



The Humorous Treatment of Prostitutes by an Early Modern German Franciscan Preacher Poet: Johannes Pauli (1522)

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Abstract

Irrespective of our comfort level, the topic of prostitution assumes an important role also within late medieval and early modern history, literature, law, and art history. While many scholars have already engaged with this issue drawing from legal or social-economic sources, the literary evidence also deserves to be considered in this context. The German-Swabian Franciscan preacher and poet, Johannes Pauli, is famous for his extensive discussion of everyday-life situations in his close to 700 prose narratives. There is hardly any aspect in human existence left out, whether we think of truth, fools, gender, peasants, judges, clerics, women, or the many different vices and virtues. Practically overlooked by scholarship, however, in one section, Pauli also turns his attention to prostitutes and entertains his audience with humorous narratives about various situations in the lives of those women, certainly an important sliver of human society during the pre-modern world.

Keywords: Prostitution in the Pre-modern World, Johannes Pauli, Humorous Treatment of Prostitutes, Go-betweeners.

Introduction

We all could easily agree that the global theme of ‘love’ has dominated world literature throughout times, even though in some periods, the focus turned away from it toward issues such as heroism, honor, exile, war, death, and God. For instance, vernacular literature composed between the end of the Western Roman Empire (476) and the rise of the early Middle Ages (ca. 8th and 9th centuries) was dominated by military themes, for better or worse, highlighting battles, individual prowess, existential threats from the outside, and violence at large. However, Roman erotic literature continued to thrive even during that somber period via monastic schools that taught their novices Latin in preparation for the study of the Bible. Both then and today, eroticism has always been an excellent segue to grammar, lexicon, morphology, and the like, providing highly valuable motivation for the students, as is perhaps best illustrated by the collection of songs, the *Carmina Burana* (early thirteenth century).

Since the early twelfth century, the theme of courtly love was suddenly fully in swing and quickly conquered the literary scene among the nobility, and later also among the lower classes (Classen 2015). From early on, however, if not always, the issue of sexuality was consistently present, either in the form of a happy physical union of man and woman - here not excluding the possibilities of queer love, although it was rarely addressed and always regarded

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by the authorities as a severe sin (for an extensive bibliography on this topic, see Classen 2021) - or as the result of physical force, rape. The third option, prostitution, was also a fairly ubiquitous topic, as much as many writers might have regarded it as a sordid business (Classen 2019). Refined aristocratic poets normally did not address it specifically, but brothels or independently working prostitutes certainly always existed in medieval cities and villages. Satirical writers such as Heinrich Wittenwiler (*Der Ring*, ca. 1400) and the anonymous author of one of the first major early modern German novel, *Fortunatus* (first printed in 1509), included facetious comments about prostitutes, laughing or warning about them as dangerous seductresses.

Social historians and scholars focused on gender issues have regularly addressed prostitution in the pre-modern world from many different perspectives (Karras 1989; Burghartz 1999; Hemmie 2007; Page 2007; Leiser 2017), mostly drawing from a variety of historical sources. To be clear, prostitution is a form of commercialized sex and cannot be confused with love under whatever circumstances. However, if a sex customer were to fall in love with a prostitute, that would change the entire relationship from a commercial bartering of sex for money to a love relationship based on personal decisions bonding both partners together in emotional terms.

One of the major tasks of literary research is to examine every aspect in their study object, the texts, and we would put on blinders if we ignored problematic issues such as rape and prostitution. In the world of the *fabliaux* (Old French) and *mæren* (Middle High German), but then also in the world of the *tales* (Middle English) and *novelle* (Medieval Italian), erotic and sexual relationships attracted the poets' greatest interest, either because they intended to titillate their audiences, or because they acknowledged and recognized that those were sensitive and problematic, hence relevant issues affecting all of society.

