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Sex and the Singlewoman

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IN HER 1962 CLASSIC *Sex and the Single Girl*, Helen Gurley Brown, later editor of *Cosmopolitan* and creator of the "Cosmo Girl," urged unmarried women to have not just jobs but careers, on the grounds that "a married woman already is something. . . . Whatever hardships she endures in marriage, one of them is *not* that she doesn't have a place in life."¹ This theme — the lack of social space or social identity for the singlewoman — has been taken up for the medieval and early modern periods by many of the other essays in this volume. In explaining that women could be happy while single, however, Brown also had to face the scandalous issue of sexuality. She wrote that "theoretically, a 'nice' single woman has no sex life."² Brown went on to dispute that claim in an eloquent, albeit hardly protofeminist, plea for the advantages (at least temporary) of the unmarried state to a woman and the enjoyable nature of sex unconstrained by the bounds of matrimony.

Like her statement about women's social identity, Brown's observation about society's expectations of singlewomen's sexuality could apply equally well to medieval Europe as to postwar United States. In medieval Europe with its strict classification of women as virgins, wives, and widows, any woman who did not fit into one of the three categories risked being equated with members of the only identifiable, demarcated group that did not fit: prostitutes. Was there in practice any cultural space in the Middle Ages, as Brown claimed there was in practice in the 1960s, for the sexual activity of singlewomen other than prostitutes? The short answer is undoubtedly yes. But it is not possible to know very much more than that, for we have only rare traces of singlewomen as sexual subjects rather than objects.³

Medieval singlewomen certainly did have sex just as Helen Gurley Brown urged her readers to do. Like Brown's readers, they did so despite . . .

or in resistance against—the social norms they were taught. Also like the Cosmo Girls, they did so in part because of their own desires and in part because of what they hoped to gain from men (in many cases, marriage). However, both medieval and modern commentators have been at pains to suppress the fact of medieval singlewomen's heterosexual activity by limiting it to sex for money. Medieval writers emphasized the seriousness of the singlewomen's sin by attributing it to greed as well as lust, while modern authors emphasize the singlewomen's agency and respectability by treating their sexual activity as work. While modern historians' views of medieval singlewomen and their sexuality have an effect only on modern readers, the views of medieval commentators had serious consequences for the singlewomen themselves. The confusion of all heterosexual activity by singlewomen with prostitution has left a gap in the historical record, preventing us from knowing much about their noncommercial sexual activity.

The crasure of women's sexuality from the historical record has already been remarked on with regard to same-sex relations. As Ann Matter has noted, we have many medieval examples of passionate friendships among women (most often within a monastic context), but these were not considered to be sexually problematic. Moral theologians did not pay much attention to the question of what we would today call lesbian sex, perhaps because anything that did not involve a phallus did not fall within the bounds of their understanding of the sexual. They were concerned mainly with the usurpation of masculine roles.⁴ Some legislation against lesbian relations can be adduced for the period, but there are remarkably few cases of its enforcement, and in any case it mainly involves the use of "instruments," in other words dildoes.⁵ There are other clues to the existence of same-sex erotic practices—for example, in discussions of midwives palpat- ing the genital region⁶—but these were not discussed by moralists focusing on sexual behavior. Lesbian sex simply did not count.

Nor did voluntary, noncommercial heterosexual activity on the part of singlewomen count; it had to be reclassified as prostitution. Where same-sex activity was irrelevant to men's control over women, independent heterosexual activity threatened that control. Rather than simply ignoring it, medieval men had to explain it away. Or rather, they had to define it away, by using language that placed it in a received category of sexual sin. Any sex act involving a woman and a man not her husband might put her at risk for identification; simple fornication, especially as a prelude to marriage, might not be regarded as severely in practice as it was in theory, but popular medieval conceptual schemes still equated it with prostitution.

Pastoral literature, which flourished all over Europe in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, analyzed sexual sin extensively. It translated the views of the moral theologians into terms intended for the laity. Most of the treatises, whether organized around the Ten Commandments, the Seven Deadly Sins, or some other scheme, listed sexual offenses and ranked them in order of seriousness. "Simple fornication" was generally the least of the sins, and where it was defined it was said to be sexual relations between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman. This definition implies some degree of recognition of singlewomen (and widows) as sexual beings, but within this context of a catalog of sins, it is not surprising that the recognition was an exclusively negative one.

Where the texts went into more detail about fornication, listing the possible partners with whom the sin might be committed, it becomes clear that the sexually active singlewoman was viewed in quite narrow terms—indeed, defined as a prostitute. The *Fasciculus Morum*, for example, a fourteenth-century English compendium of exempla and other pastoralia, defined fornication as follows: "[W]hile fornication is any forbidden sexual intercourse, it particularly refers to intercourse with widows, prostitutes, or concubines. But the term 'prostitute' must be applied only to those women who give themselves to anyone and will refuse none, and that for monetary gain." The translator has rendered the term *meretrix* here as "prostitute" because of the specification about commerce. It had a more generalized meaning, closer to the semantic field of the contemporary "whore."⁸ Here, though, the author makes clear that he has a commercial prostitute in mind. The *Fasciculus* also includes categories for adultery and the defloration of a virgin, but there is no place for a singlewoman who is no longer a virgin.⁹ The only category for her is either concubine, a term that indicates the domestic partner of a priest, or meretrix, which would conflate her with the commercial prostitute.

