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Prostitution as Labor in Imperial Rome

Erin K. Fenton

Within this article I plan to explore the industry of prostitution in imperial Rome while approaching the labor aspects of this topic with a Marxist framework. I chose this method after reviewing research about prostitution in Rome, which primarily addressed the legal elements of this occupation. Given that within Roman society women were considered property of an authoritative male (her father, husband, master etc.), I am interested in the implications of a prostitute as a commodity owned and exploited by her pimp, or *lenalleno*.¹ I will begin by putting prostitution within its cultural context in imperial Rome, including how it was perceived by the Roman public, how women came into prostitution, and the state's regulation/tolerance of its practice within the empire. From there I will address prostitution as labor and what this would mean in imperial Rome, specifically addressing the situation of a laboring woman.

The consideration of prostitution as labor is a subject of more modern debate, but one that I feel can also be applied to prostitution in the past. Karl Marx's political theories have strong roots in the classical world and it is pertinent to reflect his ideas about labor backwards, applying his early-industrial theories to a pre-industrial world. Caveats are necessary when using theories anachronistically, and I will address these issues below. Marx's description of the exploitative relationship between proletariat and employer

¹Catharine Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 66–95.

correlates nearly directly with the relationship between prostitute and *leno* (or other figure, such as father, responsible for selling the woman into prostitution) in imperial Rome; prostitutes avoided this exploitation only when employing themselves. I will focus my discussion primarily upon prostitution as it took place within a brothel, where a prostitute would be employed by a pimp, and its contrast – the streetwalking prostitute – and how these relationships function with regard to labor. Another layer of intricacy is added when the practice of slavery in the ancient world is considered. Most prostitutes in imperial Rome were slaves who had been sold into the industry, thus accentuating their status as a commodity unable to act in their own interests.²

To approach prostitution in antiquity from a Marxist standpoint it is necessary to outline what constitutes a Marxist analysis. In the interest of accessibility I will briefly discuss basic tenets of Marx's theories regarding labor. Marx explains the relationship between a worker and their product as being wrought with alienation and estrangement. Marx writes:

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him...³

Here it is important to note that the definition of the product of prostitution has been a topic of discussion and debate. Within this paper I will consider sex to be the definition

²While male prostitution did exist in imperial Rome there is little material or textual evidence surviving which describes it. Thus, within this paper I will address only female prostitution.

³Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert Tucker (New York: Norton & Company, 1978), 64.

of the product of a prostitute's labor. A prostitute who works in a brothel, then, is subject to alienation from their product as it is the pimp who decides how the product is used and for what monetary return. In this way the prostitute is made distinctly external from her product. Marx conveys this idea with the 19th century industrial worker in mind:

Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.⁴

Taking this description of a worker's relation to a capitalist and approaching the relationship between brothel prostitute and *leno*, the latter clearly fits the exploitative interaction developed by Marx in relation to the former. A brothel prostitute is an appendage of an owner or pimp who is directed for the monetary benefit of another. In this process the prostitute suffers a decrease in personal agency which leads to a reduction in identity because she is not acting in her own interest nor is she in control of her own behavior.

In my research I have come upon two main interpretations of the Roman view of prostitution. The first is that prostitutes, like gladiators and actors, were members of a highly marginalized sector of society, one which faced legal and social restrictions as a result of their performance occupations.⁵ The second analysis presents the existence of prostitution in Rome not that differently from its presence in modern times: essentially as an accepted evil and restricted only incidentally by state legislation.⁶ I believe that both

⁴Marx, 65.

⁵Edwards, 72.

⁶Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

of these analyses are correct and, when combined, present the most accurate conjecture of the true status of prostitutes in imperial Rome.

