Managing Stigma: Prostitutes and their Communities in the Southern Netherlands, 1750-1800

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This article examines the relationship between prostitutes and the communities in which they lived through the lens of stigma and stigma management. In the Southern Netherlands between 1750 and 1800, prostitutes were well aware of social tensions and negative sanctions that could result from their behaviour. To avoid conflict, they often concealed their trade in everyday interactions. If they were unable or unwilling to do so, families, neighbours, and authorities often felt the need to take action to safeguard the values of the social order—and their own reputations. For immediate support, prostitutes therefore often turned to each other.

Le présent article traite les relations entre les prostituées et les communautés dans lesquelles elles vivaient, sous l'angle de la stigmatisation et de la gestion du stigmate. Dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux entre 1750 et 1800, les prostituées étaient bien conscientes des tensions sociales et des sanctions négatives que pouvait susciter leur comportement. Pour éviter le conflit, elles cachaient souvent leur commerce dans leurs interactions quotidiennes. Si elles étaient incapables de le faire ou ne voulaient pas le faire, les familles, les voisins et les autorités ont souvent senti le besoin de prendre des mesures pour préserver les valeurs de l'ordre social ainsi que leur propre réputation. Pour obtenir une aide immédiate, les prostituées devaient donc souvent se tourner les unes vers les autres.

CATHARINA Van Laer was only 18 years old when, in 1785, her older sister Joanna filed a request to have her confined. Joanna wrote to Antwerp's aldermen about her sad situation: their father was all but blind and unable to control his youngest daughter Catharina, who "had for a long time been in the company of infamous persons and other scum" and was "openly serving as a whore and a bitch." For a while, she had stayed in Brussels and in Mechelen, but now she had returned to Antwerp and continued her "unruly life and public scandal." To

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prevent further excesses, "to the even greater scandal and heartfelt grief of the supplicant," she had to be locked away. The aldermen agreed and ordered for Catharina to be confined in a house of correction for the term of one year.[1]

After she was set free, however, Catharina had not changed her ways. She continued to walk the streets of Antwerp, but, despite her sister's claims, she did not only frequent "infamous persons" but also frequently socialized with, and was to some extent accepted by, women with more respectable jobs. She had a group of friends from her neighbourhood consisting of Anna van Dijck, Maria d'Haspé, and Maria Waeterschot, who were well aware that she was a prostitute. The Friday before Christmas in 1786, she told them about a gentleman who had offered her two crowns if she could set him up with a virgin. Van Dijck and d'Haspé "jokingly" said, "without meaning it," that for such money "they'd like to go out in the evenings, find someone and pose as virgins."[2]

Waeterschot, however, was not laughing. She seriously considered the offer as a means to improve her financial situation. She asked Van Laer if she could join her "on her tour." Van Laer refused, saying, "it was enough that she was a whore, she didn't want to bring someone else to it, for she already had such a bad name." If Waeterschot wanted to follow her, Van Laer would not stop her, "but take you with me, I won't." Waeterschot was persistent and followed Van Laer several times. Eventually, however, they were involved in a nasty incident with some sailors, which proved too much for Waeterschot. She told her sister that she had been raped, and her sister filed a formal complaint against Van Laer and the sailors. In the following inquest, Van Dijck and d'Haspé both denounced Van Laer as a dishonest woman and a public whore. Van Laer's brother-in-law and father filed a request to confine her again. She was sentenced to five years in a house of correction.[3]

The case of Catharina Van Laer reveals much about the tensions between prostitutes and their communities—their families, neighbours, friends, and colleagues. On the one hand, Van Laer wanted to stay integrated. She had contact with her father and her sister; she socialized with friends who were not prostitutes. On the other hand, she was not inclined to hide her prostitution and freely spoke about it. This frankness strained her relationships, as neither her family nor her friends wanted to be seen as people who condoned such behaviour. When it really mattered, they all distanced themselves from her in no unclear terms: Van Laer was a public whore; "from her childhood days," her brother-in-law had written, she had been "the sorrow of her family."

To make sense of the actions of Van Laer and her environment, the concepts of "stigma" and "stigma management," as proposed by the American sociologist

1 Cited in Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen? Collocatie in de 18de eeuw* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1990), p. 91.

2 "Al lachende," "sonder het selve te meijnen," "dat sij ook s'avonds wel eens souden willen […] uytgaen om d'een of d'ander te vinden ende hun voor maegden te doen passeren." Felix Archives Antwerp [hereafter FA] *Hogere Vierschaar* (V) 120 (Catharina van Laer 1787).

3 "Het genoeg sijnde dat sij eene hoere was, dat sij een ander daer niet wilde toe brengen, alsoo sij eenen quaden naem hadde", "wilt gij mij volgen, dat kont gij doen, maer mede nemen en doen ik niet." FA *V* 120 (Catharina van Laer 1787).

Erving Goffman, are useful. As was the case for many other prostitutes in the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands, Van Laer's integration in communities of family, neighbours, and friends was relative and required that she publicly pretend to be a respectable woman—in Goffman's terminology, that she "passed," even if she informed some people of her trade in private encounters. When she was no longer able to keep up appearances, people took their distance, to avoid the risk of being stigmatized themselves.

