

The Trials of Sally Salisbury, “Giant of Mischief”

by Emily Brand

“Some there are, who are of opinion, that to be a woman of pleasure is to be a giant of mischief.”

With this statement, an early biographer of Sally Salisbury (c. 1690/2–1724) must have prided himself on having summed up her career with a stroke of his pen. Her star was, admittedly, not in the ascendant for very long. Born Sarah Prydden, a child of the impoverished district of St Giles in the Fields, she rose from humble obscurity to become a lover of Lords, a darling of the media, and – ultimately – a violent criminal, seeing out her last, diseased days in Newgate Prison. Such was the history of one of early eighteenth-century London’s most celebrated whores.

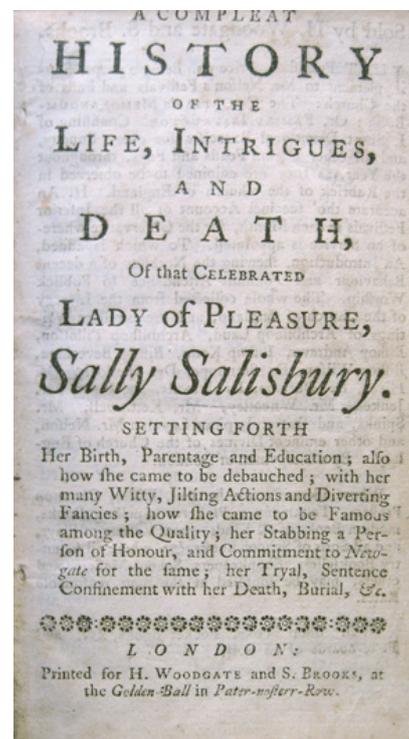
If contemporary sources are to be believed, Georgian London was home to an army of prostitutes, from the “hedge-whore” (who unflinchingly disposed of her favours “on the wayside, under a hedge”) to the fashionable courtesan. Attitudes towards these women varied wildly, and shifted dramatically over the course of the century. But it was already an old observation that “some of the finest women in England are those, who go under the denomination of ladies of easy virtue”; and the assertion that they occasionally proved themselves to be “giants of mischief” is perhaps one of the mildest rebukes to have been levelled at them by contemporaries.

Some hoped to slip almost wordlessly into a world of gentility, distinguished for the “elegance with which they sacrificed to Venus”. But, in a city increasingly engrossed by newspapers and fascinated with celebrity, it was the more notorious courtesans who took centre stage in the public’s imagination. During, and in the aftermath of, the “Great Catastrophe” of her life, a veil of myth rose around Sally Salisbury that would probably be impossible to lift.

She rose to popular attention with surprising swiftness, but the reported nature of the young Sarah’s journey into the realm of the “fallen woman” is not an exceptional tale. In fact, she may have been one of the many who fell prey to the most notorious rake of his day – Colonel Charteris. One of her biographers recounts that she first enchanted him during a dancing competition, “her Leg and Foot having Powers to excite, like the Face and Voice of others”. Despite her tender age – variously given as between thirteen and seventeen – she is cast as an almost insatiable young strumpet, with a quick temper and a sharp tongue. Having been abandoned by her lover, her fortunes ebbed and flowed, but she was ultimately initiated into the bawdyhouses of that “Sea-Captain of Satan’s Regiment” Mother Wisebourne, and later the infamous Mother Needham. The latter and Colonel Charteris are, of course, immortalised together in Hogarth’s famous print of 1749, the first series of the *Harlot’s Progress*. They both played an important role in the career of our ‘Salisbury Sal’ (who most likely adopted this alias after one of her lovers), although she was never presented in quite the same light as Hogarth’s innocent rustic Moll Hackabout.

In the relative financial security of a fashionable brothel, Sally soon found that her every move was reported in the London papers; in

1719 the *Original Weekly Journal* informed the world that “Salisbury Sally, a noted Lady of Pleasure, is setting up a Chariot, and has hired a Coachman and two Footman”. They did not always relay some of the most spurious rumours that circulated about her, including the pleasure she apparently took at rolling old women down hills in barrels, and stalking the city with violent street gang the Mohocks, “drest like a beautiful Youth” – her true sex apparently not being determined until a particularly thorough Constable saw fit to rifle around in her breeches.



She was certainly no stranger to the inside of a prison cell, having been committed to Marshalsea, Bridewell and Newgate prisons for several petty crimes, debts and being disorderly (of course, one biographer cannot resist including a tale of her escaping serious punishment because the Judge had fallen hopelessly in love with her). Speculation about her sexual life was, of course, inevitable. Even if it was not reported in the national newspapers, books and broadsides hinted at the “gally pots and Glasses” necessary for keeping herself free of the occupational hazards of the prostitute – venereal disease and pregnancy. She was represented as an irrepressible spirit – having tired of the kisses of one older suitor she abruptly flew from his knee and cried “Damn you, and your broken Tongue, can I love rotten Teeth and stinking Fifty?!” Worse, she was reputedly prone to violence, with a tendency to attack her clients and threaten to “dash out [their] brains”. If this had been the case, it seems unlikely that so many of her beaux would have sought her out, as they undoubtedly did (her lovers allegedly included two Secretaries of State, “at least half a score” of Lords, and even the future George II).

