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## *Medieval Prostitution and the Case of a (Mistaken?) Sexual Identity*

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As a historian of early modern same-sex sexuality (for lack of a better term) and as a student of current homophobia, I welcome Ruth Karras's challenge to the present master narrative in the historiography of sexuality. I also underscore the point implied in her article, that this narrative has become a stumbling block in understanding both premodern and modern sexualities, and, I may add, homophobia. I particularly welcome her attempts to critique the behavior/personality dichotomy which is so central to the Foucauldian canon. My own work has led me to the conclusion that this dichotomy is faulty, reductionist, and theoretically questionable. The idea that people prior to modern medicalization were defined only by their behaviors, or, indeed, that sodomy was only an act, suggests that there can be sex without subjects and objects, thus ignoring gender. Contradicting its own assumptions, the Foucauldian narrative essentializes desires prior to the mid-nineteenth century into biological functions, and argues that these were first culturally molded by modern medical discourses, implying that there can be sex without a cultural context. I find both contentions questionable.

Nonetheless, I doubt Karras's conclusion that in the European Middle Ages "prostitution was a sexual identity in any relevant sense of the word."<sup>1</sup> At the very least, I suspect her conclusion to be premature, as she ignores crucial issues that ought to be raised. While I contend that there are major theoretical, methodological, and factual problems (and sometimes downright errors) in the current Foucauldian narrative, I doubt whether the notion of a sexual identity is proper or relevant to medieval sexuality or that an acclaimed medieval sexual identity would resolve those problems. Nor do I think such a claim will help us understand the transition from premodern to modern times, which to me seems paramount to a critique of the Foucauldian canon. After all, one of the adagio in that canon is the virtual denial of historical roots to nineteenth-century medical discourse, and the sole attribution of this discourse to the aspirations (and imaginations) of an emerging medical establishment.

Karras argues that a minoritizing discourse on "lewd" women intersected with a universalizing discourse that considered all women as naturally lustful and at risk of losing control over their desires. The minoritizing discourse produced (or was expressed in) social practices of exclusion and regulation, and assigned special roles and spaces to women deemed lewd (whether or not they engaged in prostitution in the modern sense of the

word). Similar constructions of sexual otherness affected Jews, heretics, and lepers. Although such individuals left no texts behind which would enable us to see whether and how they appropriated such meanings and by virtue constructed subjectivity, Karras argues that such an absence should not deny outright their subjectivity. From there, she makes a quantum leap to the conclusion that medieval prostitutes not only had a sexual identity but also that "medieval discourses around certain aspects of sexuality operated in ways comparable to more modern ones."<sup>2</sup> The very fact that this identity has disappeared would then be an argument for the construction of sexuality.

Karras's application of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notions of universalizing and minoritizing discourses is helpful in understanding the medieval period and some of the changes that have taken place over time.<sup>3</sup> She does not, however, problematize enough "sexuality" and "identity," just as, to a certain extent, the present canon fails to do so. For one thing, I am not completely sure what it is that Karras claims to be constructed in the first place. Is it prostitutes' sexuality—meaning a discrete set of desires, subjectivities, subjects, objects, social roles, and practices, as the original Foucauldian narrative claimed for the nineteenth-century emergence of homosexuality? Would the medieval prostitute's identity approximate that of a homosexual identity today? Or, is it simply a matter of the meanings medieval society attributed to prostitutes' behavior, which in the process of appropriation became a subjectivity? If the latter, seeing that meanings can change and that changing meanings may account for the disappearance over time of a prostitute's sexual identity is not difficult to see. Yet, if we think of sexuality (in all its disparate elements of desires, motivations, behaviors, roles, etc.) as being constructed, it becomes an altogether different story. I support the notion of construction, while claiming that it is those very elements, including desires, which have changed over time, and that what actually was constructed in the past may in fact have been very different from sexuality today. It is not a matter of questioning constructivism, as well as asking what it actually was that was constructed. Rather, one of the main questions that needs to be addressed is how premodern construction became modern sexuality. I contend that not even the original historiographical narrative inspired by Foucault sufficiently accomplished a theory of a changing sexuality, unless, of course, one argues that discursive theory itself is sufficient to understand and explain change. I sense that few realize or care to explain the profound social, cultural, and psychological changes implied in the narrative on nineteenth-century medical discourse.

I also have problems with Karras's notions about sexual identity. Missing in her article are reflections on such issues as mind/body distinc-

tions and the public/private dichotomy. After all, sexual identity as a social and psychological formation is intimately connected to these nexuses. Surely, as a historian, she will not claim that these have not changed over time. Mind/body distinctions were indeed different in the past, while prior to the modern period a private sphere was all but absent.