Whereas pastoral literature concentrates on the moral implications of singlewomen's heterosexual activity, other sources treat it less judgmentally. Unmarried women of unfree status who became pregnant, for example, had to pay a fine to their lord, and the prevalence of these fines can be read as an indication of the practical acceptability of sex outside of marriage.¹⁰ The fines were levied as a fiscal mechanism for the lords rather than as a penalty for sin. The fact that such sexual activity took place frequently, however, does not mean that it was acceptable. One might think of more modern contexts in which heterosexual activity is common, and acceptable for the men engaged in it, but considered to reflect poorly on the moral

character or the psychological makeup of the women.¹¹ Within particular communities or subcultures nonmarital sexual activity might be acceptable — “sexual nonconformism” and “bastardy prone sub-society” are terms early modern historians have used — but even within those communities sexually active women might be suspect. As the demographer Peter Laslett put it, “breaches of social rules do not necessarily weaken those rules, and under certain circumstances can even serve to strengthen them.”¹²

Singlewomen, and the communities around them, may well have rejected the normative teachings of church and society about their sexual behavior. It is this nonconformity that allows us occasional glimpses of sexual activity that was not denigrated as commercial or sinful or both. However, such understandings went against the dominant currents in medieval culture. Even when laypeople considered fornication so routine as to be only a venial sin (a position the church vehemently rejected), the prevalent sexual double standard made it far less serious for men than for women.¹³ Manorial courts levied leytwrite, a fine for fornication, on women rather than on men, in part because it was often a pregnancy that called it to the courts’ attention, but it still shows that women’s fornication was considered more significant than men’s.

Was the conflation of heterosexually active singlewomen with prostitutes just a way of slandering women whose behavior did not meet society’s standard, or was it evidence of a real lack of conceptual distinction within the culture? It cannot have been entirely the latter: people would have been able to say who were practicing commercial prostitutes and who were not, and there were practical if not theoretical consequences to the distinction. Not, however, was it entirely the former. The verbal equation was based on a fundamental denial of independent, noncommercial sexual activity on the part of singlewomen.

The conflation of heterosexually active singlewomen with prostitutes is not unique to the Middle Ages. The word “whore” today is used to mean both “prostitute” and “promiscuous woman,” and indicates a conceptual overlap between the two, but we also have the more technical term “prostitute” to use when we wish specifically to denote one who engages in commercial sex. The Latin term *meretrix*, with approximately the same semantic field as “whore,” was the most technical term available, demonstrating how language used for any sexually active woman in the Middle Ages overlapped with that used for commercial prostitutes. The distinction made today (although not always consistently) between “pros” and amateurs was not made in the Middle Ages. The church courts of the diocese of

London in the fifteenth century illustrate the fuzziness of the categories. A woman could be presented either for fornication or for being a meretrix; a clear distinction existed between the two. But the distinction was not based on the presence of financial exchange. Payment could be taken as evidence that a woman was a meretrix, as with a case in which Margaret Weston was accused “by the token that she received a penny for her labor.” But other women were accused as meretrices for having sex with priests. A number of those accused as meretrices had borne children whose fathers were named, unlikely if they were really commercial prostitutes with numerous customers.¹⁴ The term meretrix meant a woman engaged in some sort of sexual behavior that was considered especially scandalous, and any unmarried woman could fall into that category whether or not she sought or took money for the sexual activity. The conceptual overlap between any heterosexual activity by a singlewoman and commercial activity was thus considerable.

Indeed, by the sixteenth century in England, “singlewoman” could be used as a semantic equivalent for “prostitute.” In Southwark, just across the Thames from the City of London, where legally condoned prostitution continued until 1547, a fifteenth-century set of customs proclaimed that the lack of regulation had led to “the great multiplication of horrible sin upon the single women.”¹⁵ Sixteenth-century legal records accuse men of committing adultery “with a certain singlewoman” in one of the Southwark brothels, refer to a “common woman of her body” whose by-name was “Singlewoman,” and report the dunking in the Thames of two women for being “singlewomen.” John Stow’s late Tudor chronicle of London refers to the prostitutes of the Stews as “single women” and describes the “single woman’s churchyard” where they were buried. A sixteenth-century ordinance about prostitutes was recorded in the Repertory Book of the London Court of Aldermen with the marginal notation “Singlewomen.”¹⁶ “Single woman” was also used in these same records to refer to never-married women when their sexual behavior was not in question; it was not always a euphemism for “prostitute.” It was used to refer to them frequently enough, however, to demonstrate a clear linkage.