Addressing prostitution within a medieval or early modern literary text allows us to examine a significant social concern that mattered in many different ways. Prostitution has always existed all over the world, irrespective of many moralizing voices trying to condemn and eliminate it. It has never mattered what religion dominated in a specific society, prostitutes have consistently offered their services, mostly women making themselves available to men, although there has also been the opposite relationship, with a gigolo operating successfully among wealthy women (see Classen 2019). For instance, in one of the verse narratives by the South-German poet Heinrich Kaufringer (d. ca. 1400), a young and very rich student in Erfurt pretends to the mayor that he makes all of his money by selling his body to all the women in the city, i.e., proffering sex. In reality, he is the French dauphin, but since he does not want to reveal his royal identity and is determined to provoke the mayor and dupe the entire city council, he happily assumes that role of a male prostitute. No woman in town, neither the ladies nor their maids, would refuse to avail themselves of his service ("The Mayor and the Prince," Kaufringer, no. 4), although he has no need for that at all and only fools those men. Nevertheless, as the author indicates, it was imaginable that men also prostituted themselves. Finally, we must also consider that prostitution could happen in public, or in secret, depending on the political and economic circumstances, throughout time across the world.

Johannes Pauli A Franciscan Preacher's Comments About Prostitutes

There is no doubt that the Catholic Church viewed this institution with great suspicion and basically objected to it, both because of its sordid nature and because it promoted living out one's sexual desires outside of the marital bonds (for canonical laws from the late antiquity to the early modern age, see Brundage 1987, passim). This does not mean, however, that

prostitution would not have been discussed by representatives of the clergy, such as by the German Franciscan preacher and writer, Johannes Pauli (ca. 1455-ca. 1522) (for a brief biography, see Hildebrand 1967; Schäfer 2001; Classen, forthcoming).

Despite some previous efforts, social-historical and related scholarship has not paid much attention to his work, especially his highly popular *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522). The focus has mostly rested on his narrative strategies, moral statements, the elements of comedy (Takahashi 1994; Coxon 2019), or Pauli's concepts of virtues and vices, often exemplified by the figure of the evil woman (Schmitz 1982). Both Bolte (1924, 141–54) and Gotzkowsky (1991, 536-61) have traced in detail the enormous reception history of Pauli's collection of didactic and entertaining tales. Other scholars investigated the treatment of the clergy (Pearsall 1994), and other examined the poet's sense of justice and order (Plotke 2017).

Both as a preacher and a poet, Pauli demonstrated great interest in addressing a wide range of topics pertaining to all kinds of aspects in human life. He did not hesitate to expose stupid or violent people, to ridicule and criticize evil rulers, to praise and laugh at fools, to examine married life, to warn about drunkenness and gluttony, to discuss friendship, loyalty, honor, and dignity, to reflect on truth, justice, and spirituality, or to laugh about members of the monastic communities and other clerics. Here we find numerous examples of virtues and vices, of evil rulers and suffering peasants, and of conflicts between the genders, members of various social classes, of poor and rich people.

Recently, Arnold Esch has demonstrated the great value of the papal penitentiary as a resource for an excellent study of everyday life concerns and the history of mentality (2014). Other scholars have followed his lead, combining historical documents with art works, literary texts, and other sources to reach new understandings of everyday life conditions in the pre-modern world (e.g., Schmitz-Esser 2023, as to prostitution, see 108-09).

Altogether, it thus does not come as a surprise that Pauli also turned his attention to prostitutes in a number of short tales. Although those women were certainly marginalized and viewed with a lot of contempt and suspicion, they commonly existed in late medieval and early modern cities. Hence, this paper takes those tales into view and investigates what this writer, who was apparently deeply steeped in knowledge about people's ordinary lives during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, had to say about prostitutes.

