

Introduction

In *Same Bodies, Different Women: 'Other' Women in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, the reader is presented with a fascinating volume containing much new information about relatively little-known regions of Europe as well as ideas brought forth by young scholars. Whereas the authors hail from many countries, the essays present us with some overarching concerns. Eight out of the eleven contributions broach the subject of prostitution and how various medieval societies have dealt with the issue.

The essays investigate records from “Sexual Access to Slave Women: Árpáadian Hungary as a Case Study” (C. Sutt), to material found relative to early modern times. Based on Christian and Islamic material regarding Arpad-era Hungary (1000-1300), ample evidence testifies to sexual relations of owners with slaves. Although there are manumission charters available from the period, just as in other such cultures, the relationship between slave and owner was more often exploitative than consensual.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the official brothel was considered most frequently a welcome option. It is significant that the location of such houses depended on how the officials dealt with prostitution in their cities: most of the brothels were forced to the edge of the municipalities, just as prostitutes were kept on the margins of society.

Cities where people predictably passed through, such as towns with a harbour or market towns, had high levels of prostitution. The clients were often not locals but travellers from other regions or foreign countries. In M. H. Hammer’s contribution, “Prostitution in Urban Brothels in Late Medieval Austria,” the author investigates the *Frauenhaus* where the *gute Fränlein* worked. The Austrian towns catered mainly to Italians passing through on their way to Germany (Clerics and Jews were forbidden to use the services of Christian prostitutes). Clandestine prostitutes were arrested and their expulsion from towns took the form of a public procession. As in a number of other places, in Austria too, prostitutes were singled out, being required to wear special clothing or accessories.

In “Rub-a-dub-dub, Three Maids in a Tub: Women in Bathhouses and Secondary Sites of Sex Work in Medieval Hungarian Towns” (Ch. Mielke), the author uses sources from three (then) Hungarian towns. Although, not noted in the title, Mielke compares his findings with well-documented information from Western European cities, helping us to understand the use of urban space in its relation to the location of brothels in a number of towns in contemporary Europe.

Judicial records of sixteenth-century Hungarian towns – albeit the sources are in German and Latin – were used by B. Szeghyová (“*Fornicatrices, scortatrices et meretrices diabolares: Disciplining Women in Early Modern Hungarian Towns*”), in order to evaluate accusations of women offenders. Seen as a necessary service, prostitution was tolerated during the Middle Ages: marginalized yet not prosecuted. For easy identification, prostitutes wore a yellow piece of cloth or band on their headscarves (yellow was everywhere a favourite colour placed on minorities of various ilk). Brothels began to disappear in the Post-Reformation period.

The situation is not much different when moving toward the south. In “Prostitutes and Urban Communities of Medieval Slavonia: Examples from Gradec” (M. Karbić), the sources, ranging from judicial protocols to property documents that frequently include the first and last names of the people involved, were drawn mainly from Gradec (the old part of Zagreb). They also shed light on a grey area, namely of prostitution as a way for women to have an additional income. Prostitutes came not just from the poorest layer of society but included were single women, widows and even married women, wives of artisans among them. Some came to Gradec from the nearby villages to work as prostitutes. Without an officially designated area, prostitutes practiced in private homes (either of the clients’ or of the prostitutes’). The women’s punishment was most often their banishment from the city, for a long period, or forever.

From the essay, “Prostitution in Late Medieval Dubrovnik: Legislation, Practice, and Prosecution” (G. Ravančić) we learn that prostitution was tolerated although never supported directly until 1409, when its regulation was enforced, including designates spaces, the women were allowed to occupy. It was declared (as in some societies it is still practiced) to be the responsibility of her male relatives to punish the crimes of a prostitute or of a procuress.

We also find that regulations and punishments were highly interpretive. Establishing the criteria of prostitution was not always easy. For example, in the article “Laundry Ladies in Medieval Poland,” L. Carr-Riegel contends that although poor laundresses could have been accused of low morals, the fact that they had worked with expensive fabric gained for them a higher status than other manual labourers enjoyed.

