

Sinners and Saints: The Elasticity of “Prostitute” in Medieval Europe

Honors Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with honors research distinction in History in the undergraduate colleges of the Ohio State University

by

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April 2022

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The world's oldest profession. Ladies of the night. Colloquialisms that have been part of human speech for many millennia, as prostitution has remained a core part of human society since before our first written records. The historical study of prostitution is a developing field, but many scholars have paid particular attention to prostitution in the medieval period—an era largely defined by the dominance of the Catholic Church. The relationship between the Catholic Church and prostitution is complex, in that surfacely the Church needed to condemn it, as prostitution intrinsically involves intercourse outside of marriage, which is a sin. Prostitution also represents the union of the sins of lust and greed, making it one of the most grievous sins in which a person can partake. Fundamentally, from the medieval perspective, prostitution as a profession was grounded in an unholy act, and the women who partook in it were considered sinners of the highest degree.

And yet, one of the most influential theologians in history, Saint Augustine of Hippo, infamously likened prostitutes to sewers—dirty, but necessary. The reasons behind this necessity are myriad and conflicting, one of the most common being that it provides an outlet for male lust, therefore also preventing men from defiling women of class in society. Others have posited that it discouraged sodomy¹ which was considered a worse sin than heterosexual sex that took place outside of marriage. Prostitution provided an outlet for these sinful urges, and therefore was a better alternative, making it an ultimately necessary part of Christian society. As such, the characterization of the medieval period as a pious and prudish era with respect to sex is complicated, in that the Church was required to condemn prostitution on the basis of sin, and yet also acknowledge that it was essential to society.

¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 1996) 5.

Because the Church recognized the need for prostitution, it was necessary that prostitution be controllable. This control was asserted on multiple levels, both tangible and intangible—tangible referring to formal canon law and management of brothels, and intangible referring to sermon stories and other forms of gospel that equated prostitution with sin, and sometimes even encouraged repentance. But beyond this, the definition of “prostitute” in the medieval period was convoluted. Sex in general was something that technically was discouraged in the medieval period, but was recognized as essential (and inevitable), and boundaries between when sex was acceptable and when it was not were not always clear. By extension, the lines between prostitution, fornication, and “proper” marital sex were blurred, meaning essentially that any woman who engaged in intercourse was at the risk of being labeled a prostitute. In the eyes of the Church, women were vessels of lust, had higher sex drives than men, and were associated more closely with the body and sexuality.² In other words, the belief was that women wanted to have sex and prostitution was a mechanism of achieving it. The gospel that condemns “prostitutes” also condemns “lustful women,” and as such the definition of “prostitute” is muddied, because a prostitute could be a woman who charged money for sex or simply a woman who engaged in sex outside of marriage. By conflating these two acts, the attempts made by the Church to control prostitution are in essence reflective of the Church’s attempt to control women, given that there was no clear distinction between a formal “prostitute” and a sexually active woman.

Our modern understanding of the label “prostitute” is a person (usually a woman) who engages in sexual activities for a profit. While the concept of a prostitute is an old one, the terminology gets tricky in the medieval period. As discussed by Leah Lydia Otis in *Prostitution*

² Karras, *Common Women*, 3.

in Medieval Society (1985), there was a marked shift in the meaning of the word “prostitute” during the Middle Ages. What once was a neutral term that roughly meant “public woman” came to mean “sinner” or “lost woman.”³ Otis also remarks on the term “meretrix,” a Latin word meaning “prostitute” that dates back to the Roman Empire. She explains that the term initially had no negative connotation, or was otherwise neutral, but meaning shifted over time. “Public woman,” or “common woman” as Ruth Mazzo Karras observed in the English legal records, referred to a woman with many sexual partners, and usually a woman who was paid for engaging in sexual acts. These women “belonged to the men of the common,”⁴ meaning that because they had no formal connection to an individual man like a father or a husband, they belonged to men as a whole. This designation was arguably an attempt to control these women, to place them under the supervision of men in the abstract sense. More to the point, medieval society believed that any woman not under the direct control of a man was at risk of becoming a prostitute.⁵

While “public woman” was perhaps not a complimentary label, the shift into deeming prostitutes “lost women” holds a more derogatory meaning—they are women who have strayed from the path of morality. In the medieval period, a woman’s honor was defined by her purity.⁶ Her character was reliant on her virginal or chaste status; sexual promiscuity and morality were mutually exclusive. Therefore, prostitutes were not just women who were having sex, they were immoral women. More importantly, this shift in meaning equated engaging in sexual intercourse for a profit with religious sin.

But what makes the definition of “prostitute” difficult to pin down is its conflation with “whore,” or simply a woman who had multiple sexual partners. While prostitution usually

³ Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1985), 49.

⁴ Karras, *Common Women*, 3.

⁵ Karras, *Common Women*, 3.

⁶ Karras, *Common Women*, 21.

involved a woman charging for her services, therefore combining the sins of lust and greed, the term “whore” could apply to any woman who engaged in sex outside of marriage (or in some cases, even within marriage). This is because being a whore was not necessarily defined by a series of actions, but rather a mindset, specifically, a lustful mindset. A woman who “lusted for the pleasures of the flesh” was in her heart a whore, even if she never acted on these urges. This further complicates the definition of a prostitute, or a whore, because the definition is no longer confined by visible or tangible behavior.

Both labels carried significant weight. According to Karras, the word “whore” was not used as frequently outside of London; instead, it was more common simply to accuse women of fornication or adultery.⁷ However, to be called a whore was a serious accusation, and there are many records of defamation cases involving the term. Furthermore, medieval court cases involving “whores” did not necessarily refer to professional prostitutes, especially because many of these cases may have been maliciously instigated.⁸ And yet, the gravity of this label is evident. Being called a whore is an offense worthy of prosecution, because as stated earlier, a woman’s honor resided solely in her purity and any accusation made against her chastity (falsely or otherwise) was a serious issue.

To fully understand how prostitutes were considered in society, an understanding of how medieval society considered women and sex is necessary, and these views themselves are often equally as murky. Sex was believed to be an act that was “done” to someone, rather than an activity that requires two partners each with agency, as we could classify intercourse in the modern era.⁹ Despite this, women were believed to have higher sex drives than men, because passivity during

⁷ Karras, *Common Women*, 28.

⁸ Karras, *Common Women*, 27.

⁹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, Third Edition (Routledge, 2017), 5.

intercourse “did not necessarily have anything to do with who was pursued and who was the pursuer, or who enjoyed sex more.”¹⁰ Therefore, despite women usually being the “receiving” actors during intercourse, this did not mean that the women were not responsible for inciting the sexual act.

