

**A Review of *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman***

**By**

**Loretta J. Capeheart  
Northeastern Illinois University**

Book: *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman*

Authors: Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero

Translators: Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson

Publisher: Duke University Press

Year: 2004

*Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* offers complete and direct access to a classic of criminology. While many of us have read a portion of this text in a previous form, as the translators of this version point out, this new interpretation offers a far greater understanding of the propositions of Lombroso and Ferrero. These ideas are easily dismissed as artifacts of an era (1890s) replete with unapologetic sexism and racism in the guise of scientific inquiry. However, the text is useful. The value of this version is its gift of a far more comprehensive understanding of Lombroso and Ferrero's ideas, flaws, and continuing influence on criminology and society.

The startling language and matter of fact delivery of the authors' analyses induced much laughter in this reader. While I fully expected to be offended and outraged by the text, it was difficult to take the writings seriously at first. It was a challenge to continually recall that these writings included some of the founding ideas of criminology. Once the writings are placed in their historical perspective, their continuing influence is demonstrative. While serious scholars and students will rightly reject the arguments and scientific veracity of these writings, we must also contemplate their continued import. Biological determinism, sexism, and racism still influence our popular culture, social institutions, and academic worlds. Lombroso and Ferrero's writings offer insight into the early influences of the social sciences upon our daily and scholarly lives.

The text is divided into four parts with illustrations and includes the translators' notes along with the footnotes of the authors. Two appendices allow for an explanation of needed abbreviations of the original text and of the illustrations. The appendices and notes are most helpful in gaining an inclusive understanding of the translation.

The first part of the text is titled "The Normal Woman" and includes chapters on the female in the animal world, anatomy and biology, the psyche, cruelty, love, morality and intelligence. In their arguments regarding the weakness, physical inferiorities, cruelties, immoralities, and lesser intelligence, the authors rely on multiple methodologies. These methods, however, are not particularly suited to the measures or conclusions made and would not stand up to our current standards for validity or reliability. Within the physical limitations examined, the authors conclude that women

are more childlike than are men because of smaller stature, slower aging, and lack of balding. The authors did not compare baldness in men to a state of infancy. Nor did they critically examine the relevance of height, proportion of fatty tissue, smaller skulls, or any other of their measures to actual childishness or inferiority. It is merely assumed that this difference from men and similarity to children reflects deficiencies in women.

The claims of women's inferiorities of senses and psyche are similarly without scientific (from our current standards) justification, but are clearly judged so without hesitation. The authors claim that these inferiorities are ordained by nature rather than God and write that woman "feels less, just as she thinks less" to explain among other things why a woman would repeat childbearing when men, who think and feel more, "would never do the same" (p. 64). The possibility that women might endure great pain out of willpower is considered and set aside out of an assumption (lacking any offer of proof) that such perseverance on the part of women would be pure "fantasy" (p. 64). These generalities are supported through cited correspondence with a noted anthropologist of the time.

Cruelty in women is found to exist in the natural state. The authors suggest that like an organized government tames men, men through natural selection have tamed the cruelest of women. This is not only through mate selection. This selection is achieved when the male avoids marriage with a cruel woman preferring and marrying a kind woman through their children passing along kindness rather than cruelty. Beyond this genetic manipulation, the authors describe the accepted murder of disagreeable women in previous societies as culling the population of much feminine cruelty.

The authors also argue that women love only out of maternal commitment and select mates not out of love or appreciation of beauty (which women lack due to their dulled senses), but out of a Darwinian impulse to pass along strong genes to their offspring. They argue that while women may desire a young man, they will happily marry an older man if he is wealthy. This argument is actually quite in line with those made by one of my undergraduate psychology professors (this was in the 1980s, not the 1890s) who claimed a "Mercedes affect" which caused young women to be attracted to wealthy older men even in the presence of more attractive young men. Lombroso and Ferrero would likely find themselves appreciated among some contemporary bio-psychologists (as my evolutionary psychology professor often labeled himself).

Along with the many inadequacies found in the normal woman is her lack of moral fortitude and intelligence. The authors claim that lying is instinctive in women because of weakness, menstruation, shame, sexual struggle, desire to be interesting, suggestibility, and maternal duty. Women's vanity is exemplified by a need to stand out for even the most pointless of reasons and further by a proclivity for variety in wardrobe. Women's lack of intelligence is illustrated through a scarcity of female geniuses, a general deficiency of creativity by women, and a lack of need for stimulation. The authors' suggest that women may indeed increase in intelligence if allowed to engage in civil life to a greater extent. Examples of this possibility are the "evolved races, as in England and North America" (p. 88).

Throughout the text there are comparisons between civilized and savage women with the civilized being represented by white European women and the savages represented by other women. The racism is direct and without apology. While this is startling, it is also somewhat refreshing. There are no flowery terminological acrobatics to hide or obscure the authors' contention that white European women are the standard against which others are measured. Current literature, both scholarly and popular, often hides these biases behind arguments of culture or development, but the racism persists. Reading this text reminds one that although the racism of the period of these authors was blatant and brutal, it was at least open. It also reminds the reader that counterposing any group as normative is itself erroneous regardless of the terminologies used to soften the norm to other comparison.

Reference to the degenerate classes also fill the text and substantiate the authors' bias against working class and poor persons in favor of the middle class and wealthy. In these analyses, the middle class and wealthy norms are favorably compared against the lives of working and poor persons. Structural needs and inequalities are entirely unexamined, while issues of marriage and prostitution are entirely accounted for out of the disposition of the degenerate classes. However, once again the unabashed display of bias is preferable to this reader over the less direct anti-poor and anti-working class biases presented in much of the current literature. The currently accepted biases are often obscured by the underlying assumptions of the causes and definitions of crime rather than direct in their indictment of any particular class.

