



## Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England (Studies in the History of Sexuality)

*By Ruth Mazo Karras*

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Through a sensitive use of a wide variety of imaginative and didactic texts, Ruth Karras shows that while prostitutes as individuals were marginalized within medieval culture, prostitution as an institution was central to the medieval understanding of what it meant to be a woman. This important work will be of interest to scholars and students of history, women's studies, and the history of sexuality.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"In order to deal with both 'reality' and representation, Karras had to discover and exploit a wide variety of sources. She has skillfully woven together the records of town, manorial, and diocesan courts with insights gained from literary sources such as saints' lives, sermons, plays, and *fabliaux*....From the book's title to its conclusion, Karras emphasizes that control of women's independence, much more than sexuality, was at stake in the unending insistence on the shameful nature and image of women who were not 'safely under the dominion of any one man--husband, father, master.' Karras is not the first to make this point, but she argues it with authority and with a wealth of illuminating detail....This book makes a significant contribution to our appreciation of the social and cultural history not of prostitutes alone, but of all women in medieval England."--Clarissa Atkinson, *American Historical Review*

"Karras has put together the definitive study of prostitution in late medieval England....Avoiding the problems inherent in many other studies, Karras treads a careful and well-articulated path between seeing prostitutes only as victims or describing them as agents in control of their own destiny....Karras has written an original, stimulating, and important book that will become a standard text on the history of prostitution."--*Renaissance Quarterly*

"Ruth Karras's new book will become a standard text on medieval prostitution, but it will also be required reading for anyone interested in gender, sexuality, and women in the middle ages. Drawing on literary texts, religious materials, legal documentation, and other sources, Karras places prostitutes--so often seen as marginal and atypical women--at the center of gender relations in medieval England. Her sophisticated and compelling argument is a major contribution to women's history, gender history, and medieval history."--Judith Bennett, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

"A study of prostitution should reveal the convergence of many social forces: fear of female sexuality and venality, the fine line between approved and condemned behavior, the regulation of commercial activity, the double standard, and the distinction between the moral economy of the neighborhood and that of the fathers of society. Ruth Karras touches all these points and also turns to the voice of creative and sermon literature, as well as case studies, to put flesh on the tale."--Joel Rosenthal, State University of New York, Stony Brook

"Ruth Karras here again displays her extraordinary ability to unpack the medieval meanings of twentieth-century terms that do not adequately describe medieval phenomena. Her study replaces the modern concept of prostitution with the more accurate and very wide-ranging term 'whoredom', bringing to bear and synthesizing a vast array of sources, from the legal and archival to the literary, artistic, and theological."--Edward Peters, University of Pennsylvania

## From the Back Cover

"Common women" in medieval England were prostitutes, whose distinguishing feature was not that they took money for sex but that they belonged to all men in common. *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* tells the stories of these women's lives: their entrance into the trade because of poor job and marriage prospects or because of seduction or rape; their experiences as street-walkers, brothel workers or the medieval equivalent of call girls; their customers, from poor apprentices to priests to wealthy foreign merchants; and their relations with those among whom they lived. Through a sensitive use of a wide variety of imaginative and didactic texts, Ruth Karras shows that while prostitutes as individuals were marginalized within medieval culture, prostitution as an institution was central to the medieval understanding of what it meant to be a woman. This important work will be of interest to scholars and students of history, women's studies, and the history of sexuality.

## About the Author

Ruth Mazo Karras is at Temple University.

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