More fundamentally, the female body itself represented temptation in physical form, and sexual temptation was considered one of the highest forms of evil. Prayers among men for strength against temptation were not uncommon,¹¹ and what should be noted above all else is that the blame for this temptation was not placed on men for having these thoughts, but rather women for existing as vessels of temptation. Additionally, women were not only considered inherently sexual creatures, they were considered far more susceptible to sinful urges than men. Women were far weaker than men in terms of spirit and faith—in fact, in terms of separation of the two sexes, men were associated with the soul, and “rationality,” whereas women were associated with the body, and “emotion.” By this distinction, women are conceived as being more prone to sexual desire on a fundamental level, because they are ruled by the body and lack the inherent restraint and “reason” that defines the male sex.

In terms of being more susceptible to sin, one popular theory was that the female body was more biologically “porous” than a man’s which made possession by demons and other creatures of sin easier. Women’s bodies were thought of as figments of either lust or impurity. Menstruation, for example, was a key characteristic of the corruption of women. The sinfulness of women is traceable to the myth of creation, in that all women inherited Eve’s capacity for sin. However, despite the “impurity” of menstruation and other parts of the female body, women

¹⁰ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 5.

¹¹ Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others*, 65.

were paradoxically considered pillars of purity until they participated in intercourse. As Joan Young Gregg writes, “[m]ore desirable was a socioreligious idealization of female virginity and chastity and its presentation as an attractive alternative to the secular, that is, sexual life of ordinary women.”¹²

The reasonings for these conceptions of women’s sexuality are largely biological. According to medieval humoral theory, women’s bodies are cold and wet, and men’s bodies are dry and hot. By this theory, sex is partially necessary to “warm up” women’s bodies, or otherwise sustain them. Aristotelian theory regarding gender is that women actually have the same reproductive organs as men, they are simply altered, or “further internal” than a man’s because of women’s cooler body temperature. Aristotle also posited that if a woman has too much sex, her male appendage will emerge, and she will become a man. While this theory may seem outlandish, one possible reason for the anxiety surrounding prostitutes is that because prostitutes were so often engaging in sex, they were more masculine than the average woman, and therefore had more agency. Medieval society operated under the one-sex theory, which claims that all humans are technically men, and women are simply biologically-deficient men. If women are capable of becoming more masculine through an abundance of sex, then prostitutes pose a threat to society. They have adopted the ungovernable traits of a man in that they had their own income, but this theory adds a level of agency on a biological level.

Despite prostitutes being considered sinners of the highest degree—to the point at which even being associated with the label was an extreme level of defamation—they were paradoxically deemed necessary to the function of Christian society, an idea coined by St. Augustine of Hippo, one of the most influential theologians in history, and many of his

¹² Joan Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews* (State University of New York Press, 1997), 103.

philosophies carry significant weight, especially during the medieval period. His views on marriage were of particular importance, given that sex and essentially all other aspects of marriage became the business of the Church in the Middle Ages. His treatise “On the Good of Marriage,” which was completed around 401 C.E. became fundamental to medieval society’s conception of marriage and sex.

The treatise was written partially in response to the idea that holy virginity was preferable to marriage, an idea perhaps most famously perpetuated by the monk Jovinianus. Augustine begins his counter by asserting that human nature is intrinsically social, and furthermore that society is created through social bonds. More specifically, the “first natural bond of human society is man and wife.”¹³ This is because according to the creation myth woman was formed out of man, making the bond between a man and a woman natural, or even possibly a return to the natural state. This then inherently sets up the idea that the union between a man and his wife is a key part of human society on a biological level.

In terms of reckoning with intercourse itself, Augustine insinuates that God allowed for the possibility of sexual intercourse between animals when he created them, and therefore sex is a part of God’s design. As such, the act of sexual intercourse cannot be the ultimate sin, because it is enabled by God’s model of living things. Furthermore, children are the product of intercourse, and therefore herein lies perhaps the most basic refutation of the idea that virginity is the most holy option. And yet while the biological results of intercourse are of course necessary, Augustine stipulates that marriage is beneficial beyond this component. First, it bonds the two sexes, which is necessary for human society given the social nature of humans. Second, and perhaps most importantly, it “brings lust under a lawful bond.”¹⁴

¹³ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, (Trans. C.L. Cornish, 1887), 1.

¹⁴ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 5.

This is in essence Augustine's core defense of marriage, because he acknowledges that lust is a sin, and therefore while marriage does permit acting on one's urges, because it is done under a holy bond the sin is diminished. While other theologians have disagreed, Augustine wrote that sexual intercourse that occurred within the bonds of marriage but without the intent to create children did not qualify as fornication, but rather a "minor fault." Seeking sexual gratification outside the bonds of marriage however, counted as a "deadly fault."¹⁵ In other words, it is better to have frequent sexual intercourse with one's spouse than to have infrequent intercourse with a partner outside one's marriage. This theory thus lays the groundwork for the social ostracization of prostitutes, as their profession relies on sex that takes place outside of the covenant of marriage, therefore making their entire career a "deadly fault." However, by extension there is an admission on Augustine's part that sexual urges, while sinful, are natural, and marriage exists as an outlet for these urges. Therefore, there is room for prostitutes on a fundamental level within medieval society, because sexual urges have always and will always exist, and while marriage is the preferable mechanism for controlling these urges, even Augustine admits that another outlet is necessary.

Also of note is Augustine's discussion of chastity, which he links to female obedience. Both qualities are admirable in women, but what is interesting is that he claims that obedience is the holier of the two. This is partly because a disobedient woman is more vulnerable to other sins, like being "proud, litigious, drunk, or covetous," and therefore disobedience inherently allows for the compounding of sin, making it more grievous than the singular sin of lust.¹⁶ He lays out an extensive example of sinful women, explaining that an obedient married woman is "better" than a disobedient virgin, affirming that chastity is of lesser importance than obedience

¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 6.

¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 30.

with respect to female partners. While this argument bolsters Augustine's claim that marriage is good because it is not sinful (or rather less sinful), it also offers insight into why prostitutes were so shunned. They represented not only the lustful woman, but the disobedient woman. The prostitute does not adhere to the traditional rules of society or gospel, and she does not answer to a man, therefore making her the paradigm of disobedience. Furthermore, he argues that the sin of lust is a result of the flesh being disobedient of the spirit, which was a byproduct of original sin.¹⁷

In terms of women being physical embodiments of lust, many pastoral writers claimed that women's lust originated from greed and pride.¹⁸ Pride in appearance, particularly clothing, was closely associated with the sin of lust. While vanity was a sin for which both men and women were criticized, it was more an accusation that targeted women. Because women rarely had means of their own, wearing excessively lavish clothing was one of the limited outlets for an outward expression of wealth or status. This is of course criticized, because it is an engagement with the sin of pride. A popular sermon story from the late Middle Ages catalogs a woman who "was gaily adorned with scarves, and trailing behind her was a long train upon which danced a multitude of fiends."¹⁹ The devils that haunt this woman are specifically tied to her ostentatious garment, which insinuates that the vanity represented by her long train is what connects her to sin. Indeed, the woman sees that "these fiends had great power over her because of her pride in her attire," which explicitly shows that the sin of pride is what has allowed these devils into this woman's life. The idea that women were more susceptible to pride in their appearance then can act as a device for controlling women's clothing. Societal standards for women's dress during the medieval period varied widely by region, but overarching themes of modesty were

¹⁷ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 30.

