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Nina Kushner, *Erotic Exchanges: The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2013. xi + 295 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780-0-8014-5156-0; \$24.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-5017-0570-0.

Review by Alistaire Tallent, Colorado College.

Erotic Exchanges: The World of Elite Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century Paris recreates and astutely analyzes the social milieu—or demimonde—in which socially and financially elite men paid large sums of money for relatively long-term and theoretically exclusive sexual relationships with women. The ways and reasons some women entered this sexual marketplace, the people and contracts that arranged and defined their relationships, and the police that regulated and documented it all garner as much attention in this study as the mistresses themselves.

From the very start, the author clearly establishes what *Erotic Exchanges* is and is not attempting to do. This work is not a history of the discourses about mistresses, even though all the sources—police reports from inspectors and their spies and letters from madams to the police from 1747 to 1771, as well as contemporary commentaries on elite prostitution by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the memoirs of Casanova and Marmontel, and the gossip columns of Barbier and the *Mémoires secrets*—are in fact discourses about these kept women. Kushner delves deeper to synthesize and interpret these texts and produce a sociocultural history that reconstructs the demimonde—the sexual market, its rules and customs, and its participants—that is the true subject of this book.

Focusing on the case studies pieced together from these police records (rather than a statistical analysis of the data they contain) and placing the details she teases out of them into a thoroughly documented and nuanced historical context is an effective methodology for depicting the demimonde, even if deeper insights into the lived experiences of the women involved remain elusive. Nevertheless, we find a well-supported central argument that despite the violence and vulnerability inherent in being a kept mistress, this form of prostitution should be seen as a profession and a kind of work that granted these women some degree of agency and at least a “potential for financial success” (p. 3) at a time when alternate life paths—including the normative “marriage plot”—offered women equally little freedom of choice and even less control of their own sexuality.

The first chapter, “The Police and the Demimonde” explains the role of the Parisian police not only in documenting and furnishing the narratives of these women’s lives, but also in regulating and endorsing through limited tolerance the activities of the demimonde. Indeed, the police generally turned a blind eye to the illegal acts—and both prostitution and pimping were crimes in eighteenth-century France—as long as the participants avoided causing a public scandal and corrupting the daughters of respectable families or any children under twelve.

A good portion of this chapter tackles the thorny question of the *raison d’être* of these police reports. Why did the Parisian police keep these records and for whom? After discounting the three leading

theories (that the reports were used to extort money from the men involved or to force them to stop wasting family fortunes in this way, or finally, for the prurient reading pleasure of King Louis XV), Kushner proposes a less exciting, but all the more probable explanation. The records were merely to help the police stay abreast of what the Parisian elites were doing.

After an overview of the history and organization of the Parisian police, we find clarification of exactly what kind of prostitutes earned the focused attention of these police inspectors. The terms *dame entretenue* and *femme galante* (used interchangeably throughout the book with the English equivalents “mistress” and “kept woman”) denote women whose clients were members of the *demimonde*, who could command high prices, who were treated and behaved as professionals, and who had longer and (supposedly) exclusive relationships with their clients. Women who met these four criteria and the madams who brokered their relationships were the subjects of these police reports, which usually contained a backstory describing the woman’s “fall” into prostitution. These narratives are discussed in the next two chapters.

The police accounts of how these women came to be a part of the demimonde follow astonishingly formulaic narratives. Kushner identifies four types of backstories. There are the women who found themselves in Paris without family connections but with their virtue intact, forced into prostitution by necessity. A second type of story describes women who willingly sacrificed their sexual honor (i.e., virginity), but when abandoned by their seducer turned to prostitution. The inspectors saw any woman who left some other form of employment in order to become a kept woman as part of a third group, pleasure seekers, who were driven by libidinous impulses. These three versions of the narrative are discussed in chapter two, “Leaving Home,” while the fourth path, in which parents sold or forced their daughters into prostitution, forms the topic of chapter three, “Being Sold into the Demimonde.”

These narratives of descent are presented within a detailed context based on extensive historiographical references to scholarship on the history of women, domestic work, and marriage, among other topics. The result is a strong and salient critique of the “marriage plot” of the eighteenth century, in which a young working-class woman was expected to maintain her sexual honor while employed for nearly a decade to earn her dowry. Kushner persuasively demonstrates how the examples of the young women in the police reports expose the inflexibility in this normative script and its blindness to the multiple vulnerabilities facing young women, particularly in the urban setting of Paris.

This chapter in particular, however, evokes my only real critique of the book. There are no citations in *Erotic Exchanges* from the original French documents. All we have are the author’s summaries or translations with an endnote referencing the individual report cited. Perhaps as a scholar of French literature, I am more concerned with the exact wording of these historical documents than most historians would be. Certainly, in most instances it is the content and not the specific language of the police reports that matters. Still, when the topic of discussion is a narrative of the mistresses’ backstories, passages cited in French (in addition to English translations) would have been illuminating. How similar were the stories of each type? Did the inspectors use the same words and phrases to describe these various situations? What do their words reveal about the inspectors’ perceptions of individual kept women and of women in general? Including either parenthetical citations of the original French in the text or French quotations within the endnotes would address these questions in interesting ways, and most likely would only add further support to the author’s interpretations and conclusions. As it is, curious readers are left with the responsibility of locating those documents and searching the text to find untranslated passages.