Stigma Management

The language of "stigma" and "stigma management" is popular among sociologists, social psychologists, and criminologists, but little-used by historians. The concept was launched in 1963, when Erving Goffman published *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. A stigma, Goffman defined, is a deeply discrediting attribute that is attached to a person in a specific situation. This "attribute" can be something that an individual has done, a physical or psychological characteristic, or membership of a particular race, class, or religion. People who carry this attribute, people who carry a stigma, are disqualified from full social acceptance. They are treated differently than other humans.[4]

Carrying stigma does not mean absolute rejection. Stigma occupies the space between full acceptance and full exclusion, straining social interactions. People have certain expectations about how others should behave, about who they should be. If they become aware that the other is, in fact, something else or behaves differently, they treat him or her differently. This act of discrimination does not need to be negative in intent: the physically disabled, for instance, are usually not intentionally "punished" for their stigma, but they are generally treated differently and, as a consequence, not fully accepted.[5]

Goffman's interest lies not so much in practices of stigmatization, however, as in the responses of people carrying stigma, in the practices of what he calls "stigma management." If their stigma is not known, the stigmatized have to decide whether to conceal or disclose their stigma in everyday encounters. In many circumstances, Goffman observes, the stigmatized "pass" and act as if they do not carry a stigma.[6] They often divide the world into two groups: a large group to whom they tell nothing, and a small group to whom they tell all and upon whom they rely. To be able to lead this "double life," they make use of a wide array of techniques of information control.[7] However, the stigmatized may come to feel that, if they respect themselves, they do not need to conceal their failing. They voluntarily disclose their stigma to the larger public. They must then cope with uneasy social situations.[8]

Even after more than 50 years, the concept and terminology of stigma management remain very popular: *Google Scholar* reports more than 15,000

4 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 9-19.
5 *Ibid.,* pp. 4-6.
6 *Ibid.,* p. 97.
7 *Ibid.,* pp. 92-123.
8 *Ibid.*, pp. 123-25.

citations of Goffman's *Stigma* in the last 10 years alone. Goffman is ubiquitous in disability studies, deviance studies, and queer studies, but not in history: while it is often accepted in historical studies that prostitutes were "stigmatized," what this meant and how people dealt with it are rarely studied.[9] Perhaps this gap should not surprise, as Goffman's theory is not historical in nature. However, it may offer an interesting way to look at the history of prostitution. While stigma and stigma management are not the only aspects to this history, Goffman offers a stimulating framework to interpret everyday interactions between prostitutes and their communities.

Much of the historiography on prostitution has characterized the relationship between prostitutes and their families or neighbours in terms of "acceptance" or "rejection."[10] Not only was the everyday reality often more ambiguous, but this perspective also ignores the impact of what prostitutes themselves did. The concepts of "stigma" and "stigma management" can help to shed light on these overlooked questions. The stigma on prostitution was nearly ubiquitous, but both prostitutes and those around them used a variety of techniques to allow interaction to take place, to manage conflicts, and to defuse tensions. Attending to these techniques allows us to qualify the existing historiographical debates and to focus attention on the agency of prostitutes and their environment.[11]

There is a problem, however, when historians want to study stigma in the past: unlike sociologists, we cannot interview our subjects or observe them in their everyday interactions. Here, I attend to the relationships of prostitutes with their communities in the Southern Netherlands (roughly the present-day Belgium) in the second half of the eighteenth century. To do so, we must rely on indirect sources. The richest sources to recover at least partially the views of prostitutes and their surroundings are criminal trial records. I selected all cases related to prostitution (so also cases against procurers and brothel keepers, or against pickpocketing prostitutes) for which substantial witness statements or interrogations of suspects have been preserved, between 1750 and 1795, the end of the Old Regime, in three cities: Brussels, the capital; Antwerp, the main port town; and Kortrijk, a smaller town near the French border. These records make up 59 cases: 41 from Brussels, where prostitution was most problematized; 10 from Antwerp; and 8 from Kortrijk. Due to the preponderance of cases from Brussels, the picture sketched here will be biased towards the situation in the capital.

These records contain much information on what prostitutes did and said, in court and in their everyday lives, but they are not unproblematic. Trial records do not contain a representative sample of prostitutes. Even if there are some

9 However, see another recent plea to approach historical difference through "stigma": Clyde Plumauzille and Mathilde Rossigneux-Méheust, "Le stigmate ou « La différence comme catégorie utile d'analyse historique »," *Hypothèses,* vol. 17, no. 1 (2014), pp. 215-228.

10 For example, as Marion Pluskota puts it, "close family could either try to put the 'immoral' woman in jail or, conversely, they could live on her earnings gained from prostitution." See Marion Pluskota, *Prostitution and Social Control in Eighteenth-Century Ports* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 34.

11 I think the language of stigma management can therefore work to operationalize a similar project as offered in Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1960* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 21.

exceptions, most of the cases concern women who failed to keep up appearances or who came into conflict with their neighbours or their families. Moreover, much of what is said can be seen as manoeuvres to avoid (or on the part of some witnesses, ensure) punishment. Still, although these shortcomings may limit the scope of my argument, I believe it is a useful enterprise at least to try to study everyday interactions of prostitutes in these sources.

