

“HONNI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE”

A talk given to the

Philosophical Club of Cleveland

March 27, 2001

by

Sigrid Miller

“HONNI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE”

Tonight’s presentation has to start with a confession: I am only quoting the inscription of the Order of the Garter to set the tone for the talk and – hopefully – also its reception. “Honni soit qui mal y pense” or translated “May he be shamed who thinks ill of it” sounded like an appropriate title. The historians among you may be disappointed by the actual topic of the presentation because the talk is not about Edward III and his accomplishments or controversies as a 14th century monarch.

At this point, I would like to state that it is not in a disrespectful manner that the motto of the oldest and most important order of knighthood in England is being used. Therefore, I am asking all of you to please receive the subject in the spirit of chivalry as portrayed by Edward III in the following background story of the Order of the Garter: Please note, I am using the term story, because the validity of events related to the Order of the Garter is disputed in some sources. The story describes Edward III picking up a garter which the Duchess of Salisbury had lost on the dance floor – in full public – and, upon returning it to her he, with a gallant gesture, allegedly spoke the words: “Honnie soit qui mal y pense” (may he be shamed who thinks ill of it).

With this little episode in mind I would like to proceed with tonight's actual topic which is of an economical, ethical, historical, religious, social, and, of course, philosophical nature. The interest in this subject was triggered by leafing through a small paperback book when the following sentences caught my eye: "I had thought that by selling my body I would buy independence. Instead, I lost it, because independence is invalid without the power to appreciate it, and this, unquestionably, deserted me." Needless to say, I read the book titled "Street-Walker" by Anonymous. Anonymous was a London, UK prostitute who, with remarkable literary skill, wrote her autobiography of the one and one half years of her life as a "Street Walker." Hers was a very touching story and to relive her experiences, her reactions, her physical and emotional sufferings were at times quite painful. The complete honesty with which the autobiography was written, the unfolding of a confused but searching soul, left a deep impact on me. However, it was also a humbling experience for me. Before reading the book, I had a brief and clear idea of a prostitute's character in my mind: "They are dishonest, they are masters of deception." How wrong my assumptions were!!! Anonymous only tried to deceive the police who would arrest her if she was caught soliciting. With her clients she was honest; with the poor she shared what little she had. The book created a lot

of disturbing questions for me – some of them still unanswered – and this in turn became the foundation of tonight’s presentation:

“FEMALE PROSTITUTION”

LEGALIZE IT, DECRIMINALIZE IT OR MAKE IT ILLEGAL?

HOW SHOULD HUMANS VIEW IT AND TREAT IT?

Unfortunately, the issue of prostitution has often been either evaded or has been approached with a reforming or moralistic attitude. Of course, this leads to the questions: Whose morals? Yours or mine?

The New Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary of the English Language gives the following definition of the verb prostitute: “Latin, pro-before and statuo – to place.” I find it interesting that the origin of the word does not contain any moral evaluation. The dictionary continues with the following definition. “To offer freely to a lewd use, or to indiscriminate lewdness for hire; to give up to any vile or infamous purpose, to sell to wickedness, to offer or expose upon vile terms or to unworthy persons...”

In contrast to Webster’s definition, Jean Almodovar, states in her book “Cop to Call Girl: Why I left the Los Angeles Police Department to make an Honest living as a Beverly Hills Prostitute,” she states: “I think that Sex is a positive, nurturing act, and whether it is given out of love or rendered as a service, as long as it is consensual it is still positive...” She

continues: “I cannot fathom how one could think that making another human being feel good for a fee could be degrading or demeaning unless it is degrading to make other people feel good.”

I do intend to discuss the issue of female prostitution in a dispassionate and – as much as possible – scientific manner.

The definition of prostitution is not an easy one, since different societies have different standards. Various attempts have been made to provide a universal answer to the question of what constitutes prostitution. If an Eskimo offers his wife to a visitor and she engages in sex with him and then in return for her favors accepts his gifts, is this prostitution? Or if a young female participates in premarital sex with several consecutive partners, can she be called a prostitute or is it just adolescent promiscuity? In the Japanese language there is no equivalent to the English word “whore” or “harlot.” The word prostitute would translate as “temporary wife.” (Just a little insert, the profession of geisha was only established 435 years ago. After WWII geisha became a synonym for prostitute, although the true geishas, who study art, dance, poetry, etc. for many years strongly object to the new classification.) It seems that social evaluation and legal determination give prostitution its status in a particular country. Also, there are many different explanations on the origin of prostitution. One in

particular sounds quite interesting: August Bebel, one of Friedrich Engel's disciples, thought that prostitution was a social institution of societies that emphasized private property. According to him, if the nature of a capitalist society would be transformed to a truly socialist society, prostitution would be eliminated because economic exploitation of prostitutes would cease. I wonder how he would have assessed the flourishing existence of prostitution in the former Soviet Union – the self-proclaimed socialist paradise – where ordinary citizens did not own private property? For simplicity reasons I shall use the term prostitution in my talk to refer to nonamorous, heterosexual activities, in which an adult female makes herself sexually available to men for compensation. It is actually seen as a form of professional commercialism. Society, in general – and I am speaking about western society – seems to view prostitutes as a social category by itself; they are excluded from mainstream society because they do not fit the norm for solid acceptability. They are often treated as members of a low caste. However, there were times when prostitutes, specifically sacred prostitutes, enjoyed an elevated status.

