



THE CHILDREN OUTSIDE AND THE CHILDREN INSIDE

Reproduced *View* (1942): 26. (Source not given)

WRITTEN ON THE BODY? DEGENERACY, ATAVISM AND CONGENITAL SYPHILIS: RE-READING CHILD PROSTITUTION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper examines the various meanings attributed to child sexuality from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Drawing on medical and legal discourse, art criticism and photographic evidence, it is shown that signs of sexual abuse upon the bodies of children were often read as proof of "innate depravity" in such children.

I have been disturbed by this picture since I first saw it when I began work on my Ph.D. I found the picture in a collection of photographs of Victorian children that was published in the early seventies (Melville and Ovenden). The editor of the collection, Robert Melville, must have been similarly disturbed as this was the photograph that opened the collection and that framed much of the introduction to this collection, which is rather ambiguously titled "The Budding Grove." Melville, an expert on nineteenth century photography, claimed that the picture was probably originally taken around the turn of the century by a professional photographer for an institution such as Dr. Barnardo's to keep as a quasi-scientific record of the girl's premature development.

Melville did not, however, find this picture in the files of such an institution; rather he found it in a photographic journal, illustrating an essay on the surrealist work of the artist Max Ernst written by a New York art dealer, Julien Levy, published in 1942. Levy discusses the girls in the photograph in the context of an imaginary encounter he had as a small boy riding in the country-side on his bike. As part of this account Levy presents his reading of the photograph:

That six-year old her lips swollen, her lines blurred and her hair dishevelled, is persuaded, finally and fully of her monstrosity, those breasts and that puberty and without doubt, *those shameful courses*. Her sister of eight despises her and flagellates this unwanted companion, this abnormal and embarrassing relative, this provoking nuisance. All the stringy haired, tight-lipped, flat-chested hard little girls of eight revile her, and her insecurity is multiplied by the profound effective change mysteriously happening inside... (Levy 26)

Far from being critical of this reading Melville claims that Levy does "admirable justice to the plight of the little girl who is ripening too quickly" (3). Indeed Melville confesses that Levy's reading of the picture suggested to him that these girls were in fact the Papin sisters, the murderous maids who so inspired Jean Genet. Both these men view the child with the fully developed breasts as not only pathological but as somehow responsible for her own condition. Levy claims she is "a monster, a witch, an object of superstitious terror ... a surrealist" (Levy 26).

The connection between the Papin sisters, surrealist art and the girls in the photograph is not in fact entirely obscure. The case of the Papin sisters, Christine and La, who battered the mistress and her daughter to death, tearing their victims' eyes from the sockets in their fury, became a favourite subject of French intellectuals writing in the 1930s. Genet was not alone in his fascination. De Beauvoir and Sartre, Lacan, Breton and Peret were all inspired to write on the hapless sisters (Jouve 11-12). Surrealist artists and writers were particularly interested by the extraordinary *Avant* and *Après* photographs of the sisters published in the

Parisian Press (Cox 404). The photographs were seen to illustrate the degenerative descent of the sisters and were republished in the surrealist journal, *Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, accompanied by an article celebrating their crime. The periodical also carried Man Ray's *Monument à D.A.F. de Sade*, and Max Ernst's *Oedipe* (Cox 404).

While this contextualises the connections made by Levy and Melville, it does not provide an explanation. In order to understand the connections it is necessary to place their interpretations within the broader context of discussions of child sexuality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Far from being the fanciful imaginings of twentieth century art critics, the ideas expressed by Melville and Levy are drawn from the nineteenth century medical, legal and popular discourse around both child sexuality and child prostitution. As the art critic Neil Cox has suggested, the surrealists were obsessed with the transgressive sexuality of the Papin sisters. Their relationship was characterised as both incestuous and lesbian. The before/after photographs signified not only their descent into insanity but into "masculinising" degeneration (404). Such signs of degeneration were read as proof of innate sexual depravity. It is the suggestion of transgressive sexuality in the Barnardo girls that so interests Levy and Melville.

