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HIS 332

16 December, 2025

“Saving the Innocents:” Public Health, Prostitution, and Middle-Class Philanthropy in Victorian
London

In overcrowded, working-class East London, prostitution was a way for impoverished women to earn a living or make ends meet on top of their regular jobs. Inadequate protection and contraceptive measures meant sexually transmitted infections, especially syphilis, ran rampant through the British military, a large customer block of Victorian-era prostitutes. In an attempt to combat the spread of disease through its military ranks, the British Parliament passed a series of acts called the “Contagious Disease Acts.” Blaming women for the spread of disease, these acts subjected them to intrusive medical exams and imprisonment if they were infected. These Acts did not punish or attempt to regulate the bodies of the men who would solicit sex, however. The combination of the injustices of these Acts and the poverty and perceived sin of East London drew the attention of many middle and upper-class women in London in the 1870s.¹ Philanthropy in East London became a way for middle-class women to work and socialize outside of the home, preach their moral values, and flaunt their status as an elite. Baroness Mary Jeune was one of these women; she came from an elite English family and, in the late 19th century, began publishing essays on the necessity of philanthropy in East London. She was especially concerned with the problem of prostitution, as many middle-class women were, and wrote that it was a necessity to try to save the “fallen women.” Her essays utilized rhetoric aimed at prostitutes’

¹ Judith R Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

morality, or lack thereof. She paints this image of the “fallen woman,” needing to be rescued out of a life of sin, fallen from the grace of God. She also emphasizes the inequity of punishing women for children born out of wedlock and for venereal disease, while letting the men involved in each escape accountability. Interestingly, Jeune argues that middle- and upper-class women hold a great deal of responsibility over the girls they employ in their homes to ensure that they do not fall into this life. Jeune’s appeal to other privileged women to protect working-class girls from falling into a life of vice is an argument that is only possibly within the heterogeneity and intermingling of a modern, metropolitan city, since the privileged classes of London, as Jeune argues, were unable to ignore the poverty and vice that was creeping up to their doorstep.

Prostitution in Victorian London was an object of both intrigue and disgust of popular society. It was the “Great Social Evil;” proper “ladies were supposed not to know about it, gentlemen only knew the theory, not, of course, the practice.”² By the 1850s, prostitution was at the forefront of public consciousness. Victorian London scholar Judith Walkowitz describes prostitution as not only an affront to morality, but also “a vital aspect of the social economy.”³ Novels, letters to the editor, police reports, and manifestos on the issues circulated widely around London, pushing the issue further into public discourse and mythologizing the women involved. Parliament intervened when they became concerned about the spread of venereal disease to the Royal Military in port cities, passing the first of three statutes in 1864, titled the Contagious Diseases Acts, ordering the inspection of prostitutes. The Parliament passed the subsequent acts in 1866 and 1869. Immediately after the Parliament signed the Acts into law, they garnered little attention. Florence Nightingale tried to start an opposition movement that gained little traction, arguing that the acts officially sanctioned vice. Widespread public opposition did not surface

² Liza Picard, *Victorian London: The Life of a City, 1840-1870*, 1st ed. (St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 255.

³ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 32.

until the 1870s, when a coalition of middle-class feminists called for the Acts' repeal, arguing that they were immoral and unconstitutional. However, this opposition movement had a different *modus operandi* than Nightingale's; they criticized the Acts as blatant class and sex discrimination. This series of legislation allowed plainclothes policemen to label women prostitutes and subject them to invasive genital exams. If found to have gonorrhea or syphilis, the woman was locked up in a hospital for about nine months. The definition of a prostitute under this legislation was vague, offering metropolitan police "broad discretionary powers."⁴ The injustices of these Acts rallied middle-class women with an intensity never seen before, shocking onlookers.⁵

The middle class of London was deeply interested in philanthropic causes aimed at the perceived vices of city life. There were committees aimed at improving working-class housing, societies urging men to abstain from alcohol, and women's groups who trained young girls in laundry services to "keep them on the straight and narrow path of virtue."⁶ In addition to port cities, much of this "vice" was concentrated in the working-class East End of London, including the Whitechapel neighborhood.⁷ The middle classes, as Walkowitz states, "were far less concerned with the material problems of Whitechapel than with the pathological symptoms they spawned, such as street crime, prostitution, and epidemic disease."⁸ Though the pure motivations of middle-class men and women in the East End can absolutely be called into question, the fact remains that the privileged groups of London were intertwined with the poor working class in a way that they had not been prior to the rapid industrialization of the city.

