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Visions of Indecency: The Intersection Between The Church and Prostitution in Augsburg,  
Rome, and Southwark From The Twelfth to Seventeenth Century CE

Samantha Leahy

PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

Mr. Vannelli

April 16th, 2018

“IF YOU DO AWAY WITH HARLOTS, THE WORLD WILL BE CONVULSED  
WITH LUST.”

— SAINT AUGUSTINE, IN HIS *DE ORDINE*, 386 CE.<sup>1</sup>

During the twelfth to seventeenth centuries, the Holy Roman Catholic Church existed in a grey area in regards to illicit sex. As defined by the Church, sexual activity that occurred beyond the strictly defined laws of marriage was considered morally sinful. Even couples who existed within the bounds of marriage lived within the umbrage of the Church's sexual doctrines (some of which dictated which sexual positions and days were the least sinful). Adultery, rape, incest, masturbation, and fornication were deemed the main causations of mortally sinful lechery.

In efforts to protect humankind from these sins, the Roman Catholic Church turned a reluctant blind eye to prostitution during the Middle Ages (between the 11th and 15th centuries CE)<sup>2</sup> in hopes of distracting sexually rebellious citizens through the ecclesiastically controlled profession. Although the Church remained adamant in the Bible's disdain of prostitution, it was generally ignored, as it was believed to lessen the chances of men committing the aforementioned 'greater sins'. While prostitutes were encouraged to abandon their occupation and repent, an examination of primary works by Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas reveals that the profession was widely accepted as a 'necessary evil'. However, by the end of the fifteenth century, attitudes had begun to shift from a reluctant tolerance of prostitution to an open disdain of it as indicated by actions taken by the Holy Roman Catholic Church to curb the profession. This theological shift can be traced to various syphilitic breakouts that occurred in association with the Columbian Exchange and the growing popularity of Reform Houses. These aspects of

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<sup>1</sup> Augustinus, Aurelius, and Silvano Borruso. *On Order (De Ordine)*. St. Augustine's Press, 2007. 124.

<sup>2</sup> "History: Middle Ages." BBC. Accessed January 09, 2018. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle\\_ages/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/).

European history, in conjunction with the increased influence of Protestant Reformers, expedited the progression of prostitution from an essentially ignored profession dictated necessary by the Church, to an outlawed and criminalized occupation by the 17th century CE.

Brothels, or *libidinis causas*, existed primarily in urban contexts throughout Europe, but abounded everywhere, from small rural towns to large villages. Brothels were often publicly acknowledged civic corporations which were regulated or owned by prominent figure heads in the village or city. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, “an official, known as *le roi des ribauds* (the king of the ribalds) [was appointed to] control vagrants, prostitutes, brothels and gambling-houses” in twelfth century Paris.<sup>3</sup> A century later, the brothels of Southwark, England were operated by the Bishop of Winchester. Martha Carlin describes the Southwark practice of regulation as, “a picture of model manorial governance, of public order and strict commercial regulation.”<sup>4</sup> These systems mirrored many Southern European cities which established ‘civic brothels’ to ensure easy governmental regulation.<sup>5</sup> Italy, rather than attempting to banish the profession, found ways to accommodate it into the economic and social spheres of its cities. In fact, in 1358, the Great Council of Venice declared prostitution to be “absolutely indispensable to the world.”<sup>6</sup> Following the release of this statement, many cities including Venice established their own civically-run brothels to cater to bachelors, married men, and even clergymen.<sup>7</sup>

Like many aspects of history, the meaning of words evolve and change in conjunction with the culture that inspires them. For this reason, it is imperative to the clarity of this paper to

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<sup>3</sup> Britannica. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Volume 12*. Vol. 23. Series 1911. Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Martiere, Lauren Marie. *Ill-Liver of Her Body: A Legal Examination of Prostitution in Late Medieval Greater London*. Master's thesis, Clemson University, 2016. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Davies, Norman. *Europe: A History*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998. 431.