The child in the photograph, however, is not subject to "masculinising degeneracy". Indeed quite the opposite is true. It is her hyper-femininity, signified by the largeness of her breasts that signals her degeneracy. The philosopher Iris Marion Young has argued that patriarchal culture has focused to the extreme on breasts. In a statement that could read as a caption for this photograph Young writes: "A woman's chest ... is in question in this society, up for judgment, and whatever the verdict she has not escaped the condition of being problematic" (191). Curiously Levy and Melville coyly avoid the obvious, emphasising rather that less visible signifier of feminine pathology, her "*shameful courses*". The nineteenth century photographer/observer however has targeted the obvious, not surprisingly given the *fin-de-siècle* fixation with the castrating possibilities of the vagina (Dijkstra 191). It is the child's breasts that are seen to inscribe her pathology, her innate depravity upon her body. It is her breasts that mark her out with the stigmata of atavism, they are the marks of her degeneracy.[1]

In order to understand why her breasts become signifiers of her degeneracy it is necessary to trace ideas of feminine pathology from the racial anthropology of the late eighteenth century to the criminal anthropology of the early twentieth century. It will be argued that signs that marked racial difference in the eighteenth century, came to be seen as signs of feminine pathology by the end of the nineteenth century. Such an analysis presents a new way of viewing child prostitution through medical discourse around congenital syphilis and allows for a gendered reading of theories of degeneration.

Around the end of the eighteenth century theories such as "the Great Chain of Being" were widely adopted giving misogynistic and racist assumptions the aura of scientific truth. The "Great Chain of Being" theory postulated that species were immutable entities arrayed along a fixed and vertical hierarchy stretching from God above down to the lowest sentient being (Schiebinger 163). Within this hierarchy white man's position on the scale of humanity was antithetical to the black man.

As Londa Schiebinger (146) has pointed out, there has been little analysis of where women fitted in on this hierarchy. Indeed she argues that while racial and sexual science both taught that the proper relations between the races existed in nature, they rested on contradictory visions of nature. Scientific racism depended on a chain of being or hierarchy of the sexes that was inherently unilinear and absolute, while scientific sexism depended on radical biological divergence. Thus while racial science interrogated males and male physiology, sexual science focused only on the female of the species.

It is the intersection between sexual and racial science that is of interest here. When natural scientists and anthropologists compared women across cultures their interest was focused on their sexual characteristics. Black women were marked as inherently different from white women. Unlike their European counterparts who had recently been declared innately virtuous, black women were still considered naturally depraved. Scientists and pseudo-scientists claimed her "primitive sexual appetite" was inscribed upon her body. Physical anomalies, such as wider pelvic bones, long pendulous breasts, elongated clitorises and labia were said to set black women apart from white women. These exaggerated primary and secondary sexual characteristics were seen as signs of their lesser humanity, their closeness to the apes (Schiebinger 146-149).

The Hottentot female was the favourite of natural scientists and anthropologists who cited the large buttocks and the so-called Hottentot apron, a hypertrophy of the labia and nymphae as signs of both primitivism and sexual depravity. Several Hottentot females were exhibited in Europe in the early nineteenth century and their buttocks and genital organs are still housed in Museums in Paris (Gilman 85). While the buttocks and the apron took precedence in scientific and anthropological reporting, the breasts of Hottentot women, indeed black women in general, were also seen as signs of atavism and depravity. In the visual representations of black women of the period their breasts are drawn as long and pendulous often with huge nipples. Black women were of course not the only women to be stigmatised in this way. European women, particularly those women whom observers believed to be less civilised or more depraved, such as the Irish, were also said to be affected with hideously misshapen breasts (Schiebinger 63).

Youthful depravity was seen as the primary cause of such malformations. Travellers made much of the fact that both African women and their counterparts in the Pacific were sexually active from quite a young age. Curiously it is not black women who were used as the archetype of youthful depravity in the anthropological literature, rather the archetype was the English child prostitute. As early as the 1790s Johann Blumenbach, the father of physical anthropology, cited the example "London's immature and girlish prostitutes" as proof that "precocious venery" could result in unusually large breasts in young girls (Blumenbach 247-248). The belief that youthful depravity could be written on the body in this way was to become firmly entrenched in medical and legal discourse in the next hundred years. By the early twentieth century physical characteristics used to distinguish black women from white women in the eighteenth century were being inscribed on the body of young white women in order to mark out their degeneracy and their innate pathology.