Stigmatizing Prostitution in the Southern Netherlands

Prostitutes were stigmatized by the government, the Church, neighbours, and family in that these environments excluded prostitutes from total acceptance and taught women that something was wrong with prostitution. Central to the stigma on prostitution was the patriarchal idea that a woman was to obey her father or her husband. It was unacceptable for anyone except a woman's husband to have sex with her, and it was unacceptable for a woman to have sex with anyone except her husband.[12] If it was to some extent tolerated that an unmarried woman might sleep with a man while they were courting, especially if they intended to marry, it was considered far worse if she had sex with multiple men and, especially, if she received money in return. As in other countries, in the eighteenth century, the previously rather vague distinction between women who had sex outside marriage and women who received money for doing so became sharper.[13]

Perhaps the most visible stigmatization of prostitution came from the government. While prostitution itself was not a criminal offence, some prostitutes were apprehended under the guise of disturbing public order or causing scandal. Local authorities only did so very inconsistently. In Brussels, the aldermen and police officers took many initiatives to contain prostitution: between 1779 and 1795, 451 suspected prostitutes were arrested, most of them during occasional raids.[14] This municipal policy had an important impact on prostitutes' everyday lives, as arrests were most stigmatizing affairs: prostitutes were publicly dragged to prison, reminding all bystanders of their shameful behaviour. The number of arrests was much lower in other cities and towns: in most cases, prostitutes were left alone, unless there had been specific complaints from neighbours or clergymen or a zealous public prosecutor felt the necessity to take action. In Antwerp, for instance, as far as we know, only 22 official arrests were made between 1765 and 1795.[15] The Antwerp aldermen did conduct raids, but apparently these did not result in many official arrests.[16]

Punishments for prostitution were generally less public and varied from simple expulsions to confinements of varying length. Longer confinements and

12 Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 27-28.

13 Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1996), pp. 27-34.

14 J. F. Eugene, "La prostitution à Bruxelles sous le Régime Autrichien (1715-1795)" (Master's thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1998), p. 70.

15 Lieve Van Damme, "Misdadigheid te Antwerpen, 1765-1794" (Master's thesis, UGent, 1973), p. 114.

16 As is demonstrated by the case against Pierre Dieles, who was suspected of warning prostitutes when a raid was imminent: *V* 106 (Pierre Dieles 1767).

public whippings were generally only pronounced when prostitutes were also suspected of another offence, usually theft. In the early eighteenth century, some more extreme public shaming punishments for prostitutes were proposed, but shelved for fear of scandal.[17] Starting in 1778, prostitutes in the province of Brabant—mainly in Antwerp and Brussels—were sometimes confined for a longer term in the newly erected house of correction in Vilvoorde.[18] A similar house of correction had been built in Ghent in 1773, housing prostitutes and other deviants from Flanders.[19] If they were suspected of another offence, prostitutes had a hard time to establish their innocence. After all, as the public prosecutor in Kortrijk argued in a case in 1750, they had "already for some years violated the laws of God."[20]

The stigma on prostitution was indeed also propagated by the Church. In Sunday school and in mass, priests preached the virtues of chastity and the illicitness of sex outside marriage.[21] In the confessional, they condemned unlawful sexuality.[22] Sometimes, such as in Antwerp in 1740, priests even visited prostitutes in their homes, admonishing them "both with sweetness and with severity and threats."[23] Even if people were not paying attention to their priests, all women were made aware of the fact that their sexual behaviour would be under close scrutiny in their local neighbourhood: the most common insult for a woman was that she was a "whore," and vicious gossip about women who supposedly did not conform to the reigning sexual norms flourished.[24] Women were made well aware that they were taking a serious risk when they engaged in prostitution.

Awareness of the stigma on prostitution affected families, friends, and neighbours in their behaviour towards prostitutes. They may have shared the idea that that prostitution was immoral, but, even if they did not, or only to some extent, they were often inclined to distance themselves from prostitutes, for their own reputations were also at stake.[25] This phenomenon is due to what Goffman called "courtesy stigma" or what a recent scholar has called "transferred stigma," "the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individuals to his close connections."[26] Parents, husbands, or close neighbours who did not act against

17 Eugene, "La prostitution à Bruxelles," pp. 13-14.

18 Armand Deroisy, "La répression du vagabondage, de la mendicité et de la prostitution dans les Pays-Bas Autrichiens durant la seconde moitié du XVIII^{e} siècle" (PhD dissertation, 1965), p. 413.

19 Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, pp. 203-210.

20 "Oock sedert eenige jaeren de strenge weth godts heeft overtreden." State Archives in Kortrijk [hereafter RAK] *Old Town Archives [hereafter OSAK]* 14202.

21 Hans Storme, *Die trouwen wilt voorsichtelijck: predikanten en moralisten over de voorbereiding op het huwelijk in de Vlaamse bisdommen (17e-18e eeuw)* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers Leuven, 1992), p. 145.

22 Fernanda Alfieri, "Urge without Desire? Confession Manuals, Moral Casuistry, and the Features of Concupiscentia between the Fifteenth and Eighteenth Centuries" in Kate Fisher and Sarah Toulalan, eds., *Bodies, Sex and Desire from the Renaissance to the Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 151-167.

23 "soo met soetigheijt als met straffigheijt en drijgementen." FA *V* 1840. In Kortrijk in 1755, however, the local priest wrote that he had not dared to: RAK *OSAK* 14136.

24 Elwin Hofman, "An Obligation of Conscience. Gossip as Social Control in an Eighteenth-Century Flemish Town," *European Review of History,* vol. 21, no. 5 (2014), pp. 653-670, doi:10.1080/13507486.2014.949631.

25 Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, pp. 90-91.

26 Goffman, *Stigma*, p. 43; Stacey Hannem, "The Mark of Association. Transferred Stigma and the Families

prostitutes came to be known as either morally lax or powerless.[27] People naturally wanted to avoid this transferred stigma and loss of reputation. To do so, they had to erase all doubts that they were tolerating prostitutes in their midst.