⁴ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 2.

⁵ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*.

⁶ Picard, *Victorian London*, 106.

⁷ The Whitechapel neighborhood rapidly gained name recognition in the late 19th century since it was the site of the Jack the Ripper murders, as Walkowitz expands on in her chapter.

⁸ Judith R Walkowitz, "Jack the Ripper," in *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

The Encyclopedia of Human Geography defines the industrial revolution as “an explosive increase in the speed and productivity of capitalist production [that] transformed the worlds of work, everyday life, and the global economy.”⁹ In few places did the industrial revolution happen as swiftly and intensely as it did in London. The rapid industrialization of London drew tens of thousands of workers into the inner city. By 1841, the city census counted 1,945,000 people in London, “and probably more if you include the shadowy ones who always evade officialdom.”¹⁰ This overcrowding meant that the working class were practically living on top of each other in their own waste, unable to afford rent for larger flats because they were so chronically underpaid. “There was an appalling, visible contrast between the way the rich lived, and the dreadful existence of the poor under their nose.”¹¹ It is partly because of the confined nature of the city, with people in drastically different income brackets living mere blocks away from each other that the middle class became so engaged in philanthropy.

Judith Walkowitz is the leading scholar on Victorian London society, writing prolifically about prostitution, middle class philanthropy, and social movements around the two. Therefore, her work is pivotal in informing my own analysis. *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* focuses on the Contagious Disease Acts and the widespread efforts of middle class women in repealing them, highlighting the novel nature of the opposition movement. In *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, she analyzes several case studies to weave together a picture of Victorian London as a place simultaneously intrigued by and disgusted with the vices of the East End. She discusses the middle class obsession with morality in the East End, suggesting that much of their philanthropic

⁹ Barney Warf, “Industrial Revolution,” in *Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (SAGE Publications, 2006), <https://sk.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/humangeography/chpt/industrial-revolution>.

¹⁰ Picard, *Victorian London*, 2.

¹¹ Picard, *Victorian London*, 61.

outreach was concerned about the “pathological crime” that impacted them, rather than the poverty and destitution of the working class.¹² Conversely, Hugh Cunningham suggests even less benevolent motivations for middle-class philanthropy in the East End of London, analyzing philanthropic involvement through an anti-capitalist lens in his book, *The Reputation of Philanthropy Since 1750: Britain and Beyond*.¹³ With the analysis and background both of these offers provide, I can approach Mary Jeune's essay and work with a critical eye to her motivations and an understanding of the philanthropic movements she was a part of.

Perhaps an extension of Walkowitz's argument that Victorian prostitution enraptured the attention of the masses, extensive scholarship has been done on the Victorian-era prostitute, especially those in East London. The chapters on working-class women, middle-class women, and poverty in *Victorian London: The Life of a City 1840-1890* all discuss how prostitution interacted with each of those broader categories, helping guide a nuanced understanding of how the issue permeated the consciousness of the city.¹⁴ Liza Picard's work is a leading volume of Victorian history, excellently articulating how so many seemingly distinct groups within the city interacted with each other. “Prostitution and Social Purity” by Emma Liggins focuses especially on the work of the National Vigilance Association and their aim to abolish prostitution and punish the women involved.¹⁵

Though fairly large bodies of research exist on middle-class philanthropy and prostitution in Victorian London, Mary Jeune remains underresearched as a figure in this period of history. The one book focused solely on her, *The Impressionable Mary Jeune, Victorian Influencer*, has a

¹² Walkowitz, “Jack the Ripper,” 193.

¹³ Hugh Cunningham, *The Reputation of Philanthropy Since 1750: Britain and Beyond* (Manchester University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526146397>.

¹⁴ Picard, *Victorian London*.