<sup>6</sup> Jefferies, Richard. *Sex, Dissonance, and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages*. S.l.: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Jefferies, 256.

explore and pinpoint how exactly the Roman Catholic Church defined a prostitute. Even before tensions began to escalate between the Church and secular rulers, an indication that they would soon arise lay in the two governing bodies' definition of the word. While secular rulers associated prostitution with the economic and professional spheres of the city, ecclesiastical leaders took a broader interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Any woman who was considered indiscriminately sexual, be it by their community, political leaders, or church fathers, could be deemed a prostitute by canon law.<sup>9</sup> Saint Jerome (340-420 CE), one of the founding fathers of ecclesial thought, considered a prostitute to be "one who is available for the lust of many men."<sup>10</sup> Gratian the Benedictine monk, who would soon become one of the most influential and analyzed religious writers of his time, published his *Decretum Gratiani* in 1140. In it, he affirmed and reestablished Saint Jerome's definition of a prostitute: "...promiscuous: that is, she copulates indifferently and indiscriminately, as in canine love. Dogs indeed copulate indifferently and indiscriminately."<sup>11</sup> While many girls and women were indeed employed by brothels, it can be inferred by the indistinct nature of the definition that the word was used liberally by the Church to apply to any woman who pushed at the sexual confines as dictated by her society. Still, a hundred years later, canonist Cardinal Hostiensis wrote that "a prostitute was not only sexually promiscuous, she was openly and publicly promiscuous."<sup>12</sup> Essentially, the essence of what made a woman a prostitute or a whore was based in how promiscuous she was. This can be further confirmed by the

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<sup>8</sup> Karras, Ruth Mazzo. "Journal of the History of Sexuality: Volume 18 Numbers 1-3 (2009)." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2009, pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Karras, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Brundage, James A. *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*. New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> LaTulipe, Kristin Nicole. "A Sinner in the City: Contextualizing the Magdalen Master Vita Panel." Master's thesis, The University of Alabama in Birmingham, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Brundage, James A. "Prostitution in Medieval Canon Law." *University of Chicago Press* 1, no. 4 (August 9, 2004): 51-73.

treatment of prostitutes versus concubines, who held a higher status owing to their semi-permanent legal state, as opposed to prostitutes who were considered sexually transient servicers. The legal status of concubines was closely related to that of a married Roman woman; in fact, their status was treated by many as “a type of marriage, a temporary marriage, perhaps, as Bishop Rufinus (d. 1192) called it, as ‘an informal, clandestine marriage.’”<sup>13</sup> Thus, the distinction between respected and chastised women who profited (whether socially or economically) off of their bodies was clearly one’s promiscuity and the presence or absence of marriage that was assumed to occur as a result.

Despite this, the canonists’ early attitude towards prostitution was one of slight disapproval but mostly ambivalence, which was due largely in part to the way female sexuality was viewed at the time and adhered to Saint Augustine’s (354-430 CE) beliefs concerning the importance of the profession:

If prostitutes were not available, established patterns of sexual relationship would be endangered. It would be better to tolerate prostitution in a social and economic sense than to stand the risk of further evils that would occur should prostitution be criminalized and absent from society.<sup>14</sup>

Augustine, and thus much of the governing body of the Church, viewed prostitution and the open management of brothels as necessary as a form of protection against vices deemed more sinful, such as masturbation and rape. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas (1274 CE) compared prostitution to the cesspool of a palace, which exemplified this belief, noting that if

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<sup>13</sup>Davidson, Audrey B., and Robert B. Ekelund. "The Medieval Church and Rents from Marriage Market Regulations." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 32, no. 2 (1997): 829.

<sup>14</sup>Ditmore, Melissa Hope. *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*. Vol. 1. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006

one “takes away the cesspool, the palace will become an unclean and evil-smelling place.”<sup>15</sup> If there is nowhere for the waste to go, it collects everywhere else gave way to the idea that if the undesirable profession could be contained in one or two spaces, it could be controlled by and even profit those in charge. Thus, the Church reluctantly accepted its existence, and the managed brothel—such as those owned by the aforementioned Bishop of Winchester in Southwark, England in the 1300s—was born.