Neighbours, for instance, sometimes collaborated to expel a prostitute from their neighbourhood, often by complaining to officials: in 1771, for instance, Marie Anne Peccau's neighbours in Brussels complained to her landlord that she was prostituting herself, upon which he immediately threw her out.[28] In 1783, inhabitants of the Rue des Fleurs in Brussels wrote to the governess to complain about prostitutes in their area, while in Kortrijk in 1755 neighbours of a brothel complained to their parish priest.[29] Sometimes neighbours acted more directly. In 1771, during a particularly noisy night, a group of neighbours got up and rang at the door of a brothel, shouting that "it was not permitted to keep such a brothel in the street."[30] In other cases, neighbours were less aggressive. When Marie Tilsman discovered that her neighbours were street prostitutes in 1768, she talked to them about it. They replied that "they had to go out, neither having bread nor dough." Tilsman was struck by their misery, gave them some bread, and warned them not to walk the streets anymore. Her reaction was compassionate, but not less stigmatizing.[31]

Families were more directly held responsible for the behaviour of their relatives. When some parents learned that their daughter was working in a brothel, they went to get her. In 1778, for instance, Jean Baptiste Delwaerd went to the brothel where his daughter supposedly stayed and tried to get her to come home.[32] In a curious turn of events, Jacques Blo—himself convicted for keeping a brothel—did something similar, coming to fetch his daughter, who stayed in another brothel in 1775, and "making a lot of noise" in front of the establishment in order to "get his daughter back." While Blo's background makes it questionable whether he was indeed concerned for his daughter's modesty (a few years earlier, his daughter had been found prostituting herself in his own establishment), this motivation was how several witnesses interpreted the event.[33]

These parents (supposedly) wanted to get their daughters back to get them under control. It is never mentioned in the trial records how exactly they exerted this control. What is clear is what they did if they failed. In supplications for confinements, parents (or less frequently husbands) often mentioned the steps they had taken to try to correct a prostitute: they had warned their daughter, punished her, or asked for the help of neighbours or of a local priest. Nothing had mattered.

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of Male Prisoners" in Stacey Hannem and Chris Bruckert, eds., *Stigma Revisited: Implications of the Mark* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2012), p. 115.

27 Maja Mechant, "Dishonest and Unruly Daughters. The Combined Efforts of Families and Courts in Handling Prostitution in Eighteenth Century Bruges," *Popolazione E Storia*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2013), pp. 145-146.

28 SAB *AH Proces* 9631.

29 SAB *AH Lias* 711; RAK *OSAK* 14136.

30 "Niet gepermitteert te sijn van soo een bordeel inde straet te hebben." SAB *AH Proces* 4300.

31 "Quelles n'avoient point de pain a manger, et quelles alloient sortir pour tacher avoir un morceau." SAB *AH Proces* 5027.

32 SAB *AH Proces* 4089.

33 SAB *AH Proces* 5656.

Some parents, unable to cope with their daughter's behaviour, sent her away. When Marie Anne Peccau returned from Brussels to her parents in Namur, they had supposedly chased her away for her prostitution, saying that "she had brought herself to perdition and that she was to stay there."[34] Other parents filed a request to their town's aldermen to have their daughter confined, as had happened in the case of Catharina Van Laer, cited at the start of this article. Such requests were not only made by upper and middle social groups: in the course of the eighteenth century, more and more poor families requested that their "whoring" daughters be confined at the town's expense.[35] In many cases, the aldermen honoured these requests. While they could be made for all sorts of unruly behaviour, almost all of the requests concerning women referred to their sexual behaviour, thus reinforcing the stigma on prostitution.[36]

Of course, not all parents and not all neighbours took a stance against prostitutes. There were families who, like Jacques Blo, let their daughters prostitute themselves in their own brothels; some families survived on the profits of a prostitute. Little information is available about their circumstances, as such cases do not frequently show up in trial records. Similarly, many neighbours did not take action against prostitutes unless there was an incident. Sometimes they were even supportive. In Kortrijk in 1755, 15 neighbours of a brothel signed an official declaration that they recognized the *madame* and her daughters as "virtuous and honourable persons." However, upon an intervention by the parish priest, they almost all retracted this declaration and stated that they did not know the family well enough, while some then even testified that the house was a brothel.[37] This case shows that support for prostitutes and brothels was always precarious. The reality and ever-present possibility of discrimination by police, church, neighbours, and family confirmed the incomplete social acceptance of prostitutes.

Controlling Information

Despite their awareness of the stigma on prostitution, some girls did end up selling sex. Some were misled or forced to engage in sex for money, while others—like Maria Waeterschot—saw it as an opportunity to supplement their income. Entering a stigmatized part of the economy meant that women faced a choice. Should they tell everyone, or should they hide their behaviour from some or from all? Many women chose the latter option. In light of the possible negative reactions to their behaviour, they chose to try to pass as respectable women, or at least to be as discreet as possible.

Most prostitutes did not inform their neighbours of their trade. When neighbours complained about brothels or prostitutes, they almost always testified about hearsay, about noise, about what they had seen in the corner of a window or

34 "Qu'elle s'a mise dans sa perdition et qu'elle y doit rester." SAB *AH Proces* 9631.

35 Such recourse to the law to settle family disputes was not unusual in early modern Europe. See Julie Hardwick, *Family Business: Litigation and the Political Economies of Daily Life in Early Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

36 Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, pp. 89-91; Mechant, "Dishonest and Unruly Daughters."

