ Earlier in the century, however, Henry Mayhew initiated his work on *London Labour and the London Poor* by interviewing prostitutes for *The Morning Chronicle*. See Bertrand Taithe, *The Essential Mayhew: Representing and Communicating the Poor*. London: Rivers Oram Press, 1996.

⁶ In addition to his crusade against childhood prostitution, Stead also used his journalism to advocate for causes triggered by the "Bulgarian Horrors," the London poor, and the "Soudan" controversy.

⁷ Raymond L. Schults points out Stead's fictionalization and confirms that "despite Stead's earlier denials, Lily was Eliza Armstrong" (180).

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