Categorization of prostitutes with other participants in ‘performance professions’ resulted in a restriction of their rights to participate in matters of public importance, as well as upon their ability to marry under the laws of Augustus.⁷ Prostitutes, gladiators, and actors were all not allowed to stand for local magistracies, nor, according to some laws, were they able to bring criminal accusations against others or to sit on a jury.⁸ This denial of these citizens’ rights may or may not be of extreme importance in that women would not necessarily be allowed to participate in some of these venues anyway, regardless of their status as *infames*. All three of these professions occupy a distinct place within Roman society in that the ‘performers’ are, in essence, physically selling parts of themselves. Gladiators and actors do this by creating a spectacle of themselves, while the prostitute sells her sexuality (or it is sold by her *leno*). Physical work in general was looked down upon by the Roman elite as it and urban labor were realms occupied by non-free men.⁹ As prostitutes, actors and gladiators were, very literally, selling components of themselves, gravely violating the social standards put forth by the Roman elite and their peers, they in a sense put themselves on equal social footing with the enslaved: facing marginalization, and disapproval. Prostitutes were physically laboring as members of a class of society treated as property, traded, and profited from as such. Occupying this position in society made them particularly vulnerable to exploitation, but also kept them

⁷Thomas A.J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 42.

⁸Edwards, 70-71.

⁹Padelis Lekas, *Marx on Classical Antiquity: Problems of Historical Methodology* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1988), 21.

in a domain of society whose members were viewed by the ruling class as legitimate (inhuman) objects of commerce.

While living on the wrong side of imperial and social law, prostitutes were also, at one point during the empire, forced to identify themselves publicly as a prostitute by officially registering as such with the state, or by adornment of a toga, a garment worn otherwise exclusively by men.¹⁰ Both attempts to cause public shame are examples of how prostitutes were denoted as outliers of the respectable and proper empire. Under Caligula, prostitutes and pimps were subject to a special tax.¹¹ This motion by the state shows an institutional recognition of the existence of prostitution within Roman society, while also further emphasizing the status of prostitutes as a commodity for trade. It does not necessarily imply an acceptance of the business; however, the state *is* taking part in the industry in an attempt to profit off of the exchanges of prostitutes and pimps.

So while the legislation of the Roman empire cultivated an outer image of regarding prostitution with moral objection, this did not prevent it from becoming indirectly involved with the industry just enough to benefit from the money made by pimps and their houses of ill-repute. Along with the taxation policies, other imperial laws with mention of prostitution seem to come up episodically rather than by ratification of an umbrella policy regarding the practice.¹² If the abolition of prostitution had actually been a priority for the senate there would no doubt be laws more linearly barring its practice within the empire. Surviving legislation does not attest to the creation of such

¹⁰Edwards, 81.

¹¹McGinn, 2004, 36.

¹²McGinn, 2004, 36.

laws. For this reason it can be concluded that even the ruling class recognized the social function of prostitution and went so far as to take material advantage of its existence.

In addition to preserved legislation, we cull most of our knowledge about imperial Rome from various literary sources. These literary sources are representative of the male elite of Rome, by and for whom they were written. Both legislation and literature can be indicative of social norms for any group of people, however they signify the norms held by the ruling class. From this perspective it is possible to glean societal expectations and desired roles (although these, of course, differ from how roles were performed on a practical level). The moral overtones of imperial literature give an idea of the official elite view of prostitution.

Literature of imperial Rome had a tendency to create a metaphor between a sound empire and the ideal Roman woman; Messalina, the wife of the emperor Claudius, served this purpose well as she violated that ideal and was thus used to exemplify in multiple works political and moral problems in the empire. In the symbolic sense, a prostitute, Messalina or otherwise, is antithetical to this desired empire: she is entirely accessible and subject to indiscriminate penetration.

Tacitus and Juvenal both use fictionalized versions of the story of Messalina in their literature to construct a representation of the moral degradation of the empire. Both authors create their own versions of Messalina: Juvenal depicting her as an empress-turned-prostitute, while Tacitus simply draws a picture of her as a harmful, misguided woman. Juvenal, in his *Satires*, repeatedly takes on the morality of women, and he uses the example of Messalina metonymically, having it stand within his rhetoric for problems

in the empire.¹³ Of course it is impossible to take his accounts literally and factually, but it is possible to use his writings to determine social issues of public importance during first to second century Rome. From the viewpoint of an elite male he discusses the impulsive and sexually charged nature of women while making an example of Messalina as the epitome of what is harmful for the empire (Juvenal, *Satire IV*):¹⁴

