

Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen, *Musta-Maija ja Kirppu-Kaisa – Seksityöläiset 1800-luvun alun Suomessa*
[Black Maija and Flea Kaisa: Sex Workers in Early
Nineteenth-Century Finland] (Helsinki: SKS, 2018)
283 pp.

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While looking through the archives of the local police department in Turku, Finland, Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen came across an intriguing document – *Sundhets Journal*, a health register that records the examinations of women suspected of carrying and spreading venereal diseases in the area between 1838 and 1848. This register is extraordinary in many ways: it tells us about sex work before the era of regulated prostitution and reveals details about people who rarely wrote about themselves. *Sundhets Journal* and the women appearing on its pages inspired Vainio-Korhonen to write *Musta-Maija ja Kirppu-Kaisa – Seksityöläiset 1800-luvun alun Suomessa* (Black Maija and Flea Kaisa: Sex Workers in Early Nineteenth-Century Finland).

In her study, Kirsi Vainio-Korhonen explores the lives of 164 women attending regular health inspections. She combines the information from the health register with archival materials – including documents from church records, legal institutions, the local administration, and hospitals – to construct a more lifelike picture of these women. The reader will learn about their living conditions, health problems, marital status, social relations, legal matters, occupations, and wealth – that is, about numerous aspects explaining their life course.

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Despite the great variety present in the lives of these women, the study reveals some typical features of sex work in the early nineteenth century. Readers specializing in the eighteenth century might be particularly interested in the potential continuities from the previous century that stand in stark contrast to the later developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Before the mid-nineteenth century, sexual relations outside marriage were forbidden as such, which meant that sex work was part of the broader category of «impropriety». Receiving money for sexual acts was not in itself incriminating. In fact, Vainio-Korhonen's study shows that officials were not even interested in whether money was involved.

The ways of doing sex work and the prevalent sexual norms provide further indications of continuities from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. In contrast to the regulated prostitution established during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when brothels and street prostitution became more visible, the sex work Vainio-Korhonen describes is homespun and straightforward; women seemingly often acquired their clients and spent time with them rather casually.

The fate of the women after they were free from the regular inspections reveals the conditional nature of impropriety. Sex work was not one defining social category; instead, many factors affected the social status of the women, and these factors could change. Marriage or wealth could bring a stable social standing without the past personal history causing any noticeable harm. Overall, with regard to the Foucauldian idea of an early modern positive attitude towards sexual passions before late nineteenth-century Victorian morals celebrating continence took hold, it is quite tempting to see some traces of early modern morality here, something Vainio-Korhonen seems to hint at herself.

For most part, however, rather than trying to sketch a single picture of early modern sex work, the book presents a montage of individual lives. Vainio-Korhonen distinguishes a few common patterns while still preserving the women's individuality. Not all the conclusions can be mentioned here, but one might serve to cover many: the lives of the women appearing in *Sundhets Journal* are very much similar to those of other disadvantaged women living in Turku at the time.

Vainio-Korhonen describes her aim as studying the history of the margins without marginalization. Along with her sympathetic style of writing, she contributes to this aim by showing the diversity of roles the women played. This reflects the new perspectives that have arisen in recent years in the history of prostitution. As Vainio-Korhonen notes, the topic has increasingly been treated together with women's agency and work. For example, she refers to the recent volume *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution* (2017). Examples of female agency and

of social-economic perspectives on the history of prostitution have formerly been provided by Rebecka Lennartson (2001) and Yvonne Svanström (2000).

Women and work are familiar themes from Vainio-Korhonen's previous publications, and she has touched on the subject of sexuality in her books *De frimodiga: Barnmorskor, födande och kroppslighet på 1700-talet* (The Unabashed: Midwives, Birth, and Corporality in the Eighteenth Century, 2016, 2012) and *Lemmen ilot ja sydämen salat – Suomalaisen rakkauden historiaa* (The Joys of Love and Secrets of the Heart: A History of Finnish Love, 2015). The book at hand is therefore a natural continuation of her work and an enlightening early nineteenth-century addition to the other Finnish publications concerning late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century prostitution (Katja Tikka, Iisa Aaltonen & Elina Maaniitty 2018, Antti Häkkinen e.g. 1995). Despite its title implying that it covers the whole of Finland, the book concentrates on Turku, but this does not reduce the illuminating value of the work.

In addition to being considerate in its language and approaches, the book is a source of inspiration for ethical thinking in history. Even when describing the lives of people who constantly refuse to follow the contemporary moral standards of a «good life», the book is sincerely charming. It will help the reader to relate to and understand the lives of unnecessarily marginalized historical subjects.