Before discussing the current issues of prostitution, I would like to give a few examples of the history of first sacred and then secular prostitution. There is an abundance of information available on sacred

prostitution alone. Evenings could be filled by analyzing and comparing different cultures in their approach to sacred prostitution. The same is also true for secular prostitution. So, I can only give a very incomplete account of the history of prostitution. I am aware, that by omitting so much, the historical background may become distorted.

One of the earliest documented references to prostitution dates back to the fourth millenium B.C. It was at the height of the Sumerian Empire that a form of temple brothel was operated by the Sumerian priests in Uruk. The temple, where sacred prostitution was practiced, was dedicated to Ishtar, the goddess of fertility. Three grades of women were living on temple grounds. The elite group exclusively performed temple sex-rites, where the temple prostitutes had sex with priests only. The second class served visitors who brought their offerings to the deity and then celebrated the event by having intercourse with one of the temple prostitutes. The lowest group, the harlots – although they were living on temple grounds – roamed the streets for the purpose of soliciting customers. The same classification of prostitutes eventually spread east and west to India, China, Japan, Greece and Rome. I find it interesting that even today in countries with legalized secular prostitution a three category classification still exists. There is the “call girl” who has the highest status, then comes the group of brothel workers and

finally the lowest group are the so called “street walkers.” Another account of sacred prostitution is described by Herodotus, a Greek historian in the fifth century B.C. He tells about a custom in the Babylonian Empire: “Every woman who is a native of the country must once in her life go and sit in the Temple of Mylitta and there give herself to a strange man.” After arriving at the temple, a woman was not allowed to leave the premises until a customer had thrown a silver coin into her lap and “had his way with her in the temple.” Since the coin had to be turned over to the temple this, indeed, was a profitable business for the temple’s treasure chest. The prettiest girls, of course, were able to leave the temple fairly soon while the less fortunate ones might have to spend quite some time there. It was again Herodotus who left behind a good description of the institution of sacred harlotry in Egypt. He claims that the pyramids to a large extent were actually built with proceeds from prostitution. That, of course, would mean that Cheops must have been the largest beneficiary. In early Greece prostitution was tightly connected with religious worship. An example is the temple of Aphrodite in the sea port city of Corinth. Here temple prostitutes catered to the needs of sailors and proceeds from the temple supported the city’s wars against Athens. Also, the establishment of colonies along the Adriatic Coast were supported to a large extent by temple revenues from prostitution.

In many ancient civilizations sacred prostitution was perceived as an honorable form of religious worship where female qualities were admired and adored. The sacred prostitute was essentially the embodiment of a goddess, for example a fertility goddess or a love goddess. However, as the old deities were discarded or with the rise of monotheism, prostitution underwent a major change. Sacred prostitution lost its importance and became over time completely secular. Many references to prostitution are found in the old testament. For example the story about Joshua who, in compliance with God's instructions, sends a pair of spies into the town of Jericho, where they find shelter in the house of Rahab, the harlot. In return for information, Rahab and her family are promised that their lives will be spared during the upcoming attack on Jericho with the intended mass slaughter of its inhabitants. This story had a happy ending: Joshua married the harlot Rahab. Another example is the story of Samson and Delilah; this one did not end so well. It has to be pointed out that Judaism presented mankind with a jealous God who tolerated no idols, but demanded obedience. Eventually strict moral codes were established. Women caught in adultery or pursuing the career of a harlot, could be severely punished, often even by death. But one can read in Genesis that Judah slept with a harlot (no punishment for that) or that Jephthah was the son of a prostitute as

told in Judges. A thought crossed my mind and I would like to share it with you: All of the ancient laws and the Bible were written by men. Men apparently received all the revelations by a male deity. If the laws and the Bible had been written by women, would the same double standard in reference to sexual morality have been in existence for century after century?