Do the concerns of a private household and the doings of Eppia concern you? Then look at those who rival the gods, and hear what Claudius endured. As soon as his wife perceived that her husband was asleep, this august harlot was shameless enough to prefer a common mat to the imperial couch. Assuming a night-cowl, and attended by a single maid, she issued forth; then, having concealed her raven locks under a light-coloured peruque, she took her place in a brothel reeking with long-used coverlets. Entering an empty cell reserved for herself, she there took her stand, under the feigned name of Lycisa, her nipples bare and gilded, and exposed to the view the womb that bore thee, O nobly-born Britannicus! Here she graciously received all comers, asking from each his fee; and when at length the keeper dismissed his girls, she remained to the very last before closing her cell, and with passion still raging hot within her went sorrowfully away. Then exhausted by men but unsatisfied, with soiled cheeks, and begrimed with the smoke of lamps, she took back to the imperial pillow all the odours of the stews.

Tacitus, on the other hand, depicts Messalina as a conniving, manipulative, bacchantic woman who plots secretly to divorce the somewhat incompetent emperor, Claudius (*Annals*, Book XI):¹⁵

She had grown so frantically enamoured of Caius Silius, the handsomest of the young nobility of Rome, that she drove from his bed Junia Silana, a high-born lady, and had her lover wholly to herself. Silius was not unconscious of his wickedness and his peril; but a refusal would have insured destruction, and he had some hope of escaping exposure; the prize too was great, so he consoled himself by awaiting the future and enjoying the present. As for her, careless of concealment, she went continually with a numerous retinue to his house, she haunted his steps, showered on him wealth and honours, and, at last, as though

¹³Joshel, Sandra R, "Female Desire and Discourse of the Empire: Tacitus' Messalina," *Signs* 21.1 (1995), 52.

¹⁴Loeb Classical Library translation.

¹⁵Loeb Classical Library translation.

empire had passed to another, the slaves, the freedmen, the very furniture of the emperor were to be seen in the possession of the paramour.

Tacitus' description of Messalina's calculating exploits typifies her as counter to the ideals of the empire. Comparing this description of an adulteress to Juvenal's description of Messalina running off to a brothel brings to the forefront the difficulties encountered when working with ancient sources. Both of these writers had their own agendas, whether political or moral, when creating a literary image of the figure of Messalina. A common theme between the two constructions is the clear implication of the negative effects of Messalina's behavior upon the security and sanctity of the empire. She has voluntarily placed herself in the same position as a slave, yet in doing so she maintains traces of autonomy which the enslaved are denied. I believe that these compound infractions upon social rules are what make Messalina's behavior so unacceptable to Roman mores that she becomes a literary symbol for many things rejected by the ruling class.

When discussing prostitution with an interest solely upon the labor aspects of the trade, important elements of morality are partially removed as it takes into account only the *economic implications* of prostitution. In the context of imperial Rome it is necessary to acknowledge the moral judgments about prostitution inherent in Roman law and in imperial literature. Romans enacting laws and writing about prostitution no doubt were doing so with traces of moral assessment and thus a Marxist interpretation does not address all facets of meaning of prostitution in imperial Rome. It does, however, approach the idea of prostitution in the classical world in a new way: one that focuses upon the working experience of the female prostitute herself.

HOW & WHY WOMEN BECAME PROSTITUTES: WOMEN AS COMMODITIES

Prostitutes primarily found themselves in their position via slavery. This occurred by the force of the slave owner and was thoroughly legal except in cases where a slave had been bought under a *non serva* clause, which prohibited a slave's sale into prostitution.¹⁶ In addition to slavery, a woman might have found herself sold into prostitution for economic reasons by her family. Given that what remains of Roman history is from the perspective of elite males, there is no firsthand account of how a woman came to prostitution (other than Tacitus' fictional story of Messalina). Rebecca Flemming, in her discussion of the economy of female prostitution in ancient Rome, describes a woman's path to prostitution as follows:

