William Acton and Medical Discourse in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain

Submitted by Madeleine Prudence Morgan
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Abstract
This thesis presents the life and work of the physician William Acton from his education and medical training in Paris up to the introduction of the Contagious Diseases Acts. This thesis aims to re-visit Acton’s two works on sexual function and sexual behaviour, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities. With Proposals for Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* and *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life Considered in Their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations* in order to understand Acton’s intellectual development up to the middle of his career.

The overarching theme of Acton’s work identifies the necessity of regulation on a public and private level of sexual dysfunction. Acton’s studies of prostitution and of sexual dysfunction in the male both conclude that the effective treatment of diseases such as syphilis and spermatorrhoea was not the intervention of medical curatives, but the regulation of the body. This thesis explores the development of Acton’s writing, from medical treatises on diseases to social scientific works on the causes and consequences of diseases and his appreciation of and interaction with contemporary ideas on nature and hereditary predisposition. This work highlights the similarities of his approach to the treatment of prostitution and sexual dysfunction and explores the need for a revision of Acton’s contribution to nineteenth century debates on sexuality.

## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Contents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One  
Acton Revisited  

Chapter Two  
Acton on Prostitution  

Chapter Three  
The Necessity of Regulation  

Chapter Four  
Regulation of Personal Behaviour  

Chapter Five  
Regulation of the Child  

Conclusion  

Bibliography