37 "Deughsaeme ende eerelijcke persoonen." RAK *OSAK* 11286.

through a half-shut door.[38] Almost never had the women explicitly revealed their trade. When necessary, they made up cover stories. In 1791, Marie Plas noticed that Therese Van Meerbeeck, who lived in the same building, often went out at night. When asked, Van Meerbeeck told her that she "went to her lover at night." Plas testified that she "had never known that she was a girl of pleasure."[39] Probably Plas and other neighbours had been suspicious, but as long as prostitutes remained sufficiently discreet they took no action. The compassionate neighbour in 1767, for example, who gave her prostitute neighbours some bread and warned them not to walk the streets anymore, truly believed that they had obeyed her. She was wrong, it turned out, as they had only become more careful after the incident.[40] By passing as respectable women, prostitutes avoided conflicts with their neighbours.

The question is more ambiguous for family. In many cases, family was not mentioned: the prostitutes were not married, and their parents seemed absent. In Brussels, several women claimed that their parents were dead.[41] Other girls had travelled from other towns and had little contact with their families. These families seem generally to have been unaware of their daughters' prostitution: one girl equalled returning to her family with the end of her life as a prostitute.[42] For women whose families lived nearby, life in prostitution often meant breaking with them. Therese Van Meerbeeck told judges in 1791 that her parents also lived in Brussels, but that "she had left them a year ago and had then started prostituting herself."[43] If a woman did not break with her family, sometimes her family chased her upon learning her trade, as had supposedly happened to Maria Bielen and Marie Anne Peccau, or, as in the case of Catharina Van Laer, the family tried to have her confined.[44] Others continued to live with their parents, but hid their prostitution. Cecilia Goetjaer got into a heavy row with her mother in 1783 when the mother had gotten suspicious and wanted to impose a curfew on her daughter.[45]

In only three of the 59 cases studied parents explicitly allowed or even encouraged a daughter to prostitute herself. As noted above, however, it is likely that prostitutes who lived in agreement with their families simply appear in the legal archives less often. One case I did find was that of Jacques Blo, whose daughter served as a "woman of pleasure" in his establishment.[46] The other two cases were both found in the smaller town of Kortrijk, and both concern widows who were said to prostitute themselves together with their daughters.[47] In these cases, prostitutes remained more closely attached to their families, cooperating

38 E.g. RAK *OSAK* 7605, 11286, 14502; SAB *AH Proces* 4300.
39 "Seggende dat sij s'avonts bij haer lief ging," "noynt geweten en heeft dat sij een meysken van plaisier was." SAB *AH Proces* 10071.
40 SAB *AH Proces* 5027.
41 For example, prostitutes in SAB *AH Proces* 5027, 5656, 8128, 9874, 9972, 10122.
42 SAB *AH Proces* 2024.
43 "Haer ouders verlaeten te hebben nu een jaer ende haer geprostitueert te hebben alsnu over het jaer." SAB *AH Proces* 10071.
44 SAB *AH Proces* 7673, 9631.
45 RAK *OSAK* 14676/2 (Goetjaer 1783).
46 SAB *AH Proces* 4300.
47 RAK *OSAK* 7605, 14676/1 (Isabelle Casar 1790).

with them to gain money. In all other cases, parents were either absent, kept in the dark, or in disagreement with their daughter.

The techniques prostitutes used to control information were diverse. Their mobility—prostitutes often moved between brothels, cities, and sometimes even countries—made it easier to hide their trade from family members and friends. If prostitutes also did other work, which was the case for many out of material need, they could refer to these jobs to pass as respectable women: frequently, women who were arrested for soliciting claimed that they were not prostitutes at all, but survived as seamstresses, lace-workers, or servants. The same claims would work for neighbours and family.[48] Furthermore, taking a false name was a popular strategy, especially for prostitutes who had already been convicted. Jeanne Joseph Denis, for instance, used her mother's name for some time in Brussels after she had been exiled.[49] When Anna Maria de Jode was accused of prostitution and theft in 1778, she initially also used a false name. When recognized, she claimed to have done so "out of shame for her family."[50] By using another name, she not only avoided having her family learn about her behaviour, but she also avoided transferring stigma to her family, so that they would not have to take action against her.

If many prostitutes tried to "pass" in front of neighbours and family, if they tried to keep up appearances, they may have done so not only strategically to avoid sanctions or uneasy situations. Prostitutes cared about what others thought of them and had a sense of self-respect, like Catharina Van Laer when she refused to take Waeterschot with her, worrying about her friend's reputation. When prostitutes were, despite efforts to pass, arrested and their actions exposed, some were desperate. When Jeanne Lecomte was arrested in 1779, she tried to kill herself with a knife. Asked about her motivations, she told the magistrates it was "an act of desperation and to avoid the public shame of being taken to prison."[51]

Coping with Revelation

Maria Bielen was brought before criminal court for the first time in Brussels in 1775. She stood accused of prostitution and theft and hardly tried to deny it. According to her statement, she was born in the small town of Tienen in 1754. After her parents had died, she had come to Brussels in 1774, working as a day labourer and, when she was not able to find enough work, as a "woman of pleasure." She found it came easily, as she was, in the words of one brothel keeper, "a rather pretty thing."[52] She lived in the so-called "whore building" in Brussels, together with several other prostitutes. One night, she had gone "on her tour" with Marie Helders, a friend, although they had been "in rows and enmity" for several months until a few weeks previously. They met a stranger, who went with Helders into an alley while Bielen kept watch. After a quarter of an hour, Helders shouted that

