
The Fundamental Role of Prostitutes: How Harlots Dominated Medieval Society

Hailey Perry

Hailey Perry, from Philo, Illinois, wrote "The Fundamental Role of Prostitutes: How Harlots Dominated Medieval Society" during her junior year for Dr. Joy Kammerling's Renaissance and Reformation course in Spring 2015. A member of Phi Alpha Theta and Golden Key International Honour Society, Hailey will be earning her BA in History in May 2016.

Prostitution, the oldest human profession, played a fundamental role in the lives of medieval Christians. As a civic resource, brothels provided entertainment for youthful men, as well as an outlet for their "uncontrollable" sexual desires. Until the Reformation, canonists and theologians ignored the moral consequences and recognized prostitution as a necessary evil for both men and women. As a result, municipal brothels were opened in order to render authority over to the city. "Common women" were assumed universal to all and unfortunately lacked many privileges and rights other women and men possessed. Although Medieval Christians struggled with prostitution, without the profession many "honest" women would have perhaps been overwhelmed by crazed, horny men who lacked an outlet for their irrepressible desires.

So, who was a prostitute? "Most cities contained orphans, 'ruined' girls, and untrained women of the lowest classes who frequently had no choice but to sell their bodies. Their problems usually increased as they got older; some prostitutes went from one branch of the profession to another in a downward spiral."¹ For example, a prostitute would start off as a mistress, and then later become a prostitute at a brothel, but eventually she would become "too old" for the profession and she may choose to be a brothel-keeper, or madam; however, more often than not, former prostitutes end up on the streets as beggars.² Most canonists saw financial need as the main cause of prostitution, but they did not consider poverty as a justification.³ "Involuntary prostitutes (i.e., girls who had been sold into prostitution by their parents or masters) could petition the local bishop or other authority to liberate them from their carnal bondage."⁴

The treatment of a prostitute in medieval Europe, as well as how her trade was regulated for public order and policy, sheds some light on the expansion of power of the canonists at this time. Canonists, or the lawyers of the medieval church, "constructed an elaborate and closely reasoned system of jurisprudence to regulate all the branches of human activity that touched upon the moral interests, the business activities, and the social concerns of the church..."⁵ The Church and their canonists were extremely influential in the structure of how society functioned. It is important to note, that canonists relied heavily on Roman law as a major source for their legal and moral concepts of law. So, how did the canonists regulate the oldest human profession?⁶ First of all, they had to rely on a concrete definition for a prostitute, and they employed Saint Jerome's basic criteria for a prostitute: "A whore is one who is available for the lust of many men."⁷ A very short and simple definition, which clearly emphasized the promiscuity of the prostitute. For medieval canonists,

¹ Marty Williams and Anne Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994), 99.

² Williams and Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal*, 99.

³ James A. Brundage, "Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law," *Signs* 1 (1997): 836.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 842.

⁵ Brundage, "Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law," 826.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 825.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 827.

promiscuity was the key element of prostitution because without promiscuity, a woman would not be in the profession. Cardinal Hostiensis, one of the most prominent thirteenth-century canonists, stressed that “a prostitute was not only sexually promiscuous, she was openly and publicly promiscuous.”⁸ Another canonist, Joannes Andrea, also noted that a prostitute “systematically deceives those whom she serves...the simulation of love or at least emotional intimacy between the prostitute and her client.”⁹ Prostitution was an offering of the body in return for money, as long as the woman made herself available to more than one or two men.¹⁰

Canonists disapproved of prostitution, believing that it was morally offensive and needs to be repressed, however, they lacked argument from the scripture. Instead, they tolerated prostitution, distinguishing it as a necessary evil. Saint Augustine observed that the elimination of prostitution would cause a disturbance in social order and in the established patterns of sexual relationships. According to canonists and theologians, prostitution was necessary for the public good.¹¹ Because sexual intercourse is a part of nature, the practical toleration of prostitution was justified. It was no secret to the canonists that men had a natural appetite for sex with women, but, according to canonists, sexual appetite was not an excused circumstance for having sexual intercourse with a prostitute.