Breasts remained important signifiers of both virtue and depravity. The idea that the state of the woman's breasts was indicative of the state of her virtue became commonplace in medical textbooks and in the popular imagination during the nineteenth century. Forensic textbooks particularly discussed virgin breasts in detail, describing them as pert, small, conical and with tiny rose coloured nipples. Non-virgin breasts were described as elongated and pendulous, with large, hard nipples, dark in colour. The German Professor of Forensic Medicine, Johann Ludwig Caspar, whose *Handbook of the Practice of Forensic Medicine* was perhaps the most influential text on the subject in Europe in the nineteenth century provides an excellent example of virgin and non-virgin breasts. He writes in his chapter on Signs of Virginity:

Since the condition of the female breasts undergoes material alterations even by the frequent consummation of intercourse ... a comparison of these alterations with the original condition affords a diagnosis worthy of consideration. The breasts of a healthy virgin are generally in relation to the rest of the body not too largely developed; they are firm and compact, somewhat conical with the nipple as apex, the nipple itself but slightly developed. (278)

While he conceded that as youth passes "the more general freshness and fullness of the body disappears, and the more do breasts become pendulous and withered", he also observes that such a condition is often due to "frequent and long continued intercourse" (279).

In cases of rape, particularly child rape, the breasts as well as other signs of feminine virtue were to be considered by police doctors and medical witnesses. Signs interpreted as evidence of hyper-sexuality in black women such as elongated labia and enlarged clitorises were also incorporated into medical descriptions of depraved white women and women bringing false accusations of rape. Francis Ogston, Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at the University of Aberdeen, advised his students to look for vaginal "abnormalities" in girls suspected of making false accusations of rape. He cites the case of a girl of thirteen, who lodged a charge of rape in October 1859. Ogston dismissed any possibility of rape because on examining the girl he found:

The hymen was entire, the vulvar cavity had considerable depth and the nymphae projected for about an inch beyond the labia. The girl admitted that she was not a stranger to sexual intercourse, which she commenced with a boy two years previously. (98)

It would seem that the combination of the girl's previous sexual experience with the "over-development" of her vagina signalled to Ogston the innocence of the accused. The elongated labia and nymphae are clearly reminiscent of the Hottentot apron. Ogston went on to describe to his students the physical difference between virtuous young girls and child prostitutes. Again similarities with earlier anthropological descriptions of African women are marked. He wrote:

The first thing that strikes the general observer in these young females is the contrast betixt (sic) their general development and that of their genitals. While the former preserves its infantile character, the labia are enlarged and parted below, the nymphae elongated and projecting beyond the labia, the clitoris very bulky, exposed, often red and readily erectile. (98)

The anthropology of prostitution had began with Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet's canonical text on Parisian prostitutes, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, published posthumously in 1836 (Gilman). In this text Parent suggested that it was often impossible to tell the difference between the vagina of a hardened prostitute and that of a virgin. He recorded with a combination of surprise and disgust that there was nothing extraordinary about the clitoris, the labia minor, the vagina or the anus of prostitutes. Sander Gilman has suggested that although Parent-Duchatelet observed that the genital organs of prostitutes presented no special or peculiar alterations, he simultaneously maintained that prostitutes were subject to specific pathologies of the vagina such as abscesses of the labia and fistulae of the recto-vaginal septum. This in effect meant that the appearance of the prostitute's vagina was altered by disease (95). There is considerable evidence, particularly in forensic texts, to suggest that many doctors ignored Parent's theories regarding the vaginas of prostitutes and continued to look for signs of virtue and vice upon women's bodies.

While Parent's advice about vaginas may appear ambivalent he was less equivocal in his other categorisations. He observed that vast numbers of prostitutes had raucous voices, grey eyes and dark hair. He also observed that prostitutes were particularly prone to fatness and consequently to enlarged breasts and buttocks. Parent however did not attribute this to hyper-sexuality or atavism. Rather, with the good sense of a public hygienist, he claimed that the fatness of prostitutes was due to the fact that they took a great number of hot baths and tended to sit around and eat while not working.

