

# Women in Medieval Europe

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Women in the medieval Europe were subjected to overwhelming oppression, stemming from centuries of misogyny. Religious figures persecuted them, making them shoulder Eve's sin of humanity by being forced out of the Garden of Eden, making them more prone to sin. With such views, women were limited in their freedoms and lifestyles. Peasant women were like a commodity used to better their family's financial or social standing through marriage. Some women were given to convents to secure their family's spiritual wealth. The majority of women, however, were restricted in many aspects of their lives, with few exceptions. This section will examine a few examples of women who did not fit the typical social archetype of their peers.

# Prostitution and Acceptance in Medieval Europe

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European medieval culture had a complex and often inconsistent relationship with the act of prostitution and the women who were known as prostitutes. Medieval laws, social structures, and religious systems treated the question of prostitution in complex and often contradictory ways. Prostitution is one of the oldest professions, and is found across political and cultural lines throughout the globe. Commonly viewed with disdain, prostitution has managed to survive throughout history despite endless attempts to eliminate it. Medieval society had such a stigma against prostitutes. Yet prostitution played a much more prominent role than would be expected. Understanding the relationship between medieval society and prostitution is essential for acquiring an accurate and complete perspective of this era's culture. Prostitutes would live in controversy and contradiction, with many of their lives subject to constant scrutiny.

Legal systems in medieval Europe promoted an inconsistent and contradictory attitude toward prostitution. They generally did not provide a coherent definition of what acts would count as prostitution or punishing the solicitation of prostitution. Instead, Kings and parliaments created laws and regulations and enacted punishments specifically for prostitutes. Laws pertaining to prostitution only involved restrictions and punishments, not a

uniform definition or method of determining any specific behavior that identified someone a prostitute.<sup>1</sup> This lack of legal framing created an opening for individual interpretation and the different levels of tolerance of prostitution, which explains why the treatment of prostitutes differed widely depending on the kingdom or even the local area. During the earlier part of the medieval era, rural prostitutes were never officially recognized or undersood as such. Although these rural prostitutes more than likely were still met with contempt by others, the fact that they would not be labeled in recognizable ways insulated rural women prostitutes from new laws and regulations.

Eventually, the ecclesiastical (religious) courts tried defining the term by the women's reputation or by the number of men that claimed to be her client.<sup>2</sup> These methods of determining whether or not a woman was a prostitute depended heavily on the word of others. Women who had lost favor or developed grudges with her neighbors could find themselves a victim of slander. There was an increase in court cases involving prostitution, due to people publicly using the term "whore" as an insult, with the judicial authorities taking it as a serious accusation. The lack of a legal definition created freedom from regulations for some and a cloud of suspicion for many.

Regulation of prostitution was a way of accepting its inevitability while still controlling and stigmatizing its effects. The legal authorities of the time thought it was more important to have as much control as possible over the women prostituting themselves, than criminalizing the act altogether:

municipal authorities hoped to guarantee more effectively the maintenance of public order by making sure that the business of

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 27.

prostitution should be conducted discreetly, without inconvenience or scandal to the community.<sup>3</sup>

This ideology not only allowed prostitution to exist, but drew a line between respectable citizens and scandalous whores. One of the popular ways of regulating prostitution was through the use of clothing. Depending on where they were, prostitutes were forbidden to wear fur lined hoods, coats, veils, dresses that trailed on the ground, or luxurious jewelry. These same laws provided prostitutes a dress code, which included wearing cord belts, bells on their sleeves, a striped hood, or displaying an insignia marked on their left hand.<sup>4</sup> This was a way for others to immediately recognize exactly what kind of woman she was and meant to be a form of public shaming, a constant tool used during this time to keep prostitutes firmly under social control.

Regulations also dictated the times and locations at which a prostitute could work. Prostitutes were prohibited from going into taverns or leaving a designated area in town. These locations created what is commonly referred to as red light districts, like in the fourteenth century where London's prostitutes worked on one street known as "Cock's Lane."<sup>5</sup> The famous philosopher and saint, Thomas Aquinas, said, "Prostitution in the towns is like the cesspool in the palace: take away the cesspool and the palace will become an unclean and evil-smelling place."<sup>6</sup> He like many others of his time viewed prostitution as a necessary evil; an evil that had to be contained and regulated. The main goal of these laws was to protect other respectable women from the influence of these prostitutes.