Furthermore, I wonder about the apparent desires of the *meretrix*, and how they relate to the construction of sexual subjects and objects. Karras argues that it was the *meretrix's* uncontrolled desires and consequent behaviors that set her apart from other women. Yet, to understand these women as both subjects and objects, we need to know both what they were supposed to desire and really did desire. Did *meretrices* desire men, or numerous men, or did they merely desire gratification of their corporeal lusts without much consideration of object? One clue may come from the actual sexual acts these women engaged in. Research in the Netherlands on the history of prostitution, as well as other sources, shows that the range of prostitutes' sexual acts was very small, as was that of lower-class people and, for that matter, sodomites. Prostitutes almost exclusively engaged in the "missionary position." Other acts, even masturbating a man or fellatio met with abhorrence and rejection.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, most European sodomites typically engaged in masturbation and actual sodomy. Very few would, for instance, turn to fellatio and, unlike today, of those who did, the fellator (not the fellated) was considered to have the active role. Specific sexual acts may have been taboo, but as taboos they were related to an economy of desires that prohibited women from taking active roles in satisfying men. Until the late seventeenth century, the same economy applied to same-sex behavior. In *meretrices'* dealings with men, then, reciprocity was of no consequence. (I am not absolutely sure about this, but cannot escape the idea that some form of reciprocity is substantial to modern sexual identities.)

Before engaging Karras's arguments further, let me clarify my concerns with the current narrative, which stem from my study of over a thousand sodomy trials in the Netherlands from the late Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century. In addition to extensive and detailed court records and files—which sometimes contained such personal documents as love letters (from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries)—and records from "behind the scene" dealings of courts, I have studied marital records (of those prosecuted), art, literary, legal, and (mostly Protestant) theological texts.<sup>5</sup>

Based on my findings, I argue that the idea that sodomy was "just an act," when taken literally as some do, never existed.<sup>6</sup> With roots that go back to antiquity, dominant and persistent discourse has considered sodomy to be an irreversible loss of self control: in other words, once a sodomite always a sodomite. When the Foucauldian postulate about sodomy

is taken to mean (as Karras does) that people prior to nineteenth-century medicalization were defined by their sexual behaviors instead of their personalities or some kind of essence, it comes somewhat closer to my historical findings, but the approach itself is so reductionist that it becomes nearly irrelevant in understanding the complexities of premodern sexuality. The "once-a-sodomite-always-a-sodomite" adagium originated in a sexual ontology made up, among other things, of mind/body distinctions which could only conceive of desires in a physical sense and attributed little or no agency to the mind. This paradigm barely separated sexual desires from such other physical needs as those for food, refreshment, or rest. While female bodies were inferior to male bodies and such weakness could turn women into sexually insatiable beings, male bodies could just as well spin out of control. "Excess of diet" might turn a man from a gambler into an effete womanizer, whoremonger, and, eventually, lead to his downward spiral into a sodomite.<sup>7</sup> This slippery slope of male and female desires, "natural" and "unnatural" desires, sexual and other physical needs were all part of a moral and physical continuum in which everything pivoted on sobriety and restraint or loss of control over the treacherous body and consequent indulgence in gluttony. By all accounts, a sodomite was the moral equivalent of an insatiable woman who defied the constraints of gender relations and marriage. Sodomy was apparently an effeminate disease, as "Josephus" wrote in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> This was a universalizing discourse (to use Sedgwick's phrase, in a similar fashion as does Karras) which applied to both individuals and the collective, and as such explained even the rise and fall of nations. Individual loss of control affected the collective, producing chaos and, ultimately, the undoing of society, culture, and even Creation itself.

My research also shows that from the second half of the eighteenth century onward (a period of intense persecutions in the Netherlands), men appeared in Dutch courts who called on implicit third-sex notions ("innate weaknesses"), and who clearly had developed a sense of belonging to a category of people in their own right. Yet, I do not call this "identity," as legally defined public and private spheres only began to emerge in the first half of the nineteenth century. Statements about "incurable disease" by prosecutors and other legal authorities at the time predate notions of moral pathologies. In short, about a century before supposed nineteenth-century medicalization, a folk psychology evolved that included more "modern" notions of sexuality. This folk psychology represents a missing link in the present-day archaeology of knowledge which connects the earlier period with the nineteenth century. While there are no simple causalities, the present narrative's implication that there were no historical antecedents to the emergence of modern sexual categories is thus both

fallacious and theoretically questionable. To suppose that members of the nineteenth-century medical establishment "invented" sexual categories just to pass them on to the subjects they studied, is a highly unlikely and poorly theorized model for historical change of this magnitude.