Returning to Greece, the development from sacred to secular prostitution occurred when Greek philosophers emphasized the idea of rational thinking. The existence of prostitution in accordance with religious rites was questioned and eventually the religious connection was severed. The Greek statesman Solon established the first, strictly state regulated, municipal bordellos in Athens in the sixth century B.C. Its inmates were primarily slaves or non-Athenians who were compelled to pay taxes to the state. Wives of Athenian men were expected to stay at home, procreate children and rear them, while husbands were free to spend their leisure time – if they had the money – in the company of a common prostitute, or the female flute players and dancing girls, or the “painted women,” the hettairae. The last group is of some interest, since the hettairae were not only beautiful but also well educated prostitutes and we do know of some who rose to fame like Aspasia, who was loved by Socrates and numerous other men and who

– in time – became Pericles’ mistress and political advisor. Another example is the hettairae Archanassa, who was involved with Plato. Later, under Roman law, first attempts of registration of prostitutes were made and the following statement came into existence: “Once a prostitute, always a prostitute.” The rule stated that even after leaving the profession, the name could not be taken off the register.

With the advent of Christianity major changes occurred. Christ’s teaching was one of forgiveness and redemption as exemplified in His treatment of the harlot, a woman accused of adultery. (John VIII, 3-11) Under Mosaic law she should have been stoned to death, but Jesus said to the audience, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” As we all know, nobody did. Also prostitutes, like Mary Magdalene, who had sinned were – upon repentance – redeemed. The other change the Christian religion eventually presented us with, was a clear distinction between the spirit and the flesh. A dualism was acknowledged, where two opposite, non-compatible elements were competing with each other. True salvation became only possible by denying and ultimately abandoning the desires of the flesh. The early fathers of the Church, like St. Jerome, called sex unclean, the theologian and moralist Tertullian described it as shameful and for St. Augustine it was the loss of self-control that disturbed him. Their

highest goals were asceticism and celibacy. Mary, the Virgin mother of Christ, became the image of absolute purity – she had experienced an immaculate conception. Lust and pleasure in combination with sexual intercourse became – at least theoretically – a sin in the eyes of the Church. In the Middle Ages the Church’s attitude towards prostitution was expressed through the rules of penance: if a prostitute intended to leave the profession, she was to subject herself to six years of penance, while a man who had engaged a prostitute was to fast for 10 days. The evil of prostitution rested largely with the woman. Eve’s original sin was considered a burden to man’s chastity. However, there are many examples when the Church looked the other way. At one time, during the end of the seventh crusade, the so-called “camp followers” or prostitutes numbered about 13,000. These ladies were on the payroll to encourage the troops to continue the Holy War. The Crusades were not the last time the Church turned a blind eye on prostitution. This trend actually started with Saint Thomas Aquinas. In his opinion, prostitution was the lesser evil. Yes, a prostitute had a sinful soul, but she was needed to keep lust within bounds, it was better to engage a prostitute than to rape a woman. The Grand Council of 1358 A.D. stated that prostitutes were absolutely necessary. And in 1510 A.D. Pope Jules II built a brothel solely for Christians. Later, Voltaire reported that the Bishop

of Geneva managed all the brothels in Switzerland. - The author of “Dossiers Prostitution,” Dominique Dallayrac, even states in his book, which was published in 1966, that “prostitution brought more wealth to the clergy than all contributions of the faithful added together.”

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century western society felt it appropriate to identify and isolate prostitutes. The reason behind it was to shame the woman, and to collect taxes and exorbitant license fees. After WWII, the United Nations put eradicating prostitution on its agenda. However, the evidence that prostitution is immune to attempts to regulate and eliminate it, is the fact that more than half a century later, the profession still survives. It can be safely stated though, that the single largest factor in the reductions of the number of prostitutes to this day has been the increase in the number of women willing to engage in sexual relations without a monetary or economic exchange. And this leads us to the actual question of how one should view and treat female prostitution.

What are actually the reasons which lead women into prostitution? It seems that most are seeking to escape poverty, violence and lack of opportunities and – unfortunately – end up with exactly what they had wished to leave behind. Since the majority of modern western prostitutes do not have any form of higher education, the idea of having money

immediately available without investing time and funds in further education, seems to have quite an appeal. Statistics show that 95 per cent of the prostitutes choose the profession in preference to other forms of occupation.

– The following questions arises: Could there be a psychological factor which predisposes certain individuals to enter prostitution? Could it be low self-esteem? Or have they been rejected as children and are afraid now to form binding relationships? With very little recourse, prostitutes often use drugs and alcohol to numb the physical and emotional assaults to their bodies and dignity.

Voices of “righteous” citizens wish to denounce prostitution as being sinful and shameful. They feel the police should be empowered to arrest prostitutes on the basis that sex outside of marriage is immoral and consequently it should be illegal. They fail to see that by eliminating prostitutes the demand for sex will not disappear. The real issue is that certain men do not crave to have sex because prostitutes exist, but prostitutes exist because certain men crave to have sex. Laws against prostitution are not effective, they only create clandestine operations. Pimps are a direct result of anti-prostitution laws. Under such a system prostitutes cannot rely on protection from the authorities. They seek security and protection

through their association with pimps who often confiscate the prostitute's earnings, beat them or make them otherwise dependent.

