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Medieval Sex Work Studies: The State of the Field

Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany. By Jamie Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021; pp. 176. £71);

A Life of Ill Repute: Public Prostitution in the Middle Ages. By Maria Serena Mazzi, tr. Joyce Myerson (Montreal, QC and Kingston, ON: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2020; pp. 176. $125);

Same Bodies, Different Women: 'Other' Women in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Edited by Christopher Mielke and Andrea-Bianka Znorovszky (Budapest: Trivent, 2020; pp. 223. €99);

Prostitution in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: The Dark Side of Sex and Love in the Premodern Era. By Albert Classen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019; pp. 244. $111);

Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World: The Economics of Sex in the Late Antique and Medieval Middle East. By Gary Leiser (London: I.B. Tauris 2017; pp. 350. £75).

I

Recent scholarship on medieval sex work is varied in its approach: scholars have tackled the thorny issue of identity and subjectivity, examined the economy of sex work, and sought to understand its moral place in medieval society. Despite these varied approaches, however, much of the scholarship continues to persist in othering, and even dehumanising, pre-modern sex workers. This can be seen in the titles of some of the books under review here: *A Life of Ill Repute: Public Prostitution in the Middle Ages*, or *Same Bodies, Different Women: 'Other' Women in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period*, or *Prostitution in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: The Dark Side of Sex and Love in the Premodern Era*. All of these titles make explicit judgements about the subjects to be discussed: they had poor reputations, they were different from 'normal' women, and their work had a dark side.

Similarly, this othering can be seen in the continued use of the word 'prostitute' to describe sex workers, despite modern scholarship by sex workers themselves stating a clear preference for the term sex worker. The term 'sex work' was coined by Carol Leigh ('The Scarlot Harlot') in 1980 as she sought to 'reconcile my feminist goals with the reality

of my life' and struggled to find appropriate terminology.[1] She wrote, 'the words used to define us contain a century of slurs', and rejected the term prostitute because it 'is yet another euphemism … "prostitute" does not refer to the business of selling sexual services—it simply means "to offer publicly"'.[2] Leigh chose to use 'sex work' instead because it is inclusive of all types of sexual work done for money, and it 'acknowledges the work we do rather than defines us by our struggle'.[3]

The word prostitute is used to describe medieval sex workers in all of the books reviewed here, even those by scholars whose treatment of the subject is otherwise careful and considered. Jamie Page's *Prostitution and Subjectivity*, which presents three meticulously researched case-studies of individual sex workers, still uses the word prostitute. Eleanor Janega's essay in *Same Bodies, Different Women* uses the term sex worker within the text but uses prostitution in the title.[4] Gary Leiser laments the fact that there is no word in English that has the 'neutral resonance of, say, "rug merchant"', and so decides on the term 'public woman', apparently unaware of the existence of the term sex worker.[5] There are bound to be varying scholarly opinions on which description is more accurate to use in the study of the Middle Ages. However, the term 'sex work', rather than 'prostitution', emphasises the fact that sex work is labour, and it is more inclusive than any other term. This is particularly important when analysing medieval sources which are not always clear on which type of sex work a woman was engaged in, whether she was employed at a licit brothel or working clandestinely. Furthermore, while 'prostitute' figures more as an identity label, 'sex worker' is more descriptive, attesting to the work certain women were engaged in and leaving room for an identity and life outside of work. This debate is important, given that medievalists are increasingly concerned with their own identity and that of their subjects, and sex workers continue to occupy contested spaces in society.

In the 1980s and 1990s medievalists published several influential works on the history of sex work. These include Leah Otis-Cour's *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of An Urban Institution in Languedoc* (1985), Jacques Rossiaud's *Medieval Prostitution* (1989), and Ruth Mazo Karras's *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (1996) and her essay 'Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe' (1999).[6] Otis-Cour established

1. C. Leigh, a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot, 'Inventing Sex Work', in J. Nagle, ed., *Whores and Other Feminists* (New York, 1997), p. 225.

2. Ibid., p. 229.

3. Ibid., p. 230.

4. E. Janega, 'Suspect Women: Prostitution, Reputation, and Gossip in Fourteenth-Century Prague', in C. Mielke and A.-B. Znorovszky, eds, *Same Bodies, Different Women: 'Other' Women in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period* (Budapest, 2019), pp. 40–69.

5. G. Leiser, *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World: The Economics of Sex in the Late Antique and Medieval Middle East* (London, 2017), p. xiii.

