

MARGINALIZATION IN MEDIEVAL CULTURE

CHRISTINE DE PIZAN'S ADVICE TO PROSTITUTES

In late medieval Paris, prostitutes were everywhere, it seems. Looking at the map published in Bronislaw Geremek's study of the margins of medieval society we get the impression that prostitutes were in fact not marginal at all, at least as far as their locations are concerned.¹ On the Ile de la Cité, along the Rue St. Jacques and the Rue du Temple we find the little oblong boxes indicating brothels and other sites of prostitution. Geremek notes the surprising "stability many of [these marginal groups] showed" (94), and we can imagine that Christine de Pizan's peregrinations around Paris led to more than one encounter with these "folles filles" as contemporaries called them.² While they may have been visible in more places than just the margins of the city, in economic, moral, and religious terms they existed on the edge of the urban society that surrounded them.³ Secular as well as ecclesiastical authorities were certainly aware of them, for prostitutes made many appearances in medieval sermons and town ordinances, but the brutal reality of their lives was mostly elided in the name of efforts at containing them or at working toward their moral improvement and salvation. In this context, Christine de Pizan's advice to prostitutes in book 3 of her *Livre des trois vertus* (1405) is remarkable, for while she does not completely avoid the sermonizing of contemporary moralists, she counsels prostitutes to embrace a way of life that was not in the forefront of contemporaries' thought: that of the working singlewoman.⁴

The *Livre des trois vertus* was written for Marguerite of Nevers, the daughter of Jean sans Peur, Duke of Burgundy.⁵ In 1404, when Marguerite was eleven, she married the French dauphin, Louis de Guienne, who died in 1415 before becoming king. In 1423 she became the wife of Arthur of Richmont after he was released from an English prison. The book was thus dedicated to a woman of the highest aristocracy, and the advice contained in the majority of chapters of the *Trois vertus* is meant for princesses and the lower aristocracy. Yet, Christine also addresses herself to artisans' and merchants' wives, peasant women, nuns, and, toward the end of the book, to prostitutes. She includes this advice:

par charité et en entencion de bien, et afin que aucunes d'elles puist, se l'aventure s'i adonne que elle l'oye, recueillir et retenir de noz enseignemens quelque chose qui puist estre cause de la retraire de fole vie. (211)

[with charitable and good intentions, so that some of them, if by chance they hear this, can receive and retain of our teachings something that might cause them to abandon their foolish life.]

Christine clearly hopes that some charitable and literate upper-class person will read this chapter to a prostitute and convert her to a decent life. She condemns these women whom she calls “foles, legieres et de desordonnee vie” (211; foolish, of light morals, and leading a disorderly life) but hopes to play a role in their salvation. Her perspective on how to effect this salvation differs considerably from other means of rescuing prostitutes proposed over the preceding centuries.

Basically the choices described for medieval prostitutes who wanted to abandon their sinful lives were limited to the two that remained the same over centuries: the convent or marriage. These choices began to be clearly articulated in the twelfth century, for it was only then that the categorical condemnation of prostitution found a more positive counterpart in the “novel goal [of the] reform and rehabilitation of prostitutes.”⁶ Pope Innocent III in 1198 was one of the first to exhort people to try to “reclaim” prostitutes, and the thirteenth century saw several foundations of special penitential orders for reformed harlots by Fulques de Neuilly and Guillaume d’Auvergne (the *Filles-Dieu*).⁷ Fulques de Neuilly also encouraged these women to get married, after doing public penance and receiving a dispensation, and he persuaded the Parisian authorities to give them a financial incentive which he supplemented.⁸ The men who would marry former harlots were assured that this was an act of piety. Pope Innocent III considered this kind of marriage an act of the greatest charity.⁹ It remains unclear, however, how many men were willing to undertake such an act of charity, for a passage in the *Registre criminel du Châtelet* suggests that a man’s marrying a former prostitute is considered so astonishing that a magic spell or potion must be responsible for his acts.¹⁰

The later Middle Ages saw, as James Brundage points out, a radical change in the legal status of prostitution which became more and more a “public utility” and consequently “efforts to reform prostitutes diminished sharply” (521). At that time, as well, prostitution seems to have become somewhat more lucrative, and there is evidence that some prostitutes rejected offers of reform and charity, because they made good money.¹¹ Christine thus needs to make a very skillful appeal to the prostitute in order to persuade her to abandon her former life.