As discussed before, prostitutes were believed to possess a sexual promiscuity not found in men. The Church saw the practice of prostitution as an outlet to express this insatiable sexuality found explicitly in women. There were two explanations for this ideology: one being the theological basis and the other being the biological. It was justified theologically by citing that women were not made in the image of God. This idea contributed to the belief that they were endowed with a proclivity to harbor an increased sexual appetite in comparison to men, especially as sexuality was considered sinful and un-godlike.<sup>16</sup> James Brundage, author of *Prostitution in the Medieval Canon Law*, references Cardinal Hostiensis, a thirteenth century canonist in communicating the suspicion that the Church held towards female sexuality:

Cardinal Hostiensis illustrated his comments on these points with the story of a priest who was journeying with two girls, one riding in front of him, the other behind. The priest, said Hostiensis, could never swear that the girl in back was a virgin.<sup>17</sup>

The chastity of women, particularly young women, [the church fathers] held, was always suspect, and women, they observed, were always ready for sexual intercourse.<sup>18</sup> The biological

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<sup>15</sup> Lemma, Alessandra, and Paul E. Lynch. *Sexualities: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Lemma and Lynch, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Brundage, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

claim was based in the belief that girls reached sexual maturity before boys, which affirmed the Church's standing that girls were ready and thus more eager for sex earlier on than their male counterparts. Hostiensis was a torchbearer of this stance as well, arguing that "women are like weeds, which mature earlier than desirable plants."<sup>19</sup> As pointed out by Steven Ozment, author of *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, "Because of women's overpowering sexual desire and her weak, pliant mind medieval theologians generally subjected her to the strictest standards of sexual morality."<sup>20</sup> This was ironic however, as this belief was similarly used to justify women being prostitutes, making the female desire to go into the profession more forgivable and understandable. Not only do both of these points work to clarify the definition of what a prostitute was during the time period, they affirm why the Church was generally passive towards prostitution before the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

While the Catholic Church assumed an indifferent stance, there was certainly disjointed opinions on the subject within the makeup of the church. Around the beginning of the thirteenth century, conservative members of the Church latched onto the idea of 'prostitute saints,' which hailed Mary Magdalene as the exemplar of reformed prostitutes.<sup>21</sup> Desperate to regain control and influence over how prostitution was being dealt with by secular rulers, the Church employed Magdalene's biblical story of sin and penance to encourage prostitutes to repent by either getting married or by joining a convent.<sup>22</sup> Numerous reform houses were established to support this avenue, including the Order of Saint Mary Magdalene, which was given the highest sanction by

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<sup>19</sup> Ozment, Steven E. *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ozment, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Duthel, Heinz. *Kathoey Ladyboy: Thailand's Got Talent*. Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2016, 181.

<sup>22</sup> Duthel, 181.



Pope Gregory IX in 1227.<sup>23</sup> Because of their white habits, the women became known as the ‘White Ladies,’ and coupled with the uniqueness and mysterious aura of their convents, the movement’s popularity grew widespread.<sup>24</sup> Mary was not the only ‘prostitute saint’ however. Her story, along with that of Thaïs’, acted as fodder for the homilies of priests and examples for prostitutes looking to repent:

There was once a prostitute by the name of Thaïs, of such beauty that many sold all their goods for her sake. A monk by the name of Paphnutius heard of her reputation and took it upon himself to convert her. He disguised himself as a lover and showed his money to her. When she took him into her chamber he asked for a more private room where they could not be seen. Surprised at her response that no one could see them but God, he asked why, if she believed in God, she was a prostitute. She broke down and repented (after a sermon). She then burned all of her goods before retiring to the desert.<sup>25</sup>

According to the story, Thaïs lived in the desert as an ascetic for a period of time before returning to civilization and joining a convent. Stories such as that of the life of Thaïs recounted in the standard Latin version, became widely known among those looking to repent their ways as former prostitutes.

Two hundred years later, a syphilitic outbreak that occurred in Naples in 1494 intensified the hardening attitudes towards the profession. After this syphilitic epidemic that ended up overtaking Europe during the early fifteenth century was discovered to have been spread by sexual conduct,<sup>26</sup> religious and secular rulers began cracking down on prostitution in efforts to lessen the risk of contagion. This epidemic was rooted in the period of global exploration

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<sup>23</sup> Weaver, Mary Ann. "Prostitutes in the Middle Ages: A Choice Between God or Husband." The New Zealand Digital Library.