6. R. Karras, 'Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe', *Journal of Women's History*, xi (1999), pp. 159–77.

medieval France, and the Languedoc in particular, as having a rich history of sex work as told through various local statutes and laws, and as being part of a complex economic system. Karras expanded the understanding of medieval sex work to encompass parts of England, and she cemented the image of the public sex worker as someone who occupied not only a particular place in medieval society but who was also branded with a specific sexual identity. The discipline's inheritance from Rossiaud is more problematic, as *Medieval Prostitution* tells a continuous tale of woe: in his account, sex workers and women who were raped were shamed and cast out from society, with little hope of restoring their reputation or accessing help. It is therefore unfortunate that some of the works reviewed here, such as Mazzi's, bear similarities to Rossiaud's, or do not integrate some of Otis-Cour's more innovative conclusions. However, Jamie Page's *Prostitution and Subjectivity* has advanced the field of medieval sex work studies in leaps and bounds, providing an excellent analysis of sex workers, subjectivity and agency. Leslie Carr-Riegel has nuanced our understanding of medieval laundresses, challenging the stereotype that they were also sex workers, and Susan McDonough has demonstrated that sex workers formed important networks of knowledge. Finally, Gary Leiser proposes a way of life for medieval sex workers in the Middle East that is entirely different from that put forth by Rossiaud or Mazzi.

II

Maria Serena Mazzi makes broad claims about how medieval society at large treated sex workers, while relying on a narrow set of documentary evidence that in actuality attests only to how sex workers were treated in Florentine courts. Mazzi's point throughout, though, is that sex workers figured exclusively as victims in medieval society. The book is divided into four sections, intended to cover the many aspects of a sex worker's life: 'The Words For It', 'The Reality', 'The Places and the Rules', and 'The Business Itself'. The chapters similarly progress from '"Using One's Body For Ill-Gotten Gain"' to, finally, 'Repentance'. However, Mazzi is not interested in engaging with the complexity of sex workers' lives or their subjectivity, or examining the way they are represented by the sources with any scrutiny or rigour. The discussion of sex trafficking is particularly lacking and confused. First, Mazzi makes the case that medieval sex workers sold the 'whole' of their person, and were less valued than slaves, though she does not question whether sex workers themselves thought about their work or themselves in this manner.[7] Then, while interrogating what types of circumstances would have forced a woman to work in the sex trade, she

7. M.S. Mazzi, *A Life of Ill Repute: Public Prostitution in the Middle Ages* (Montreal, QC, 2020), p. 99.

theorises that they might have been manipulated by a husband or lover, or were perhaps the victim of a rape.[8] In order to prove these points, she relates the story of a young girl named Sandra who was trafficked into a brothel, and that of another woman, Stella, who was nearly sold to one by her husband. But nowhere does she question how these women might have felt, nor does she interrogate the fact that the women she is discussing were trafficked by *men*. One is left wondering if Mazzi is implicitly blaming women for participating in something that, by her own arguments, they did not participate in of their own free will.

If Mazzi's point were simply that women were often abused in the Middle Ages, and trafficked into the sex trade, it would be more nearly correct. But her arguments are complicated by the slippage between the medieval view of sex work and her own. The opening to the final chapter demonstrates this well:

> The road to repentance is paved with good intentions, resignation, and hope, and is full of obstacles. Humility and perseverance are essential … After "a life of ill repute" comes "a life of good repute," here on earth, before the hope of eternal salvation.[9]

There is little indication here of who, exactly, is making such judgements. What follows is a discussion of those sex workers who were able to repent by joining religious houses. She writes, 'Just like the act of prostituting oneself, repenting seems to be a page written by others, a script predetermined and not the result of a journey of reflection or a voluntary choice'.[10] Mazzi seems unaware that she has reproduced this dynamic in her own analysis of sex workers, and because she rarely—if ever—treats the women she studies as true subjects, we cannot necessarily believe her conclusions about the meanings of their lives.

Albrecht Classen's book on sex work in medieval and early modern literature presents the subject of sex work in a slightly more complex manner. He asserts that, while most of the literature on sex work was not positive or approving, medieval writers understood sex work as serving an 'important function' and that medieval literary evidence on the whole 'paints a complex picture and sensitizes us to a sophisticated discourse'.[11] This is reflected in the literature which Classen analyses. Christine de Pizan's inclusion of sex workers in her *Livre des Trois Vertus*, which was a conduct manual for women of all social classes, exemplifies this. As Classen argues, Christine was primarily concerned with how sex workers might be reintegrated into society, and she argued that aristocratic women should help sex workers with this goal in mind.[12]

8. Ibid., p. 100.
9. Ibid., p. 142.
10. Ibid., p. 147.
11. A. Classen, *Prostitution in Medieval and Early Modern Literature: The Dark Side of Sex and Love in the Premodern Era* (London, 2019), p. 30.
12. Ibid., p. 76.