The linkage between heterosexually active singlewomen generally and commercial prostitutes did not mean that all singlewomen were prostitutes, nor that none of them were. Commercial prostitution did exist, practiced by wives and widows as well as singlewomen. Many towns in medieval Europe had licensed brothels, where prostitution was condoned.¹⁷ In this situation, an official list of prostitutes would be created, and there can be no

question to a historian of the validity of classifying as a prostitute a woman who was employed as such in a municipal brothel. One might expect that the existence of a class of official prostitutes would lead to a clear understanding of who did and who did not fall into the category, as was the goal with nineteenth-century registration movements.¹⁸ However, the existence of some official prostitutes did not mean the disappearance of "clandestine prostitutes" — that is, commercial prostitutes practicing on their own rather than in officially recognized brothels. And it is for these women that the lines blur. It is difficult to know how many of the women thus labeled in the extant sources were full-time professionals, how many were occasional prostitutes, and how many were simply heterosexually active women with no commercial involvement. We must not lose sight of the fact that a number of singlewomen did in fact practice prostitution at least occasionally.

In many respects, widows occupied the same social position as singlewomen, and if heterosexually active were referred to as meretrices (whores) in the same way as singlewomen. Yet the confusion of categories does not seem to have affected them as significantly. The widow was not as problematic as the singlewoman; medieval society recognized her existence and allowed her a space, even if not always an entirely respectable one.¹⁹ Even the *Fastidulus Morum* allows for the possibility of heterosexually active widows who are not meretrices. Whereas singlewomen were out of place for not marrying, widows had performed that obligation — indeed, the church frowned upon, though it did not prohibit, their remarriage.²⁰ Their independence and their morals might be suspect like those of singlewomen, but they were not as anomalous.

The anomalousness of singlewomen put them in a position where their heterosexual activity could easily — sometimes deliberately — be confused with prostitution. The legend of the sacristan, a popular miracle of the Virgin that appears in many European vernaculars, reflects the failure to draw a sharp line. In this legend, a nun leaves her convent out of lust for a lover; he later abandons her. In several versions of the story, she is described as living an evil life, or more specifically as living with a lover and bearing him children. In other texts, however, she is described as turning to prostitution in order to support herself after her lover abandons her.²¹ In English texts at least, later texts have the second version of the story.²² There is a certain plausibility in this shift: a former nun, abandoned by the man she hoped would support her, would be unlikely to have the skills or connections she would need to earn a living in another way. Yet we also see here slippage between the categories of unchaste woman and prostitute: if she

was no longer a nun, but was not married, there was no other way to think about her. The contrast between the nun and the prostitute certainly created a dramatic contrast to emphasize the moral message, but it was also indicative of a pervasive way of thinking about women.

The stories of saints who were former prostitutes, so popular in the Middle Ages, illustrate this same slippage. There were a number of these saints, and their stories were popular in both Latin and vernacular versions: Mary of Egypt, Mary the Harlot, Pelagia, Thais.²³ The preeminent repentant saint, of course, was Mary Magdalen. The Magdalen became the patron saint of repentant prostitutes; shelters for them took her name. The medieval stories about her all identify her with the "sinful woman" of Luke 7:37, and all assume that her unnamed sin was sexual, although it is very rare that they represent her as a prostitute in the commercial sense. In the fifteenth-century *Arras Passion*, for example, she explicitly repudiates financial gain:

Here is my body which I present
To anyone who wants to have it.
I don't want to sell it,
I don't want to have gold or silver,
Let each one do his will with it.²⁴

Many of the texts also stress the Magdalen's social standing: she is a woman of good birth and of riches, needing no money from her lovers. Yet because there was no conceptual space for a singlewoman who was heterosexually active, she became identified with prostitutes.

This suspicion of singlewomen, especially heterosexually active ones, is illustrated for a very different social group — working women — in a fifteenth-century German text, "Stepmother and Daughter," also known in some manuscripts as "How a Mother Teaches her Daughter Whoring."²⁵ The story describes an older woman training a younger one in the upbringing of men. The terms of the account do not envision commercial prostitution of the sort practiced in fifteenth-century German towns with their official brothels,²⁶ but clearly a financial element is involved: the younger woman is to expect gifts of cash or apparel, or long-term maintenance, in return for her sexual activity. As Ann Marie Rasmussen points out, the women in the story are presented as typical working singlewomen of the town, who were always viewed with suspicion by the town fathers; indeed, Beate Schuster argues that in Germany by the end of the fifteenth century "the boundaries between prostitutes and unmarried, independent women

had been obscured.²²⁷ The poem is misogynous in the sense that it implies a sexual and financial greed on the part of all women (or at least all single women), but on the other hand it also presents some element of women's redefinition of themselves. The older woman speaks of her daughter's "honor"; this might be ironic to someone who considered such a woman dishonored by definition, but it could indeed reflect such women's actual evaluation of their own activity. Both the character of the older woman and the advice to extract wealth from the lover are reminiscent of La Vieille in the *Roman de la Rose* and indeed a whole lineage of similar representation of older women, from Aphrodisia to La Celestina.²⁸

These representations emphasize, indeed, the venality of all feminine sexuality, not only that of singlewomen. The message was that any woman could be bought: any unchaste woman was the equivalent of a prostitute. The effect was greater, however, for a singlewoman. Lacking a wifely identity, she was more obviously in need of categorization. Further, a wife (or a nun) was subject to clear lines of authority: there was a man or a rule who was supposed to be in control, even if the woman had managed to escape that control. The singlewoman who was no longer living in her father's home lacked such an authority and was therefore a greater threat to social order; conflating her with a prostitute at least gave her a familiar identity and, depending on local regulations and their enforcement, a means for controlling her. If a singlewoman living in her father's or master's home was accused of prostitution, he was assumed to be in control, and could be accused of procuring or of brothelkeeping.