Only a handful of reasons for women's prostitution are provided, more or less incidentally, by imperial writers; and though they eschew the more baroque styles of making woman victim, they do not exactly offer her much choice in the matter either. She might be prostituted, first and foremost as a slave or, secondly, as a wife or daughter; otherwise she herself might be driven to sell her body systematically by either her depraved lusts or indigence.¹⁷

As implied in this description, a woman, slave or free, was considered property, a commodity, on par with that of a slave or cattle.¹⁸ Her fate was up to the discretion of a male figure of her family. As a commodity, she could be utilized by her family and sold to make profit. Her independence as a human was thus negated through her default classification as an object with a market value. Being prostituted as a slave would indicate that profit from the sale of the woman's sexuality would accumulate in the hands

¹⁶McGinn 2004, 216.

¹⁷Rebecca Flemming, "Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution in the Roman Empire," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (1999): 38-61.

¹⁸John R. Love, *Antiquity and Capitalism: Max Weber and the Sociological Foundations of Roman Civilization* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 27.

of the slave owner, similar to the power structure present in a brothel. The slave woman herself would gain nothing from these exchanges but instead would repeatedly commodify, and thus dehumanize, her own sexuality. In these transactions the slave/prostitute would magnify the fact that her agency had been denied her when she was established as a slave, prostitute, or both. In situations of a father prostituting his daughter or wife, it is clear that the woman is being used in order to gain profit for the family. In situations of a family selling a daughter as a prostitute, this arrangement was potentially temporary and meant only to be a short-term effort to acquire capital. Further outlined by Flemming when describing the status of a prostitute are the implications of the use of a woman's sexuality for the profit of others:

So, becoming a *meretrix* is, as the word suggests, primarily understood as an economic act, but one that belongs far less to the prostituted woman herself than to those around her; to those who profit from her initial and recurrent sale...female bodies clearly counted amongst the economic resources not only of slave-dealers and owners, but also of any family network, available short- or long-term for the avoidance of penury and probably in some cases also for the pursuance of more ambitious economic strategies...Both these mechanisms of prostitution were, broadly speaking, deemed legitimate in the Roman world; they function within two of its most basic power structures. Slaves and daughters in particular were legally positioned so they could be prostituted...¹⁹

In contrast, women who prostitute *themselves*, both in antiquity and currently, have done so often out of pressures symptomatic of a patriarchal society. The prevalence of this occurrence in antiquity is not known, but it may be possible to assume its economic viability given the structure and hierarchies of Roman society. Pressures that may persuade a woman to prostitute herself are likely economic in nature and may manifest themselves in restricted employment or education options for women in general; this may manifest itself in a woman's relegation to the private sphere. By remaining in

¹⁹ Fleming 1999, 69.

the private sphere women abided by certain elite male constructions of the Roman ideal, but also severely restricted their ability to earn any profit or capital independent of the earnings of her husband or male family member. Labor deemed socially acceptable to Roman women was crafts such as weaving, street-selling, or other non-glamorous occupations.²⁰ When putting herself into prostitution a woman gave herself the opportunity to acquire amounts of capital, and simultaneously violated Roman standards of chastity and gender-determined work by marketing her sexuality independently in the public sphere.

METHODS OF PROSTITUTION AND THEIR RELATED AGENCY

A brothel, or place where prostitution may occur, could have taken a few forms. There is archaeological evidence surviving in Pompeii of structures presumed to be brothels, one of which appears to be built for the purpose of being a brothel.²¹ Little material evidence remains in Rome of such structures, however prostitution could have taken place in a number of public places, not just those thought of as a brothel. Prostitution most likely took place in other businesses such as at inns or taverns and perhaps also at public baths. A *leno* or *lena*, an owner of the establishment and prostitutes, would set women up within the business and collect profit through them. This business, called a *lupanar*, would organize multiple prostitutes who would serve multiple customers per day, the profit from which it is unlikely she would ever see.²²

Given the opportunities for revenue, investment and co-ownership in a brothel could have been considered a financially tempting, if looked down upon, endeavor.

²⁰Suzanne Dixon, *Reading Roman Women* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 114.

