

The Recording Demon

“The spinsters jangle or engage in harlotryyyyyy.”

‘harlotry’ then meant idle talk. Talkativeness or idle chatter was often assimilated into lust, relating verbosity to bodily u-un-un-un-un-chastity.

In London, groups of people would be punished at the same time for the “foul and detestable sin of lechery, bawdry and common scolding”. Scolding and gossiping were not exclusive to women, although they made up a significant percentage

Many of the same women accused of scolding or gossiping were also accused of prostitution or some other sexual crime. From 1489–92, of the 161 women charged as “whores”, 45 were charged at the same time as being “common defames of their neighbors, common scolds, or both”.

Medieval society did not clearly distinguish between professional sex work and promiscuity. Sex work was simply a market-oriented version of a more general phenomenon.

Any woman who frequently went out in public alone, or went to brewhouses, or was particularly outspoken or confident was subject to stigmatization. Society attempted to control women by using labels like ‘Common Woman’, or in French, *Femme Public*, or ‘Public Women’. This inferred that they had ceased to be their own persons, and were held ‘in common’ by men.

It was very usual for women to turn to prostitution on a casual basis when they weren’t earning enough in their primary occupation, namely the highly cyclical and underpaid textile trade.

Evidence for their main source of income is derived from surnames like Kempster, Sempster, Spinster (comber or seamstress or spinner),

These weren’t family names at the time but by-names given to individuals. Spinsters – that is, women who span – came to be associated directly with prostitution as an indication of their economic precarity.

But, sex work was one of the first and then only ways women could gain financial independence from men. Professionals, or ‘abominable queans’, were singled out by being ordered to wear unlined, striped hoods. This need to visibly distinguish them from ‘honorable women’ came from the unusual but documented incidents of the queans wearing in furs, embroidered dresses and headdresses.

These decorated single women were seen a threat to the social order - as an owner was responsible for the deeds of a horned beast, so a soul was responsible for the deeds of a horned body.

Women’s entrance into the labour market through prostitution and textiles did provide women with a degree of financial independence not attributed to them under serfdom. However, this is not to say that this signaled a victory for peasant women. The Enclosures were the harbinger of the creation of a new sexual division of labour, implemented largely through the Great Witch Hunt.

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All of these behaviors described previously - sexual deviancy, aggressive or obstinate behavior, and 'reproductive crimes' such as the use of contraception or abortion - featured heavily in charges brought against women in witch trials. Accusations of sex with the devil, infanticide, cannibalism and cursing all accompanied cases brought against women who were involved in disputes that were otherwise mundane.

The focus on female sexuality in the witch trials reveals their social and political undercurrent; any woman who did not comply with ideals of femininity - chastity, obedience, and maternity - were

considered enemies of the state, who pledged their allegiance to the devil at demonic orgies. This campaign of terror against the newly formed female proletariat cultivated a culture of women being bound to domestic labour:

Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus "liberated" from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labour power.

When Elizabeth Chekyn was carted through the streets for selling sex to a priest, she wore a striped hood and carried a white rod. Pinned on her chest was a woolen yellow letter H and on her left shoulder, was pinned a woman in a priest's gown.

A woman in a priest's robe was a symbol of the social order turned upside down, or an embodiment of what was considered the two biggest threats to patriarchy, sexuality, and the ability to teach. There was a lot of debate at the time as to whether women should be allowed to speak in public at all.

Of the few alternatives available to women in medieval cities, a religious life was attractive one. Generally only women from wealthy families could afford the fee to join a convent, so several spontaneous all-female religious communities sprang up in Northern Europe. This is not to suggest they were available to women everywhere - but they were most common in the low countries and parts of Germany.

They sustained themselves by spinning. Their claims to mystical experience, teaching and business acumen required constant official scrutiny

The pseudo-nuns were described as inherently untrustworthy, two-faced tricksters and liars, and unbearable ecstasies, always ready to prophesy, referring to themselves as God's lover & playmate.

Everything that happened was given a religious meaning, all aspects of her life were signs, all things were repackaged and recoded to be broadcast as "religious experience". They were derided as brothel keepers for providing refuges to women. They were depicted in Dutch farce as having such violent sex with the guests they received they'd come crashing through the floor boards into chapels below; or drawn in marginalia plucking penises off cock-trees.

You talk, we act
You learn, we seize
You inspect, we choose

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You chew, we swallow
You bargain, we buy
You glow, we take fire
You assume, we know
You ask, we take
You search, we find
You love, we languish,
You languish, we die
You sow, we reap
You work, we rest
You grow thin, we grow fat
You ring, we sing,
You sing, we dance,
You blossom, we bear fruit
You taste, we savor
You debauch, we dispute, we dispute, we dispute...we dispute...