The venality of singlewomen as represented in literature had its roots in reality. Singlewomen needed money. As other chapters in this book indicate, they worked in poorly paid crafts and it was only the exceptions who became wealthy. Thus, it is only to be expected that they would seek gifts from lovers. Kathy Peiss's work on "charity girls" and treating in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century United States provides a model of what may have been going on. Working-class women commonly accepted gifts and treats from men they dated. This was the only way, given their wages and expenses, that they could afford the luxuries and amusements offered in the nascent consumer society. When they had sex with the men, in more or less explicit return for the treating, they were known as "charity girls," and reformers considered them not much different from "occasional prostitutes" who accepted cash. For the women themselves, however, the meaning was quite different.²⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz notes, for the same time period, that among singlewomen in Chicago, "The higher

wages of men, plus the social sanction given to a courtship in which a man plied a woman with gifts, encouraged forms of dependence that fell somewhere between professional prostitution and marriage.³⁰

Medieval singlewomen, of course, did not have available to them the same range of luxuries and amusements as did modern ones, but gift exchange was still an important part of courtship. Indeed, material considerations were a major part of medieval marriage generally, and both men and women seeking to marry could well be considered venal. The exchange of gifts—if not the property arrangements that would be part of a marriage contract among the better-off—risked confusion with prostitution. In one case brought before the bishop of London's Consistory Court in 1470, a woman testified that she and her sexual partner had exchanged gifts, which she had understood as being signs of betrothal. He, on the other hand, acknowledged having given her gifts of knives, gloves, and cash, but said that they were given not with the intent of marriage but "so she would continue with him in sin."³¹ Perhaps he was indeed deliberately misleading her, but the case indicates that the same sorts of gifts were used as steps towards marriage and as the price of sex with a prostitute. These circumstances reinforced the association of heterosexually active singlewomen or widows with prostitution. Even in the case of a relationship apparently leading to marriage, the association might be made.

The confusion between courting gifts and prostitutes' fees did not happen among the aristocracy. As one would expect, the conflation of the heterosexually active singlewoman with the prostitute operated more strongly at lower than at higher social levels. Poorer women were more likely to turn to prostitution for economic reasons. In addition, the definition of sexual categories was, in medieval European society as in so many others, one of the tools used by those in power to control others. Geoffrey Chaucer might have one of his pilgrims (the Manciple) note that the only difference between a woman "of high degree" who sins and a poor woman is one of terminology: he reminds the reader that "Men lay the one as low as lies the other,"³² but in practice aristocratic women were less likely to be equated with prostitutes. This fact is not simply because such an equation would have been ludicrous for a wealthy woman; a real suspicion of commercial activity need not have been present for her to have been called a whore. Rather, it has to do with the reasons independent feminine sexual activity was suspect. The higher one looks in medieval society, the more closely monitored was the sexual activity of unmarried daughters, who could be an important commodity in the marriage market. Even when they

were not — when finding a dowry for yet another daughter could become a drag on even a large fortune — the sexuality of daughters reflected on the honor of fathers and brothers, and stigmatization of the woman took a back seat to the seeking of revenge against her “seducer.”³³

This is not to say that aristocratic women’s heterosexual activity was not an issue in the Middle Ages. It certainly was, and indeed its extent remains hotly debated today, but it did not mainly involve singlewomen. Adultery was the sexual transgression commonly associated with aristocratic women, and most commonly represented in literature (even if scholars have questioned its acceptability in reality).³⁴ Where we do see heterosexuals sexually active aristocratic singlewomen, in literature or in documents closer to actual practice, their transgression was not in wrongly using their independence (of which they had a good deal less than women of other social groups) but rather, in effect, in stealing one man’s property in them by transferring it to another man.³⁵

Male aristocrats, in late medieval and Renaissance Italy at least, also created a demand and hence an opportunity for one type of sexually active singlewomen, who did to some extent operate on a commercial basis. The courtesan was mainly an Italian phenomenon. Aristocratic men elsewhere in medieval Europe were certainly involved in sexual liaisons, but the social position of an Alice Perrers (the mistress of Edward III) or Katherine Swynford (the mistress of John of Gaunt, mother of his Beaufort children and ancestor of Henry VII) at the English court in the fourteenth century was not the same as those of the famous courtesans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Italian courtesans were distinguished from common prostitutes largely through their selectivity: they were automatically choosy because their price was high, but they also developed a reputation for culture and preferring men of cultivated tastes.³⁶ Here too, however, a sort of conflation might have been going on: a singlewoman who was the lover of a particular aristocratic man would be considered a courtesan simply because the courtesans were a recognized class of women (a class that could, if necessary, be denigrated as whores).

