PROJECT MUSE®

James Joyce, *Sexuality and Social Purity* (review)

Ellen Carol Jones

James Joyce Quarterly, Volume 44, Number 1, Fall 2006, pp. 162-166
(Review)

Published by The University of Tulsa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjq.2007.0011>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/217427>

JAMES JOYCE, *SEXUALITY AND SOCIAL PURITY*, by Katherine Mullin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 236 pp., 6 illustrations. \$75.00 hardback; \$43.00 paperback.

At the 1998 Miami Joyce Conference, Katherine Mullin received a rare standing ovation for her exploration, now the centerpiece of this book, of how Joyce in writing "Eveline" responded to contemporary Irish nationalist propaganda cautioning against emigration and to social-purity propaganda warning against white-slave trafficking. Essential reading for all scholars of Joyce, Katherine Mullin's *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity* unveils Joyce as an "agent provocateur" in his battle against censorship: appropriating to his art contemporary debates about morality and sexuality, Joyce anticipated the censorship his texts would solicit.

Mullin explores the populist discourse on sex by advocates of social purity, a discourse that paradoxically intended to suppress the explicit expression of sexuality in art, particularly in fiction. Situating Joyce's struggles to publish his art within the strictures imposed by the social-purity movement, Mullin focuses on the evangelical Protestant ideologies and organizations dominant in the United Kingdom, particularly the National Vigilance Association, whose branch in Dublin, the Dublin White Cross Vigilance Association, actively promoted social purity during Joyce's residence. This focus on Protestant vigilance organizations does not deny the importance of the Catholic Church in regulating sexuality in Ireland, but highlights those aspects of social control and discipline that operated outside Catholicism: the secular public policing of private morals that utilized "far more socially pervasive techniques such as street patrols, agitation for legislation, confiscation and prosecution" (20). Joyce's efforts to publish his art within these strictures became an integral element in the modernist avant-garde fight against censorship, the publication of his texts "a symbolic act of cultural rebellion" staged, in turns, as heroic epic and as melodrama (17). Such struggles determined not only the reception of Joyce's work but also, Mullin argues, the very shape of it. And that Joyce anticipated—and deliberately provoked and courted—"the eventual vice society intervention into the publication of *Ulysses* in 1921 which would win him worldwide notoriety" Mullin proves through her analyses of three chapters crucial to the trials of the publication of *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*, demonstrating how the threat of censorship becomes increasingly integral to Joyce's aesthetic project (27, 210).

Historicizing Joyce's assault on social-purity ideology and legislative censorship in the context of the support, critique, or condemnation of these institutions by various feminist movements enables Mullin to argue that "Joyce's sporadic aversion towards 'emancipated' or 'intel-

lectual' women, despite his friendship for and gratitude to a coterie of women who must be classed as such, can be particularised as hostility towards one particular and dominant strand, the purity feminist mainstream" (206). His art politically aligns itself with the radical feminists who proved his most active helpers, as Bonnie Kime Scott and other scholars have so fully documented: the dissident emancipated women who waged their own assault against cultural taboos, social proscriptions, and politically charged disciplinary acts.¹

Given social purity's "increasing reliance upon legal coercion, its collaboration with the state, its love of surveillance and its status as an unofficial branch of the police force," it is not surprising that the Irish viewed this Protestant and Unionist movement, so aligned with the state repressive apparatus, as yet another social, cultural, and political manifestation of British imperialist suppression, appropriating to state control and discipline the private realms of the body and erotic fantasy (208). Mullin thus posits that the acceptance by the Irish of the social-purity movement serves as one of Joyce's examples of the grateful oppression of the Irish under British colonial rule. Yet one would need to examine in more detail precisely who in Ireland—and of course in Joyce's fiction—advocates, practices, and benefits from the regulation of social purity in order to substantiate such a claim.