<sup>24</sup> Brundage, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Paulus Diaconus, trans., “Vita sancta Maria: Ægyptiaca: meretricis,” *PL*, 73:680 (English translation in Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert*, Cistercian Studies Series, 106 [Kalamazoo, MI, 1977], pp. 35-56).

<sup>26</sup> Choi, Charles Q. "Columbus May Have Brought Syphilis to Europe." LiveScience. January 15, 2008. Accessed January 11, 2018. <https://www.livescience.com/2217-columbus-brought-syphilis-europe.html>.

pioneered by Christopher Columbus where European voyagers sailed to North America, engaging in a trade that offered smallpox and brought back slaves, precious metals, and syphilis.<sup>27</sup> "Syphilis became venereally transmitted only when it reached Europe, where it was not as hot and humid as it was in the tropics, and where people wore more clothing, limiting the ways it could spread," said researcher Kristin Harper, an evolutionary biologist at Emory. "Sex became its answer."<sup>28</sup>

There are numerous hypotheses on the origins of syphilis, both in a geographic and genetic sense. The one discussed previously, known as the 'Columbian Hypothesis,' is the most widely agreed upon theory. However, the Pre-Columbian Hypothesis and the Unitarian Hypothesis have also emerged among historical theorists. Advocates of the Pre-Columbian Hypothesis claim that syphilis—along with a myriad of other venereal diseases—was already present and circulating in both the New and Old World prior to the explorations that prompted the Columbian Exchange.<sup>29</sup> According to the pre-columbians, pinta, a member of syphilis' bacterial family, originated in Asia around 15,000 BCE and by 10,000 BCE had spread across the Asian, African, and European continents. As a consequence of newly arid climates that resulted from a wave of climate change around 7000 BCE, syphilis as it would later be recognized in the fifteenth century began to appear more commonly across Europe.<sup>30</sup> The Unitarian Hypothesis is recognized separately, but is commonly believed to be an offshoot of the Pre-Columbian Hypothesis. It advocates that a different form of the disease began in Central and

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<sup>27</sup> Choi, 56.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Tampa, M., I. Sarbu, C. Matei, V. Benea, and SR Georgescu. "Brief History of Syphilis." *Journal of Medicine and Life*. March 15, 2014. Accessed January 12, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3956094/>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

West Africa and traveled in conjunction with the slave trade where it evolved into venereal syphilis after meeting with Europe's cold and dry climate.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike the two aforementioned theories, the Columbian Hypothesis has foundations in primary documents written by Fernandez de Oviedo and Ruy Diaz de Isla, two Spanish physicians who worked with Columbus and his crew immediately after returning from America. They cited syphilis as being an "unknown disease, so far not seen and never described."<sup>32</sup> Examinations of the crew affirmed that many who had not exhibited symptoms were positive following their trip to the New World.<sup>33</sup> Those who identify with the Pre-Columbian or Unitarian Hypotheses have attempted to refute the Columbian Hypothesis by carbon dating skeletons with apparent lesions, but all have come back as dating after 1492, rather than before.<sup>34</sup> This absence of evidence has been used to affirm that while Europe's evidence of the presence of syphilis predating 1492 is lacking, there has also been explicit evidence from America supporting the existence and commonality of syphilis.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the sudden attention brought to syphilis during this period of large-scale voyeurism in the early sixteenth century elicited an immediate response from Catholic and Protestant Reformers, who turned to the brothels and bath houses as culprits.