At higher as well as lower levels of society sexual practices were at odds with the dominant moral code. Heterosexual relations outside of marriage persisted despite anything the church — or individuals within the church — the law, or secular literature said or did. Lawmakers or authors, within the church or without, and their legal enactments and textual productions could, however, deeply affect, if not control, the way society viewed the women involved in those relations. That view was extremely negative, plac-

ing all the opprobrium on the woman. In addition to the consequences to those women, they also created consequences for modern historians in terms of the evidence they left us.

Modern scholars have collaborated with medieval sources in blurring the distinction between heterosexually active singlewomen and prostitutes.³⁷ Victorian attitudes tended to attribute prostitution to a moral defect common to all working-class women.³⁸ Even a relatively enlightened reformer like Abraham Flexner, who believed it was circumstances rather than innate defects that drove women to prostitution, wrote that “the seduced servant or shopgirl, or the pregnant country lass” may turn to prostitution because “in point of character, the girl has no longer anything to lose; meanwhile need presses.”³⁹ Any heterosexually active singlewoman thus risked crossing the line. By the twentieth century, too, the medicalization of prostitution had proceeded far enough that prostitutes were seen as having psychological problems that brought them into the trade; this, too, they shared with other sexually active singlewomen.⁴⁰

Historians long accepted these attitudes, whether they came from medieval sources or from modern reform movements. W. W. Sanger’s influential *History of Prostitution*, for example, amounted to a history of what he termed “vice.” In his chapters on medieval France and Britain, he discussed not only commercial prostitution but also *gynaeceae*, concubinage, lewd manuscript illumination, the sodomy of the Templars, the *Roman de la Rose*, incest and succubi, flagellation, bridal chambers, women’s property ownership, incest, rape of nuns, brideprices, and royal mistresses.⁴¹ He found prostitution in any sexual activity by women; like the fourteenth-century author of the *Fasciculus Morum*, he had no other category for the heterosexually active singlewoman. Nor was he the only historian to group singlewomen with prostitutes. Paul LaCroix, who published his massive *History of Prostitution* in 1852–54 under the name of Pierre Dufour, was a bit more careful in his scholarship but even so made similar assumptions: he claimed that a number of women named in the *Paris taille* of 1292 were prostitutes even though they are not labeled as such and “the majority of them were scattered among various kinds of trades.” He apparently assumed this on the basis of their nicknames, which are not in fact unusual among working men and women, and on the basis that independent women must have been sexually immoral.⁴²

These views more or less conflating all heterosexual activity outside marriage with prostitution grow from an attitude that lumps all such behavior together as immoral. But one can observe the same process occur-

ring with historians who have very different sorts of agendas. In the case of historians who pioneered the study of the history of sexuality in the Middle Ages as a serious academic subject, for example, the inclusion of information on sexually active women generally in a discussion of prostitutes stemmed from a desire for comprehensiveness in the study: all pertinent evidence was to be included.⁴³ Other, less academic, historians have lumped all feminine sexuality together because they see women as having a robust heterosexual desire expressed both through prostitution and otherwise.⁴⁴

The same conflation of heterosexually active singlewomen with prostitutes appears in the work of feminist historians. These historians begin from a position of not wanting to make moral judgments about women's sexual behavior in the past, and from a position of respect for women workers and their work. This respect occasionally leads them, however, to treat all nonmarital sex as work. In line with the strand of feminist thought that calls prostitutes "sex workers," attempting to eliminate judgmental language and treat their work like any other,⁴⁵ historians of several societies have examined prostitution from the point of view of women's agency. Asking why the women involved chose prostitution and what they got out of it, they focus on prostitution as one of a number of possible career choices for a singlewoman.⁴⁶ Feminist medievalists, too, have tended to emphasize the agency of female workers, including prostitutes. The conjunction of this respect for women's work and willingness to accept prostitutes as workers rather than as moral transgressors puts us at some risk for conflating heterosexually active singlewomen generally with prostitutes.

If a singlewoman was labeled a meretrix — or even if she was accused of fornication with multiple partners — we have tended to accept that she was a commercial prostitute, so that we may include her in an analysis of female workers. In my own *Common Women* I treated many women as prostitutes even though there were problems (noted in the book) with this identification. For example, in the records from York, I interpreted repeated accusations of fornication and adultery as pointing to prostitutes, and elsewhere I interpreted meretrices as prostitutes although the term meretrix did not always mean a prostitute in the modern sense.⁴⁷ Maryanne Kowaleski, in an important article on women's work in medieval Exeter, treats prostitutes as one of the occupational groups.⁴⁸ "Prostitute" here is a translation of "meretrix" in the Exeter records. Kowaleski assumes that women so labeled were commercial prostitutes, and that their inclusion along with other commercial offenses means that the fines for prostitution were de facto licensing fees like the fines for brewing and baking. I used this insight of

hers in my work. Yet, we should be aware that this is simply an assumption. Fines for other, noncommercial offenses, such as assault or quarreling, are also found in the same records. Many of the meretrices were cited for sex with a specific man, although others were called *communes*. Are they commercial prostitutes, or are they unmarried women whose sexual activity posed a threat to the orderliness of the town? The likely answer is that they are both, but this hypothesis is by no means proven. Since Kowaleski's treatment of prostitutes is only a few paragraphs in a larger context of women's work, one could hardly expect her to go more deeply into the question, but it still remains.