Of all the copious archival research Mullin conducted for this book, no material is more fascinating than the propaganda propelled by the moral panic over white slavery. Sensationalist, veering on the salacious, this propaganda, like other social-purity propaganda, seems to delight in the sordid details (often imagined) of the vices it condemns. In Eveline's chance meeting of Frank and his courtship of her, Joyce's story follows fairly closely the paradigmatic white-slave narrative, Alfred Dyer's 1880 *The European Slave Traffic in English, Irish, and Scottish Girls: A Narrative of Facts*, as well as other white-slavery scare melodramas.² Yet the white-slave panic is an ideological import from England, connected to the Protestant and Unionist Dublin White Cross Vigilance Association, an affiliate of W. T. Stead's English association. Thus, by deploying the white-slavery panic as a submerged intertext in "Eveline," Joyce himself, Mullin asserts, "performs a disconcerting act of cultural and creative 'emigration.' In smuggling this rival, Anglocentric anti-emigration narrative into the pages of the *Homestead*, Joyce critiques the didactic purpose Plunkett's paper assigned to its fiction by highlighting the suggestive and compromising overlap between ideologically divergent propagandas" (75).

Catholic proscriptions of sexuality overlapped social-purist policing of sexuality and the purist ideologies, such as that of "true manliness," undergirding that patrolling; Joyce's insistence on such an overlap undermines both the Catholic and the evangelical Protestant claims to ideological difference. Mullin also pinpoints how both puri-

ty discourses of “true manliness” police male sexuality in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, from Irish politicians and the Catholic clergy selling Charles Stewart Parnell “to the pharisaical conscience of the English non-conformists”;³ to Church prohibitions articulated in the hellfire sermon; to purity campaign tracts and pamphlets against “that lewd habit,” masturbation; to the institutional surveillance and public discipline of male sexuality; to Stephen’s own confessed “sins of impurity” “with others” (P 144). As Dora Marsden suggested in the issue of *The Egoist* including the initial installment of *A Portrait*, a difference of degree, not of kind, exists between the vicious and the “pure”: the pure are stimulated, like the vicious, by what they imagine, “first by concentration and then by a refusal which is in itself a further stimulation” (113).⁴ The serialization of *A Portrait* in *The Egoist* and subsequent printing under its imprint offers an Irish Catholic perspective, Mullin asserts, on that radical feminist and modernist journal’s theories of sexuality and its challenges to purists’ policing of sexuality. Even the Catholic rite of confession is imaged in Joyce’s exposé as masturbatory, “self-induced ejaculation” (105-106). Joyce’s portrait of developing sexuality “thus dissolves the distinction between sexual proscription and sexual dissidence which social purity’s organised war on the double standard attempted to uphold” (108).

John Sumner, the secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, initiated court proceedings against the July-August 1920 number of *The Little Review*, the issue that carried the third installment of “Nausicaa,” one copy of which had been accidentally mailed to the daughter of an attorney who then complained to the District Attorney. As Jane Heap noted the irony, *The Little Review* was prosecuted for exposing to a young girl “the thoughts in a young girl’s mind” (141).⁵ Thus “Nausicaa” preemptively subverts the bedrock of social-purity ideology: the protection of the innocent young person. Mullin explores how Joyce assaults that “‘young person’ of the social purity imagination” through a competition of intertexts: the 1854 didactic and sentimental transatlantic best-seller, *The Lamplighter*, by Maria Susannah Cummins;⁶ and the mutoscope, that “*fin de siècle* optical toy which destabilised the ideas of youth, femininity and violated innocence upon which social purity rhetoric depended” (141).

Passages in “Nausicaa” to which the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice explicitly objected were those that disclosed Gerty MacDowell’s improper knowledge, particularly concerning male masturbation. By exposing Gerty’s masquerade, Mullin argues, Joyce also exposes what social purists chose not to see:

the economic factors compelling women and girls, if not towards actual

prostitution, towards some form of barter of their sexuality for a subsistence. Accordingly, Gerty masters the strategies, conventions and choreography of sexual display in the mutoscope's "cinema of attraction," prudently allying herself, in her desperate bid to gain some little economic security, with a particularly successful machine for the commodification of sexuality. (169)