¹⁸ Karras, *Common Women*, 109.

¹⁹ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 110.

paramount in nearly all Christian societies. Because men could so easily be tempted by lust, it was up to women to dress in a way that would not incite advances. Even if a woman did not intend to kindle lust by means of her clothing, if a man did make an advance she was still to blame for letting the devil use her as his tool.²⁰ By tying the sins of lust and pride together at the locus of women's dress, women are made responsible for the lust of men because of their appearance, arguably one of the few things women had a modicum of control over in the medieval period.

Prostitutes were inherently concerned with their appearance. It was how they attracted customers and therefore how they made their livelihood. Because a focus on her appearance was enough to condemn a woman who was moral in all other aspects, prostitutes were thus further categorized as sinners, given their occupation with their appearance and adherence to vanity. Therefore, Augustine's condemnation of pride as the ultimate sin and society's demonization of prostitution can be linked, in that prostitutes were often concerned with their appearance, which conflated the sins of pride and lust.

Augustine asserts that prostitutes are necessary, but that they also commit grievous sin by their occupation. And yet, the "prostitute saint" trope implies that simply being a prostitute does not exclude one from redemption. On the contrary, prostitute saints appear to be some of the most holy figures within medieval hagiography with Mary Magdalene being of course of the highest influence. She was arguably the most important saint after the Virgin Mary, which is of note on two counts: one, that she reached that level of influence as a woman, and two, that she reached that level of influence as a prostitute.

²⁰ Karras, *Common Women*, 110.

Mary Magdalene was rarely depicted as a professional prostitute (that is, one who charged money for her services), but rather a woman who simply engaged in promiscuous activities on account of her own lust. Indeed, according to the Golden Legend—a compilation of Saint’s Lives written in the thirteenth century by the Archbishop of Genoa Jacobus de Voragine—Magdalene and her siblings came from wealth. So reads the legend, “Mary Magdalene had her surname of Magdalo, a castle, and was born of right noble lineage and parents, which were descended of the lineage of kings.”²¹ By establishing Magdalene as someone from wealth, it seems unlikely that she would pursue prostitution as an avenue for accumulating wealth; thus, her prime motivator must be lust. The legend continues: “Mary gave herself to all delights of the body,”²² which reinforces the notion that Magdalene was chasing intercourse, not wealth. This complicates our working definition of prostitute, because while no gospel ever used the word “prostitute” or “harlot” to describe Mary Magdalene, her background as a prostitute is accepted as an unspoken fact in the medieval world, and this label is not dependent on her having intercourse in exchange for money, but rather a desire to partake in the “delights of the body.”

The Golden Legend thoroughly condemns this activity, despite Magdalene not explicitly charging money for her services:

Then when Magdalene abounded in riches, and because delight is fellow to riches and abundance of things; and for so much as she shone in beauty greatly, and in riches, so

²¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend* (Medieval Sourcebook Fordham University, Volume IV), 36.

²² Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 36.

much the more she submitted her body to delight, and therefore she lost her right name, and was called customably a sinner.²³

This passage implies that there is a connection between an accumulation of wealth and a desire to commit sins of the flesh, but nowhere does it claim that Magdalene was a professional prostitute with a monetary rate. Rather, the implication is that wealth begets a desire for “delight,” and therefore the sin of accumulated wealth begets the sin of lust. Therefore, Magdalene is condemned as a sinner, and she has lost her “right name,” or her status.

Despite this seeming increase in her lust and participation in intercourse, when she met the “Lord Jesu Christ,” she famously washed his feet “with the tears of her eyes and dried them with the hair of her head.”²⁴ Not only is this representative of his willingness to forgive her, as “he would not have suffered a sinful woman to have touched him,” but it shows that she held a high place within the circle of Christ. As Karras explains, Magdalene’s wealth, noble background, and beauty made her a more acceptable friend of Christ, but her status does not negate the fact that a woman was of such importance to Christ that not only was she able to touch him, but she was one of the first people to be incorporated into his inner circle.²⁵ She is mentioned by name twelve times in the canonical gospels, which is more often than many male saints. She was undoubtedly one of the most influential saints, given her proximity to Christ, and according to record she was one of the most popular saints of the medieval period--which may have had to do with her tale of redemption. Magdalene was associated with sin in the highest

²³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 36.

²⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 37.

²⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1.1 (1999): 21.

degree, and yet she ended her story as one of Christ's confidants, often referred to as "Apostle of the Apostles."²⁶

But what exactly is Mary Magdalene's sin? According to the Golden Legend, she seeks "delights." One line specifically says she "submitted her body to delight," implying sex, but this is as close we get to an explanation of to what "delights" actually refers. Other depictions of Mary Magdalene portray her singing and dancing prior to her relationship with Christ, which insinuates that simple revelry was also a sin. Indeed, Karras makes note that she was commonly depicted participating in a "courtly dance," an activity that was associated with sin.²⁷ The perception then of Magdalene as a prostitute stems from her engagement in frivolous activities, or activities that would prompt "delight": singing, dancing, and having sex. There is no mention of her charging money, and therefore her label of "prostitute" one solely as a woman who enjoys and seeks out sex. It should be noted that no piece of gospel ever refers to Mary Magdalene as a "prostitute," but the public perception of her during the medieval period was that she was in fact labelled a prostitute. Magdalene is a woman who seeks pleasure, and this is her sin. This is of course in line with medieval canon law, which articulates that any sexually promiscuous woman is a whore.²⁸

The Golden Legend explains that Mary Magdalene got her name from the castle she inherited, called Magdalo.²⁹ And yet another tale claims that she hailed from the town of Magdala, a town that was known for sin, specifically sexual sin.³⁰ This is of note, because prostitutes were often considered "city women," a term that has continued into the modern era.

²⁶ Kevin Brown, "'Tis Pity She's a Whore: The Revision of Mary Magdalene in Contemporary Fiction," *Papers on Language and Literature* 42, no. 3 (2006), 300.

²⁷ Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," 26.

²⁸ Karras, *Common Women*, 27.

²⁹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 36.