Part two of the text is titled "Female Criminology." This section includes chapters covering crime in the animal world, the crimes of savage and primitive women, and the history of prostitution. Within the animal world, female criminals are noted within the ant and bee populations. These females, however, are described as having extraordinary intelligence. These inordinately clever females are explicated as a third sex because they deviate so far from the more natural low intelligence and non criminal nature of the normal female of these species. Prostitution is examined as the main criminal activity of women and described as evolutionary in nature. As one might expect, the authors contend that prostitution was normal (and perhaps even beneficial) in the first phases of human development and became less so until disappearing among the normal population remaining only among the retrograde classes.

Part three of the text deals with pathological anatomy and anthropometry. Chapters in this part cover a variety of physical characteristics including the skull of the female offender, pathological anomalies, the brains of female criminals and prostitutes, anthropometry, facial, cephalic, and other anomalies, photographs, tattoos, and atavistic origins. In the introduction to their analysis of the female criminal skull, the authors' note the lack of clear differences between criminal and non-criminal crania. However, this does not dissuade their concluding that the female criminal has a smaller cranium than women labeled as normal or lunatic. Beyond size, other anomalies of note in the female criminal skull include irregular occipital fozetta, receding or narrow forehead, prominent jaws, and enormous nasal bones. These representations lack any tests of

significance in difference, and further do not indicate the number of normal women included in the comparisons. The editors also note discrepancies between the descriptive text and the tables offered for illustration.

The brains of criminal women are argued to weigh less than that of healthy women. Of the other physical differences between normal and criminal women, the authors suggest that their findings “do not amount to much” (p. 125) yet go on to suggest that criminal women are shorter than normal women and that prostitutes are heavier (and have larger calves) than honest women. Hair was also a concern and the authors’ suggest that criminal women have darker hair than normal women (with the possible exception of prostitutes) and that criminal women are more likely to go gray and less likely to go bald than are normal women. Other degenerative abnormalities among the criminals and/or prostitutes include asymmetrical facial features, protruding jaws, lacking, enlarged, or atrophied nipples, and hypertrophy of the labia and/or clitoris.

Anomalies are argued to be more common among prostitutes than criminals. The exception is a lack of wrinkles among the prostitutes. The authors offer a warning that the cosmetics used by prostitutes often mask anomalies. The classic atavistic and racist argument of criminality is also undertaken in this section complete with illustrations of savage women. The lack of scientific rigor coupled with scientific language and authority of conclusion astound.

The subjects of part four of the text are the biology and psychology of female criminals and prostitutes. The born and occasional prostitute and criminal are covered in this part along with menstruation, fecundity, vision, sexual sensitivity, crimes of passion, suicides, insanity, epilepsy, and hysteria. Here the authors continue in their misogynistic explanations and assumptions regarding women’s biology and psychology. Topics taken on in greater length in this section include lesbianism, which is explained as deriving from a variety of causes. These causes include “excessive lustfulness” (p. 177). Another cause is the giving in to the bad influences of more corrupt women while in prison or other confined states. Finally, offered as a cause is the influence of a “gathering of many women” in brothels or boarding schools in which nudity, shared beds, and/or competitions over “who has the most beautiful sexual organs” may lead some to occasional lesbianism (p. 177). Several novels are cited as supportive of these arguments.

The born criminal is described as masculine in her pursuits, vengeful, cruel, dishonest, and wicked, though loving of finery. She is more terrible than her male criminal counterpart. The category of occasional criminal includes both the milder born criminal and the normal woman who, because of her latent immorality, is occasionally drawn to low level offenses. With regard to crimes of passion, the authors describe female offenders as paralleling male offenders except that the females tend to be more savage and tend to be more likely to plan the offense. Jealousy is considered a particularly powerful motivator for the female offender.

The authors describe suicide as a type of crime of passion. They inform us that suicide is more common in men than women and that physical pain is a more common cause for suicide among men than women because of women's dulled senses. Poverty is also offered as a cause of suicide and again is found to affect men (as a motivator for suicide not as a circumstance in general) more than women because women have less pride and can therefore cope with the circumstance better. Love, however, is more likely to drive the woman who is "truly a woman" to suicide (pp. 210-211). The authors carefully explain that the criminal woman is more likely to respond with violence against others when disappointed in love. However, the true woman experiencing true love, "a form of slavery," (p. 210) and then losing her man (master) will respond with suicide, "her true crime of passion" (p. 211).

Prostitution is of concern to the authors not because of its criminality so much as its deviation from their perception of the female norm. They distinguish between the born and the occasional prostitute finding the former to be similar to the male criminal. Because the authors consider female modesty to be second only to maternity in the female senses, they find prostitution to be a great aberration. Prostitution is presented as contrary to "the goal toward which the entire psychological evolution of women has focused its energy for centuries" (p. 226). Yet, no evidence is offered regarding this psychological evolution or its goal. This section of the text concludes with a short examination of insanity, epilepsy, and hysteria.

This comprehensive translation of these classic and founding writings is an important and useful text. It is highly accessible and would be easily employed by undergraduate students beyond criminology courses. Students engaged in women's studies and other area studies dealing with the deceits of sexism and racism as they are presented within the supposed scientific literature would find the text most enlightening. As an exercise in discerning fact from fiction within an authoritative narrative, the text would serve the purpose of any course or student attempting to engage in the critical examination of mainstream media interpretations of crime, women, minorities, non-Westerners, and others often depicted yet seldom regarded.

#### **ENDNOTE**

Correspondence concerning this review should be sent electronically to Loretta Capeheart at [L-Capeheart@neu.edu](mailto:L-Capeheart@neu.edu).