“Female Rebellion in the Margins of a Late Thirteenth-Century *Mort de Roi Artu*” (E. Shartrand), a changing of gender roles appears in the book’s margin where a woman and a man are depicted jousting. The woman, armed with a spindle, forces the man to retreat. The author connects the illustration with the numerous uprisings of cloth workers (1270-1281) and the person of Count Guy of Dampierre for whom the manuscript itself was produced, alluding to the latter’s unpopular textile trade deals.

As they are seen through time, sometimes changes in perception, standards and punishments appear, especially with the introduction of the Reformation. At a trial recorded in 1545, in Transylvania (then a part of the Hungarian Kingdom) where a father accusing a man of having raped his daughter and impregnated her (A. Chira), the testimonies of fifteen witnesses were heard. Since Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, and Calvinism were represented in the population, the attestations provide us with a unique backdrop to the proceedings.

In medieval societies, the consummation of a relationship (other than the one that had been paid for) was often accepted as marriage vows and, consequently, marriage was often viewed as a solution to moral deviancy. A case in point is the essay dealing with “Prostitutes and Urban Communities of Medieval Slavonia: Examples from Gradec” (M. Karbić).

Throughout the periods under investigation, male authority (religious, civil and social) determined the measures needed for social stability. As far as women were concerned, the focus was on “purity.” Women were considered property and their beauty or noble birth was frequently used to further the goals of their family. A case in point is the fate of Sophia de Monferrat (“A Heretic with a Distorted Face: Sophia of Montferrat, the ‘Other’ Empress of Byzantium,” P. Melichar), an Italian noble woman of Byzantine descent, born with a

disfigured face. She was married off, practically pawned (with papal consent), to the Orthodox John Palaiologos. However, the marriage was not consummated, and she ended her life in a Catholic convent.

“Suspect Women: Prostitution, Reputation, and Gossip in Fourteenth-Century Prague” (E. Janega) deals with the role of gossip. While the Church condemned gossip, authorities relied on hearsay. Although the accusations included males, and even an archdeacon was involved, the men mainly took measures to punish the women. Men were either not punished for their participation, and if at all, they were merely fined. However, as Barisa Krekic has pointed it out in a much earlier study, in medieval Dubrovnik, if a woman was violated against her will, the perpetrator would lose his eyes, unless he married “the consenting woman” (*Liber statutorum civitatis Ragusii*. Zagreb, 1902, p.128).

In general, men’s lust and their actions were considered normal, whereas women’s behaviour called for punishment; it was the women who needed to be corrected. The essays therefore mainly focus on the punishments women received. The period is characterized by an exhaustive protocol, addressing the issue of “*mulieres suspectas*.” In connection with the cases that deal with official municipal brothels, we learn much about women’s conditions: permanently indebted, it was almost impossible for them to leave their line of work.

The punishments for prostitution varied from one municipality to another. They included whipping, banishment, public shaming, pillory, in one case a woman’s nose was cut off, and in several towns, such as Gradec and a number of Hungarian towns that today are a part of Slovakia, punishment included drowning.

Nonetheless, in almost every community discussed in the volume – when the situation was salvageable – marriage was recommended as an alternative to banishment or even to the death sentence. Thus, marriage was an option for remediation of crime: the belief was that marriage would amend issues and allow for a smoother functioning society.

As is testified to in Pietro Germi’s satire, *Seduced and Abandoned* (1964), the honour of the Sicilian family “can be preserved only if the girl marries the man who defiled her. She is repaired by her marriage and the family honor is restored.” Moreover, marriage may be interpreted as the person is willing to lead a responsible life and adjust to the norms of society.

The contributions in this volume render a historical overview of issues that still occupy social scientists and the broader public as well. They are especially welcome, because these young authors illuminate for us lesser-known areas of Europe, by introducing some seminal documents and adding their fresh interpretations to the published research in the field.

Marianna D. Birnbaum
Research Professor, UCLA