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Urbanized Prostitution in Swift's "Beautiful Nymph"

Tyler Moore

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, London's market sphere was radically altered. Lands which had been once owned by the Catholic Church were now sold to the private sector, and the founding of private venture companies such as the Royal Exchange and the East India Company, as well as London's strategic location on the Thames and its access to the North Sea, brought London a flood of new commercial opportunities. Paired with the demise of the feudal system and the emergence of a middle class, this spike in commerce pulled immigrants to the city in droves. In only seventy-five years, the population of London quintupled, jumping from 50,000 in 1530, to almost 225,000 in 1605. London was urbanizing, changing into a city that would eventually become one of the most important commercial capitals in the world.

As commerce and population rose, so did the ancient, infamous industry of windmills and red lights: prostitution. Southwark flourished as London's prostitution center, as its location near the Thames's only bridge provided accessible

service to citizens, travelers, and sailors alike (Shugg 292). Drury Lane became one of London's worst slums, decried by Richard Steele as "ladyships...over which matrons of known ability preside" (Steele). One newspaper writes that hundreds of persons kept "houses of ill-fame," brothels specifically designed for the prostitution of twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls (Simpson 366).

It seems impossible (and unnecessary) to try to prove that this prostitution was caused by urbanization. Prostitution is called the world's oldest profession, after all, simply because it always exists, and the writings of Chaucer and Shakespeare clearly indicate that prostitution existed in England at least since the fourteenth century. Moreover, there are almost no statistics from the time period that could show the increase in prostitution from feudalist London to urban London.

Instead, it is more plausible to integrate London's prostitution with its urbanization, into a composite *urbanized prostitution*. Prostitution exists as long as money exists, and as urbanization increased commerce in the city, prostitution increased with it. Urbanization amplified traditional prostitution, infusing it with urbanized qualities: increased exposure to venereal disease, increased demand for prostitution, poor work and living conditions, overcrowding. All these things together create a kind of urbanization-commerce-capitalism-mercantilism-prostitution amalgam.

Jonathan Swift's poem, "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," depicts a woman, Corinna, who has been forced into urbanized prostitution. The poem describes, with painful detail, how Corinna returns home from work, removing her clothing, her false teeth and false hair, and finally her false body parts, all in preparation for bed. While much of Swift's poetry is satirical, this tragically unfunny poem is crucially unique to Swift's canon, for it reflects the convergence of three moments in history: urbanization, commercialism, and prostitution. The poem, for Swift, is a plea to society not to undo these moments, but to abate them, by ceasing to idolize money above beauty and humanistic power.

This topic and thesis fill a unique position in the available literature regarding Swift, "Beautiful Nymph," prostitution, urbanization, and commerce. Plenty of scholars have written around the poem. Louis Landa offers an indispensable article about Swift's economic theories, in which he argues that Swift's Irish heritage caused his anti-capitalism (74). Brean Hammond discusses Corinna's dream, and how in revealing it to the reader, Corinna loses all sense of privacy (99). Sheila Shaw writes a scintillating article about how Corinna becomes dismembered in the poem, revealing her incompleteness as a human (1). And

plenty of other scholars have provided essential articles that have helped form a context into which this paper fits. However, while these articles tackle the contexts around the poem, economics, urbanization, and prostitution, not one of them addresses how these issues interact with each other. This paper is therefore unique in addressing that convergence.

The first line of the poem contrasts urbanized London with the pastoral, rustic England of the past. “Corinna, pride of Drury Lane,” Swift writes, “For whom no shepherd sighs in vain” (ln. 1–2.) Swift is referring to the Renaissance lyrics of poets like Marlowe and Campion, whose personae pined over their loves with syrupy language and exaggerated blazons. These lyrics often exalted idyllic natural settings, like Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,” whose speaker invites his love to the rocks, to watch the shepherds and their flocks, and to see the waterfalls (ln. 5–8). That is a very different scene from the city streets and dark alleys Corinna would frequent. So in writing this first line, Swift reveals the gap between the past and the present: urbanized London cannot enjoy the benefits of nature as does rural England.