Classen further examines works by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, whose plays present sex work as a dangerous alternative to life in a convent, though one which would allow women to earn money and 'live out their high degree of sexuality'.[13] Also included are works by Villon, Boccaccio, Fernando de Rojas and others.

Classen concludes that most discourses on sex work in pre-modern literature can be found in satirical works, poems and plays, because 'sexual jokes' 'have always appealed to many audiences'.[14] He also, somewhat oddly, concludes that this literature serves as evidence that sex work 'has never disappeared' and 'has always been around all over the world'.[15] These conclusions are perhaps basic, but the book has value for those wishing to start reading about sex work in medieval and early modern literature, and it is accessible enough for undergraduate use.

However, even Classen's treatment of the subject is not free from bias, exemplified most simply by his use of the word 'whores' to describe medieval sex workers.[16] In the introductory chapter, he states that 'the entire institution of prostitution does not represent a matter of real choice for women (and sometimes men)' and that these 'observations' apply across time periods.[17] The emphasis on choice here makes it seem as if Classen is concerned with determining whether or not sex work can be ethical—but such a question is at odds with the literary historical aims of the book. Classen is also clear, in a footnote, as to what his own personal views on sex work are (he believes it should be legal and regulated).[18] At least he, unlike Mazzi, is explicit about what his position is, though it is still somewhat irrelevant to his argument, such as it is.

III

Scholars perhaps feel emboldened to treat sex workers in the medieval past as exclusively marginalised because they are certain that this is how they were treated by medieval society. This contrasts with Susan McDonough's findings: her recent article has shown that sex workers were tolerated by Mediterranean port cities to a certain extent, and that they formed important networks of knowledge with one another.[19] Sex workers used their knowledge of the legal system 'to argue

13. Ibid., p. 65.
14. Ibid., p. 205.
15. Ibid., p. 207.
16. Ibid., p. 45.
17. Ibid., p. 5.
18. Ibid., p. 47, n. 15.
19. S. McDonough, 'Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, Migration and Knowledge in Late-Medieval Mediterranean Port Cities', *Gender and History*, xxxiv (2022), pp. 401–19, at 402.

for their right to participate in the economic and social life of the cities' and they may even have shared their legal knowledge with their clients.[20] Furthermore, as Classen demonstrates, medieval authors had complicated views on sex work. That Christine de Pizan included them in her conduct manual at all suggests that even upper-class women were aware of the social issues that sex workers faced. Similarly, Leah Otis-Cour has shown that sex workers were aware that what they did was labour, and thus sought better working conditions. Otis-Cour, in an examination of sex workers in Toulouse, details how in 1462 sex workers hired a lawyer to bring a complaint before the *parlement*, in which they argued that the practice of selling their contracts to a male brothel farmer should be stopped. They asserted that the farmer was essentially a pimp who wanted to 'extort the maximum from the women, therefore encouraging illicit intercourse'.[21] They then proposed that a woman should be head of the brothel, and that each sex worker in the house should contribute money for its running.[22] Sex workers may have often been othered in medieval society, but this did not prevent them from forming their own groups and networks.

The history of sex work in the Middles Ages is thus clearly more complicated than the version Mazzi presents. It often appears that scholars consider medieval sex work in a manner that ignores what the sources *actually* point toward, allowing their own preconceived ideas about the medieval period to influence their analysis. This is evident in Maria Karbić's article on sex work in urban areas of medieval Slavonia in the collection edited by Christopher Mielke and Andrea-Bianka Znorovszky, *Same Bodies, Different Women*. She begins with the question of who sex workers were, and finds that they were mainly widows or unmarried women, but that married women also engaged in sex work. Sex workers could be from all social classes, including those who had committed other crimes, as well as the wives of artisans, and even women who had the status of full citizens.[23] Karbić asserts that married women engaged in sex work for additional income. She also asserts that in urban areas of Slavonia, sex work was 'considered a great evil'.[24] This is evident in the fact that calling someone a *meretrix* was considered a grave insult, and many lawsuits arose around this issue. The penalty for calling someone a *meretrix* was a fine. The penalty, however, for actually practising sex work was much higher: banishment. This is where Karbić's argument that sex work was considered evil begins (interestingly) to break down, as there is ample evidence

20. Ibid., p. 415.

21. L. Otis-Cour, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of An Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago, IL, 1985), p. 61; the document is quoted in the footnotes, p. 185 nn. 77–9.