Prostitutes in the U.S. – except for 15 counties in Nevada – live a life of isolation, where they are cut off from the general public, trying to exist in a criminal atmosphere where blackmail, rape and “protection” fees are not uncommon. Theirs is a life of degradation where basic human rights are severely violated or even non-existent. Please analyze and explain the following: If two consenting adults decide to engage in sex without exchange of money, the act is not labeled as prostitution. However, if the same scenario takes place and a fee is paid for the service, it becomes prostitution. The decisive factor seems to be the exchange of money, so it is not really a moral issue in the eyes of the law, it must be the loss of taxable income! So why not legalize prostitution? Legalization of prostitution is not intended to justify the morality of the profession but rather to protect those who choose it. But, legalization means regulation. And in the words of one former prostitute, “legalization will not end abuse, it will make abuse legal.” Instead of the pimp, the state or law enforcement agencies will be in charge. Prostitutes will be registered, they will be required to work in areas designated by the authorities. In brothels in Nevada a prostitute must service any clients who choose her, even regardless of apparent disease. She is only

allowed to walk around town during specific hours and cannot have non-paying visitors during her three-week work period. Legal prostitutes are required to undergo mandatory health checks which, of course, makes little sense: why provide a “clean product” to men of unknown health status? Mandatory health checks of prostitutes only insures customers that their service provider is HIV and STD-free. On the basis of equal rights, where does the prostitute fit in? To legalize prostitution would merely mean that ostracism and persecution are traded for unreasonable restrictions on how prostitutes have to work and live. Again, a basic human right, the right of free choice, would be denied.

In countries where prostitution is illegal (like in the U.S.) or even where it is legal (like in Germany), organized crime and prostitution are closely connected. Just as in the past, the era of prohibition and illegal gambling attracted organized crime, so in present day does the drug trade and prostitution. The high profit margin for those in control of prostitution, and the fact that practically all transactions are for cash – in other words almost untraceable – invites trafficking of women and children, money laundering and various forms of physical crime. Accordingly, exploitation of prostitutes, tax evasion and violence are quite prevalent in the trade of current day prostitution.

Decriminalization would eliminate laws that criminalize the sale of sexual services between consenting adults. Since the 1970s and 1980s a clear and definite development in North America and some west European countries has been noticeable: It was the beginning of the prostitutes' rights movement, which was directly related to the feminist movement. Demands to remove the term "prostitute" and substitute it with "sex worker" could be heard. In October 1991 the First European Sex Workers' Congress was held in Frankfurt, Germany. Ex and present day sex workers were in attendance, as well as politicians and supporters from 16 European countries. Social rights of sex workers within the "Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers" were requested. And, in preparation for the Common Market, sex work was to be universally decriminalized and the right of self-determination for every person working in prostitution was to be guaranteed. Similar demands are made by COYOTE in the United States. (Coyote stands for: Call off your old tired ethics.) Coyote's representatives also wish to see prostitution decriminalized and classified as work, with its workers having the same rights and protection that other workers and citizens enjoy. Exploitation and abuse would be easier to punish, since sex workers would be protected under existing labor laws. Occupational health and safety provisions are of particular relevance in the current context of

HIV/Aids. Without these rights, sex workers are more vulnerable to infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. I am not qualified to interpret the law in reference to prostitution. I am also not qualified to interpret labor law issues. But when a city like San Francisco spends \$7 million per year arresting and prosecuting women, I find this rather senseless. Decriminalization would loosen up funds for legal protection and social services for prostitutes. Lorie Naire who works with Legal Action for Women states: “What happens in most cities is that their law enforcement resources go into a criminalization process: arrests, court time, decoy operations, police stakeouts and street sweeps.” What is actually accomplished through these actions? Over time a high number of prostitutes establish quite a police record preventing them – or making it almost impossible – to leave the trade in order to find more reputable employment.

When assessing prostitution maybe we should remember that in the soul of every prostitute one could find an Anonymous, the author of “Street Walker.” Anonymous was able to break out of the vicious cycle of prostitution. Others may not have her emotional strength and determination but they may, to various degrees, share her thoughts and sufferings as portrayed in the following closing statement: “...I became hag-ridden by

hate, fear, guilt, despair, disgust, every negative emotion known to man, so that I was chained to a monstrous life of my own making, in order not to be chained to the definitely less monstrous way of living of my fellow men. – And, of course, the most terrifying consequence of all the various degenerations of being on the game I had completely overlooked – that it would rob me of the ability to think, because I would not dare to do so, and to look at myself, because I would not have the courage to see behind my own eyes.

No, there is no choice. Anyone who perceives, however indistinctly, what he has become and what he will be if he continues on that road, commits the ultimate and most unforgivable sin against himself and life if he still chooses it. ...I cannot – not in the most minor degree – go back on the game.”