Jeremy Goldberg, whose knowledge of the records of medieval Yorkshire and their application to women's history is unparalleled, has made similar assumptions. A main theme implicit in Goldberg's work is women's agency: that is, he assumes that when women married early or late, when they went into one job or another, they were making a choice. Prostitution was one of those choices, constrained of course by the range of other opportunities available. When Goldberg states in his chapter on "Women and Work" that from 1403 to 1432 Isabella Wakefield was "regularly presented as a prostitute, procurress, and brothelkeeper,"⁴⁹ he relies on sources that never use the word "meretrix." Rather, he deems repeated accusations of adultery and fornication the equivalent of accusations of prostitution.⁵⁰ Goldberg is quite probably right about Isabella Wakefield.⁵¹ But the evidence is not unambiguous, and it is difficult for a historian to draw the line. We may deem Wakefield a prostitute because of repeated accusations of fornication and adultery; yet she also had a long-term lover, the priest Peter Byrde. Might that not be what got the authorities so upset about her? What about the singlewoman accused only one or two times: can we safely conclude either that she was a prostitute or that she was not?

These examples, taken from the work of historians that I respect greatly, illustrate the readiness of thoughtful, careful feminist historians to assume or accept that singlewomen's heterosexual activity is paid work. When historians focus on marriage and work, the heterosexually active singlewoman who is not seeking remuneration has disappeared. If we are too ready to equate heterosexually active singlewomen with prostitutes, we fall into the trap set for the singlewomen themselves by medieval moralists and municipal authorities.

If the heterosexual activity of singlewomen were only a taxonomic problem for historians, it might seem unimportant. People behaved as they behaved regardless of what historians choose to call it. However, if we wish

to understand medieval culture, it matters a great deal whether we believe women were engaging in sexual behavior for economic, affective, or libidinous reasons. Not all singlewomen who had sex with men were rape victims or prostitutes (though of course some were). Given the nature of the sources that describe the sexuality and sexual behavior of singlewomen, we must treat any given incident or representation as falling within a range of options, rather than assuming from the language used that we can automatically know or categorize it.

While the medieval sources' conflation of heterosexual activity by singlewomen with prostitution creates problems for historians, it created the greatest problems, of course, for medieval singlewomen themselves. The association with prostitution worked to undercut the possibility of sexual independence. We must reckon with the possibility, however, that singlewomen rejected that association.⁵² We know that there were many heterosexual active singlewomen who were not professional prostitutes. Some of them may have internalized the rhetoric about feminine sinfulness. Surely, however, not all of them did. Some singlewomen, as we know, carried on long-term relationships with men whom they did not marry — because the men were clerics, because they were married to other women with whom they no longer lived, or simply because the couple did not feel formal marriage was necessary.⁵³ Such women were subject to opprobrium from their communities — the appellation of "whore," in their neighbors' comments if not in formal court accusations, applied to them.⁵⁴ But we should not forget that despite the efforts of medieval society to deny to women other than the most degraded the possibility of sexual activity outside of marriage, women were still making choices for themselves, and those choices could include sexual activity.

Notes

1. Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 80.
2. *Ibid.*, 4.
3. Heloise is probably the best-known example, but the letters in which she describes her premarital sexual feelings about Abelard were, of course, written after both her marriage and her profession as a nun. The most up-to-date account of authorship of these letters is Barbara Newman, "Authority, Authenticity, and the Repression of Heloise," in her *From Virile Woman to WomanChrist: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 46–75.

4. E. Ann Matter, "My Sister, My Spouse: Woman-Identified Women in Medieval Christianity," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2 (1986): esp. 88–93; Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 6. See now Jacqueline Murray, "Twice Marginal and Twice Invisible: Lesbians in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 191–222.
5. Brown, *Immodest Acts*, 14. Louis Crompton, "The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital laws from 1270 to 1791," in *Historical Perspectives on Homosexuality*, ed. Salvatore J. Licata and Robert P. Petersen (New York: Haworth Press, 1981), 11–25, provides no medieval examples where the woman was not taking what was considered a masculine role. Similarly, female masturbation was not considered problematic.
6. Murray, "Twice Marginal," 201.
7. Siegfried Wenzel, ed. and trans., *Fasciulus Morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 117, 669.
8. For a discussion of the terminology of prostitution in the Middle Ages, especially England, see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 10–12. The first part of this essay draws heavily from my previously published work, citing that work has seemed preferable to repeating in detail arguments developed elsewhere.
9. The term "concubina" in Latin pastoral literature from England meant a woman who had sex with a priest. Some of them were apparently prostitutes whom the priest visited regularly; others may have been supported financially by an individual priest; but most seem to have been in quasi-marital relationships for which the contemporary language of domestic partnerships seems appropriate and nonjudgmental. See Karras, *Common Women*, 108–9.
10. Tim North, "Legerwite in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," *Past and Present* 110 (February 1986): 3–16; E. D. Jones, "The Medieval Legerwite: A Historical Note on Female Fornication," *English Historical Review* 107 (1992): 945–53.
11. See, e.g., Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992). The double standard in premarital sex — with the blame placed on women — is by no means the main point of this work, but is amply illustrated there.
12. Peter Laslett, "Introduction," in *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, ed. Peter Laslett, Karl Ostervee, and Richard M. Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 3.
13. Ruth Mazo Karras, "Two Models, Two Standards: Moral Teaching and Sexual Mores," in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 123–38.
14. Karras, *Common Women*, 25–30; quotation from Guildhall Library, MS 9064.1, fol. 82r.
15. J. B. Post, "A Fifteenth-Century Customary of the Southwark Stews,"