I have also noticed that major changes in same-sex practices occurred in the second half of the seventeenth century. A predominant but not exclusive form of intergenerational same-sex behavior, which included strictly prescribed active and passive roles, changed over the course of that century in northwestern Europe (England, France, and the Netherlands) into more egalitarian and exclusive forms which blurred active and passive roles.<sup>9</sup> Coterminous with this shift, such subcultural phenomena as networks, cruising sites, pubs and brothels, body language (effeminacy), specific gestures, and a "sodomite lingo" also emerged. Beginning in 1730, the discovery of such networks in the Netherlands set off the most severe series of sodomy trials in early modern Europe. Under the influence of these *public* persecutions, universalizing discourses which implied that as a result of collective wrongdoing (indulgence in gluttony) every man could become a sodomite, were replaced by minoritizing discourses that blamed only the individual for going astray. These new discourses shifted the focus from the body as the locus of desires to the interaction between mind and body. Moreover, while in the old system, or in what I called an "economy of desires," a passive role in sodomy was not supposed to be an expression of sexual desire (rather one of material greed for rewards), in the new system, such a role not only became an expression of desire but some supposedly favored it.

The transformation from intergenerational same-sex patterns to egalitarian patterns represents profound change in the objects of desires (boys were *not* men, for example) and, consequently, in desires themselves. To put it simply, also taking into account that men who desired boys also desired women, I propose that desires changed from being primarily inspired, motivated, and directed by a power hierarchy into desires primarily related to gender. The emergence of these new forms of desire were related to the birth of a new, individualized self, which originated in part in Protestant discourse about personal piety and individual moral culpability. (The Catholic Counter Reformation may have produced something similar.) Like Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, I claim that prior to the emergence of this self (or the subject) a more collective notion of being and subjectivity existed.<sup>10</sup> This sense of subjectivity was rooted in the pursuit of honor, and in the moral superiority and inferiority that class, gender, and age, as well as family, personal, and professional relationships, and the body, conferred. Honor/dishonor, and moral superiority/inferiority explained and legitimized difference.

Although Karras mentions honor at one point in her article, she does not address the issue of how the pursuit of honor permeated the premodern "shame culture" that by the end of the seventeenth century began gradually to be replaced by a "guilt culture" in which personal conscience and the avoidance of feelings of guilt, rather than honor, supposedly reign people's drives.<sup>11</sup> Honor did not simply affect social relations but was literally inscribed in the body. While the body was the locus of desire, in this shame culture people's physical experience and appearance was the embodiment of honor and social difference which pivoted around restraint and loss of control. Postures (an upright head), gestures (no effeminate affectation), and dress (sober and clean) expressed bodily restraint, or the loss or lack thereof. "Excess of diet one can read in a man's face," a Dutch church minister wrote in the late seventeenth century.<sup>12</sup> Pivotal to understanding premodern sexuality is the realization that in a shame culture little compares to a private sphere, as we know it today. Honor is by definition a public issue, related to a collective form of subjectivity. A seventeenth-century Dutch jurist summarized, "In life there is nothing more important than honor. . . . It relates to the good feelings others have about us."<sup>13</sup>

Exclusion, such as that of prostitutes, lepers, heretics, and Jews in premodern Europe, was related to either the loss or denial of honor, which in turn was based on loss or an apparent lack of control over one's affects. There are indeed strong sexual connotations to this discourse of exclusion of the groups Karras mentions but the same discourse applied to other groups or individuals as well. Bankruptcy or corrupt statesmanship carried similar stigma, ascribed to loss of control rather than to bad economic tides. In premodern Holland, for example, for a man to be called names referring to bankruptcy was an offense that equaled a woman being called a whore. Some professions apparently held less honor than others or no honor at all, and members of such professions lived in neighborhoods that were deemed places (and spaces) of dishonor. Generally, people of ill-repute were to be avoided in public, as their dishonor would rub off. Although we may have trouble recognizing sexual connotations in more general discourses of exclusion, one should remember that sexual affects were hardly separated from other corporeal needs and cravings and that loss or lack of control itself—even when resulting in bankruptcy—was first and foremost a corporeal matter.