22. Ibid., p. 185, n. 80.

23. M. Karbić, 'Prostitutes and Urban Communities of Medieval Slavonia: Examples from Gradec', in Mielke and Znorovszky, eds, *Same Bodies, Different Women*, pp. 83–96, at 84.

24. Ibid., p. 86.

showing that sex workers who were set to be banished from cities were often pardoned at the community's request.[25] Karbić is careful to point out that the practice of petitioning the court for a pardon was not unique to the crime of sex work, but that makes it all the more interesting: sex workers in fact had access to the same systems of justice as other members of the community, and were perhaps not viewed as any more evil than any other criminal. Karbić gestures at this argument, but could push it much further than she does.

In another interesting article here, 'Laundry Ladies in Medieval Poland', Leslie Carr-Riegel sets out to examine and challenge the stereotype that laundresses were 'victims and poor menial labourers', who were often sex workers in some capacity.[26] She finds that, in Poland, most women did their washing at home for their own households, and that professional laundresses who worked for students at the University of Krakow were not 'singled out' as any more suspect than other women.[27] There was a further class of professionals who washed and cared for expensive garments for courts and churches, and these women did highly specialised work. Carr-Riegel does not find any substantive link between laundresses and sex work, as they made decent wages, nor does she find evidence that they had particularly poor reputations. Carr-Riegel's article argues that medieval historians ought to reconsider stereotypes about laundresses that have long been accepted, and those about women as workers in general.

However, despite these two articles which raise interesting questions for further research, *Same Bodies, Different Women* otherwise flounders and never quite hits the mark. The title itself is bio-essentialist, and the scope of 'different' is strange. The articles primarily concern sex workers, but also included are articles about disfigured women, enslaved women, and women who committed adultery and those who were raped. Difference as a category of analysis always begs the question: different from who and what, exactly?

Furthermore, several of the authors seem unable to engage with the topic of sex work without making light of it in some way. In one, a map is included that indicates the areas of sex work in Dubrovnik via a symbol of a high heel, a heart, and a stack of coins.[28] Another is titled 'Rub-a-dub-dub, Three Maids in a Tub'.[29] And even Carr-Reigel uses the phrase 'a sudsy slide into prostitution' to describe laundresses who also ended up doing sex work.[30] The desire to make one's academic

25. Ibid., pp. 88–9.

26. L. Carr-Riegel, 'Laundry Ladies in Medieval Poland', in Mielke and Znorovszky, eds, *Same Bodies, Different Women*, pp. 132–51, at 132.

27. Ibid., p. 140.

28. G. Ravančić, 'Prostitution in Late Medieval Dubrovnik: Legislation, Practice, and Prosecution', in Mielke and Znorovszky, eds, *Same Bodies, Different Women*, pp. 97–114, at 102.

29. C. Mielke, 'Rub-a-dub-dub, Three Maids in a Tub: Women in Bathhouses and Secondary Sites of Sex Work in Medieval Hungarian Towns', in Mielke and Znorovszky, eds, *Same Bodies, Different Women*, pp. 115–31, at 115.

30. Carr-Reigel, 'Laundry Ladies', p. 132.

work comedic and therefore engaging for one's readers is an understandable one. But it is at odds with stipulations that sex workers must have been victims: if they led lives of such misery surely we should not be encouraged to laugh in our studies of them. Furthermore, the topic of medieval sex work deserves serious attention, especially given how little work has been done on some aspects of it, particularly who sex workers were as individuals.

IV

The problems associated with accessing the subjectivity of regular medieval people—that they left few or no written records of their own, that they appear in sources only mediated through other voices and discourses, and that men are represented in the sources far more than women—are even more pronounced when studying medieval sex workers. They are in the record in fragments only, and some of the best information we have on sex work comes from their contact with criminal courts.

