

The Covent Garden Ladies

Published in *Factotum* 1989

This is an early draft and for the full and final edition, see *Factotum* 30, pp. 10-11

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THE COVENT GARDEN LADIES

The long arm of ESTC does not yet seem to have reached every corner of the British Library. The notorious 'Private Case' has several 'sensitive' eighteenth century items which do not appear to have been recorded. An interesting example recently came to light in the present author's search for anything which might be described as a London directory.

I was aware that an accelerating eighteenth century hunger for information of all kinds had stimulated a flourishing trade in name lists and other varieties of directories,¹ but nothing had led me to expect the extraordinary publishing enterprise of Mr. H. Ranger. The British Library has his *Harris's list of Covent Garden ladies, or man of pleasure's kalendar* for the years 1788, 1789, 1790 and 1793. In short this was a directory of the oldest profession in a district of central London which had a concentration of bagnios and massage parlours. For his 2/6d. the consumer was treated to a 146 page description of the attractions and accomplishments of 75 'ladies'.

The author of the 1788 edition could not resist a florid geographical prologue to his work:

"The parterre of Venus was never more elegantly filled, never did the loves and graces shine with more splendor than at present; Marybone, the new grand paradise of love, and Covent Garden, her elder born, beam with uncommon ardor; nor is our antient Drury unfrequented; no sooner do the stars above shed their benign influence, but our

more attracting ones below bespangle every walk, and make a heaven on earth; Bagnigge, St. George's Spa, with all their sister shops, deal out each night their choicest gifts of love; nor will the sons of pleasure be disappointed should they extend their travels still further east, and visit the purlieus of Whitechapel. The Royalty is overfull, and Wapping, Shadwell, and the neighbouring fields lend their lovely train to glad each night; these then shall be our walk; from these gay spots of pleasure shall we call love's purest sweets, and without thorn the rose.

By thus extending our researches we shall be able to suit every constitution, and every pocket, every whim and fancy that the most extravagant sensualist can desire. Here may they learn to shun the dreadful quicksands of pain and mortification, and land safe on the terra firma of delight and love.'

The 1788 edition was not the first compiled. According to 'Rhodon' Jack Harris produced a manuscript in the 1740s, and printed editions appeared in the 1760s.²

Each prostitute is listed. For instance Miss L-st-r of no. 6, Union Street. Oxford Road, who 'now arrived at the tempting age of nineteen, her imagination is filled with every luscious idea, refined sensibility ... her form is majestic, tall and elegant ... Add to all this, she sings very well, is a very chearful companion, and has been in life nine months'. At the start of her career this woman was able to charge three guineas per assignation, but the rate of another listed, aged forty, had dwindled to five shillings.

This book is by turns hilarious and pornographic, although it is not difficult, reading between the lines, to imagine the pathos in the situation of these girls, many of whom would have been exploited rural migrants. Since each edition seems to list different names and addresses, it should be possible to reconstruct the geography of vice in late eighteenth century west London, although one would hardly expect the sample to be reliable and representative! As a whole the book gives an insight into the twilight world of the times which, through its pages, briefly assumes the curiously ordered mantle of a new information age.

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Notes

1. P. J. Atkins, 'Eighteenth century London directories', *Factotum* 28 (1989), 12-15.
2. 'Rhodon', 'Harris's list of Covent Garden ladies', *Notes and queries* 166 (1934), 150-1.

Editor's note: Readers may like to know that, since Dr. Atkins wrote the above piece, the British Library's holdings of *Harris's list* have indeed been added to ESTC (t187027, t187063, t187065, t187066). Feeling sure that our readers would like to know more, we print below the results of further investigations into these directories.