Based on all of these issues, I must question Karras's conclusions about the existence of sexual identities in the Middle Ages. The more so because modern sexual identity is intimately and politically connected to a public/private nexus in which private space is the externalization of the individualized "self" or "the subject." The "self" historically developed as an

inner sanctum in which an individual found moral justification for whom he or she thought himself or herself to be, while in the nineteenth century, private space created the political, legal, and physical boundaries around that inner sanctum.<sup>14</sup> If Karras wants to call the medieval prostitute's subjectivity an identity, I would argue that it was an identity very different from a modern one. With the suggestion that medieval discourse on sexuality operated like modern discourse I must strongly disagree.

In my opening paragraph I said that the present master narrative has been a stumbling block in understanding both premodern and modern sexualities, as well as to understanding homophobia. In our academic work today, we understand the plural in sexualities to refer to different categories of discrete sets of desires and consequent personal constructions of subjects and objects as they relate to gender and ethnicity. We apply such categories unequivocally to the Western world. Supposedly, wherever we are or wherever we come from in the West we possess modern sexualities and sexual identities. I suggest yet another use of the plural. By declaring the era prior to medicalization a sexual formless void, we fail to recognize that much of the present controversies over sexual issues are rooted in old folk psychologies and conceptualizations of sexuality. We should now recognize that modern right-wing arguments about, for instance, homosexuality being a choice related to greed and hedonism, are rooted in profoundly premodern notions of desire.<sup>15</sup> Southern Baptists' recent declaration about women's roles in family and society are equally rooted in old conceptualizations of women's bodies and desires. Consequently, when Karras states that modern prostitutes no longer have a sexual identity, one wonders whether parts of modern society still exercise discourses of exclusion of prostitutes in the Middle Ages. If medieval prostitutes indeed had a sexual identity, I suspect that today's prostitutes would have one as well. Sexualities are not just different sexual categories, but also represent different sexual ontologies, including conceptualizations of mind and body.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras, "Prostitution and the Question of Sexual Identity in Medieval Europe," 159, in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>3</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Lotte van de Pol, *Het Amsterdamse Hoerdom. Prostitutie in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Werelbibliotheek, 1996), 328–32.

<sup>5</sup> Theo van der Meer, *Sodoms Zaad in Nederland. Het Ontstaan van Homoseksualiteit in de Vroegmoderne Tijd* (Nijmegen, Holland: SUN, 1995). See also, Theo van der Meer, "Sodom's Seed in the Netherlands: The Emergence of Homosexuality in the Early Modern Period," *Journal of Homosexuality* 34, no. 1 (1997): 1-16, and Theo van der Meer, "Sodomy and the Pursuit of a Third Sex in the Early Modern Period," in *Third Sex/Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 137-212.

<sup>6</sup> Gert Hekma, *Homoseksualiteit, een medische reputatie: De uitdoktering van de homoseksueel in negentiende-eeuws Nederland* (Amsterdam: SUA, 1987). See also Gert Hekma, "'A Female Soul in a Male Body': Sexual Inversion as Gender Inversion in Nineteenth-Century Sexology," in *Third Sex/Third Gender*, 213-39.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Bray (*Homosexuality in Renaissance England* [London: Gay Men's Press, 1982]) uses the term "excess of diet" while writing about similar discourses in England. Although not a literal translation of the Dutch seventeenth-century term "brooddronkenschap," it does approximate the meaning of that term.

<sup>8</sup> Henricus Jacobus van Byler, author of the most scholarly eighteenth-century book on sodomy (*Helsche boosheit of grouwelyke zonde van sodomie* [Groningen, the Netherlands, 1731]), attributed this statement to a certain "Josephus." Like other authors at the time, he may have been referring to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian humanist Josephus Scaliger, who in the early seventeenth century became a professor at the University of Leiden in Holland.

<sup>9</sup> Randolph Trumbach, "Gender and the Homosexual Role in Modern Western-Culture: The 18th and 19th Centuries Compared," in *Homosexuality. Which Homosexuality?* ed. Dennis Altman (London: Gay Men's Press, 1989), 149-70.

<sup>10</sup> See Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Jacobus Hondius, *Swart register van duysent sonden* (Amsterdam, 1679), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Simon van Leeuwen, *Het Rooms-Hollands-regt* (Amsterdam, 1676), 469-76.

<sup>14</sup> Theo van der Meer, "Private Acts, Public Space: Defining Boundaries in Nineteenth-Century Holland," in *Public Sex/Gay Space*, ed. William Leap (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 223-45.

<sup>15</sup> Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).



*International Labor Representative* (University of Pittsburgh Press, both forthcoming).

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