With the advent of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, many brothels across Europe were forcibly closed down. This was in part because of the new sexual morality that accompanied the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Martin Luther, a seminal figure of the Reformation, described the prostitute as "stinking, syphilitic, scabby, seedy, and nasty" and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Harper KN, Zuckerman MK, Harper ML, Kingston JD, Armelagos GJ *Am J Phys Anthropol.* "The Origin and Antiquity of Syphilis Revisited: An Appraisal of Old World Pre-Columbian Evidence for *Treponema* Infection." 2011; 146 Suppl 53:99-133.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

publically condemned “the whore [who] can poison 10, 20, 100 children of good people, and is therefore considered a murderer, worse than a poisoner.”<sup>36</sup> Those who had already begun to reassess their moral attitudes towards prostitution as a result of venereal outbreaks quickly expressed their distaste through legal action. Much of this was inspired by Luther and his “new sexual ethic in which the long-standing idealization of chastity would be expunged [and] prostitution would be eliminated.”<sup>37</sup> As a result, towns and provinces such as Augsburg, Germany began to close the doors to their municipal brothels as early as 1532.<sup>38</sup> In 1946, the hailed Southwark Brothels of England were emptied and shut down in conjunction with the spread of the English Reformation.<sup>39</sup> Those who were caught participating in illicit sexual acts were subject to banishment, fines, public flogging, or shaming at the hands of religious and civic leaders.<sup>40</sup> These movements supported a larger goal of the Protestant Reformation to outlaw all sex outside of marriage. So, while the institutions of brothels were being shut down, the professionals who worked within them were given harsh punishments to ensure the eradication of the profession. Additionally, Martin Luther disapproved of the ‘indulgences,’ or spiritual privileges, that the Church granted to itself. He believed that the Church had become corrupt with selfish pursuits, namely through their hypocritical relationship with fornication.<sup>41</sup> The Counter-Reformation acted as the Roman Catholic Church’s response to the spread of Protestant Christianity and included the establishment of the Council of Trent—Pope Paul III’s attempt at

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<sup>36</sup>Luther, Martin. *Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke, Erlangen-Frankfurter Ausgabe*. Heyder, 1829. 398.

<sup>37</sup> Rublack, Ulrika. *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 259.

<sup>38</sup> Rublack, 259.

<sup>39</sup> Martiere, 115.

<sup>40</sup> Rublack, 259.

<sup>41</sup> The Ideas Room for PBS, producer. *The Protestant Reformation | Inside the Court of Henry VIII*. 2015. PBS, 2015. Online video.

reacclimating the Catholic Church on relevant issues.<sup>42</sup> Luther's pointed exposure of the Church's beliefs towards prostitution translated into a dogged approach to eliminate prostitution from the social and economic landscape.

In many respects, the attitudes towards prostitution in the last two centuries have paralleled those that struggled for dominance during the Middle Ages. Prostitution remains legal in Italy but brothels and pimping were made illegal in 1958.<sup>43</sup> The profession is legal in England, but was criminalized in Northern Ireland in June of 2015.<sup>44</sup> Just as with any major social issue, it has split into seemingly infinite opinions, which mirror the tensions seen during the Middle Ages: secular rulers supported prostitution for the economic gain, the Catholic Church reluctantly endorsed it as a 'necessary evil,' and Protestant Reformers took a strictly conservative approach while working to expurgate it completely. As power shifted from the Catholic Church to secular and municipal authorities in regards to prostitution, the Church reacted, popularizing 'prostitute saints' and convents for women seeking reform. With the rise of the Protestant Reformation and the syphilitic outbreaks in the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively, the Church once again adjusted their stance, joining the reformers and city leaders in the eradication of brothels. Arguably, this shift by the Catholic Church most exemplifies the need for power and control not only over the women profiting off of their sexuality, but over the various institutions that held power between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. When analyzing

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<sup>42</sup> "The Counter-Reformation." CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: The Counter-Reformation. Accessed March 09, 2018. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04437a.htm>.

<sup>43</sup> "Human Trafficking Bill Receives Royal Assent." BBC News. January 14, 2015. Accessed January 12, 2018. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-30805990>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

the Church's progression from valuing prostitution to actively opposing it, it is easy to criticize them for being hypocritical or inconsistent, however, is this fluid behavior that adjusts as time passes and new events arise not a commonality among humans throughout history? When humans feel a comfort or normalcy slipping out from under, do they not adjust their beliefs or behaviors to feel safe once again, whether they be an individual in a community or an institution? The Church's responses to major issues, like any major institution, have and will continue to fluctuate with time. If the leaders of modern-day Amsterdam can agree with fourth century theologian Saint Augustine on the necessity of legalizing prostitution, then the pendulum will continue to swing.

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