In 1722, Sally shocked society and catapulted herself into the dizziest heights of her fame, with her “Great Catastrophe”. On the night of the 22nd December, she committed a “crime of passion” that seemed an unbelievable move for someone whose living relied on the generosity and trust of her clients: in a fit of jealous rage, she stabbed one of her lovers in the chest.

Although, amazingly, the attack did not seem to diminish popular affection for her, it would prove to be her downfall. Her victim was the Honourable John Finch, son of the Earl of Nottingham, and

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even he forgave her without hesitation. While they were carousing in The Three Tuns in Chandos Street (alternately labelled as a tavern and a brothel), she found that he had offered an Opera ticket to her sister in favour of herself. Inspired by envy – and perhaps the pint of wine she had called for when she arrived – “most forcibly smote him at unawares” with a bread-knife. Some reports stated that she immediately ran for a surgeon before fainting away in horror; others that she cruelly “wrapt up the Action in a Scene of Gaiety and Laughter”.

At her trial, however, all accounts attest to her penitence. Her famous bouts of cholera seemingly melted into remorse; she sobbed uncontrollably, fanned herself nervously, and “was taken, for a short time, with Vomiting” when she laid her eyes upon her victim. Her defence claimed that she had acted on impulse, to protect her sister from being debauched, and not with intent to kill. Fortunately for Sally, although he languished in great danger for some weeks, Finch did recover and absolved her of an actual murder charge.

Nevertheless, on the 24th of April 1723, Sally received her verdict; the court sentenced her to a year’s imprisonment in Newgate and imposed a fine of one hundred pounds, finding her guilty of assault but acquitting her of intending to commit murder.

For a more delicate soul, the prospect of incarceration itself could have been enough to spell the end; Newgate was renowned as a “Hell above ground”. Sally, however, took to her new circumstances with characteristic aplomb, furnishing her apartments in “a very decent Manner” and continuing to entertain fashionable society. Hopeful visitors would often leave a little disappointed when finding her already attended by two or three other gentlemen, drinking a bowl of punch.

Despite undoubtedly enjoying a much more comfortable confinement than the majority of inmates, Sally did not escape the hardships of life in Georgian London’s most infamous prison. As the months passed, newspapers would be peppered with references to her struggles with ill health. On the 18th of May 1723, she was “very much indisposed”; on the 28th of September she was “dangerously ill”. Her condition deteriorated further in February, and the last air this celebrated courtesan breathed was tainted with the stench of Newgate, only a few weeks short of her release. Sally Salisbury died on the 11th of February, her ailment variously given as “Consumption

attended by a fever” or “brain fever brought on by Debauch”, depending on the discretion of the reporter. She was buried at St Andrew’s, Holborn, although it is possible that even in death she could not find peace; in 1747, reports began to circulate that her coffin, along with a number of others, had been vandalised and stolen.

The impression that this “Termagent She-Hero’ left on the popular imagination certainly survived her. Her name was, however, more likely to be connected with merriment and bawdiness than idolised or remembered with the affection that she so relied upon. While gossiping contemporaries such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu called her “a dearly beloved drab”, later commentators were more likely to label her as a woman possessing, in the words of one Victorian journalist, “the form of an angel with the disposition of a fiend”.

In the months immediately following her death, several memoirs, accounts and songs began to circulate, most of which – grumbled one writer – were characterized by “Ribaldry, Obscenity, and Billingsgate-Language”. She even enjoyed the somewhat dubious posthumous honour of having a racing horse named after her, who somewhat fittingly shook off a competitor named ‘Maidenhead’ in pursuit of ‘Merry Batchelor’ during recorded races of 1739.

Like Nancy Dawson, the “charming Sally Salisbury” remained a favourite figure of popular songs and bawdy ballads for decades after her death. There appeared in *The Sailor’s Jester* of 1788 one particular ditty that perhaps encapsulates the spirit of her memory:

*Here flat on her back, but inactive at last,
Poor Sally lies under grim death;
Thro’ the course of her vices she gallop’d so fast,
No wonder she’s now out of breath.*



About Emily Brand

Emily Brand is a writer and historical researcher with a particular interest in the long eighteenth century. She published *Royal Weddings* in 2011, and her next book *Bawdyhouses: The Georgian Brothel* will be published in October 2012. You can follow her on twitter @EJBrand.