³⁰ Brown, "'Tis a Pity She's a Whore,'" 294.

Not only does the idea of a “common woman” connote a woman who belongs to the people of a city, which in a way associates prostitutes with a larger public, but larger towns and urban centers in general were often more closely associated with sin than the countryside. In medieval parlance, the countryside connotes “pastoral” and peaceful, whereas the city represents urbanity and sin. Magdalene’s name, and the mentions of “seven demons”³¹ being expelled from her (presumably a reference to the seven deadly sins), help to establish her early life as sinful.

The focus of Magdalene’s tale in the Golden Legend is decidedly not her past as a prostitute, but rather her redemption and ensuing following of Christ. Themes of redemption are evident in nearly all the tales of prostitute saints, of which there is a surprising number. Mary Magdalene is of course the most famous, but the theme of a female prostitute being reformed was rather common during the medieval period.

Saint Mary of Egypt, for example, lived as a prostitute until she traveled to Jerusalem. In the original tale, Mary does not charge for her services, but rather begs for money to sustain herself, implying that this life of prostitution is only partly motivated by her desire to have sex. However, the story undergoes a notable shift in the twelfth century. While the original tale, which dates back to a Greek text, stipulates that Mary did not charge money for intercourse, later versions implied that she did, and eventually it was claimed that she worked in a brothel before receiving the blessing of the Virgin Mary.³² This shift could potentially be explained by the period of institutionalization of prostitution that much of Europe underwent beginning in the thirteenth century. As Otis outlines, the Ordinance of 1256 in France lays the groundwork for the gradual organization and state participation in prostitution, and municipally-owned brothels

³¹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, 37.

³² Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” 9.

began appearing approximately in the 1360s.³³ While it would perhaps be irresponsible to paint these few centuries as periods of entirely institutionalized prostitution, it is logical to imagine that stories of prostitute saints would also begin to shift to reflect this change in how prostitution was regarded in society.

Karras outlines this tale, explaining how when Mary of Egypt attempted to enter a church in Jerusalem to repent, she was barred entry, presumably on the grounds of her impurity as a result of her sexual past. Despite this, the Virgin Mary interceded on her behalf, claiming that Mary must cleanse her sins in the River Jordan, after which her sins will be forgiven. The notion of water being cleansing is old in canon law, and the fact that it is capable of “healing” decades-worth of public prostitution is significant. This water in particular is significant, given that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan river, making its waters a relic. The idea that the same water is being used to cleanse a prostitute is powerful, because it demonstrates that even a harlot is worthy of salvation by one of the most holy rivers in the world. Beyond this cleansing, Mary of Egypt spent many years in the desert, during which she hardly ate or drank. Indeed, Karras specifies that she survived on three loaves of bread for seventeen years, and then another thirty years without eating or drinking anything.³⁴ The severe nature of this fasting was considered holy, and was a rather common phenomenon among saints and other clergy members in the Middle Ages. Mary’s ability to turn from a life of prostitution to being able to subsist on morsels (and eventually nothing at all) shows quite a dramatic redemption arc, as this mode of subsistence was achieved by only the very holy.

This theme is repeated in the story of Saint Thaïs, another saint who turned from a life of prostitution to desert asceticism. Interestingly, Thaïs is described as charging money for her

³³ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 12.

³⁴ Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” 8.

services, the tale going so far as to claim that she was an “expensive prostitute,” only having sex with those who had the most wealth to offer.³⁵ This implies that greed was her prime motivation for engaging in prostitution, not lust. Again, we see the definition of “prostitute” complicated, because while both Thaïs and Mary of Egypt are classified as prostitute saints, only one was (initially) known to charge money, the implication being that the monetary element is not always a necessary requirement for being classified as a prostitute.

Despite charging for her services, and thereby associating herself with greed, Thaïs in later stories was also condemned for her pride. She was described as being very beautiful and vain, traits common to prostitutes in sermon stories. Medieval Christianity considered vanity to be a subset of pride, the sin that Augustine condemns as being worse than lust.³⁶ Therefore, the redemption that Thaïs undergoes – fasting and then “retiring to the desert”-- could have been motivated on three counts: committing the sin of greed, the sin of lust, and the sin of pride. Indeed, Thaïs was instructed by the monk who converted her to burn her earthly goods, which is symbolic of penance for greed, or an accumulation of material wealth. While most depictions of Thaïs show her destroying her worldly attachments or praying, some depictions show her with money, which suggests that the public may have assumed her primary sin was greed, establishing her as perhaps the most “traditional” prostitute saint.

The story of Thaïs also expresses the concern that prostitutes are responsible for their customers submitting to sin, most clearly articulated in the phrase “she sent them to hell and would have to account for their souls as well as her own.”³⁷ The idea of women being held responsible for tempting men, and therefore responsible for any sins caused by this temptation, is

³⁵ Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” 12.

³⁶ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 30.

³⁷ Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” 12.

not new. Despite Augustinian notions of prostitutes being necessary to “curb the impulses of man,”³⁸ the reigning ideology concerning lust during the medieval period was that women were in fact more susceptible to desires of the flesh, and as such any occasion in which a man succumbed to his impulses was the fault of the women--or rather, the “temptress.” By this reasoning, it is only logical then that a sinful woman is responsible for the souls she damned along with her own, because she is the one who caused the men to sin.

These saints all encompass different definitions of “prostitute.” Some actually engage in sexual acts for payment, while others simply enjoy sexual acts, or partake in vanity. And yet all were considered prostitutes in medieval society, and were venerated as prostitutes who had been reformed. This is the key element of these stories: all of these women atone for their sins and find redemption, either through repentance or at the hands of Jesus Christ himself. These stories are in effect not attempting to define what a prostitute was in society, because all of these women embodied different aspects of “prostitution.” Instead, a sweeping generalization is made that all prostitutes, no matter their specific sinful acts, have the capacity to repent and become saints. This was a necessary message, given that the Church must give hope to even the most grievous of sinners.