In the next chapter, “Being Sold into the Demimonde,” the discussion of women’s entrée into prostitution continues with those cases in which parents sold their daughter’s virginity and later her sexuality. The central question for Kushner here is the ownership of a young woman’s sexuality. Discussing the sale of these women’s bodies as commodities establishes the discursive framework within

which the author will later (in chapters five and six) articulate her notion of sexual capital as a useful tool for measuring and describing a *dame entretenue's* desirability.

The next chapter, "Madams and Their Networks," looks at madams not as former or working prostitutes themselves, but as women who brokered patron-mistress relationships, and in so doing, developed and maintained connections with clients and providers. As Kushner explains, "madams were the hubs of overlapping networks of buyers and sellers of elite sexuality" (p. 99). These networks were not only representative of the sociability of the demimonde; they were also the very source of the madams' economic power. Even though a madam lost a significant source of income when one of her indebted, revenue-generating brothel pensioners left to be supported by a patron, they all ironically worked tirelessly to place their girls in such relationships. Kushner explains how the benefits of assuring the loyalty of a client, establishing a reliable contact to add to her network, and solidifying her reputation as a successful broker outweighed the costs of losing a pensioner. As Kushner points out, without the madams as intermediaries, the demimonde's networks would have come unglued, but without the networks the madams' earnings potential would have been stunted.

Chapter five, "Contracts and Elite Prostitution as Work," is in many ways the heart of this study. The contracts between patrons and mistresses, although not written or legally enforceable, were nonetheless an essential feature of this sexual market. These verbal agreements spelled out explicitly how much financial support a patron would provide his mistress in exchange for her services, reminding all that these were still transactions of prostitution. But the contracts between patrons and mistresses were also reminiscent of marriage contracts in that the specific sex acts and required duties of the woman were never articulated. The contracts, then, demonstrated the unique position of the *dames entretenues*—somewhere between the mercenary and the matrimonial. Their very existence also establishes these kept women as professionals receiving compensation for their work and not just the happy recipients of gifts from pleased lovers.

This chapter also develops more fully Kushner's concept of sexual capital as a way to express the practical benefits of a woman's desirability. The more desirable the woman (in the sense of the more demand for her among clients) the more she could charge, and the greater gifts she could expect to receive. A variety of elements combined to determine a woman's sexual capital: her beauty (both her face and body), her salary history including the gifts she had previously received, her sexual skills, and any artistic talent or experience she may have had in the theatre or opera. All of these qualities taken together at any given moment formed a kind of capital, which, as Kushner demonstrates, was easily transformed into economic capital (wealth and consumer goods) and social capital (heightened reputation within the demimonde.)

Chapter six, "Male Experiences of *Galanterie*," provides an exploration of why a man would choose this kind of expensive relationship rather than simply availing himself of the services of a streetwalker or brothel resident. The many examples provided reveal the heterogeneity of patron-mistress relationships, but several possible reasons nonetheless emerge. Maintaining a mistress was a visible sign of wealth and privilege, and if not always an indicator of sexual prowess, certainly always a sign of masculinity. Patrons also enjoyed enormous power over a kept woman, who lacked legal rights and was not protected by her own family the way many wives were. Finally, one must not discount the real possibility of genuine feelings on the part of the man towards a specific woman, with whom he could develop intimacy and at least the reliable pretense of reciprocated feelings.

Despite its title, "Sexual Capital and the Private Lives of Mistresses," the final chapter does not provide much information concerning the private daily lives of these women. Clearly, the police records have little to say about the interests and opinions of kept women. For instance, what did they do when they weren't working? Did they have hobbies? Pets? What were their preferences in books or plays? Did they ever express opinions about their clients or other women? Did they form meaningful friendships

with each other or with other women (or men)? Presumably, these are the kinds of questions the police reports do not answer.

The private lives of mistresses that Kushner does explore are their marriages before, during, and after being *entreteneues* and their relationships with *greluchons*, the boyfriends who enjoyed their sexual favors without having to pay. The author's analysis of these relationships again reveals ways in which kept women were able to exercise some level of agency in their lives. Particularly fascinating are the *greluchons*, who as men that the mistresses supported financially in exchange for sex—the direct inversion of the usual gender dynamics of elite prostitution—are proof of the special status of the *dames entreteneues*. These women could be patrons, too—with all the power and emotional and financial vulnerabilities that position implied. As Kushner reiterates in the conclusion, the elite mistresses of eighteenth-century Paris occupied a unique position as women who all at once sold sex like prostitutes, provided companionship like a wife, and presented the illusion (or reality) of love, like a lover.

Like all good scholarship, *Erotic Exchanges* inspires and paves the way for further inquiry. For instance, an anecdote at the end of chapter six raises questions about how other *demimondaines* viewed these patron-mistress relationships. Kushner describes a “reconciliation party” used to cement the reunion of a patron and his mistress and postulates that it may also have been a way for the little demimonde community to heal itself. One wonders what would need healing? Would the rupture of a patron-mistress relationship have been traumatic to other members of the demimonde? Why would that be that case? Was there social value placed on the longevity of these relationships?

In choosing context over content, that is, recreating the demimonde over a focus on the actual reports and the women in them, this book leaves some questions unanswered. Without direct access to the police records cited, it is hard to know how many of those questions could be explored with these archival sources. In the end, though, Kushner does just what she sets out to do: present a sociocultural history of this group of people over these years by reconstructing various aspects of their world. And she does this well.

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