¹⁵ Emma Liggins, “Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s,” *Critical Survey* 15, no. 3 (2003): 39–55, JSTOR.

subtitle that reads, “a forgotten Victorian celebrity.”¹⁶ Even her biography hinges on the fact that she is understudied.¹⁷ ‘Irréconciliables,’ ‘Reclaimables,’ and ‘First Falls’: Lady Mary Jeune and the Fallen Woman in “Tess of the d’Urbervilles” by William Davis focuses, in part, on Jeune. He weaves together Jeune’s essays and Hardy’s novel about Victorian sexuality to tell a broader story about the presence of morality and vice in Victorian-era conversations about sex.¹⁸ Though Davis briefly cites Jeune’s “Saving the Innocents,” I intend to perform a more detailed analysis of the essay, placing it against the background of broader social and political movements in Victorian London. Jeune’s essay offers invaluable insight into the motives and strategies of middle-class philanthropy in Victorian London. She appeals to her privileged female peers, urging them to act as positive examples for the women they employ, to treat their employees with respect and grace, and look after them as if they were family. She urges her community and government to care for illegitimate and abandoned children, often the product of the vice she is trying to address in her essay. Though she is bold in her criticism of middle-class women and working-class men, she stops short of blaming upper-class men for their role in perpetuating a culture of vice in London.¹⁹

Jeune’s essay begins with an earnest call to her readers, convincing them of the pressing nature of the issue of vice and illicit sex in London. She explains that it is “impossible” for vice to not exist in London, given how large it is, but that does not mean that efforts to reduce the harm of vice are futile.²⁰ She says that it is necessary to put aside “any wish to look at the sentimental or morbid side of the matter,” instead “turning our thoughts and energies to devise

¹⁶ Amelia Fletcher, *The Irrepressible Mary Jeune, Victorian Influencer* (Troubador Publishing, 2025).

¹⁷ I was not able to access this biography through ILL. Further, the biography is not a scholarly source, not written by a historian or published by a reputable academic press.

¹⁸ William A. Davis, “‘Irréconciliables,’ ‘Reclaimables,’ and ‘First Falls’: Lady Mary Jeune and the Fallen Woman in ‘Tess of the d’Urbervilles,’” *The Hardy Review* 10, no. 1 (2008): 69–82, JSTOR.

¹⁹ Mary Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” *The Fortnightly Review* (London, UK), 1885.

²⁰ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 345.

some way of cleansing our towns of the stream of pollution” that flows through them.²¹ Evoking imagery of the Thames, the heavily polluted river that runs through central London, Jeune pathologizes sin, stating that the city can and should be “cleansed” of it.²² Much of her essay is devoted to proposing preventative measures to ensure that young girls do not fall into a life of vice and sin, since, as she argues, some women have fallen too far to be helped. She writes, “I do not believe it possible to do much, to rescue and restore to any position, in any kind of society, the lowest class of fallen women in this country.”²³ As is expected for a woman of her social standing, Jeune uses mostly veiled euphemisms in this essay, rarely expanding on the definitions of the identifiers she places on these working-class women. However, it is easily inferred that the “fallen women” she refers to here are prostitutes, likely those who have been in the business for a while. She encourages her readers to help other women: “there are many good Christian women working night after night,” who might, with “loving, tender influence,” be sheep who “come back to the field.”²⁴ The language in this plea references the parable of the lost sheep, where a farmer has 99 sheep and loses one. Instead of letting the one go, he searches for it tirelessly and carries it back to the herd, meant to teach about God’s care for every individual’s soul that follows Him.²⁵ Using this language is a specific choice, meant to call to good Christians and follow in the path of God, saving as many souls as they can, even if they have to do so one at a time.

A central argument of Jeune’s essay is that middle-class women hold a great deal of responsibility for the women in their employment, since they are able to prevent them from falling into a life of vice through careful consideration of their own actions. She says the “richer

²¹ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 345.

²² Picard calls human waste the “main ingredient” of the Thames.

²³ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 346.

²⁴ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 346.

²⁵ Luke 15:3-7 *New American Bible*. New York City: HarperCollins, 2010.

women” in England are to blame for their domestic servants falling out of good graces because of the “little care and interest they show in their servants.”²⁶ She explains that the way these women live are a bad example to their servants, suggesting they value “extravagance in dress,” “wastefulness of living,” and a “general atmosphere of indulgence.”²⁷ She argues that if mistresses act this way, their servants will chase after the same things. Since they do not have the money to live the same way, they will fall into a life of vice chasing materialistic goods and an extravagant lifestyle. She explains, “the general atmosphere of indulgence extends from the drawing-room to the servants’ hall,” emphasizing the influence that middle-class women have over their servants.²⁸ Jeune tells middle-class women that they need to act as examples for the moral life their servants should lead.