Christine first uses a moral and religious argument. She concedes that though there is nothing more abominable than a prostitute, Christ condescended to talk with them and convert them. Christine thus inscribes herself into the venerable tradition of converting prostitutes, an act she considers a great “aumogne” or

charity that would reflect well on the person doing the converting. She exhorts these women to open their eyes and see the light before night overtakes them and leads them straight to hell. She reminds them that they are the targets of God's wrath and are despised by the world as if they were excommunicated. The indecency of living and consorting with men who are more vile than pigs runs counter to woman's honest and simple nature. Christine does not shy away from describing the reality of a prostitute's life, at the mercy of men who "vous batent, traignent et menacent, et desquelz tous les jours vous voiez en peril d'estre occises" (212; beat you, drag you about, threaten you and through whom you see yourselves in danger of being killed every day). Christine then lists three reasons that could prevent women from reforming themselves: that their customers or pimps would not permit it; that the world would reject them; and that they would have no income (213). She goes on to counter each argument in turn. First, true repentance (including wearing decent clothes and going to church) will bring God's protection against a prostitute's male aggressors to whom she should say that she would rather suffer martyrdom than return to her evil ways. If they continue to bother her, she should ask the authorities for help.¹² Second, her conversion will move people to compassion, and they will begin to treat her decently. Third, if she was strong enough to take the abuse of her male customers and pimps, she will now be strong enough to find an honest job, such as doing laundry, spinning, taking care of women in childbed or tending the sick. Indeed, Christine believes that "chascun la prendroit volentiers" (214; everyone would hire her gladly). She should also live simply and soberly in a quiet street and stay away from men or else she could risk losing everything she has achieved. Like this, she can serve God and earn her living. It would be better for her to have one penny earned honestly than a hundred earned in sin (215).

Christine's advice thus is quite original, for earning a living was not one of the possibilities generally offered to reformed prostitutes. Although Jacques Rossiaud claims that "ex-prostitutes could easily find a place as a servant or a wife" (36), he gives no examples of the first possibility. The second, marriage, was, as we saw, a major goal of a number of preachers and canonists (but apparently not that common either). Indeed, earning a living and rooming somewhere on her own was not one of the obvious options for any medieval woman, and Christine certainly departs from traditional models here. She seems very confident that such jobs are available. But could a woman alone live on the wages of the jobs Christine proposes? Some prostitutes earned more than a washerwoman, and at least for thirteenth-century Paris there is evidence that some women turned to prostitution part-time because of low salaries in other professions. This seems to suggest that salaries of typically female professions were often insufficient.¹³ For late fourteenth-century Exeter Maryanne Kowalewski has found that among 435 working women, prostitutes and brothel

keepers comprised seventy-two. The remainder included fifty-one artisans, ninety-nine merchants, one hundred and sixty servants, and one hundred and fifty brewers and tapsters.¹⁴ Prostitutes and their keepers were thus a sizable part of the entire female labor market, which indicates a certain popularity and probably lucrative nature of this occupation. But the statistics also show that a large variety of honest professions were open to women and that many more women embraced these occupations.¹⁵ Although employment opportunities for ex-prostitutes may have been different in Paris, Kowaleski's brief sketch of the economic possibilities for reformed prostitutes in Exeter suggests that Christine's advice may not have been completely unrealistic.

In addition to moral and economic concerns we find a spiritual angle to the reform of prostitutes which Christine addresses through the mention of two exemplary saints: Saint Mary the Egyptian and Saint Afra. What could Christine's audience learn from these two saints? Is there any relationship between her pragmatic advice and the Lives of these women? The first thing we notice is that these saints hail from the distant past, as did the saintly women Christine used in her anti-misogynist polemic in the *Livre de la cité des dames*. Unlike the aristocratic saints cited as exemplars in book 1 of the *Trois vertus*, these two women have a more common background.¹⁶ Christine thus uses her saintly exemplars in a different manner here than at the opening of the book addressed to princesses.