Ruth Mazo Karras examined prostitution as a sexual identity in 1999, and concluded that 'prostitutes' sexuality … led to their demarcation from the rest of medieval society and was seen as constituting the core of their being. In other words, prostitution was a sexual identity'.[31] She maintained that the evidence was too insufficient to allow us to determine whether there was 'individual identification' or 'group solidarity', and thus her theory of sexual identity hinged on the creation of that identity by medieval society rather than being named as such by sex workers themselves. Karras further asserted that 'We simply do not have the sources through which to hear subjects' voices'.[32]

Jamie Page's *Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany*, however, demonstrates that finding evidence of sex workers' subjectivity is not impossible. In the Introduction, Page sets out the aims of the book: to place individual women at the 'centre of the narrative' and to examine medieval sex work 'from a vantage point hardly known till now: that of prostitutes themselves'.[33] The Introduction then sets out the methodological issues that arise from trying to study the sex worker's voice and subjectivity. Page details the tradition of microhistory and archival 'voice' from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie to Natalie Zemon Davis. This tradition is clearly of particular importance for Page, who bases his book on three case-studies. Page also reflects on John Arnold's work on the inquisition and subjectivity as crafted by and for an interrogation, as well as Arnold's thoughts on the ethics of historians seeking to restore agency to their subjects.[34] Page's own exact views on these

31. Karras, 'Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity', p. 171.
32. Ibid., p. 162.
33. J. Page, *Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany* (Oxford, 2021), p. 3.
34. Ibid., pp. 17–18.

issues, however, remain unclear, though he does state that he wishes us to 'interrogate our own desire for authenticity, for the true voice of the past'.[35] Given that historians of pre-modern sex work are often too free in giving their opinions on the subject matter, Page's circumspection is welcome.

The book is structured around his three case-studies, the first of which concerns a woman named Repplin who was accused of abortion in fourteenth century Zurich. Repplin is not explicitly defined as a sex worker within the record. She did, however, have sexual relationships with at least five men, and Page uses this information to interrogate whether or not she was practicing sex work clandestinely. Ultimately, he concludes that 'to describe her as a prostitute is undoubtedly reductive', especially given the difficulties of 'seeing' Repplin in the record—there is no testimony from her available. However, the difficulties associated with seeing Repplin are 'indicative … of the wider ambiguities inherent in the concept of clandestine prostitution'.[36] In this way, Repplin's case serves as a way for Page to grapple with the problems associated with categorisation as a method of understanding the subjectivity of historical subjects.

The second case-study concerns the women of Nördlingen's municipal brothel. In the late fifteenth century, two judicial officials began investigating the poor working conditions in the brothel. The interrogation records contain testimonies from sex workers and detail the abuses they suffered for years at the hands of the brothel-keepers, with one episode culminating in a forced abortion. The investigation resulted in both brothel-keepers being banished, and new regulations for the running of a municipal brothel were drawn up.[37] Page remarks that 'in a field of inquiry shaped profoundly by silences in the sources, the testimony given by the Nördlingen women in the winter of 1471 stands out as a remarkable exception'.[38] These records, taken along with what Otis-Cour found in the *parlement* of Toulouse, indicate that sex workers were perhaps more vocal in the pre-modern period than historians are currently aware. Importantly, though, Page reminds us not to view the women in Nördlingen as 'heroic resisters of oppression' or through the simple binary of 'victims or agents', as their individual subjectivity was more complex than either.[39] And it is worth remembering that the sources we have which provide evidence that sex workers could speak for themselves are those which attest to their mistreatment, and which only exist because they had fraught contact with legal systems. To conclude, Page states that, despite the way the women in the record shifted

35. Ibid., p. 25.
36. Ibid., p. 64.
37. Ibid., p. 104.
38. Ibid., p. 68.
39. Ibid., p. 110.

between 'victimhood and agency', their 'collective agency' is still one of the record's chief attributes.[40]

The final case-study reminds us that, although sex workers had opportunities to use the legal system for their own purposes, courts could, and often did, criminalise them and their work. At the end of the fifteenth century in Augsburg, Gerdrut Birckin was accused of theft and clandestine prostitution. The records reveal that she was imprisoned for more than a month and interrogated multiple times. Page finds that the 'dialogue' between Gerdrut and the interrogators 'saw her ability to shape the narrative surrounding her progressively extinguished'.[41] Her agency was eroded by the court to such an extent that she was forced to admit that she led a 'miserable, shameful life', and the court thus used her subjectivity as a sex worker to frame her as powerless and to enforce their moral agenda.[42]

Page's book is well-researched, articulate and, above all, careful. Where so many historians of pre-modern sex work have run roughshod over their historical subjects, Page gives them adequate space to exist, not necessarily as they were, but as they might have been. He writes in the conclusion that

> to truly attribute 'complex' subjectivity to individuals in the past might thus lean towards a paradox: that the most meaningful attempts to do so might need to admit the impossibility of ever fully capturing them.[43]

The acknowledgment of this unknowability is exactly what makes his work so good.