Though prostitution was seen as necessary evil, the Church still promoted the structure of marriage and its repression of sexual temptation. Although sex was allowed in marriage, for many theologians at this time, sex within marriage without intent to procreate, was still sinful.¹² However, some canonists focused their efforts on promoting sex within marriage so that both husband and wife would be satisfied and outlets such as prostitution, would not be necessary. The canonists treated sex within marriage as an obligation, enforceable at law.¹³ Monogamous marriage was one of the keys to a Christian life. Promiscuity was strictly forbidden for women, and women were more severely punished for committing adultery than men.¹⁴ There was no space in society for unmarried, heterosexual, active, single woman.¹⁵ If she was not a wife, then she was an assumed prostitute. According to the Church, women were more susceptible to sexual desires due to overly trusting nature, ignorance to sin, and their early onset of sexual readiness.¹⁶ These “handicaps” enabled the Church to teach a double standard of sexual morality. Theologians often taught that modesty was a woman’s glory, so therefore a woman who did not “blush at sex” was “at heart a whore.”¹⁷

Commercial prostitution tended to be largely in cities, due to the overwhelmingly wide variety of services in demand.¹⁸ City-run brothels, or municipal brothels required their brothel-keepers to swear an annual oath of office to the Council.¹⁹ Because the brothel was a civic asset, women were subjected to inspection by officials who were usually midwives that were hired to ensure that the brothel-keeper was fulfilling his obligation to provide the city with “suitable, clean, and healthy women.”²⁰ Prostitutes at municipal brothels were expected to always be free from

⁸ Ibid., 827.

⁹ Ibid., 828.

¹⁰ Ibid., 828.

¹¹ Brundage, “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law,” 830.

¹² Ibid., 831.

¹³ Ibid., 832.

¹⁴ Williams and Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal*, 92.

¹⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 104.

¹⁶ Brundage, “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law,” 833.

¹⁷ Ibid., 834.

¹⁸ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14.

¹⁹ Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 89.

²⁰ Ibid., 90.

diseases such as syphilis, should be of age, and of sound mind.²¹ Common women were also not allowed to develop preferences in their clients, even being forbidden to say no to any man who pays.²²

Despite brothels being public institutions, they were not “officially” open to all men; theoretically, married men were prohibited from entering, and consequently would even face punishment if they were discovered.²³ Of course, brothels were designed for a particular clientele—“journeymen and apprentices.”²⁴ The brothel served as a rite of passage for many young men, allowing them to celebrate their youthful male virility; young men were unsuited to marry until they could support a wife and children, and as a result, the brothel was the ideal evening entertainment for young men.²⁵ Sexual experience, even with a prostitute, signified a young man becoming “a real man”; furthermore, due to these prostitutes being “common women”, or belonging to all men in common, sexual experience with a prostitute also strengthened male bonding.²⁶

Because of the lack of social status for prostitutes, many were not even required to obey the law because she was beneath the law’s contempt.²⁷ Consequently, common women lacked legal protection. Prostitutes were not able to sue men for their fees, nor could they accuse anyone of theft or assault.²⁸ A common assumption at the time was only non-prostitutes, or chaste women, could actually be raped or assaulted due to a supposition that the women had given consent to all by her choice of profession.²⁹ On the other hand, town laws and even rape statutes existed in places that saw prostitution as a vital civic resource, which protected “honest” women from unruly men.³⁰ Money given to prostitutes was not permitted to be reclaimed by the customer, and according to doctrine of classical Roman lawyers, which was still current law in many secular jurisdictions, “the client had no right to take back the money he had paid for her sexual services.”³¹ Furthermore, prostitutes were not permitted to charge more than a “just price for her services.”³² The money she received was lawfully hers, and consequently she was forced to pay tithes from her earnings.³³ Saint Thomas Aquinas declared that she must pay the tithe, but the church is allowed to not accept the payment until she reforms.³⁴ Although they had some rights, prostitutes had extremely limited power in regards to either complaining wrongs done to her or alleging an assault or rape.³⁵ “The medieval law viewed the prostitute as a largely powerless person, socially degraded, but in actual practice tolerated and allowed to exercise some limited property rights in her earnings.”³⁶

Most clergy advocated reforming prostitutes, perhaps even the conversion of the women into nuns. They could even marry if they were able to find husbands; in 1198, Pope Innocent III stated marrying a prostitute as a means to reform her “a work of charity.”³⁷ Additionally, Gospel writers portrayed prostitutes as poor and exploited women who should be pitied not condemned.³⁸

²¹ Ibid., 91.

²² Ibid., 93.

