

Harlots: both 'deliciously wanton' and 'a feminist triumph'

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Everyone agrees: *Harlots* is the most under-valued series on TV right now. The story of warring mid-18th century brothels has been called "the finest show no one is tuning into" in *The Guardian*; "the best erotic workplace drama you're not watching" in *The Hollywood Reporter*; "Hulu's most underrated gem" in *Decider*; and "one of serialized television's under-discovered and appreciated entertainments" in *Salon*.

This isn't for any lack of star power: *Harlot's* cast includes Oscar nominees Samantha Morton (*The Walking Dead*) and Lesley Manville (*Phantom Thread*), Screen Actors Guild nominees Liv Tyler (aka Arwen in *Lord of the Rings*) and Jessica Brown Findlay (aka Lady Sybil From *Downton Abbey*), and a 2019 Emmy nominee in Season 3 newcomer Alfie Allen (aka Theon Greyjoy from *Game of Thrones*).

It's also not for any lack of great reviews: *Harlots* has a 98% critics rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, where both Season 2 and 3 have rare 100% scores. *Variety* described it as "*Game of Thrones* meets *Downton Abbey*;" *Decider* called it

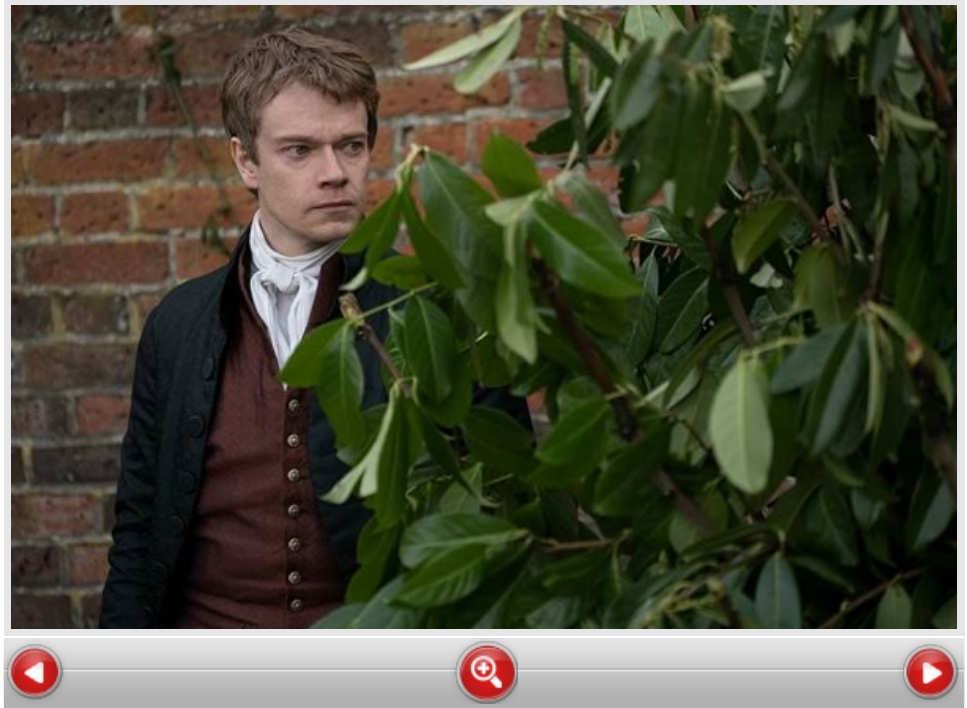
"spectacular," *AVClub* "scintillating" and *The Guardian* "obscenely enjoyable" while *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote, "*Harlots* has consistently been one of TV's top dramas of the last few years, a thrilling, brainy bodice-ripper that combines the epic wordplay of Shakespeare, the ruthless political survivalism of Machiavelli and the gutting sentimentality of Mario Puzo [author of *The Godfather*]."

But perhaps that's *Harlots'* challenge. The kind of audience that typically gets excited by "bodice-rippers" - or just by the thought of Lady Sybil playing a prostitute - may not hear "brainy" as a turn-on, and vice versa. Take the headline of a recent *Guardian* review of Season 3 - "Smutty sex trade drama is a feminist triumph" - and you see how easy it is for *Harlots* to fall between audiences.

Which really is a shame, because in an ideal world the combination of bodices and brains wouldn't even be remarked on.

Harlots has never dealt with an ideal world though. After all, it's set in London 1763, the capital of the world, the most cosmopolitan place on Earth, where one in five women is making her living selling sex.

Co-creator Moira Buffini (*Jane Eyre*) was partly inspired to create *Harlots* by reading Harris's *List of Covent Garden Ladies*, a bestselling yearly publication describing, in very fine language, the services of London's sex workers, from high-class courtesans to those who solicited in seedy bars and taverns. This gentleman's guide to whoring led her to an outlaw society of women who had found a way to survive within an economy of exploitation.



With the help of Oscar-nominated producers Alison Owen (*Elizabeth*, *Saving Mr. Banks*) and Debra Hayward (*Les Misérables*, *Love Actually*), she put together a rare all-female writing and directing team to create a mother and daughter drama about the family business - a brothel.

As *Rotten Tomatoes*' critics consensus for Season 1 put it, "*Harlots* uses its titillating subject matter to draw the viewer into a deeper drama about the intersection of survival, business, and family."

The first two seasons of *Harlots* revolved around rival brothel owners, Margaret Wells (Morton) and Lydia Quigley (Manville), but at the start of Season 3, it seems that Margaret's daughters, Charlotte (Brown Findlay) and Lucy (Eloise Smyth from *Fortitude*), can finally free themselves of their mother's feud.

But Charlotte soon learns that running a lucrative brothel brings enemies as well as friends, including new pimp in town Isaac Pincher (Allen). Can Charlotte protect her girls from the men who want to take over her business?

Meanwhile, Lucy pursues a new business opportunity of her own with another newcomer, Elizabeth Harvey (Angela Griffin), opening a 'molly house' catering for homosexuals - which pays double, because it's a hangable offense...

As *The Hollywood Reporter* put it, *Harlots* is "as thrilling and intelligent as ever in its third season... an intellectual lens into the sprawling business of sex work that also deeply empathizes with people who commodify their bodies..."

They go on to add that it's also "deliciously wanton, offering a formidable vision of marginalized women claiming their sexual autonomy — and economic freedom — from their controllers."

So whether you prefer clever, emotionally devastating costume dramas, or plot-driven take-off-your-costume dramas, *Harlots* is the next show you should be watching...

Watch the Season 1 trailer:

Watch the Season 3 trailer:

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