Journal of the Society of Archivists (1977): 423; Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19 (1989): 427.

16. Corporation of London Records Office, Repertory Book 5, fol. 103v; London, Guildhall Library, MS 9064/6, fol. 70r; CLRO, Rep. 9, fol. 256v; John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 2; 54; CLRO, Rep. 12, fol. 27r.

17. These are discussed in Karras, *Common Women*, 32–43.

18. Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 69–89, 202–4; Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France After 1800*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 30–36, 84–86; Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), 19–32, 212–15; and Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the State in Italy 1860–1915* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 32–37.

19. Joel T. Rosenthal, "Fifteenth-Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices," and Barbara A. Hanawalt, "Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 33–58, 141–64. See also Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 119–20; Louise Murter, ed., *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), esp. Heather M. Arden, "Grief, Widowhood, and Women's Sexuality in Medieval French Literature," 305–19; Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton, eds., *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994).

20. James A. Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law," in *Wife and Widow*, ed. Walker, 17–31.

21. Robert Guette, *La légende de la sarrestine: étude de littérature comparée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1927; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1981).

22. Karras, *Common Women*, 115–17.

23. The legends of these saints are discussed in Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990): 3–32; extensive references to different versions of their stories may be found there. The following discussion of Mary Magdalene is also based on "Holy Harlots."

24. *Le mystère de la passion joué à Arras*, ed. Jules-Marie Richard (Arras: Société du Pas-de-Calais, 1891; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1976), 117, ll. 9981–86.

25. This discussion relies heavily on Anne Marie Rasmussen, "'How a Mother Teaches her Daughter Whoring': The Rhymed Couple Text 'Stepmother and Daughter,'" chap. 7 of *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature, 1180–1557* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1997). I am grateful to Professor Rasmussen for allowing me to see this work in advance of publication.

26. Peter Schuster, *Das Frauenhaus: Städtische Bordelle in Deutschland (1150–1600)* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1992).

27. Beate Schuster, *Die freien Frauen: Dirnen und Frauenhäuser im 15. Und 16. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1995), 216.

28. Karras, *Common Women*, 62, 90–91.

29. Kathy Peiss, "'Charity Girls' and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working-Class Sexuality, 1880–1920," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 74–87.

30. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 101.

31. Greater London Record Office, DL/C/1, fol. 55v. Cf. the case translated by Shannon McSheffrey in *Love and Marriage in Late Medieval London* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: TEAMS, 1995), 42–43.

32. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 285, ll. 221–22. This passage — and the theme of the relation between social difference and sexuality in the Middle Ages — is discussed in Ruth Mazo Karras, "'Since the Other is a Poor Woman, She Shall be Called His Wench': Gender, Sexuality, and Social Status in Late Medieval England," *Difference and Gender in the Middle Ages*, ed. Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, (forthcoming).

33. Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Error: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 17–18.

34. John E. Benton, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," in *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, ed. E. X. Newman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969), 19–42, is still a classic. See now Peggy McCracken, *The Romance of Adultery: Queenship and Sexual Transgression in Medieval French Narrative* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

35. Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 121–44, discusses this issue with regard to married women; for the unmarried it was the father's rather than the husband's property that was at stake.

36. The courtesan became an established and recognized status in Italy in the sixteenth century. See Guido Ruggiero, *Binding Passions: Tales of Magic, Marriage, and Power at the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33.

38. Cathy Santore, "Julia Lombardo, 'Sontuosa Meretrice': A Portrait by Property," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988): 44–83; Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Lynne Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987).

37. I am far from the first to point this out: Iwan Bloch — the M.D. who was a pioneer of what he termed *Sexualwissenschaft*, or the scientific study of sexuality — offered in his two-volume study of prostitution, published in 1912, a trenchant critique of those who, "in accordance with canon law, have identified prostitution with any illegitimate sexual satisfaction, and thereby unacceptably blurred the boundaries between prostitution and other forms of extramarital sexual relations" (Iwan Bloch, *Die Prostitution*, vol. 1, *Handbuch der gesamten Sexualwissenschaft* in

Einzeldarstellungen, 1 [Berlin: Louis Marcus, 1912], 25). Bloch himself was not always consistent in drawing the distinction: see, e.g., p. 787, where he finds prostitutes in the Prose Edda.