Mary the Egyptian was extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages, being the subject of a number of Lives in the vernacular (including one by Rutebeuf); she was also part of Jacques de Voragine's *Golden Legend*.¹⁷ Mary was an Alexandrian prostitute who followed this career path voluntarily and not, according to Rutebeuf, out of poverty.¹⁸ On a pilgrimage to Jerusalem she finds herself unable to enter a church, and the Virgin Mary appears to her to urge her to repent and lead an ascetic life in the desert. There she is eventually found—a darkened and emaciated shadow—by the monk Zosimas who receives her blessing and witnesses her levitation. One day he finds her body and buries her with the help of a lion.

Afra appears in the *Speculum historiale* by Vincent of Beauvais which Christine uses as a major source (in the French translation of Jean de Vignay). Afra is said to have lived in the fourth century in Augsburg, a victim of the persecutions of Diocletian.¹⁹ The legend was preserved in writing as early as the eighth century, and in the course of transmission Afra was somehow transformed into a priestess of Venus and acquired a reputation of promiscuity—although her principal sin was her initial paganism, effaced, of course, by her martyrdom.

Certainly, these saints could not be exemplary; that is, Christine could not use them as models to suggest that reformed prostitutes should aspire to sainthood.

In fact, in the Middle Ages no saints were canonized who had been prostitutes in their former lives.²⁰ The fact that Christine does not draw an explicit lesson from the Life of Mary the Egyptian suggests that she wants her audience to think of the story's most general meaning in medieval culture. The key issue was repentance; these legends demonstrated that God would take pity on even the worst sinners. In this perspective the harlot would stand for sinful humanity as a whole.²¹

But for Christine these women were not merely symbols of "humanity lost and redeemed."²² More specifically, Christine establishes an explicit link between Saint Afra's martyrdom and the late medieval prostitute when she says that the woman should respond to anyone who would lead her back to sin: "plus tost offreroit son corps a martire que elle le souffrist" (213; she would rather offer her body in martyrdom than tolerate it [sin]). Interestingly, Christine introduces here a topos of the early Lives of the martyrs that is not apparent in the story of Afra herself,²³ but is a staple of many others: that of persecuted virtue preferring death to sexual impurity. Christine thus offers Afra's Life to the reform-minded prostitute as a rhetorical weapon: she offers her a ready-made script to be used against tempters who might want to lead her astray again, a concern not unknown in the early Lives of Mary the Egyptian as well as for medieval orders of reformed prostitutes. In fact, the statutes of one such order specified that only women who are still attractive enough to be tempted by "voluptuous pleasures" should be admitted.²⁴ The less attractive, presumably, were left to fend for themselves.

It is these women, then, who are at a loss as to how to leave a life they can no longer tolerate that comprise Christine's target audience. She sees the two reformed harlot saints as predecessors of the unfortunate women of her own time, whose task it is to leave behind the degradation and despair of their former lives. Certainly, the prostitutes should repent—and after repentance comes not the stake or the desert but a quiet life of devotion and independent work.

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1 See Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, Engl.: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 88.

2 See Albert Lecoy de la Marche, *La Chaire française au moyen âge, spécialement au XIIIe siècle* (Paris: Renouard, 1886) 449. Prostitutes were a part of society in the *ad status* sermons. Lecoy de la Marche analyzes the special "modèles d'allocation" preachers used to address an audience that included prostitutes (449). On this terminology see also Geremek, *Margins*, 215–16.

3 In rural areas there seem to have been more "amateur prostitutes"—at least this is what the thirteenth-century Dominican preacher Humbert de Romans believed. See Alexander Murray "Religion

among the Poor in Thirteenth-Century France: The Testimony of Humbert de Romans," *Traditio* 30 (1974): 285-324; at 314-15.

4 The recent volume on medieval and early-modern singlewomen is the first sustained scholarly effort to recover these "forgotten" women. See *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250-1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

5 See *Le Livre des trois vertus*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks (Paris: Champion, 1989). All translations are my own.

6 See James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 211.

7 See Vern L. Bullough, "The Prostitute in the Early Middle Ages," in *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church*, ed. Bullough and James Brundage (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982) 34-42; at 41. For statutes of one such order see Jacques Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 201-04.