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<sup>3</sup> Leah Lydia, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 77.

<sup>4</sup> Leah, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> McNeill, Maggie. "The Honest Courtesan." Wordpress. Accessed December 3, 2015. <https://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/resources/quotes/>

The final way in which the medieval legal system accepted prostitution, was through the various punishments instituted for law breaking prostitutes. Women convicted of being a prostitute, but who had never presented themselves as such, faced harsh penalties. Shaming, made evident by forcing a humiliating outer appearance to others, was a reoccurring theme. For example, a woman was paraded around town with her clothes stripped from her upper body. Another punishment illustrating the use of shaming was shaving the convicted woman's head. In locations where prostitution was already criminalized, women were sent to prison. However, many were subjected to public shaming on the way there, forced to wear a striped hood and hold a white rod, which was another symbol of prostitution found in religious text.<sup>7</sup> These punishments helped to keep prostitution regulation laws enforced and were used as a tool to warn respectable women not to follow that lifestyle.

The legal system was not alone in the simultaneous toleration and scapegoating of prostitution. Society also recognized the importance the practice held. One of the ways it did this was by the institution of brothels. Brothels helped to keep prostitutes in a contained area, but they also were celebrated for the positive outcomes they brought. In Florence, Italy, they claimed the purpose of brothels was to battle the declining birthrates and inspire men to marry, who otherwise would seek homosexual acts. Florence was not alone in crediting brothels for bettering society. In Dijon, France, brothels were recognized for creating an outlet for sex so that men did not go out and rape innocent girls. Germany reported a similar result by believing brothels made the streets safer for respectable women and overall restricting crime to the area around the brothels.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 32.

Sex was and continues to be a difficult topic to discuss, and during the medieval period the men were the only group allowed to talk about sex. The popular thought about sex during this time was that men had uncontrollable urges and it was a woman's responsibility to keep men from giving into their urges. This is one of the reasons men were more often than not, excused or not held accountable for an act of rape, but the woman was.

The medieval world adopted a hydraulic model of masculine sexuality: people believed that pressure builds up and has to be released through a safety valve (marriage or prostitution), or eventually the dam will burst and men will commit seduction, rape, adultery, and sodomy.<sup>9</sup>

Brothels played to this way of thinking by creating a place where men could release these uncontrollable urges. This is one of the reasons various communities allowed such questionable institutions to exist.

Society accepted the practice of prostitution by setting up a class system exclusively for prostitutes. A *common woman* was on the lower end of the spectrum, and was what contemporary American society would call streetwalkers. They were most often found in towns and cities, and were the women who populated the brothels. *Honest courtesans* were the upper class of prostitution. Women who were categorized as such had to meet certain qualifications. They must have come from a noble family background and possess a wide expanse of education. These women were truly the celebrities of medieval prostitution, the most famous being, Veronica Franco.

A reoccurring publication distributed throughout the nobility, which eventually trickled down to the masses, ranked prostitutes. This ranking system reflected an honest courtesan's reputation, popularity, and various talents. Veronica Franco was constantly ranked at the top of the list. Not only was she well educated, but she also gained prestige for her role in a diplomatic deal with

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<sup>9</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 6.

King Henry III of France.<sup>10</sup> Due to her reputation, a nobleman who wished to further his status would seek out Franco. In the medieval mindset, a nobleman who was able to afford a contract with a highly ranked honest courtesan advanced their personal reputation in the court. This way of attributing status to a high-end courtesan did not apply to common women, who had the opposite effect on men's reputations by lowering it. Women who came from common means and fell into prostitution were destined to lead a hard and despised life.

In some communities, prostitutes were used as scapegoats for other underlying social problems. Due to their occupation, prostitutes were tasked with the job of preventing men from raping respectable women. They were expected to fulfill this mission, yet at the same time be condemned for it. Shouldering the shame and guilt of a community was also a prostitute's job. They were constantly made examples of in public displays of humiliation, which could potentially "[...] undermine the social order, and because it represented in the most extreme and dramatic way tendencies that were characteristic of feminine sexuality."<sup>11</sup> Prostitutes were also the first to be blamed for anything that went wrong in the community they worked in. For instance, plagues, a bad harvest season, or a freak act of nature, were considered their doing. Because they represented the worst possible type of women, those who lived in deviant lives, they were automatically thought of bringing evil into the places they lived. These women were frequently banned from these communities only to have the ban lifted a short time later. Living a life, which was constantly scrutinized, prostitutes were often riddled with guilt, and solely dependent on others, leading to live in dire poverty.