²³ Ibid., 91.

²⁴ Roper, *The Holy Household*, 92.

²⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁶ Ibid., 94.

²⁷ Brundage, “Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law,” 837.

²⁸ Williams and Echols, *Pit and Pedestal*, 95.

²⁹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 106.

³⁰ Williams and Echols, *Pit and Pedestal*, 95.

³¹ Brundage, “Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law,” 837.

³² Brundage, “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law,” 838.

³³ Ibid., 838.

³⁴ Ibid., 838.

³⁵ Ibid., 839.

³⁶ Ibid., 841.

³⁷ Williams and Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal*, 94.

³⁸ Vern L. Bullough, “Sex Education in Medieval Christianity,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 13 (1977): 192.

Medieval Christians held a fascination with the legends of Harlot Saints. “Saints who had been sinners embodied the message that confession, contrition, and penance could wipe away the worst of sins, and saints who had been whores embodied it most drastically.”³⁹ Hagiography was one of the most popular literary genres, and four prostitute saints’ legends were widely known at this time: Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt, Thais, and Pelagia.⁴⁰ A whore who became a saint symbolized “the sinful soul redeemed through Christ,” while a prostitute who did not quit her profession was a “figure of sin and temptation.”⁴¹ Mary Magdalen, the prostitute mentioned in the Bible who had first discovered the empty tomb of Jesus and Jesus’s Resurrection, played a pivotal role in the way medieval Christians viewed prostitutes who sought reform, or redemption.⁴² Mary was the widow of rich landowner in Magdala who had began prostitution after spending her inheritance on “frivolous pleasures.”⁴³ Although Mary was never depicted as a professional prostitute, she became the patron saint of repentant prostitutes.⁴⁴ On the other hand, Mary of Egypt’s story is unique: she was a prostitute all of her life, even paying her passage to Jerusalem with her body. One day in church, a voice tells her to cross the Jordan in order for her sins to be forgiven. She finished her life as an ascetic in the desert, even accepting communion once from Saint Zosimus.⁴⁵ Asceticism and repentance remained crucial in Mary’s story, much like Thais, who was an extremely beautiful prostitute who enabled men to give her all of their riches for her services. After she repents to Saint Paphnutius, she burnt all of her possessions and retired to the desert as an ascetic. Saint Pelagia was an “actress,” a profession notorious for loose morals. She lived a life emphasizing her beauty, riches, gold, and gems, but after hearing Bishop Nonnus give a sermon, she converted and became a desert ascetic. During her final years, she disguised herself as a man, and only after her death did her fellow ascetics discover her true sex.⁴⁶

“As small numbers of prostitutes left the brothel, the Council showed its support for the reintegration of the women into respectable life by presenting them with an outfit of clothes—a gift⁴⁷ both practical and symbolic, for the mock noble attire of prostitutes branded them as such.” Reformers began to question the assumption that male desire was an uncontrollable force, which justified the means for prostitution.⁴⁸ Although prostitution was regarded as the cure for male lust, reformers and others alike began to see contradictions between church doctrine, law, and prostitution; promoting an illicit act as a necessary evil was no longer going to be accepted by those following the Reformation. The closure of town brothels represented a new idea that male lust could be directed towards marriage, and not towards a brothel. However, it would be wrong to assume that all medieval prostitution ends here: in fact, the line between prostitute and non-prostitute began to blur and distinguishing “good matrons from evil” was impossible.⁴⁹ Finally, though, “the whore” had become a moral category and not just a profession.

Despite resistance from theologians and canonists, prostitutes flourished in medieval society. Municipal brothels enabled commercial prostitution to an extent that served as an important civic resource for the city. Brothels played a crucial role, theoretically, as a justified outlet for men’s sexual desires. Because of their “sacrifice,” women were able to avoid the advances of men who had

³⁹ Karras, *Common Women*, 120.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴¹ Karras, *Common Women*, 119.

⁴² Bullough, “Sex Education in Medieval Christianity,” 192.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 192

⁴⁴ Ruth Mazo Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval England,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990): 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷ Karras, “Holy Harlots,” 103.

⁴⁸ Roper, *The Holy Household*, 107.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

uncontrollable emotions. Through hagiography, prostitution was seen as unnecessary evil for both men and women, until one day when the women would ultimately become pious Christian women and the men become faithful husbands.