One of the mechanisms at the disposal of the Church for disseminating the message of the gospel to the greater public was the sermon story. In essence, the sermon story encapsulated a moral lesson or piece of gospel in a more accessible form for church-goers, who were usually unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Holy Bible. Scholars have noted that these stories were popular with the illiterate, as they were generally short and were reflective of everyday life. Many of the most popular sermon stories involved a sinner either being punished or reformed,

³⁸ Saint Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage*, 12.

presumably because punishment meant for excitement. Interestingly, scholars note that stories in which women were the targets were popular among men, and stories in which men were preached against were popular among women.³⁹ Sermon stories like the one mentioned previously that condemned prostitutes were common, and so were stories that condemned “lustful women” in a more vague sense. The actual use of the word “prostitute” or “whore” is rare in sermon stories, but general notions of lechery among women are common themes, which can arguably be viewed as a mechanism of the Church passing judgement on sexually promiscuous women, women who were often conflated with prostitutes. One story, dubbed “A lecherous woman fails to reform,” tells the tale of a woman who was mistress to a man for many years, until one day attending church she listens a preacher tell of “the horrible pains of hell ordained for those who refused to stop committing the sin of lechery.”⁴⁰ Moved, the woman repents, but is convinced by her lover to once again have intercourse, on grounds that surely nothing bad will happen (and “the woman’s heart was stirred and she committed the sin of lechery as she had done before”⁴¹). The two lovers die suddenly, and a passing holy man hears their spectral forms conversing in the afterlife, condemning each other for their sins and subsequent punishments—indeed, the man curses the woman, “if you had held firm to the promise you made yourself, you might have saved both of us.”⁴² This tale condemns both the woman and her partner for engaging in an extramarital affair, but given the title of the story, the woman’s lack of repentance is the focal part of the story. It is she who re-commits the sin of lechery, and even though it was her partner that convinced her to sin again, the actual wording of

³⁹ Karras, *Common Women*, 105.

⁴⁰ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 125.

⁴¹ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 125.

⁴² Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 125.

the tale associates the act of sinning with her, making it her decision. This is essentially shifting the blame of the affair onto the woman, because it is she who is categorized as “lecherous,” she who actually commits the sin. Therefore, it is also her fault that she failed to repent, because if she had held firm in the way of her lover’s temptation, they may not have been condemned. This story encapsulates the idea that women are the ones driving the sin of sexual lust. It is through their desire and their will that these sins are committed, which contributes to the overall anxiety surrounding prostitutes during this time. Prostitutes were women who were instigating sexual intercourse, and they were capable of damning others with them.

Another sermon story that deals more closely with the idea of prostitution is the story “A roper’s false wife,” in which a woman who “was not faithful in keeping vows to her husband” becomes involved with a “bawd,” one of the most unscrupulous figures in medieval sermon stories. The roper’s wife is enticed by a proffered gift of jewels from a prior to sleep with him.⁴³ The roper’s wife continues her affair with the prior, meeting with him multiple times, her husband becoming more aware of her promiscuity as the story continues, culminating in him finding her and the prior in bed together.⁴⁴ In this story, a transaction is much more evident. While the woman does “have malice in her heart,” that is, a proclivity for sin, she is further enticed to commit adultery by the gift offered by the “foul priest,” which more closely associates her with prostitution. There is both a clear financial element present, as well as the assertion that this woman was acting on behalf of the devil: “and she, full of sin and tempted by the devil, went out soon enough to the prior.”⁴⁵ The tale ends with the “good husband” slaying the lecherous

⁴³ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 128.

⁴⁴ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 129.

⁴⁵ Young-Gregg, *Devils, Women and Jews*, 129.

wife and her lover, along with a reminder that this woman acted “through temptation of the devil.”

The woman in this story, unlike the woman in “A lecherous woman fails to reform,” makes no attempt to correct her sins. She is lured multiple times by the prior, cementing her as a character that revels in repeating a sin. Also of note is the woman’s friend the bawd, who assists her in her affair and actually facilitates many of the rendezvous between the wife and the prior. “Bawd” could refer to prostitute, or it could refer to a prostitute’s employer, which would imply that the wife has essentially become a prostitute: she has accepted payment, and her actions are being controlled by a figure akin to a brothel owner. The bawd is referred to as being “deceitful,” which is a trait associated with covetous, licentious women, and she is in effect helping another to deceive her husband. This theme touches on a real concern of the medieval period, that prostitutes would corrupt women of good morals if they interacted.⁴⁶ While the wife in this story was perhaps not moral from the beginning, her relationship with her friend the bawd facilitated her affair, which reflects the fear that women of bad morals could influence one another.

It is perhaps a combination of being bought by bribes and being assisted by another morally loose woman that makes the woman in this sermon story less redeemable than the woman in the previous story, who at least makes an attempt to repent.

This story is achieving multiple ends: not only is it remarking on woman’s desire for material goods, a trait that was closely associated with prostitutes, it is reinforcing the ideal that women are more susceptible to sin and the machinations of the devil. And it was this vulnerability that was used to undermine women’s agency in the medieval period. As Karras explains, in the Middle Ages, “[s]tories about women's lust became not a means of recognizing

⁴⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England." *Signs* 14, no. 2 (1989): 403.

women as sexual beings, but an excuse for denying women independence in other areas of life.”⁴⁷ But perhaps most importantly, this tale reflects the anxiety that prostitutes, or women with bad morals, had the power to influence other women, which speaks to the general fear of prostitutes holding agency.

Secular stories also contained depictions of prostitutes and contributed to the wider discussion of what exactly defined a prostitute. The Decameron is one such collection, written by Giovanni Boccaccio in the 14th century, varying in topics from the moral to the humorous. In the collection there are nearly one hundred stories, and one in particular contains mention of a prostitute. John Payne’s translation of the tale begins with the proclamation that women are “very fair of their person, but sworn enemies to honesty.”⁴⁸ This is a continuous theme in the story, which tells the tale of a young man named Salabaetto who falls in love with a mistress, or *barabaress*, Madame Biancofiore. They establish their relationship by having intercourse, for which Biancofiore does not explicitly charge him. However, he leaves some items in her room that she quickly sells for profit, establishing a connection between sex and money. Therefore, while Madame Biancofiore is by no means a “street woman,” she is essentially engaging in a sex-for-pay relationship with a young man. But most importantly, Salabaetto is unaware of her swindling, making her an unscrupulous and greedy figure.

Indeed, after the two have an established relationship, she cries that she needs money from him to save her brother from his debts, for which he is to be executed. Salabaetto admits at this point that he is in love with her, and gives her five hundred gold florins to save her brother, “which she received with tears in her eyes, but laughter in her heart.”⁴⁹ Not only has Madame

⁴⁷ Karras, *Common Women*, 118.

⁴⁸ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*, Trans. John Payne, 2007.

⁴⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*. Trans. John Payne.

Biancofiore now been characterized as duplicitous and false, but she is using emotion to her advantage: she is using her tears to manipulate, of which only women are capable. Women's tears are powerful instruments, in that they can both deceive and beguile men, or they can redeem lost souls.⁵⁰ The weaponization of her tears for the specific gain of profit cements Madame Biancofiore's status as a prostitute, in a way, because she is using whatever is at her disposal, be it her flesh, her womanly wiles, or her emotions, to get money. Additionally, the idea that there is "laughter in her heart" while she does this, meaning that she enjoys this deception, paints her as a fully-conscious sinner. She is not only deliberate in every sin she commits, she delights in them. This is why the story must end with Madame Biancofiore being punished. After Salabatto gives her the initial sum, she allows him to have intercourse with her less often while increasing her requests for money and trinkets. He however clues into her scheming, and eventually is able to swindle his money back from her, leaving Madame Biancofiore outwitted. The harlot has been dealt her due by the end of the story, showing that in this instance, her sins cannot be forgiven.