48 For example, SAB *AH Proces* 9874; FA *V* 109 (Susanna van Uffelen 1773); and numerous examples in SAB *AH Register* 1143.
49 SAB *AH Proces* 9170. The incident dates from 1767.
50 "uijt schaemte voor haere familie." FA *V* 113 (Anna Maria de Jode 1778).
51 SAB *AH Register* 1143, 4-5.
52 "Gij sijt nog al een aerdig dink." FA *V* 112 (Het Vuijlhemde 1776).

people were coming, and they both ran away. They met a little later, and Helders told Bielen that she had stolen her client's watch. They sold it and split the profits. The client, however, filed a complaint, and the crime was traced back to Helders and Bielen. After a short hearing, judges ordered Bielen to leave the city, and she was led away with four shillings left to travel to her hometown.[53]

Two years later, Bielen was arrested in Brussels again. She was asked to explain her whereabouts and gave an extensive overview of her movements since her exile. She had come back to Brussels the very same day that she had been banished, to say goodbye to her "lover" (her words), a soldier who had supported her. Leaving him apparently fell hard. The day after, she had left for Mechelen, a town halfway between Brussels and Antwerp, where she had continued her prostitution. After four months, she had been arrested in Mechelen and banished from the city and the entire province of Brabant. She had gone back to her soldier in Brussels and carried on her prostitution. One night, she had been warned to leave, as the public prosecutor would otherwise have caught her. She had then gone to Antwerp, where she had been arrested in a brothel once again. Afterwards, she had gone back and forth between Mechelen, Antwerp, and Brussels, "in accordance with the prosecutions of the police of those places."[54]

The story of Maria Bielen is revealing of the ways prostitutes "coped" with stigma and managed situations in which people were aware of their trade. Her travels again show the importance of geographical mobility in their strategies. Bielen's history also indicates that, even when they passed for neighbours and family—or, as in this case, if they no longer had any family—prostitutes often revealed their stigma to some people. They needed support for their daily and nightly activities, and to this end they told certain others about their activities.

In the first place, they did so to other women who occasionally or more frequently engaged in prostitution. Many prostitutes attached great value to this "in-group" and formed strong connections to each other. Like Maria Bielen, they often lived together, away from family and other friends. In everyday life, prostitutes cooperated and supported each other, often walking the street in pairs, with one watching out for police or passers-by while the other was with a client.[55] In times of need, other prostitutes could also be of aid. In 1762, after Barbara Du Chesne was set free after spending some time in prison, "bereft of all her things and unable to live," she moved back and forth, living with different prostitutes and brothel keepers, who all provided her with shelter and food for a short time until she was able to gain her own living again.[56] In a similar vein, after Marie Anne Peccau was exiled from Brussels in 1772, she returned to the city the same day and lived with fellow prostitutes before settling with a pimp.[57]

While these women revealed to each other that they were prostitutes, they were not always keen on revealing other stigmatized activities. Many prostitutes

53 SAB *AH Proces* 10122.
54 "Volgens dat sij van de politie van die plaetsen vervolght wirdt." SAB *AH Proces* 7673.
55 For example, in SAB *AH Proces* 5027, 3519.
56 SAB *AH Proces* 8128.
57 SAB *AH Proces* 9631.

considered theft to be worse than simple prostitution. When prostitutes did steal, they usually hid the fact from their colleagues.[58] Older or experienced women who "seduced" young girls into prostitution were also regarded poorly: recall Van Laer, who, while not hiding that she was a prostitute, refused to take Waeterschot with her. Similarly, when a visitor to a brothel in Mechelen accused Bielen of seducing a young girl into prostitution, "reproaching her whether she wasn't ashamed of seducing such a young girl," Bielen got angry and scratched his face.[59]

Prostitutes also revealed their trade, of course, to their clients and brothel keepers, who became accomplices. Many prostitutes also confided in a long-term lover, often a soldier, as Bielen did with her lover. The dynamics of these relationships were often complicated. Anna Veul was in a relationship with Silvester Lauwens, a cannoneer in Brussels. However, their relationship was faltering, for, as another woman testified, "they had not had intercourse for more than eight days because they were in discord." Veul was saddened and, after she had robbed a Dutchman's wallet while "playing with him," she called Lauwens to say he had to come with her, for his godson was ill. On the way, she told him that "something funny had happened." A clergyman had followed her to have sex with her, but, when she told her name, he acted frightened, gave her a purse with money, and ran away: "So she suspects that the clergyman must have been family." They then both inspected the purse, and Lauwens took it with him; the day after, they went out together to buy all sorts of things. The Dutchman, however, in the meantime had gone to the city guards, and they found Veul and arrested her. She immediately confessed, and Lauwens told his side of the story. Veul was condemned to two years in a house of correction. It was probably the definitive end of her relationship with Lauwens.[60] Prostitutes did have and value long-term relationships; while their partners were aware of their prostitution, as with members of their in-group, prostitutes did not entirely come clean when they engaged in other illicit activities.

Some prostitutes told other poor women what they were doing. Prostitutes were, after all, in many respects similar to other women from lower social groups. They were recruited among the poor and did the same work before, after, and while they were prostitutes. As a consequence, some scholars have contended that they were as much an accepted part of the poor as any other group.[61] Prostitution was, so the argument goes, just one way of providing for themselves, not particularly different from other means to which the poor could resort.[62] For the Southern

58 Cf. Van de Pol, *Het Amsterdams hoerdom,* p. 85.

59 "Verweijtende ofte sij niet beschaemt en was van soo een jonck meysken mede te brengen om te verleyden." SAB *AH Proces* 7673.