Carole Fabricant has argued that this change, to Swift, is a cause for lament, not satire. “[Pastoral] destruction will mean the demise of poetry,” she attests, and the land will be “ravaged by the acquisitive and avaricious spirit characteristic of the new economy” (Fabricant 230). Satire or not, Fabricant’s essay illustrates the conflation Swift employs of two extremely different ideas, natural destruction and poetic welfare. “Beautiful Nymph” has little to say about poetic welfare, but Fabricant’s essay shows Swift’s tendency to compare seemingly unlike ideas: the poem in particular associates natural destruction with moral and physical well-being.

So prostitution and urbanization in “Beautiful Nymph” are inextricably linked, forming the aforementioned composite of urbanized prostitution. The first line mentions that Corinna is the “pride of Drury Lane,” one of London’s most dilapidated slums at the time (ln.1). She has “no cellar where on tick to sup,” referring to a tavern, part of the commercial district where Corinna could purchase dinner instead of making it (ln. 6). And finally, arriving at her home, she must climb “four stories...to her bow’r” (ln. 8). “Bow’r” is a sarcastic description, for Corinna’s home is not the leafy, rustic hollow of Spenserian poetry, but a tenement, driven four stories upward by population crowding in the city, likely undersized and falling apart, more of a shelter than a home. So Corinna’s prostitution is as physically destitute as it is morally destitute. If Swift is criticizing prostitution, therefore, he must in part be criticizing urbanization.

In large part, this urbanized prostitution was caused by commercialism, a term which here serves to compositely reference several aforementioned political and economic changes: the fall of the feudal system and the rise of a middle class, mercantilism, capitalism, and London's development as a major port. Serfs left manorial estates and made middle-class incomes as merchants, smiths, artisans, and entrepreneurs. Mercantilists persuaded the state to seek wealth through foreign trade. Through the exercise of private business—capitalism—merchants encouraged open buying, selling, and trading of their goods and services. The sea trade, in particular, brought London more market opportunities than ever before. Commercialism, in short, refers to all of this, the economic zeitgeist which simply made London an easy place to make money.

Swift himself was openly against this commercialism. "Power," he writes, "which...used to follow Land, is now gone over to Money" (qtd. In Fabricant 228; emphases original). This is clear nostalgia for the feudal system, in which estates and land were the only money, or they were at least the only way to have money. Robert Irvine writes that Swift's comment "[figures] the moral priority of land that Swift sees as being eroded by the money economy" (972). Much of Swift's distaste for commercialism stems from the fact that it sapped power from the feudal estates and turned it over to the merchant class.

Thus Swift's protest of commercialism and his protest of urbanization are essentially grounded in the same idea. Urbanization pays no attention to land, as cities build upward, and population crowding requires using as little land as possible. The richest billionaires in Manhattan, with their skyscraper penthouses, effectively live above the land, in a much smaller square footage than a feudal palace would have occupied. Commerce and urbanization together consign power to money, not to land.

This ties back to urbanized prostitution in that the increased value of money is what creates a market for prostitution. Prostitution, as noted earlier, only exists so long as money exists; unpaid sex is just sex. Persons who prostitute themselves—and the pimps who control them—are doing so for the cash; if they did not want the money, they would not charge a fee. So once a society develops money, and once that money has an incentive power, then prostitution emerges. In a feudalist society, where markets were small, where capitalism was impotent, and where money was worth less than lineage, prostitution must have been minimal at best, limited because there was no market where exchange could occur.

The irony that “Beautiful Nymph” and Swift’s economics together illustrate is that although money had increased in power, Corinna herself is completely powerless. The poem is rife with moments of her subjection: she has “no drunken Rake to pick her up,” meaning that she cannot even lure a witless playboy into helping her (ln. 5). Nor can she buy dinner on credit at a “Cellar where on Tick to sup,” as apparently the money she makes is only enough for her living quarters (ln 6). Corinna is powerless at the hands of vermin: cats, who pee on her plumpers, rats, who steal her plaster, pigeons who pick her issue-peas, and dogs who fill her tresses with fleas (ln 59–64). Worst, perhaps, Corinna dreams of bullies, cullies, watchmen, constables, and duns, correctional men, who represent the oppressive forces that dominate Corinna every day, and dictate Corinna’s every move. The johns choose what she does because they pay for it; the pimps choose what she does because she belongs to them. Their money, ultimately is the power; in following it, Corinna is simply a pawn in the commercial game, always desiring that power, but never quite possessing it.