By the 1880s the discussion of prostitutes' physiognomies was framed by B-A Morel's work on degeneration. Morel was the author of two highly influential texts, *Traité des*

dégénérescences physiques, intellectuels et morales de l'espèce humaine published in 1857 and *Traité des maladies mentales* published in 1860 (Pick 44-50). Morel's interest in degeneration was sparked by research he had undertaken on Cretinism. Cretinism, a condition caused by thyroid gland deficiency, presents a picture of mental retardation, dwarfism and other developmental defects from birth or early infancy. Morel became the centre of a debate on Cretinism in the 1850s. Unlike his counterparts, who argued that Cretinism was due to environment, Morel maintained that the problem lay in heredity. He stressed the incurability of certain types of cretin and argued that they were victims of a "constitutional pre-disposition to the disease". The historian Daniel Pick has suggested that as a result of Morel's influence the Cretin's body defined the degenerate's body (47). It could also be argued that the syphilitic body came to represent the degenerate's body. Morel's theories had wide-reaching implications. He defined degeneration as pathological deviations from the normal type, which are transmissible through heredity and which develop progressively until death. According to Morel's thesis, degeneration could be due to intoxication, social milieu, pathological or congenital abnormalities of various kinds (Rosen 254-255).

The link between syphilis and degeneration was Morel's law of progressivity. This law stressed that in hereditary transmission from generation to generation, not only was the "bad seed" passed along, but each new generation received a heavier and more destructive dose of whatever the evil influence was. Morel's work provided detailed examples of this process. The first generation was characterised by a nervous temperament and a tendency toward cerebral vascular congestion, as well as irritability, quick temper and resulting violent behaviour. The second generation ran the risk of illnesses of the central nervous system such as cerebral haemorrhages, epilepsy and the neurotic disorders of hysteria. In the third generation degeneracy manifested itself in the form of insanity. As Eric T. Carlson records, by the fourth generation "infants were born with markedly reduced vitality, demonstrated a congenital weakness of their faculties and were sterile, imbeciles or idiots" (122).

Prostitutes were the archetypal syphilitics and Morel's theories enhanced the idea that prostitutes were innately predisposed to both vice and disease. The notion that the physiognomy of the prostitute was different to other women related back to the work of Parent. Signs of congenital syphilis came to be seen as marks of degeneration. These marks separated prostitutes from virtuous women. It was but a small step to use such catalogues of signs as a means of categorising those women who appeared to be "born prostitutes". Throughout Europe this medical anthropology became a tool of public health officials. The prostitute came to be seen not merely as a pathological female, but as an atavism.

The first major study based on these principles was done by a Russian physician Pauline Tarnowskii (Gilman 93-94). In her work Tarnowskii went into Russian prisons and examined the mental and physical state of many incarcerated women. Like Parent, Tarnowskii presented a detailed inventory of the physical attributes of prostitutes; excessive weight, dark hair, low fecundity, but she added signs of degeneration to her description such as asymmetry of the face, misshapen nose and low forehead. Where Tarnowskii differed from Parent was in her belief that the physical appearance of the prostitute and her sexual identity were pre-established by her heredity. Tarnowskii concluded from her research that the prostitute was as a rule a "degenerate being, the subject of an arrested development, tainted with morbid heredity, and presenting clear signs of physical and mental degeneracy" (Talbot 319).

Other such studies followed. The work of criminologists Cesare Lombroso and William Ferrero in Italy borrowed heavily from Tarnowskii's research. For these men the prostitute became the model of moral degeneracy. They claimed that a large proportion of women were born with certain traits that made them more susceptible to prostitution than other women. For Lombroso this had its roots in atavism. He wrote "atavism helps to explain the rarity of the criminal type in woman. The very precocity of prostitutes - the precocity which increases their

apparent beauty - is primarily attributable to atavism" (112). The atavism of prostitutes was of course descended from the Hottentot female and other "primitive women". Lombroso posited that prostitutes physiognomically resemble Hottentot women, being subject to similar hypertrophy of the buttocks and breasts.

Lombroso's ideas married well with theories of "moral insanity" posed by Victorian psychiatrists such as James Cowles Prichard and Henry Maudsley. "Moral insanity" had become one of the cornerstones of Victorian psychiatry, re-defining madness not as a loss of reason but as a deviance from socially acceptable behaviour (Showalter 29). Since the 1870s psychiatrists had been trying to posit an organic cause for moral insanity. Maudsley was convinced that there was a hereditary predisposition to madness or moral insanity. Other Darwinian psychiatrists came to argue that the hereditary organic taint combined with the habits of vice caused congenital moral insanity.