What is also of note is the emphasis on the material wealth of Madame Biancofiore--there are several descriptions of how lavishly her home was decorated, and how expensive her tastes were, further placing emphasis on notions of greed. While Biancofiore is referred to as a "harlot," and therefore implicated as a woman who commits the sin of lust, the focus of wrongdoing in the story lies mostly within her greed and covetousness.

Another translation of the Decameron begins the story differently, saying instead: "a Sicilian Courtezane, named madame Biancafiore, by her craftie wit and policie, deceived a

⁵⁰ Barbara Newman, "On the Threshold of the Dead: Purgatory, Hell, and Religious Women," from her *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995): 108-36.

young Merchant.”⁵¹ This summary appears before the rest of the story, meaning that before the story has begun the reader knows that the female character will be deceitful, and most importantly, is a “courtezane.” This is distinct from Payne’s translation, given that in Payne’s version the tale begins with a mere summary of events: “a certain woman of Sicily artfully despoileth a merchant...”⁵² Payne’s version references the cunning and deceit of Biancofiore, but does not outrightly refer to her as a prostitute. This differentiation is critical to our understanding of what a prostitute was. This second translation implies that “courtezanes” by nature are cunning, whereas Payne’s implies that this “certain woman” was capable of an artful deception. So then, are courtesans by definition cunning? Are all cunning women courtesans? Or is a courtesan merely a woman who was capable of swindling a man?

Whatever your interpretation, there is a distinct anxiety that surrounds women who have their own means. Prostitutes by definition are independent women, as they belong to no man, and presumably have their own income (taxes and dues to brothels aside). The implication of this story in the Decameron is that prostitutes, like Biancofiore, spend their money frivolously on luxury items. The descriptions of Biancofiore’s lavish household and her desire for goods are consistent in both versions, and the idea that this money is sinfully wasted on luxury items connects prostitutes to vanity, one of the most damning sins a woman can commit. And yet, we see stories warning married women of vanity, the story of the woman with the fiends dancing on her long train cements the idea that showing pride through clothing or other material markers of wealth is a sin that can touch both prostitutes and married women.

While the religious aspect of prostitution contains many contradictions and nuances, one would expect the secular side – meaning the physical, tangible aspects of prostitution, such as its

⁵¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*, Trans. Massimo Riva, 1995.

⁵² Boccaccio, *The Decameron of Giovanni Boccaccio*. Trans. John Payne.

institutionalization and laws— to be more uniform in its definition of prostitution, especially given that courts often associated prostitution with a financial element, “recognizing a class of professional prostitutes.”⁵³ And yet, the secular realm holds just as many complications as the religious, both in terms of how a prostitute was defined, and how the Church itself was involved in prostitution.

Canon law did not differentiate between sexually-promiscuous women and women who charged money for sex. However, the exchange of money was a far easier crime to prosecute than vague notions of lust that seem to categorize prostitution in religious doctrine, because money was the most traceable piece of evidence against prostitutes, and therefore most court cases brought against prostitutes included a clear financial transaction. And yet, because most legal proceedings regarding prostitution were conducted under canon law, it is important to understand that canon law is by definition “an offshoot of moral theology and never escaped its moralistic heritage.”⁵⁴ and therefore it is nearly impossible to consider the legality of prostitution in a secular view.

In the legal sense, prostitution was always connected to money, and in canon law “the element of gain, the cash nexus of transaction, will tend to be emphasized.”⁵⁵ While a financial element would theoretically make prostitution much easier to define, this was not always the case, given the caveat that dowries provided. A dowry is payment given to the husband by the bride or her family when they are wed, and it was considered a necessary part of marriage in the medieval period. It was seen as an investment by the bride’s family to facilitate the building of a new family, but it also served as a formal acknowledgement that a marriage had taken place. Few

⁵³ Karras, “Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend,” 5.

⁵⁴ James A. Brundage, “Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law.” *Signs* 1.4, (1976): 826.

⁵⁵ Brundage, “Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law,” 826.

in the Middle Ages could afford a formal ceremony overseen by a clergyman: this was an occasion usually reserved for the wealthy. Wedding rings themselves were also a rarity among medieval couples. What we would consider markers of a formal marriage did not exist for many, and dowries were seen as a physical indicator of an accepted marriage bond.

Dowries varied greatly in terms of their content by region and by class. A dowry might consist of a plot of land, livestock, or for those of a lower class, something as inconsequential as a piece of kitchenware. While dowries existed for multiple reasons, their payment was a key indication in trial records that to prove a marriage had taken place; they were a financial transaction. Husbands were also expected to give a “marriage gift” to their brides, which also denotes a transaction between husband and wife. In order for sex to be considered lawful, it must happen under the covenant of marriage, which was commonly expressed through the exchange of a dowry. Therefore, there is a similarity in how marriage and prostitution are classified in medieval society. If prostitution was defined as a woman charging payment for sex, what happened if she claimed her payment was actually a marriage gift? What happened if a man gave a woman a marriage gift, but later claimed that the exchange was merely to purchase sexual favors, and not an expression of marriage? There is a lack of clarity here, especially if the gift was a small, quantifiable token. While it would be difficult that a gift or dowry in the form of land was actually a payment for sex, something as small as a pot or piece of clothing could easily be misconstrued as either a dowry or payment for a sexual act. Therefore, the concept of dowries and marriage gifts serve as another muddying feature of the division between prostitutes and women having sex under acceptable circumstances, and the fact that dowries and marriage gifts are considered one of the more quantifiable methods of defining marriage adds another layer to the conundrum.

On the subject of money, the Church had conflicting views on the relative legality of earnings of prostitutes. Many questioned if a prostitute was entitled to her earnings, given that she committed a sin to gain them.⁵⁶ Thomas of Chobham was one of few to defend the earnings of prostitutes; in fact, in his *Summa Confessorum* he even claims that prostitution itself is justifiable as a way for women to earn their livelihood.⁵⁷ In the text *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, a piece written in 1372 by a father for his daughters detailing how they should conduct themselves as women, prostitution is actually defended as a way for financially-destitute woman to support themselves.⁵⁸ By this measure, any earnings made must be acceptable, as they would allow a woman her livelihood. Other clergymen wrestled with the purity of any money earned from prostitution. For example, could one accept alms from a prostitute? Are all monies earned by a prostitute impure? Robert of Coursson in his canon published in 1213 argued that alms from a prostitute could not be accepted, and even “urged bishops not only to excommunicate such women but to expel them from town so that they would not scandalize others.”⁵⁹ All of this to say, there was murkiness on the relative legality of even the most minute aspect of prostitution, that is, how earnings gained by a prostitute were to be seen in the eyes of the Church.