60 "[A]erdigh gevaeren was,","uyt welck gedragh sij seijde te vermoeden dat dien geestelijcken van haere familie moeste wesen." SAB *AH Proces* 9928.

61 Tony Henderson, *Disorderly Women in Eighteenth-Century London: Prostitution and Control in the Metropolis 1730-1830* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 43-47; Faramerz Dabhoiwala, "The Pattern of Sexual Immorality in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century London" in Paul Griffiths and Mark S. R. Jenner, eds., *Londinopolis: Essays on the Cultural and Social History of Early Modern London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 100-101.

62 Tim Hitchcock, *Down and out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon and London, 2004), pp. 88-96.

Netherlands, at least, this seems a bit too optimistic. I have shown above that there were many incidents in which families and neighbours, in fact, reacted harshly, complaining, filing requests for confinement, or testifying against prostitutes. It seems that neighbours and families were most tolerant when prostitutes kept a low profile and when brothels were not too noisy—in short, when they tried to pass as respectable. Only when they remained discreet were most prostitutes tolerated. Even then, however, when there was an official investigation, neighbours or family often testified against prostitutes to save their own reputations. In these cases, private support went along with public denunciation.

Even if neighbours or friends were to some extent supportive, encounters with those who were aware that a woman was a prostitute were often uneasy. In many cases, prostitutes tried to defuse tension by rationalizing their situation, by referring to their poverty and misery. In Antwerp in 1792, Susanna Debruijn testified that a neighbour called Bellotje was a "public whore." She had reproached her to "refrain from this doomed trade," but the woman had said "that she had no other means to win her bread, for working did not yield enough."[63] In a reversal of this rationalization, Elisabeth van Heurck testified that Maria Waeterschot had come to her asking for help, moaning that, if Van Heurck did not help her, "she would have to go walk as a whore."[64]

When prostitutes were apprehended, either because they had not been discreet enough, or because they were in the wrong place at wrong time, many accepted their fate and confessed quickly. Of the 38 women in my sample who were explicitly asked if they were prostitutes, 31 confessed. Very frequently, they used the same rationalization techniques they used to their neighbours, referring to their great poverty and indicating that they only prostituted themselves "when they couldn't find other jobs."[65] They generally went along with the stigmatizing views of the authorities, professing shame and guilt about their work. The last time Maria Bielen was arrested, in Brussels in 1777, she indicated that she wanted to better her life: "given her young years, and that she has only prostituted herself for three years, she asks your honours to commute her sentence to a few years of confinement in the house of correction […], to be able to leave her dissolute life." She asked for a sentence that was heavier than she would otherwise receive: banishment, or in the worst but unlikely case a public whipping. Her wish was granted: judges condemned her to four years in the house of correction and she was not confronted with the law again.[66] Similarly, in 1782, Amerienne Gonzales said that "she had continued her libertine life to have bread" and that "she would happily learn another trade, for which she asks your lords to place her in the house of correction in Vilvorde."[67] Bielen, Gonzales, and others spontaneously asked

63 FA *V* 126 (Bellotje et al. 1972).

64 FA *V* 120 (Catharina van Laer et al. 1787).

65 SAB *AH Proces* 3241.

66 "Soo versogt sij van UE. in aendacht genomen haere jonghe jaeren ende haer maer alleneleyck geprostitueert te hebben omtrent de drij jaeren van haere straffe te comuteren in eenighe jaren van collocatie in het stadts deughtshuys […], om alsoo haer onbondigh leven te connen verlaeten." SAB *AH Proce*s 7673. The case of Anne Marie Rochet is similar: SAB *AH Register* 1143, p. 15.

67 "[A]voir continueé sa vie libertine pour avir du pain," "elle voudroit bien apprendre un autre metier, c'est

for a confinement in a house of correction, accepting at least in this situation the stigma on prostitution and hoping to "better" their lives.

Causing Scandal

Many scholars have argued that prostitutes were only arrested by the police or confined by request of their parents when they caused scandal.[68] In many of the cases studied, scandal was indeed mentioned as a crucial element in a prostitute's behaviour. But what was meant with the term "scandal"? In most cases, "scandalous life" was simply used as a synonym for a libertine life, for a life in prostitution, while a "scandalous house" referred to a brothel. Judges asked Catherine Bricteux in 1789 if she had not been banned for her "scandalous life," which only referred to her prostitution.[69] It was also suggested in other cases that prostitution was in itself scandalous. In 1754, a Kortrijk priest complained that the women in an inn "were causing great scandal by their unruly and indecent lives."[70] In 1790, the archbishop of Mechelen wrote a letter to the Brussels magistrates, complaining about moral corruption in the city, with an ever-increasing number of girls occupying entire streets, where they met with all sorts of persons, "to the great scandal of the neighbours."[71] As indicated above, Joanna Van Laer similarly mentioned in her request for confinement that her sister's prostitution caused public scandal. Simply by engaging in their business, prostitutes were causing scandal.

