

Marilynn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution In New York City, 1830-1870* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press 1993)

Until recently, prostitutes, like other marginalized women, did not have a place in historical work. Once historians recognized the prostitute as worthy of academic enquiry, however, she emerged from the pages of reformers' investigations and descriptions as a mere shadow, often more a composite of reformers' and historians' projections than an historical agent. But excavations of lower criminal court archives and the rereading of contemporary social surveys have offered a corrective to this situation, and today we have a rather rich prostitution historiography. Marilynn Wood Hill's book on New York City prostitutes in the last century makes a sound contribution to the literature by giving voice to women who, for a variety of reasons, sold sex for money.

Using an array of primary sources, Marilynn Wood Hill reveals the intimate details of prostitutes' lives in antebellum New York City. By using tax and court records, brothel guidebooks and the personal correspondence of prostitutes, Hill gives us an opportunity to see how prostitution functioned in New York City, and to view the lifestyles of women who chose this economic option.

The book is divided into three parts: "Nineteenth-Century Prostitution, Profiles and Problems;" "The Public World of the Prostitute;" and "The Private World of the Prostitute." The first section of the book retells a familiar story of urban life, women's economic choices, and the practice of prostitution. Hill concludes that women turned to

prostitution for any number of reasons, mostly to do with economic need and a desire to be independent (64) and to exercise sexual freedom. (103) Hill uses specific women to illustrate her point about downtrodden yet wise women who decided not to starve, but to control their working lives through prostitution. In the era before the male pimp, prostitutes "appear to have been brokers of their own sexual goods in an open marketplace." (194) In the second section, she delves into the relationship between the public world and prostitutes. Prostitutes were well aware of their legal and political rights, taking to court men who abused them and working with municipal agencies "to further their own interests." (173) Hill also locates prostitution in the social geography of the city. In the third section, the intimate side of the prostitute's life and her relationships with lovers and family members are explored.

Hill argues that "prostitutes need to be viewed in terms of the variety of possibilities and responses their profession allowed, as beings who engaged in a full range of human interests and relations, beset by problems but also by opportunities related to both their profession and their status as women." (321) What frames the book is the assertion that, by focusing on prostitutes' lives, we can rescue them from the reformers' discourse and elevate them to historical agents who shaped their own destinies.

What stands out in the book are the women at the top of the prostitution hierarchy. One of these women was Helen Jewitt, who was brutally murdered in 1836. Reformers of the day saw her life, and subsequent death, in moralistic terms, a result of the ravages of urban life and immoral living. What comes out at her sensational murder trial, however, is that Jewitt "appeared to have led an

attractive and independent life.” (11) Hill sets out to take on the disparity between the tales of Jewitt’s life as a prostitute and the “reality” of life for a woman in New York City. We are presented with the charmed lifestyle of a single working woman in antebellum New York City: earning as much as \$50-\$100 per week, Jewitt was able to “attend the theatre, dress elegantly, make generous gifts to her friends, and even lend money on occasion.” (13)

Prostitution historiography has come a long way from the days of adopting reformers’ discourse depicting the sex trade workers as “poor unfortunates” and victims, or sexual predators. But here I think that the desire to champion these women’s lives has been pushed a little far. Certainly Hill is not the first to attribute agency to prostitutes. What troubles me, though, is that Hill seems to invoke a female version of the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches myth. An example of this romanticization is illustrated in the section “Achieving the Dream” (91) in which we learn about successful prostitutes who earned thousands of dollars each year and served as models for other women. Her focus on such “success stories” and her cursory treatment of the majority is most likely the result of emphasizing the fabulous sources concerning the lives of the rich and infamous. I do not wish to give the impression that this is yet another version of the insidious 1990s film “Pretty Woman” in which prostitution is portrayed in an inspiring week of glamour, sex, and shopping. But, like the film, this book emphasizes the potential of prostitution and ignores the tragic conditions of most prostitutes. The result is, at best, that the lives of the prostitutes on the street, at work, in relationships with lovers and friends, gain centre stage. At worst, the

book romanticizes prostitution and the system that produced and encouraged commercialized and criminalized sex. That prostitution did offer a small number of women opportunity and independence is a point well-taken. However, this point needs to be balanced with more in-depth work on the “ordinary” prostitute.

Also, the sections on the private world of the prostitute are an important avenue of discovery, yet connections to families and wages are not explored. Luise White’s work on prostitution in colonial Nairobi has made the case for linking the history of prostitution to the history of work and family in a broader way.

These criticisms are not to say that I found *Their Sisters’ Keepers* a bad read. Hill engages her subjects, tells their fascinating stories, and with the marvelous illustrations, this is a richly-textured work. But it should be read in conjunction with Timothy Gilfoyle’s *City of Eros* and Christine Stansell’s seminal *City of Women*, on New York in the same period.

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Dawn H. Currie and Valerie Raoul (eds.), *Anatomy of Gender: Women’s Struggle for the Body* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press 1993).

Anatomy of Gender is a diverse, informative collection of feminist writings that document the historical, masculinist control of the female body, while suggesting and advancing emancipatory alternatives. The editors have selected the essays according to the transforma-