The formal institutionalization of prostitution is another arena in which we may look for clarity on the label of prostitute, and how the Church attempted to control it. Of course, the institutionalization of prostitution varied widely by both region and time. In France, the legality of prostitution changed every few years. For example, the Ordinance of 1256 re-established prostitution, reversing the Ordinance of 1254, which abolished it.⁶⁰ The Ordinance of 1256

⁵⁶ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 22.

⁵⁷ Thomas of Chobham, *Summa Confessorum*, c.1215, as discussed in Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 23.

⁵⁸ Rebecca Barnhouse, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 164.

⁵⁹ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 23.

⁶⁰ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 24.

dictated that prostitution be legalized on grounds that it was “inevitable,”⁶¹ which reflects the ideas of Augustine, and also can be viewed as an attempt by society to formally control what it could not prevent.

This ordinance contributed to an overall shift in France towards the acceptance and formal regulation of prostitution, including the gradual institution of “red light districts,” which began to appear in the 13th and 14th centuries. As stated previously, municipally-owned brothels began to appear around 1360, and with this development came a more accepting culture of prostitution. In Montpellier, there is record of the first protective policy towards prostitutes, which declared that prostitutes cannot be expelled from their intended area, and placed prostitutes under the protection of the king.⁶²

Brothel regulations accompanied this institutionalization and can serve as evidence to investigate how such a sinful business was controlled and maintained. In France, most brothel owners were in fact women, which is perhaps surprising.⁶³ Given all the sexual proclivities and overall vulnerability to sin of the female sex, one would expect that a man would be necessary to oversee a brothel and ensure the delicate balance of maintaining a brothel was kept. But records show that it was not unusual for women to own brothels in some areas in Europe, and it was not unheard for prostitutes themselves to own brothels. Margaret of Lyon was one known prostitute who owned and managed her own brothel in England.⁶⁴

Many scholars have posited that the Church actually owned and managed brothels in the medieval period; records show this occurred in both France and England, and while not common, was not necessarily rare. On a fundamental level, the Church owning a brothel denotes control

⁶¹ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 22.

⁶² Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 26.

⁶³ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 53.

⁶⁴ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 53.

over the formal institutionalization of prostitution. Whether or not the Church actually received profits from the business itself, or the church merely received rents from owning the land upon which the brothel is built is up for debate, however. The Southwark Stewhouses, a group of brothels in London active around the fourteenth century, were home to the infamous “Southwark stews” (prostitutes). They were allegedly partially “owned” by the Stratford nuns, a bordello called “The Unicorn” was apparently on the nuns’ land.⁶⁵ However, it has been theorized that The Unicorn may have not in fact have housed prostitutes, and if it did, whether the nuns of Stratford actually profited from the establishment remains unclear.⁶⁶

While this caveat to the conversation regarding Church ownership of brothels is necessary, it was not inconceivable for a church official to actually manage the brothel. Records indicate at least one example of an abbess owning and managing a brothel in England.⁶⁷ As paradoxical as it may seem, having a clergy member on site to oversee the proceedings of a brothel could perhaps have been defensible in that the clergy member might offer absolution of a sort to both prostitutes and customers (although, literal absolution is only offered by male clergymen). More likely, it was seen as a way for the Church to have direct control over brothel dealings.

In terms of punishments for prostitutes, they certainly existed despite prostitution being legal at multiple points during the medieval period. Prostitutes were not punished for their occupation, but rather for straying outside of their intended area. Prostitutes were restricted to certain areas as a mechanism of preserving good society and essentially “quarantining” any licentious behavior, and any attempt of a prostitute to solicit outside of her space was a

⁶⁵ Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd in the Stews of Southwark.” *Speculum* 75, no. 2 (2000): 342–88.

⁶⁶ Kelly, “Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd,” 349.

⁶⁷ Karras, *Common Women*, 53.

punishable offense. These punishments varied widely by region and period, but prostitutes who were part of brothels consistently faced less severe punishments than prostitutes who operated individually, as “street walkers.”⁶⁸ In areas in which prostitution was institutionalized, prostitutes were confined to a certain part of town, known in modern terms as red light districts. These areas could be as large as multiple streets in larger towns, or as small as one brothel building in smaller, less urban areas.⁶⁹ Prostitutes were mainly punished for operating outside of their established zone. Punishments for this offense usually entailed a fine, a removal of clothing, or in extreme cases, a beating. Some towns offered protections for prostitutes in that physical punishments were limited, but this was not always the case. In some cities, like Perugia and Foligno in southern Europe, beatings of a prostitute were allowed by the brothel keeper so long as their faces were not maimed.⁷⁰

Another common punishment was a barring from Church, which was less a formal punishment and more a means of upkeep of the division between prostitutes and good society. In some places, prostitutes on the whole were not allowed within a church, but others allowed it so long as they did not come to church at the same time as the respected ladies of society,⁷¹ who they could hypothetically associate with and thus corrupt. This usually meant that prostitutes were not permitted to attend the most popular masses on Sunday (of the eight masses held on Sundays during the medieval period, two were usually the most attended), and on some holidays like Easter they were banished from town entirely.⁷² There is record of an English prostitute named Mariona Wood who appeared regularly in court records from 1479-1496 on charges of

⁶⁸ Kelly, “Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd,” 375.

⁶⁹ Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society*, 29.

⁷⁰ Karras, “The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England,” 404.

⁷¹ Karras, “The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England,” 404.

⁷² Karras, “The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England,” 404.

fornication, adultery, and harlotry. Ultimately, it was written that it was “no use” to bring her into court because she was “a hardened, incorrigible prostitute.”⁷³ One of her punishments was that she was suspended from church,⁷⁴ although perhaps this punishment had little effect, given the frequency by which she appeared in court. While punishments for prostitutes varied widely, overall they were perhaps not as severe as one might expect, given the importance society imposed on separating prostitutes from the rest of society. This relative laxness was a product of the recognized need for prostitution. While the Church could condemn it as a sin, prostitution was also essential to the functioning of medieval society, and therefore those practicing it could only be punished for pushing social boundaries, such as attending Church and soliciting outside of their designated areas.

