

**William Acton and Medical Discourse in Mid-Nineteenth Century
Britain**

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to the University of Exeter as a thesis
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, April 2011

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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.

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