In many cases, then, the rhetoric of scandal seems to have been only a legal device. As prostitution itself was not a crime, it had to be established that the women were actually causing scandal. Equating prostitution with scandal did of course just that. In a few cases, however, a distinction was made between prostitution and scandal. In the trial against Jacques Blo and his wife, who were condemned for keeping a brothel in Brussels in 1772, judges specifically mentioned the frequent rows on the street as the main cause of scandal.[72] In this case, unlike the case of the inn in Kortrijk, disorders outside the house seem to have been crucial for the notion of scandal. The most explicit differentiation between prostitution and scandal was made in the interrogation of Amerienne Gonzales in Brussels in 1781. She was asked, "why not content to prostitute herself, she causes scandal in the streets day and night?" Gonzales answered "that she didn't walk the streets by day, and that if she caused scandal at night, it was only when she was drunk, which had happened only twice."[73]

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pourquoi elle supplie vos seigneuries de la vouloir faire mettre dans la maison provinciale a Vilvorde." SAB *AH Proces* 10243.

68 Lis and Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen*, pp. 90-91; Geneviève Hébert, "Les 'femmes de mauvaise vie' dans la communauté (Montpellier, 1713-1742)," *Histoire Sociale*, vol. 36 (2003), p. 511; Clyde Plumauzille, "« Scandale » au Palais-Royal," *Hypothèses,* vol. 17, no. 1 (2014), pp. 241-253.

69 SAB *AH Proces* 3241.

70 "Een groot schandael commen te geven ende te veroorsaecken door hun ongebonden ende onkuijs leven." RAK *OSAK* 7605, Letter from Cooreman to magistrates, 10/9/1754.

71 "Au grand scandal des voisins." SAB *AH Lias* 711: Letter of archbishop to magistrates, 8/11/1790.

72 SAB *AH Proces* 4300.

73 "Demandé a la detenue non conente de se prostituer a l'un et a l'autre pourquoi elle donne du scandal dans les rues tout de nuit que de jour," "Dit quelle ne court pas les rues du jour et si elle donne du scandal

Although the notion of scandal was elastic, it was crucial that the women involved had not been discreet. What neighbours or family members complained about when they were talking about scandal was that the women had not tried or had not been able to pass as normal women. They had very publicly displayed their activities. To avoid the stigma of prostitution being transferred to them, neighbours, family members, and friends had to assert their distance.

While most women causing scandal did so unwillingly—like Amerienne Gonzales when she was drunk, for instance—some went further, especially if they thought their cause was lost. Let us return to Marie Anne Peccau. She was prosecuted for prostitution in Brussels in 1773, which was nothing new—she had already been convicted numerous times. This time, however, she also faced charges of petty theft, which she vehemently denied. After a summary trial, she was sentenced to a public whipping and exile. While on the scaffold, she raised her skirt above her knees and cried out that "the lords magistrates are all pimps," "stupid pricks of pimps." "I'm not a thief," she further exclaimed, "I'm nothing but a whore!"[74] While resisting the accusation of theft, she at the same time questioned the authority of the judges and suggested that prostitution was not that bad. Causing scandal offered prostitutes an opportunity to defy their stigmatizers and resist the stigma on prostitution.[75]

Conclusion

To understand the relationship between prostitutes and their communities, I have argued, the concepts of stigma and stigma management are useful tools. Prostitutes actively adapted their behaviour to accommodate friends, family, and neighbours. They were aware that engaging in paid sex could provoke negative reactions. To avoid these reactions, many women therefore tried to conceal their trade. Family or neighbours might have suspected what they were doing, but, as long as they managed to keep up appearances, they were generally not rejected. Yet, when looking for immediate support, prostitutes often turned to an in-group of other prostitutes, clients, and pimps, who often protected each other. Even among themselves, however, they often hid other stigmatized activities such as theft.

When their prostitution was discovered (or could no longer be ignored) by parents or neighbours or when they were apprehended, many women rationalized their prostitution, referring to their extreme poverty and claiming to want to improve their lives. They were thus complicit in the stigma on prostitution. Only a minority of prostitutes actively resisted stigmatization. They caused "scandal" by refusing to hide that they were prostitutes, some even widely exclaiming it.

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pendant la nuit que c'est quand elle est pris de boisson, ce qui lui est arrivé pendant deux fois." SAB *AH Proces* 10243.

74 "[D]e heeren van het magistrate altemael macraux waeren," "foutu, jeanfoutre de macraux," "je ne suis pas une voleuse, je ne fais autre chose que la putaine," "sij haere eere binnen dese stede verloren hadde ende dat sij deselve niet en sal verlaeten." SAB *AH Proces* 9631.

75 This resistance is a common practice of "neutralizing" stigma that has been called "condemnation of the condemners." See, for example, William E. Thompson, Jack L. Harred, and Barbara E. Burks, "Managing the Stigma of Topless Dancing: A Decade Later," *Deviant Behavior*, vol. 24, no. 6 (2003), pp. 563-564, doi:10.1080/713840274.

They defied their stigmatizers. Only when prostitutes caused scandal, when they refused to pass, did families, neighbours, and authorities have to take action to safeguard the values of the social order—and their own reputations.

Stigma and stigma management do not cover all aspects of prostitution. The great advantage of these concepts, however, is that they direct our attention to a domain that is often ignored, that of everyday interactions, and offer an interpretation of these interactions. Using these concepts, I have been able to point to the restrained but real agency that people in the margins could exert. Prostitutes lived in difficult circumstances, but, by using the appropriate strategies, they had opportunities to advance their own causes. Applying this concept in a historical context allows us to give more attention to prostitutes themselves, to their decisions and behaviour, and so nuance claims that prostitutes were either ostracized or simply accepted by their communities.