8 Bullough, "The Prostitute," 42. See also Sharon Farmer, "It Is Not Good that [Wo]man Should Be Alone: Elite Responses to Singlewomen in High Medieval Paris," in *Singlewomen* (see note 4), 82-105; esp. 93. See also Ruth Mazo Karras, "Sex and the Singlewoman" (127-45 in the same volume) on the difficulty of defining who was a prostitute and who a sexually active singlewoman.

9 Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, 84. See also Brundage, *Law*, 309 and 395-96.

10 Geremek, *Margins*, 239, n. 153.

11 See Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 65-66.

12 Pimps were not always condemned or punished, as a late medieval preacher pointed out. See Larissa Taylor, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 170. On pimps and public order see also Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. 39-43; Geremek, *Margins*, 228-29; and Ann J. Kettle, "Ruined Maids: Prostitutes and Servant Girls in Late Medieval England," in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler (Woodbridge, Engl.: Boydell, 1995), 19-31.

13 Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, 115. Sharon Farmer, "Down and Out and Female in Thirteenth-Century Paris," *American Historical Review* 103 (1998): 345-72; at 355. Geremek discusses prostitution as a "secondary or supplemental occupation" in *Margins*, 221. He also found that the salaries of single women hovered somewhere around half of those of men. See his *Le salariat dans l'artisanat parisien aux XIII^e - xve siècles* (Paris: Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, 1968); 91, 97-98.

14 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), 145-64; at 148. She lists fifty-five prostitutes and seventeen brothel keepers. With all these statistics we should keep in mind the difficulty of clear-cut definitions. See Karras, "Sex and the Singlewoman" (see note 8).

15 On the "career development" of prostitutes see Karras, *Common Women*, esp. chaps. 3 and 4.

16 See Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, "Femme de corps et femme par sens: Christine de Pizan's Sainly Women," *Romanic Review* 87 (1996); 157-75 and "Sainly Scenarios in the *Livre des trois vertus*" (forthcoming).

17 For the different versions see Benedicta Ward, *Harlots of the Desert: A Study of Repentance in Early Monastic Sources* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 34–35. See also Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 1, 84–85.

18 Rutebeuf, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Edmond Faral and Julia Bastin, 4th ed. (Paris: Picard, 1977), 2:21.

19 See Ruth Mazo Karras, "Holy Harlots: Prostitute Saints in Medieval Legend," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1 (1990): 3-32; at 15–16.

20 Karras, "Holy Harlots," 32.

21 See Coon, *Sacred Fictions*, 91 and 93; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story," in *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity*, ed. Lynda L. Coon, Katharine J. Haldane, Elisabeth W. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 36–59; at 45.

22 Harvey, "Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography," 45.

23 See Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale*, vol. 4 of the *Speculum quadruplex* (Douai, 1624; rpt. Graz: Akademische Druck&Verlagsanstalt, 1965), 503.

24 See Rossiaud, *Medieval Prostitution*, 36 n.21 and on Mary, Gillian Cloke, *'This Female Man of God': Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, AD 350–450* (London: Routledge, 1995), 218.

GENDER, SKIN COLOR AND THE POWER OF PLACE IN THE MEDIEVAL DUTCH ROMANCE OF MORIAEN

In the western European Low Countries in the later Middle Ages, a curious figure emerged in the Arthurian romance literary tradition¹. His name was Moriaen, and he was the title character of the thirteenth-century Dutch *Romance of Moriaen*.² What marked Moriaen as curious was not his occupation (he was a knight) nor his behavior (like most other knights, Moriaen was courteous and chivalrous, and he was in search of honor and adventure). What marked Moriaen as curious was his skin color: Moriaen was all black from head to toe, except for his teeth. Moriaen was the child of a black-skinned mother (the Queen of the Moors) and a white-skinned father (Sir Agloval, knight of King Arthur's court).

The *Romance of Moriaen* has its place within western medieval literature and art's exemplary genre of black and white interactions.³ The *Moriaen*, moreover, offers the opportunity for consideration from several different geographical, psychological, and gendered perspectives: we see the point of view of the Arthurian knight (Agloval), for example, who travels to the Moorish land in search of Lancelot, and we see the point of view of his son, Moriaen, who travels