V

In addition to the lenses of morality, subjectivity, and identity, sex work is also studied through the lenses of economic and social history. Such is Gary Leiser's approach in *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, which ambitiously spans the time period from 300 CE to 1500 and a large geographical area. The book does not analyse the lives of individual sex workers, in part due to the fact that, according to Leiser, all of the sources available were authored by men and so 'we know nothing of the personal experiences of these women or what they thought of their trade'.[44] While this is perhaps true, Leiser is too hasty in saying that 'the women concerned have no voice'. They may not have a voice as represented in the sources but they did while alive. Leiser himself is at least not concerned with passing moral judgement (his use of the term 'public women' not withstanding).

The book begins with an overview of sex work during Late Antiquity, and then turns to Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Anatolia.

40. Ibid., p. 111.
41. Ibid., p. 137.
42. Ibid., p. 138.
43. Ibid., p. 141.
44. Leiser, *Prostitution in the Eastern Mediterranean World*, p. xiii

Leiser compensates for the fact that he does not have sources from sex workers themselves by placing what he does have front and centre, often quoting lengthy, detailed passages. To this end, he draws heavily on writings by historians or secretaries, such as Ibn Sa'īd's writings on Cairo, 'Imād al-Dīn's description of sex workers in the crusader states, and Al-Maqrīzī's description of the system for taxing sex work during the Mamlūk period.[45] Such sources make the book compelling to read, and in addition to providing a thorough overview of sex work in the eastern Mediterranean, also serve as an introduction to the types of primary sources available to historians working in this area. The book is also approachable: each section includes a clear conclusion, and at the end, Leiser provides a useful summary of the key findings.

The section on Egypt is particularly fascinating as, despite some chronological gaps, the sources allow Leiser to discuss both who sex workers were and how they worked. He finds that sex workers were either native to Egypt or foreigners from Europe. They were Christian or Muslim, and either worked independently or were slaves, in brothels or alone. Some sex workers made a significant amount of money, some had multiple jobs, and some were even married. They worked in places such as apartments and inns, or even on boats, and in camps set up at pilgrimage sites. And though new rulers often tried to ban sex work, Leiser does not find much evidence that sex workers were punished, and the bans never lasted long. In general, he finds that 'Neither the ruling authorities nor the populace as a whole considered public women to be criminals'.[46] Furthermore, sex work was taxed in medieval Egypt, in the same way as other professions, and sex workers had to register in order to ensure that they paid their taxes. Leiser argues that sex work was 'fully integrated into economic and social life' and that in addition to the government, people of all classes had economic stakes in it.[47]

One of Leisers main arguments is that sex work in the medieval Middle East was 'a common profession' to which 'the general populace was indifferent' and 'even some respectable women engaged in it part-time from their houses'.[48] Leiser's assessment paints a very different picture of what sex workers' lives in this region might have been like from that in Mazzi's work on Italian sex workers. It also differs from Page's (at times) bleak portrait of sex workers' lives in late medieval Germany. This difference can perhaps be attributed to the fact that Leiser's work focuses on areas that were subject to Byzantine, and then Islamic law. As he points out, sex work was not illegal in these systems—only the procuring of slave women for sex was.[49] Leiser's work thus underscores the importance of looking outside of Europe

45. Ibid., pp. 108, 181 and 131 respectively.
46. Ibid., p. 162.
47. Ibid., p. 163.
48. Ibid., p. 256.
49. Ibid., p. 254.

in our study of the Middle Ages, as it complicates our understanding of medieval sex workers as primarily victims and medieval sex work as highly criminalised.

While some recent scholarship on medieval sex work is antiquated and biased, scholars such as Page, Leiser and McDonough have asked more interesting, nuanced questions. Their work has, at least in part, shifted the field away from the view that medieval sex workers led lives of 'ill repute', and towards a view of medieval sex workers as having led complex lives of varied meaning. Sex work as an occupation and trade existed in medieval societies for reasons other than its supposed ability to curb male sexual appetites and protect virtuous women.[50] Leiser's work in particular demonstrates that sex work had great economic and social importance. Page's work on sex workers' subjectivity is the most important work discussed here, as he both treats his subjects with the humanity that is lacking in some of the other books under review, and refrains from attempting to reanimate the dead in order to restore their agency. Instead, he allows himself, and the reader, to sit with and accept the messy, often difficult realities of sex workers' lives, while still exploring their exercises of individual and collective will.

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50. For a discussion of this, see Mazzi, *A Life of Ill Repute*, p. 29.