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Rosenthal, "Franco, Veronica (1546-1591), Venetian Courtesan Poet," University of Chicago. Last modified 2003, accessed December 3, 2015. <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/IWW/BIOS/A0017.html>

<sup>11</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 5.

Surprisingly, the Catholic church was sympathetic to prostitutes. This point is illustrated by the Church's advocacy on behalf of prostitutes as well as their active participation in the market for prostitutes. In fact, in many religious areas the clergy made up the majority of the prostitute's client base.<sup>12</sup> This evidence is shocking, especially in light of the Catholic churches stance on women and sex in general. Sex was not supposed to be for pleasure, but exclusively for procreation purposes. Under this constraint, a couple who had sex but failed to conceive a child were technically, in the Catholic church's eyes, committing a grave sin. Women also were condemned by the church for being temptresses, who diverted good men from an honest and virtuous life; they were after all born with a piece of Eve in them, who was solely responsible for tempting Adam and casting humanity out of Eden. The contradiction between the Church that condemned non-procreative sex and the Church whose members frequently solicited prostitutes is plain to see.

One of the leading religious figures and theologian of this time, St. Augustine, was a driving force behind the church's approval of prostitution. This is contradictory to many of his teachings, where he repeatedly demonizes both sex and women. Yet, he saw the act of prostitution a necessary evil in society, firmly believing that if a man with urges is looking for an outlet, he should go to women already tainted than defiling an innocent one. He went on to state that to "suppress prostitution, and capricious lusts will overthrow society."<sup>13</sup> In fact, it was St. Augustine who was the driving force behind repealing any laws that sought to ban prostitution. His backing of prostitution

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<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Ward, *Women In Medieval Europe, 1200-1500* (Great Britain: Pearson Education, 2002), 104.

<sup>13</sup> McNeill, Maggie. "The Honest Courtesan." Wordpress. Accessed December 3, 2015. <https://maggiecmneill.wordpress.com/resources/quotes/a>



was enough for other clergy to take the same stance and thus started a double standard of religious life.

The Church also demonstrated their tacit acceptance of prostitution through asserting its authority over prostitutes. They fashioned this authority similar to the medieval legal systems, thus policing their souls. In many communities “being labeled a whore [...] had serious consequences, and that also automatically granted both local secular and church authorities rights over her.”<sup>14</sup> This authority was unique in religious culture. Under normal circumstances the Church only became involved in legal matters when there was an accusation of witchcraft or another type of excessive heresy. Prostitutes were wholly bound to religious legal regulation. Although their actions were condemned, they faced very little ecclesiastical penalties. This presented another contradiction on the Church’s part, but once again many clergies overlooked this conundrum.

The Church, which undoubtedly contributed to the practice of prostitution, also sought to regulate and police prostitutes’ souls. This was done in a variety of ways. One was to have brothels host a resident cleric. Another was for communities to require prostitutes to attend religious sermons, separately from the public of course. The “goal of these arrangements was to give women ample opportunity to do penance and to encourage them to repent.”<sup>15</sup> Which from a medieval outsider’s view was a fruitless endeavor. The churches attempt to regulate their souls, was also another type of shaming prostitutes had to endure. This was another attempt in having male supervision over a group of unpredictable women. The church feared they would spread their lifestyle to impressionable young girls. Through the mandated act of

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<sup>14</sup> Karras, *Common Women*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Leah, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 87.

confession and penance, the church hoped to cause girls to think twice before living a deviant life.

Shame was undoubtedly an ever-present entity in a medieval European prostitute's life. It is evident that the humiliation and legal consequences were not placed on the men involved. Women, either prostitutes or virtuous were held to a standard that men were not. This was evidenced by the legal, religious and societal expectations of men and the counter expectations of women. Men were rewarded, while women were responsible for either their actions or the actions of the men around them. Prostitution was just another facet of this culture and an important part of understanding the dynamics of medieval culture.