

Prostitution in the High Middle Ages

(or How to bring in more Revenue for your city and have fun doing it)

by Mistress Magdalena la Sanguigni

The SCA covers a large span of history, but if we have to pin down our greatest influence it would probably be somewhere between the 12th and 15th centuries in Western Europe. We practice the “Middle Ages as it should have been” as we often quote to newbies who want to know why we skip things like beating women, religious persecution and the Black Plague in our re-creation.

Falling into a grey area of re-enactment is prostitution. We do play at it a little. Wench-wear, as I’ve come to think of it, the classic bar-maid persona is flirting with the concept of the prostitute in period, much the same way our battles flirt with the idea of wholesale slaughter without anyone actually getting killed.

But like religious strife, prostitution in period was more than an everyday occurrence. It was deeply ingrained in the culture. We might not want to re-create it, but if we want to understand the influences of medieval life as it actually was, then we have to know some things about prostitution and how it was practiced.

Medieval people lived with it every day. No one hid it. Prostitution was for the most part legal during the high middle ages. It was publicly practiced and frequently government supported. It was standard entertainment for any unmarried man, and frequented as often as we today might go to a bar or a movie. Its structure and presentation continued largely unchanged from the Roman Empire until the Protestant Reformation, when it was banned almost entirely. Those changes have carried through to our modern world. But unlike our modern world it was possible to shed the stigma of prostitution and become a normal married person. I will cover exactly how the transition was made later in this article, but in the meantime, how did medieval society incorporate prostitution so easily?

How does a society struggling with the idea that the most perfect way of life was to avoid sex altogether, a culture that believed that if you must have sex then you should be married and it should only be for the purposes of having children; reconcile itself with selling sex for money? It’s complicated, but the greatest reason was put succinctly if not grotesquely by the great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, “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.”

Clearly he was not a fan.

But most of the rest of Europe loved them, and that included the Church. Brothels were great money makers for municipalities. Abbots periodically owned them, particularly if the town in question was run by the local monastery. Every major city and many of the mid-level towns had brothels built and run by the city itself. This was really the 1st, and most common form of prostitution. Brothels could be quite lavish affairs. One of my favorites, in Dijon France (c. 1349), was called the Chateau Gaillard. Public records describe it has a house of 20 rooms, each with its own fireplace, a large common room, caretakers quarters, and a large central garden connecting 2 wings by a gallery.

Women were hired to manage these establishments. Their official title was “Abbess”. If the Abbess could not perform her function, for whatever reason, a city official was usually sent in to take her place until another abbess could be chosen.

Municipal prostitution commonly had several levels, the city sponsored brothel was at the top level. Surrounding that establishment (or establishments if it was Paris or Rome) were other smaller houses called bordelages. In “Medieval Prostitution” Jacques Rossard describes them as being on a more artisanal scale. I love that. At any rate, they were usually made up of a husband and wife who boarded as many as 3 or 4 women, and allowed them to rent out space to serve customers. Below this level were the street walkers, women who left their homes to wander the red light districts, servicing their clients wherever they could find a little privacy. In addition to city prostitution, there was yet another layer out in the country side. Women who needed to make money for whatever reasons, could wander to neighboring farms, often bringing a male relative with them for protection, to find customers among other farmers and their workers. All levels of prostitutes traveled to fairs periodically to entertain and make money.

The daily life of a prostitute didn’t begin until the afternoon. Cities controlled the operating hours of most red light districts. Women spent the morning bathing and preparing for clients who would be allowed to start arriving after dark. Beyond the fall of the Roman Empire there were no legally practicing male prostitutes. The sexual favors of prostitutes were also regulated. Oral and anal sex was illegal. All positions beyond missionary were frowned upon. Also brothels were not socially appropriate for married men, only single men were allowed there without judgment.

Speaking of judgment, prostitutes occasionally had another public service involving Courts of Law, both secular and ecclesiastical. Marriages could be annulled if the husband was proven impotent. Prostitutes were used by both the prosecutors and defendants to assess a husband’s ability to function.

So how did these women have sex everyday and avoid becoming pregnant? Well, the truth is they did become pregnant, though not as often as you might expect. Infanticide was illegal but nevertheless a common occurrence. Children of prostitutes could also end up being raised in the brothel and put to work when they were able. Attempts to avoid pregnancy were made. Many prostitutes douched with wine or vinegar after every client. This changes the Ph of the vagina and might actually have been helpful in killing sperm. But my theory is that many of them developed Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, scarring their fallopian tubes and eventually making them sterile. PID occurs when a woman contracts STD’s over a period of time. Her body’s attempts to fight viruses and bacteria eventually cause the walls of the fallopian tubes to become enflamed and finally too small to allow sperm to reach the ovum. This is a common occurrence observed in brothels for as long as we have been giving medical attention to the ladies who live there, so it is an educated guess to assume this happened in medieval brothels as well.

What happens when you no longer want to be a prostitute? Are there any alternatives? Medieval society developed a solution; the Magdalene Home.

In later centuries Magdalene homes were the stuff of nightmares, unwed mothers, prostitutes and other criminals were sent there by the courts to be rehabilitated. They were run by the Catholic Church. You might have heard about them in the news because many of them are being sued by former inmates, who suffered horrendous abuse at the hands of caretakers. These medieval Magdalene homes were nothing like their later incarnations.

If you wanted to run a small business out of your home you could accept former prostitutes in, train them in a skill, like spinning or weaving, sell their wares, and at the same time essentially save the reputation of a fallen woman. Once someone spent 2 years in a Magdalene home they were considered “clean” and able to go on with their lives. They were a relatively good catch too because they already had a new skill they could use to make money in their new home. Eventually women who applied to Magdalene homes had to prove they had formerly worked in brothels because many young women tried to get in just to get out into the world.

As the centuries progressed prostitution was alternately tolerated and reviled. The Protestant Reformation dealt a blow to the institution when Martin Luther declared that married love was a gift from God, but all fornicators, including prostitutes were worthy of death. The Catholic Church, not to be out done by the heretics’ piety also came on board with the new moral code. Legal prostitution began to recede from Europe in the 1540’s until it was eventually banned across the continent by the late 18th century.

Works Cited:

Cohn Jr., Samuel K. Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power In Renaissance Italy. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

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

Otis-Cour, Leah. Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1985.

Rossiaud, Jacques. Medieval Prostitution. New York, NY: Blackwell, 1988.