Jeune also advises middle-class women to closely look after their servants, monitoring their activities and who they spend time with to ensure that they are living moral lives. She says, “I do maintain that we stand grievously condemned for not paying more care and attention to their welfare.”²⁹ She urges for these women to be treated almost as family – “every mistress ought to consider it as much a duty as she owes to her husband or children to look after her servants.”³⁰ Jeune is deeply humanizing these girls, suggesting they be placed on the same level of importance as one’s family, certainly an unusual rhetoric for the time. Further, she admonishes the long, cruel hours they are forced to work,

If the women of England would look on their servants as something more than machines, would realise that they are women like themselves, subject to the same weaknesses of temper and disposition, sometimes wanting rest and sympathy like themselves, and, remembering this, would try to act up to it, we should have fewer miserable broken-down women than we have, and a great deal less suffering.³¹

²⁶ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 348.

²⁷ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 348.

²⁸ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 348.

²⁹ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 347.

³⁰ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 348-349.

³¹ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 349.

Here, she directly calls out that these working-class girls are not thought of as human, but simple machines to help the upper classes run their household. This excerpt is perhaps the sharpest writing in the essay, criticizing expectations for domestic servants directly without euphemism or toned down language. This suggests that this dismissal of the humanity of these girls is the issue Jeune feels most frustrated with. She feels as though privileged women are mistreating their servants, unable to see or treat them as human, and then act outraged and disgusted when they fall into more illicit ways of making a living. Jeune believes that middle-class women who employ working-class girls are in a position to “save the innocents,” catching girls before they fall into a life of vice.

Though Jeune places a great amount of responsibility on women in the middle class, specifically, to prevent women from falling into prostitution, she vehemently defends the upper class in her essay. In response to claims that London’s tendency towards vice starts with the upper class, she says, “I give it an emphatic denial.”³² Calling back to her earlier claim that vice is inevitable, she suggests that a fallen fate is simply what happens when a child is forgotten or neglected, not through the fault of the upper class. She also explains that it is a popular assumption that women are ruined by men of the upper classes, but she says that in her interactions with so-called fallen women, “I can count on my fingers the number that even said they were ruined by ‘gentlemen.’”³³ Throughout this essay, she remains critical of working-class men who abandon women they impregnate, but completely denies upper class gentlemen wrongdoing in furthering a culture of vice and sexuality in the city. Though she preaches middle-class responsibility for these women, she claims that girls falling from virtue is not as

³² Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 346.

³³ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 345.

much of a problem in larger households, since they normally have an older head housekeeper.

She says,

The care and supervision there is generally excellent, and it is rare to find fallen girls among servants who take situations only in houses of the highest class; and I think this fact is worth mentioning at this moment, when such terrible accusations are being brought against the upper class in this country.³⁴

Mary Jeune is part of this social class that she is so vehemently defending. She is quick to place blame on middle-class women, working-class men, and the fallen women themselves, but is unable to place the same critical lens onto herself and her peers. This inability to criticize the upper class, especially the men, may be because she is unwilling to criticize her peers, or possibly because she is unable to. Her power as a member of the upper class in England is still limited because she is a woman existing in a highly patriarchal society. She might feel as though publicly criticizing upper class men in the same way she does to middle-class women and working-class men may be pushing the limits of her freedom.

Jeune speaks out several times over the course of the essay about the inequity of punishing women for actions that men do not face the consequences of. She makes a reference to the Contagious Diseases Act, lamenting its tendency to punish only the women involved in acts that involve two parties. Though she does believe that state-sactioned consequences are necessary to curb prostitution and illegitimate births, she calls for punishment for both men and women. She criticizes the hypocrisy in only punishing one end of cycle, saying “the partner of her guilt must not be forgotten. She alone often bears the consequences; the shame and suffering are hers; the man escapes altogether.”³⁵ Referring here to illegitimate pregnancies, she says that men escaping unscathed is “an immunity from punishment [that] is monstrously unjust.”³⁶ She

³⁴ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 348.