The possibility of a relationship between syphilis and general paralysis of the insane (GPI) seemed to be the causal link many observers, both medical and non-medical, had been seeking. GPI became the perfect example of a Darwinian disease as it linked immoral behaviour to hereditary causes (Showalter 27). The ability to catch a venereal disease showed a tendency toward vice; a degenerative condition such as GPI seemed to confirm it. Even though it was primarily men who were affected by GPI, women were often held responsible. Dr George Savage, one of England's foremost experts on tertiary syphilis, noted that there were:

... many patients admitted yearly to Bethlehem whose diseases I believe to be chiefly produced by sexual excesses; but such men are generally not only living the lives of general excitement, but are wedded to women of a specially amatory nature; and although it would be unscientific to connote excess as necessarily associated with certain types of women, I have been stuck by the frequency of the occurrence of general paralysis in the husbands of women of voluptuous nature. (Mott 244)

Lombroso's proposal of a biological explanation of prostitution was taken quite seriously throughout Europe, although his theories on male criminality were rejected (Zedner 81). Despite its lack of scientific objectivity the idea that certain types of women were more likely to indulge in sexual excess became a common idea during this period both within popular and medical discourse. Fallen women both real and fictional were analysed within this framework. The ancestry of Marie Duplessis, heroine of Alexandre Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias* was sometimes used to demonstrate this degenerative model.[2]

Such ideas had their root in older notions of innate feminine depravity and pathology. The Victorian model of feminine purity was always tenuous. Prostitutes, particularly child prostitutes, posed a serious threat to this ideal. Finding ways to differentiate between prostitutes and "virtuous" women helped ease the sexual anxiety they created and enabled the question of male responsibility to be ignored. Throughout the nineteenth century doctors made this distinction through venereal disease. By the 1890s, however, theories of degeneration allowed doctors to incorporate congenital defect into the disease model.

Prostitutes were thus seen as physically and morally degenerate. Usually such women were said to be feeble-minded and the result of syphilitic heritage. Congenital syphilis came to be equated with hereditary moral degeneracy. The disease was not only seen to cause degeneracy of the constitution, but to affect the moral sense. The feeble-minded, idiots, imbeciles and the insane were all targeted as moral degenerates. The symptoms of congenital syphilis came to be read as the signs of degeneracy. This resulted in a vastly different idea of the prostitute. The infectious model of disease that had characterised the body of the prostitute earlier in the century was abandoned and the idea of congenital defect was incorporated (Fournier). In this way prostitutes' differences from other women were no longer based merely

on moral judgment or on the presence of disease but inscribed on their body as congenital deformities.

The girl in the photograph is no doubt part of this long anthropological tradition. Her breasts signify her difference and her depravity. Positioned as she is next to a child of her own age, she is revealed as monstrous, primitive and hypersexual. While the modern observer has chosen her menstruation as sign of her pathology, her contemporaries expose her breasts. At the time this photograph was taken it had become widely accepted that certain women had been born with an aptitude for prostitution. Child prostitutes or victims of sexual abuse who may have evoked pity and outrage in the 1880s were now viewed merely as a potential prostitute. A girl's seduction and decline into prostitution was viewed as part of a process that was inevitable, her innate depravity inscribed upon her body. One did not become, rather one was born a fallen woman.

Notes

[1] The terms "degeneracy" and "atavism" are concepts that stem from theories of degeneration, particularly those derived from Benedict-Augustin Morel, author of two highly influential texts, *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuels et morales de l'espèce humaine* (1857) and *Traité des maladies mentales* (1860). According to Daniel Pick, who has written extensively on degeneration, the term degeneration/degeneracy "was applied to the patterns of heredity in societies, and specifically to deviations from the "normal type" of humanity. It did not "signify the reproduction of a constant anomaly from one body to another... it was concerned rather with an infinite network of diseases and disorders and the patterns of returns and transformations between them" (Pick 322). Atavism refers to the primitive. Signs of atavism, such as low forehead or beady eyes, were viewed as signs of degeneration when found in Europeans. They were seen as proof of man's regression through degeneration.

[2] The American eugenicist Eugene Talbot used the hapless Marie as "scientific proof" of the degenerative process. He wrote that "her paternal grandmother who was half-prostitute, half beggar, gave birth to a son by a country priest. This son was a country Don Juan, a pedlar by trade. The maternal great-grandmother was a nymphomaniac, whose son married a woman of loose morals, by whom a daughter was born. The daughter married a pedlar and their child was Marie. She died childless, early in life from consumption".

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