There is another power which dominates Corinna’s life, and which has invaded her physical body: syphilis. Swift never explicitly mentions the disease, but Corinna’s false and failing body parts are evidence of its presence. Her hair and eyebrows have fallen out (ln 10, 13). One of her eyes, and most of her teeth, are gone, she wears a bolster for her hip, and her skin is overrun with shankers, issues, and running sores (ln 11, 20, 28–30). Swift writes, hauntingly: “The Nymph, though in this mangled Plight/Must every Morn her Limbs unite” (ln 65–66).

Corinna is not just surrounded by sludge—the animals and the smells and the makeup and the tenement—she herself has turned into it. She is literally decomposing, as her body—the thing which once gave her power—falls apart, like a robot smashed into parts. So money comes to symbolize not just power, but decay, as Corinna’s syphilis is directly caused by her pursuit of the market. Her disease obstructs her physical humanity, in destroying her body, and her spiritual humanity, in preventing her from living as a normal middle-class citizen would.

So Corinna’s urbanized prostitution, for Swift, is not simply a new entity to be reckoned with in the eighteenth century, but a metaphor for decay caused by commercialism. Just as prostitutes’ bodies are sold for money, so is urbanization driven by commerce, as people move to cities in the hopes that they can sell goods and services to a wider market. So the magnetism of the market runs two spheres to decay: the city, which in urbanizing becomes dirtier, more crowded,

less safe; and women, who in turning to prostitution abandon their humanity, and contract diseases which corrode their bodies.

Swift's poem excels because it merges these forces together. Apart, both cities and prostitutes will decay on their own; pollution does not come from prostitutes, nor does syphilis come from high immigration. But, magnetized by the pull of commercialism, the forces *do* come together, as crowded cities and new money form an inevitable breeding ground for urbanized prostitution. "Beautiful Nymph" matters because it shows the gravity between these three forces, how urbanization and prostitution, fueled by commerce, are driven to ruin.

What change does "Beautiful Nymph" encourage? A return to pastoral feudalism, even if that is what Swift wanted, is impractical and unnecessary. Plenty of cities today—Barcelona, New York, even modern London—exist in much better conditions than those of Drury Lane. City ordinances can fight pollution and overcrowding; law enforcement can curb prostitution. And though Swift would never believe it, commerce, as Adam Smith argued, ultimately improves the quality of life for the common man, as riches once held by a feudalist few can now be exchanged freely throughout the working class. If Swift's poem is a plea for reversal, then it effectively fails, as cities around the world have improved without having to resort to feudalistic overhauls.

More resonant, instead, is the poem's humanistic cry, the charge to avoid the worship of money to which the city and Corinna fall prey. It is not that Corinna and London participate in commerce, but that they exalt it above all else which fuels money's destructivity. London, in relinquishing its pastoral landscape, could still be a beautiful city with strong markets, but because it prizes money over beauty, it allows tenements and sludge and overcrowding to run rampant. And Corinna, who prizes money over her body, precludes any future she could have in the middle-class market by allowing syphilis to infect and destroy her. Thus "Beautiful Nymph" presents a kind of pragmatic morality, rather than dogmatic: commerce alone is fine, but worship of that commerce, to the exclusion of beauty and of humanistic potential, yields total annihilation.

Endnotes

- 1 I regret that I have had neither the space nor the time to examine how much of a choice Corinna had in prostituting herself. Swift's poem is notably silent on Corinna's history: why she becomes a prostitute, and whether or not she can get out of it. With regards to my thesis, however, these questions are ultimately irrelevant, for Corinna is neither the villain nor the victim here; she is simply an example that illustrates the convergence of economic forces, an example which Swift uses to attack what he really esteems the villain: commercialism.

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