³⁵ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 352.

³⁶ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 352.

says that once a woman falls pregnant out of marriage, “the man is never heard of” again.³⁷

Because of her previous emphatic defense of upper class men in their involvement in the culture of vice in London, it can be inferred that she is largely referring to working-class men in these passages. In criticizing the injustice of the Acts, Jeune joins the ranks of privileged women who were fierce opposition advocates against the regulatory crackdown on only the women involved in the prostitution of East London.

In addition to prompting middle-class women to action, Jeune feels as though government intervention and regulation are imperative in solving the issues present in the East End. In this essay, she argues that most of the men and women engaging in lives of sin started out as illegitimate or abandoned children. She suggests a “compulsory registration of all illegitimate births” so the city knows exactly how many children it must provide services to.³⁸ She acknowledges that for the previous years, the general population of London has closed their eyes and ears to the issues facing impoverished children. “The time,” she says, “for closing our eyes has passed, and we are bound now to face the matter bravely, and to admit that we owe a duty as a community to these children, by recognising their existence and claims to our protection.”³⁹ She suggests that not only the government owes charity to these children, but that the greater community also must care for these children. The poverty, disease, and destitution among the working class has reached a point that Jeune feels it is impossible and immoral to ignore. She feels as though it is now a community matter – “were the evil of less magnitude, I would gladly leave it in a great measure to be dealt with by private benevolence; but it has long since assumed proportions which make that out of the question.”⁴⁰ Though she encourages

³⁷ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 350.

³⁸ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 347.

³⁹ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 351.

⁴⁰ Jeune, “Saving the Innocents,” 356.

private charity, she acknowledges that it can only do so much; broader societal changes are needed to adequately address the issues she outlines in her essay.

Many of Jeune's ideas in this essay are fairly radical for the time. She advocates for illegitimate and abandoned children, directly criticizes privileged women overworking their domestic servants, and insists on a community culture of charity to pull the masses out of what she sees as a life of vice. Though she is highly critical of working-class men and middle-class women, urging them to do more to promote a culture of morality in London, she absolves the upper class, especially upper-class men, of guilt or responsibility related to the issue of vice.⁴¹ She could have avoided a direct confrontation with the upper class because she was unwilling to apply a critical lens to her own actions, but it could also be argued that even in her position as a powerful, wealthy woman, her ability to criticize English society was still limited. Ultimately, she might have been unable to criticize the men of the upper class because she was a woman and, though women experienced far more freedom in Victorian England than they had previously, it was still a patriarchal society and her freedom had limits.

Jeune's essay "Saving the Innocents" offers interesting insight into one perspective of the groups of middle- and upper-class women who involved themselves in East End philanthropic endeavors. The kind of widespread advocacy against the Acts that these ranks of women carried out was highly unusual at the time. The ability to advocate, publish writing, and leave their homes to physically interact with the impoverished of the East End was a new phenomenon. The urban metropolis by nature offered women far more freedom: to shop, to exist in public spaces, and to do philanthropic acts. Further, the modern metropolis exacerbated poverty in the working class. The poor of East London lived practically on top of each other, horribly underpaid and unable to afford more space in nicer parts of the city. Because the city accommodated and

⁴¹ Jeune, "Saving the Innocents."

encouraged residency of varying social classes, the wealthiest parts of the city and the poorest parts were not far from each other. This is another factor in the middle-class philanthropy craze of the late Victorian period. The upper classes were forced to acknowledge the crime, poverty, and destitution of the working class because they lived so close together. The heterogeneity of the modern city meant that varying social classes were interacting with each other far more frequently and regularly than ever before, making the issues of the working class essentially impossible to ignore. Louis Wirth, in his attempt to find a sociological definition of urban, says that the modern city “has brought together people from the ends of the Earth because they are different and thus useful to one another, rather than because they are homogenous and like-minded.”⁴² The middle-class philanthropy in this era of London is a prime example of heterogeneity being a positive force in the modern city. Jeune’s essay allows us to understand the middle-class perspective on the injustices facing their neighbors. She was unafraid to call out her community and government, urging them to quit turning a blind eye to the destitution and sin at their doorstep.

⁴² Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 44, no. 1 (1938), 10.

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