²¹McGinn 2003, 105.

²²Flemming, 41.

While many customers to a typical brothel were of the middle and lower classes, proprietors often came from the wealthier strata of society (not unlike investors in modern businesses).²³ It is unknown whether all investors knew the real nature of the business they were supporting given that a brothel may have been housed in other establishments, but a profit was still earned through the employed prostitutes. A prostitute's rate of charge depended upon the act performed as well as arbitrary elements, such as the attractiveness of the prostitute, and would have been determined by the brothel owner and not the prostitute. Brothel workers did not enjoy flexibility and overt control in their own interests. In fact, slave prostitutes employed at a brothel enjoyed few rights and lived primarily at the brothel without the ability to come and go as they wished.²⁴ In situations where the prostitute was also a slave, the nature of the relationship between *meterix* and *leno* was inherently and overtly exploitative and devoid of autonomy.²⁵ The prostitutes of brothels in ancient Rome faced these same constraints and in this way is a literal example of Marx's exploited proletariat. Marx metaphorically writes of a worker selling himself for a wage, while a higher up authority accumulates wealth from the profit earned by this sale. Prostitution, however, is a corporeal example of this relationship based upon power inequities. The prostitute is subject to exploitation by both her customer as well as her pimp.

A prostitute not working under a *leno* in a brothel could, of her own accord, find customers by street-walking. Presumably, street-walkers were more independent as they could, for themselves, dictate price rates, hours of work, duration of their career as a

²³ McGinn, 2004, 215.

²⁴ McGinn, 2004, 215.

²⁵ Flemming 1999, 39.

prostitute, and select customers. In a recent article, Julia O'Connell Davidson wrote a sociological analysis of modern brothel-based prostitution as inherently exploitative.²⁶ Davidson begins this discussion by distinguishing between independently-employed prostitutes and those working at a brothel. She goes on to relate that streetwalkers maintain an agency lost by brothel workers who act under the wishes and control of a boss or pimp, whose role in the interaction is solely to earn a profit. While in this situation the prostitute is still commodifying her sexuality, she may be doing so at her own behest and for her own profit.

The case of the literary Messalina is interesting in that she shows her ability to act in her own interests by joining a brothel, which contradicts the overarching themes of this paper. As an example of a woman acting independent of an authoritative male and defying her socially-defined role, the character of Messalina is ripe with fodder for the moral treatises of elite men. Aside from her choice of a brothel as her forum for prostitution, Messalina is a precise example of a woman prostituting herself in avoidance of living under the authority of a male (husband or otherwise). This subversion puts her in the status of *infamia*, and is therefore immoral.

CONCLUSION

With the rise of gender studies within the field of classics, the roles of marginalized people, such as women, have come under a new light within research. As a result of this shift in focus of academic discussions, the histories of groups such as

²⁶Julia O'Connell Davidson, "Prostitution, Power and Freedom," in *Society and Sexualities*, ed. Jeffrey Weeks, Janet Holland, and Matthew Waites (Malden, MA: Polity, 2003), 216.

prostitutes have begun to be considered critically. Having read works regarding this topic I was interested in expanding upon previous research by approaching prostitution with an interest in the implications of labor. To synthesize the role of a prostitute in the labor force of imperial Rome it is necessary to put her into her cultural milieu and address the social forces playing upon her. From there it is possible to look at her relationship to others: in the case of the prostitute the main interaction shaping her life would fall primarily on a *leno*, and secondarily upon the customer. I assert that these relationships, when under the puppetry of a *leno*, are inherently and severely exploitative. Because the majority of female prostitutes in imperial Rome were sold into prostitution via slavery, their situation is a prime example of being unwillingly forced into an estranged and alienated work environment. Despite the significant influence classical thought had upon Marx, he still wrote centuries later and was provoked by industrial development, clearly far removed from first and second century Rome. In his development of his critique of capitalism Marx looked at slavery and social structure in antiquity as a precursor to the bourgeois/proletariat relationship that was a product of industrialization. While the economy of antiquity was clearly not capitalist in the modern sense, elements of this form of social hierarchy were in place.

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