



**“The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: An incursion into Sexuality, Power and Law”. Review of: Stead, W.T. (2007). *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*. Edited, and with Annotations and an Introductory Essay by Antony E. Simpson. Malaysia: The True Bill Press.**

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W.T. Stead, has, indeed, acquired a salient importance for understanding and assessing 19<sup>th</sup> century England history of law and sexuality relationships. The publication of the complete series of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, surely will help scholars, researches and persons interested in the legal history of sexuality to address such an interesting and always heated issue: the meaning of sexual desire and its relationships with legal policy.

W.T. Stead work is worth to mention not only for having developed the journalist technique of the *interview* and for creating news instead of simply reporting a social, economic or political event; also his work is famous for advancing the design of legal policy directed to the protection of young females from sexual exploitation. In 1885, Stead -influenced by the campaigns of Josephine Butler denouncing the existence of *white slavery trade*- gets himself into a sort of crusade against child prostitution and published a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Under the title *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, Stead made public the findings of his explorations into the underground world of young women sexual exploitation, showing that actually it was possible in late 19<sup>th</sup> Victorian England to “purchase” a young virgin women to satisfy personal desires. In order to demonstrate the truth of his revelations and findings, Stead made the arrangements and “bought” a thirteen years old, Eliza Armstrong, daughter of a chimney sweep, something that he actually was able to do. It is well known that, as a consequence of the “purchasing”, Stead was imprisoned for three months in Coldbath Fields and Holloway Prisons. Stead unveiled the hidden abode of sexuality production, as well as the market hinging on sexual desires satisfaction in Victorian England. This volume reprints for the first time -since its original publication- the full text of the Secret Commission’s report.

*The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, a title that evokes the Greek myth of the Minotaur’s virgins tribute, constitutes one of the finest pieces of first hand observation of England underground life and Victorian representations of sexuality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, when reading the text, one should bear in mind Stead’s personal purposes and practical objectives such as changing a legal statute and rise the age of

legal sexual consent. The reliability of the text is something that has not necessary to go against its value as a piece of personal description, a tale of one's incursion into the urban underground sexual life. However it is not usually regarded as a conventional literature piece, the reader may approach the text from that perspective also: the descriptions Stead presents of the hidden life of Brothels, the social profile of its usual costumers, the functioning of the virgin's market, the managing of sexual desire and the social meaning attached to age and sexual consent, purity and sexuality, all depicted by Stead's vision and writing style, make the *Maiden Tribute* a most interesting text from the literature point of view. Sexuality -and its relationships with horror, desire, subjectivity and power- was a most writing issue in 19<sup>th</sup> century England: from Victorian classic *My Secret Life*, passing through *Dorian Gray's Portrait*, to *Dracula* and *Jack The Ripper* tale, a complete set of writings around sexuality, secret and power, was established. Stead states that the report of the Secret Commission "will be read to-day with a shuddering horror that will thrill throughout the world", the horror and secret side of desire and sexuality which stills remains with us. The *Maiden Tribute* is an important piece in the sexuality power puzzle of what Foucault calls *We the Victorians* discourse on desire. Perhaps, it is not as fine writing as Oscar Wilde or Stoker works - Stead's writing, as Editor Simpson acknowledges, "is sometimes careless, even sloppy, and frequently repetitive", but it has something important to tell us about the same compelling issue: the way we understand sexuality, desire and power and its secret but at the same time public and open manifestations .

But also those interesting in the field of legal history may find in the *Maiden Tribute* a pretty fine text to read. The volume is edited by Antony E. Simpson. Professor Simpson not only makes careful annotations and clarifications to the original text, identifying places and names, which helps the reader to understand and catch the meaning -both textual and contextual- of the *Maiden Tribute*, but also places it in a specific legal historical frame. The fine introductory essay focuses in the social and legal context in which was enacted *The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885* ("An Act to make Further Provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the Suppression of Brothels, and Other Purposes"), a legal statute that, according to Simpson, is regarded as a piece of "British legislation most effectively designed to protect women, and particularly young girls, from sexual exploitation, and to penalise those profiting from prostitution as an organised business" (2007: 9). Precisely, the *Maiden Tribute* original publication was one of the factors influencing the final enactment of that legal act.

Simpson's introductory essay carefully describes the different legal efforts to govern sexuality, in the specific field of women sexual exploitation and prostitution, performed in 19<sup>th</sup> century England. He analyses the role of growing middle class morality and social burgeoning feminist movement on legislative efforts to protect women from exploitation. The second section of his essay contains a illustrative British landscape of the "law relating prostitution", showing how prostitution has been governed indirectly or, one may say, through diversion, because it "is not now, and has never been, a crime in Great Britain, although many of the activities associated with it clearly are" (2007: 11). Indirectly, prostitution was regulated in its relationships with public disorder, vagrancy and population protection from venereal disease infections. Simpson also shows that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the prostitute was generally regarded as "a victim to be pitted and helped, rather than a criminal to be scorned and punished" (*Ibid.*: 12), however the attitudes in public opinion and legal statutes were ambivalent. As it was believed that the act of prostitution itself "should be neither criminalised nor regulated

by the state” (*Ibid.*: 18), the legal efforts were directed towards those who perform organised and systematic profit from prostitution: the Brothel-Keepers.

All these considerations help Simpson to show the social circumstances, legal efforts, class mobilisation and public notions towards prostitution and sexuality, which surrounded the final enactment of the 1885 Act, strongly fuelled by the *Maiden Tribute*. Simpson also presents a critical assessment of the meaning of the *Secret Commission Report* and of Stead’s intentions and vision of sexuality. The way Stead represents Eliza as an innocent, powerless naive girl needed of protection, helps to reinforce the claim for raising the age of sexual consent, ignoring, at the same time, “the idea that prostitution may have been a viable way of life for girls whose other options were unpleasant lives in factories, agriculture, or domestic service” (Simpson 2007: 28). Simpson says that “Stead’s entire campaign was intended to achieve success through the deliberate stimulus of class resentment” (*Ibid.*: 28), as the figure of the Minotaur exploiting virgins was equated to that of the wealthy aristocracy represented by his “favorite upper-class lecher, the elderly doctor” (*Ibid.*: 31), who required up to 100 virgins a year for his own satisfaction.

These are some examples of Simpson’s compelling criticisms to the *Maiden Tribute* meaning and intentions that the reader will find in the text. Simpson concludes his essay with an analysis of the *Labouchère Amendment*, which helped to criminalise consensual homosexual activity for near eighty years in Britain. Under the *Labouchère Amendment* Oscar Wilde was prosecuted and imprisoned in Reading. *De Profundis*, the letter that Wilde wrote while he was in prison, shows the contradictions of Victorian sexuality and the unexpected outcomes of policing desire by penal means.