Sumptuary laws are another example of a mechanism by which authorities could control prostitutes, and they have a long history. These laws have roots in Ancient Rome,⁷⁵ and even in this era they mainly targeted women, but in a different context, in that they were more largely concerned with the crime of dressing extravagantly to promote one’s station, rather than attracting male attention. In the medieval period, while pride was certainly a component in sumptuary laws, there was also a clear focus on women dressing modestly in order to prevent male attention. There was a clear moral element to dress codes: how a woman dressed was directly related to her morality, because the sins of pride and lust could both be reflected through clothing. A woman dressed extravagantly is a woman who wants to attract attention, specifically male attention. St. Paul stipulates that women should be cautious in their adornments, that “sweet disposition and gentle piety, not gems, bangles, and flashy dresses, should be the adornments that

⁷³ Kelly, “Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd,” 394.

⁷⁴ Kelly, “Bishop, Prioress, and Bawd,” 394.

⁷⁵ James A Brundage, “Sumptuary laws and prostitution in late medieval Italy.” *Journal of Medieval History* 13, no. 4 (1987): 343.

holy women cherished.”⁷⁶ In this passage, modesty in dress is explicitly connected to holiness, reinforcing the link between pride and clothing. Prostitutes were categorized as women who dressed flashily, as they relied on their appearance to attract customers. This connects prostitutes to the sin of pride, but on a more basic level, decorative or flashy garb separates prostitutes from women of “good society” in a clear and visible way.

Aside from this moralistic element present in gospel, sumptuary laws also reflected the secular need to divide classes and uphold the social order. A woman of good social standing must never be mistaken for a prostitute, and that is part of the reason why sumptuary laws began to gain popularity as a mechanism for dividing prostitutes from the greater female population. As James Brundage observes, “[i]n 1351-1352...the city of London forbade women of bad moral character to wear fur or to line their cloaks with silk.”⁷⁷ This phrasing here is of note: “women of bad moral character” is meant to refer to prostitutes, and the fact that the two labels are used interchangeably once again reinforces the notion that morality is reflected through clothing: prostitutes are immoral partly because of how they dress. Other sumptuary laws grouped prostitutes by colored garments: “in Liepzig and Vienna ladies of easy virtue wore yellow, in Zürich red was prescribed...[in] many other cities loose women wore green.”⁷⁸ Prostitutes in England were forbidden from wearing fur, and were often made to wear a striped hood, a symbol of harlotry that persisted throughout the medieval period.⁷⁹ These clothing regulations represent the need to distinguish prostitutes in a visible way. Sumptuary laws were a mechanism by which

⁷⁶ (1 Tim, 2:9-10; cf. 1 Peter 3:3-5; Isaiah 3:16-24), as cited by Brundage, "Sumptuary laws and prostitution in late medieval Italy," 344.

⁷⁷ Brundage, "Sumptuary laws and prostitution in late medieval Italy," 346.

⁷⁸ Brundage, "Sumptuary laws and prostitution in late medieval Italy," 346.

⁷⁹ Karras, *Common Women*, 21.

prostitutes could be recognized, and therefore existed as a device to provide clarity to the murkiness of the label prostitute.

Distinctive clothing requirements made it easier for customers to approach prostitutes, but it was also easier for authorities to pinpoint and harass these women. There was a fair amount of incentive for officials to persecute and harass harlots,⁸⁰ but more importantly the stigmatization of sexual misbehavior that was reinforced by this harassment and restriction was another mechanism by which prostitutes could be controlled.

Prostitutes were not the only women whose clothing was policed—female servants existed within the same category with respect to the types of clothing they were allowed to wear, as they were not allowed to dress above their station.⁸¹ Any attempt otherwise would be seen as an attempt to thwart one's place in society, which for unmarried women not of any rank, was at the bottom. These clothing requirements seemed to target women of a lower class rank who had no men to speak for them, given that prostitutes were women who either belonged to a brothel or were entirely independent, and servant women technically did not belong to a man either. A woman's sense of self was inherently tied to the men around her, and a woman with no ties to a man was considered extremely vulnerable to the temptations of sin, and also a risk to other women. Single women were not permitted to live alone in the medieval period, which led to many lower-class women to begin work as domestic servants who lived with the family for whom they worked. It was these women whose clothing was also regulated by sumptuary laws, as it would be uncouth for a woman of a higher social class to be mistaken for an unmarried, working woman.⁸² The problem that the sumptuary laws actually attempted to address was

⁸⁰ Karras, *Common Women*, 21.

⁸¹ Karras, *Common Women*, 22.

⁸² Karras, *Common Women*, 21.

women who were out of place, among others, the prostitutes and other lower-class female workers who were not formally linked with a man. Therefore, sumptuary laws existed not only as a device to make clear the murkiness regarding the classification of “prostitute,” but as a device by which women on the whole could be controlled.

It is important to realize that class was not a secular creation in the Middle Ages. The Great Chain of Being structured how society viewed itself and served as a direct reflection of how holiness was perceived among humans. The Great Chain of Being is a systematic hierarchy that organizes all components of the earth, from angels to minerals, in order of holiness, with the holier creatures at the top closest to God. Angels are more holy than humans, humans are more holy than animals, and animals are more holy than the inanimate parts of nature. According to this system, royalty ranked higher on the Chain than knights, followed by other members of wealth, with peasants dangling at the bottom of the “human category.” Conceptions of class in the medieval period were intrinsically tied to holiness, meaning that poorer subjects were more inclined to be sinful because their existence was further away from God. Women always ranked lower on the Great Chain than did men of the same class, because men were less vulnerable to sin. Prostitutes occupied one of the lowest ranks on the Great Chain, as they were grouped with sinners, and worse, female sinners. Because notions of class were intrinsic to notions of holiness in the medieval period, class divisions were of the utmost importance in the medieval period, because they were literally divisions between the holy and the unholy. Sumptuary laws were a concrete mechanism to enforce this divide and reinforce the place of prostitutes at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Brothel regulations and sumptuary laws were mechanisms by which society could control what prostitution actually looked like in the medieval period. Deemed a necessary part of society

by Augustine, prostitution in actuality required governance and regulation in order to function within what was supposed to be a pious, god-fearing society. Prostitution occupied a paradoxical space, because by definition it was a sin, and yet from the mouths of theologians it was recognized as integral to the functioning of society. Medieval gospel and other stories on the other hand offered multiple definitions of prostitution, and the sweeping generalization that all prostitutes were redeemable. But this muddiness, this murkiness surrounding the terms “prostitute” and “whore” was more than an unwillingness to give clarity to an uncomfortable situation, it was a device by which women’s sexuality could be policed. Being a whore was a terrible thing, but what was a whore? A whore is a woman who has sex for money, it is a woman who enjoys sex, it is a woman who thinks of sex but never acts on her urges. The elasticity of the term allows for any woman who is greedy, lustful, or simply independent to be classified as a prostitute, therefore a prostitute was perhaps simply a woman who did something medieval society did not want her to do.

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