38. Henry Mayhew and Bracebridge Hemming, "The Prostitute Class Generally," in Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, vol. 4, *Those That Will Not Work* (1862 ed., rpt. New York: A. M. Kelley, 1967), 35; classified any woman living with a man to whom she was not married a "cohabitant prostitute."

39. Abraham Flexner, *Prostitution in Europe* (New York: The Century Co., 1914; rpt., Patterson Smith Reprint Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems, 30, Montclair, N.J.: Patterson Smith, 1969), 80.

40. Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 184–99.

41. William W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution: Its Extent, Causes, and Effects Throughout the World* (New York: Medical Publishing, 1897; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974), 93–108 and 282–94. The point of all this was that vice was rampant in medieval society, encouraged by the church (except among the "hardy, vigorous race" [283] of Anglo-Saxons).

42. Paul LaCroix, *History of Prostitution Among All the Peoples of the World, from the Most Remote Antiquity to the Present Day*, trans. Samuel Putnam (Chicago: Pascal Covici, 1926), 2:410. I thank Janice Archer for suggesting some of the details about this source that confirmed my hunch that these women are not likely to have been prostitutes.

43. Historians who discuss other heterosexually active women along with prostitutes out of a concern for inclusiveness or context include Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Prostitution: An Illustrated Social History* (New York: Crown, 1978), 106–29.

44. E. J. Burford, *The Orrible Synne: A Look at London Lechery from Roman to Cromwellian Times* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 10; Andrew McCall, *The Medieval Underworld* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), 189, 182. See also Burford, *Bawds and Lodgings: A History of the London Bankside Brothels c. 1000–1675* (London: Peter Owen, 1976).

45. The other strand in feminist thought calls them "prostituted women" or "women used in systems of prostitution," emphasizing their victim status. This position is especially prominent among feminists who have worked with women whom all would agree are exploited—that is, where race, class and the global economy enter the picture (as with child prostitutes in southeast Asia)—but it is by no means limited to these situations: a study of prostitution in a socialized and relatively ethnically homogeneous European nation notes that "prostitution's destruction of emotional life, self-image, and self-respect is so massive that the comparison with typical waged work grows thin." See, e.g., Asia Watch and The Women's Rights Project, *A Modern Form of Slavery: Trafficking of Burmese Women and Girls into Brothels in Thailand* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993); Cecile Hoigard and Liv Finstad, *Backstreets: Prostitution, Money, and Love*, trans. Katherine Hanson, Nancy Sipe, and Barbara Wilson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), quote at p. 183; Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995). See also Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing,*

and Rewriting the Prostitute Body (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 49–54. The prostitution-as-work perspective comes out of the prostitutes' rights movement in the U.S. and Europe, in which prostitutes themselves (though usually the more independent and better educated ones) agitate for good working conditions, civil and legal rights, and respect. See Valerie Jenness, *Making It Work: The Prostitutes' Rights Movement in Perspective* (New York: de Gruyter, 1993); Gail Pheterson, ed., *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989); Bell, *Reading*, 99–123; Laurie Bell, ed., *Good Girls/Bad Girls: Sex Trade Workers and Feminists Face to Face* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1987). Anne McClintock, "Screwing the System: Sexwork, Race, and the Law," *boundary 2* 19, 2 (1992): 70–95, reconciles the two positions I have identified by arguing that prostitution is exploitative under male control, but when free of that control it is well-paid work that allows women's independence.

46. Examples include Marilyn Wood Hill, *Their Sisters' Keepers: Prostitution in New York City, 1830–1870* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Vccena Oldenberg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," in *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23–61; and especially Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), who presents the sexual behavior of the prostitutes as incidental to the work aspect.

47. Karras, *Common Women*, 27–28.

48. Maryanne Kowaleski, "Women's Work in a Market Town: Exeter in the Late Fourteenth Century," in *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 154.

49. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, 155.

50. Similarly, of the other terms used for Wakefield, "pronuba" could mean a number of things besides procuress, and "keeps scortum" in her house" did not necessarily mean keeping a brothel (Ruth Mazo Karras, "The Latin Vocabulary of Illat Sexuality in English Ecclesiastical Court Records," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 2 [1992]: 1–17).

51. Indeed, I used her as a case study: Karras, *Common Women*, 66–67, citing Goldberg's work as well as the relevant court records.

52. Jones's suggestion (in "Medieval Leyrwite," 949) that the fact that most women paid their own leyrwite instead of having a man pay it for them indicates women's independence may be a trifle optimistic. They were considered "individuals in their own right, able to, and expected to, take responsibility for their own actions," but here the responsibility is blame rather than credit.

53. Michael Sheehan, "Theory and Practice: The Marriage of the Unfree and Free in Medieval Society," *Medieval Studies* 50 (1988): 457–87, shows how some people who simply chose not to marry were forced to marry or simply defined as married by the church courts.

54. Karras, *Common Women*, 29–30.