Redrafted during the months leading to the February 1921 trial of *The Little Review* for publishing "Nausicaa," "Circe" is, Mullin asserts, Joyce's most sustained assault on the social-purity crusaders, particularly their coercive campaign against prostitution. "Through Bloom," she argues,

Joyce interrogates contemporary social purity initiatives to police the unruly city, exposing the voyeuristic complicities which fissured reform's supposedly detached, altruistic gaze. He dramatises the perilously self-reflexive quality of the social purity project through a "reformer" both susceptible to the pleasures he purports to discipline, and thereby vulnerable to the policing strategies he claims to operate. (175)

Situating Bella Cohen's brothel at 81 Mecklenburgh Street "next door to the headquarters of the city's most active prostitution reform organisation, the White Cross Vigilance Association at number 82," Joyce symbolically questions the efficacy of such policing among the "open houses" of one of Europe's worst slums (177).

Bloom's pose as reformer, in fact, is compromised by his voyeurism, by his preoccupation and involvement with "the social evil" he would police, by his oscillation between rescuer of fallen women and rake. And, given that the "rescue" of prostitutes most often resulted in their victimization, such a project of reformation was suspect for its effect on rescuer and rescued alike. "Circe" argues that their positions are unstable and potentially interchangeable: as Mullin suggests, "Bloom's visceral and shocking transformation into the somatic spectacle of the prostitute tropes for the chapter's sustained drive to interrogate the fragile boundary separating the reformer from the target of reform" (194). "Circe" itself exposes the "faultline dividing reality from fantasy" in the social-purity crusaders' exposé of social sins. The episode dramatizes the purity movement's own "feverish sin-stained dreams," Mullin argues, the prurient fantasies that inform social purity's unconscious and propel the movement's hysterical repressions and overt suppressions of vice (202).

The proscriptions advocated by the social-purity movement, in conjunction with the Catholic Church's regulation of sexuality and the free expression of sexual matters, constituted formidable social, religious, and legal obstacles for the artist. If the social-purity move-

ment is no less hydra-headed than the vice it intended to obliterate, so too is Joyce's multifarious assault on that movement. Mullin unveils the spectacle of social-purity crusaders' political, legal, and moral maneuvers to regulate vice and Joyce's outmaneuvering of such social controls over his art. Joyce's conflict with censorship, particularly that motivated by the morally and politically suspect social-purity crusade, lies at the heart of his creative practice, Mullin argues. Joyce, of course, has taught his readers the significance of the throwaway, revealing a world of contestatory social and political discourses lodged in turn-of-the-century cultural ephemera. Yet few readers have so superbly revealed that world half offered by the throwaway. Mullin expertly demonstrates how the forgotten cultural ephemera that Joyce deploys in his work, particularly in *Ulysses*, and that she has retrieved in her book "reveal a sustained, complex and politically freighted assault upon a movement responsible for the international proscription of *Ulysses*, and thus partly productive of his notoriety" (210). That he courts that conflict and benefits from that notoriety form part of his assault. Few readers have so compellingly demonstrated Joyce's complex engagement with and radical critique of the contestatory discourses that shaped his world as Katherine Mullin has proven in *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*.

Reviewed by Ellen Carol Jones

NOTES

¹ See, for instance, Bonnie Kime Scott, *Joyce and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984).

² Alfred S. Dyer, *The European Slave Trade in English, Irish, and Scottish Girls: A Narrative of Facts* (London: Dyer Brothers, 1880).

³ James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical and Political Writing*, ed. Kevin Barry, trans. Conor Deane (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 144.

⁴ Dora Marsden, "The Chastity of Women," *The Egoist* (2 February 1914), 45.

⁵ See Jane Heap, *The Little Review*, 8 (October 1921), 7.

⁶ Maria Susannah Cummins, *The Lamplighter* (Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1854).

JAMES JOYCE AND GERMAN THEORY: THE ROMANTIC SCHOOL AND ALL THAT, by Barbara Laman. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004. 176 pp. \$39.50.

Barbara Laman's volume opens with Donovan's words in the fifth chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: the brief reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—"the classical school and the romantic school," the "idealistic, German,