Pauli and Prostitutes

It might come as a surprise that a Franciscan preacher would also address the institution of prostitutes, but since he intended to draw from virtually all aspects of human life, including sexual pleasures, there was no reason for him to close his eyes to those women. Moreover, prostitution was mostly accepted in late medieval and early modern cities and even regarded as necessary to regulate sexual drives and to avoid sexual crimes, especially during market days when many people entered cities for business purposes. It did not have any particular impact on marriage, on religious concerns with virtues and vices, and was hence mostly tolerated as a necessity for the health of the urban and other populations (Rossiaud 1988; Richards 1990/2013; Zimmermann 2002; Bumb 2006; Maugère 2009, etc.). In fact, the owners of brothels were commonly invited to participate in processions to welcome foreign guests, a custom which soon disappeared with the rise of the Protestant Reformation.

Stories About Prostitutes

In his fiftieth section, Pauli also addressed prostitutes, not because he might have been

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concerned with their negative impact on the morality in urban communities. Instead, he viewed them as ordinary members of city life and addressed them primarily as fellow citizens with their own shortcomings and virtues. In tale no. 404, for instance, a young fellow, positively characterized, lives with a prostitute who is ugly and overweight (241). Often, people ask him why he had chosen her, since normally one would have chosen a beautiful woman, but his answer is always the same. For him, there is no choice but to hand over something of oneself to the devil. So, there would be no reason to send him only something beautiful. This response shuts up the critics, and they leave him alone since then. The poet, in clear contrast to many other samples in his collection, did not include any comment here and voiced no opinion about the fact that this man lived with a woman outside of marriage.

The very humor with which Pauli engages with prostitutes as ordinary members of early modern urban society strikes a unique cord because he recognizes in them professionals, as morally suspect their work might be. In tale no. 405, we are told of an old and very heavy-set whore who, when she has passed away, cannot be lifted up for the burial. People are at their wits' end at first, but then a man opines that they should proceed as in all other cases when someone has to be buried. Like in all other situations, it "ist in etlichen Landen gewonlich, das ein Handwerck das ander zuo Grab tregt. Suochen ander Metzen!" (242; it is the habit in many countries that members of the same craft carry the others to the grave. Look for other prostitutes). But he then also adds that they would find enough whores who would be married, meaning, former prostitutes who had found a husband and had thus found a way out of the life of a prostitute. Indeed, once four women have assembled, they easily lift up the heavy dead 'colleague' and can thus complete the proper funeral. The same comment can be found in tale no. 190 where the dead person is a usurer and must be carried by four other usurers.

Remarkably, according to this narrative, even old women carried out this job, whether as sleeping partners of men or as madams of a brothel, which is not defined here. Pauli has nothing negative to say about these women, apart from the fact that the deceased person is too heavy to be lifted up easily. Despite the fact that she was a sex worker, as we might say today, she receives all the respect due to a deceased person and is helped by other prostitutes to receive an honorable burial. Laughing about this situation, as implied, was not a form of mocking or hence an expression of contempt of this profession or of this particular person. However, as the analogy to the usurer in no. 190 indicates, the author placed both the usurers and the prostitutes in a similar, marginalized category, without expressing explicitly any condemnation or criticism.

In tale no. 406, a beautiful and attractive prostitute lives together with a fairly wealthy man who spoils her all the time with ever-new robes and jewelry. He does not have any real freedom in that regard and soon realizes that he is going to run out of money, which worries him considerably. One day, he warns her that she is about to ruin him financially, but she, quick-wittedly, retorts that his ruin would be nothing compared to the eternal condemnation of her soul as a result of her relationship with him (142). Much of the crucial background information is withheld from us since we do not learn anything about their concrete cohabitation. They are, however, certainly not married, yet he must pay much money for all of her demands so that she can beautify herself even more.

Yet, since he has 'hired' her for his own pleasure, she feels justified in demanding those material gifts to compensate for the suffering her soul would later have to go through. In other words, she is said to feel a sense of sinfulness for her business activity, as a prostitute. Again, the narrator leaves us without any further comments as if he would not have to say anything about prostitutes from his own moral and religious point of view. Instead, they appear to be integral citizens of his own world who operate and speak in their own way, receive the same

acknowledgment and mockery as everyone else addressed throughout this huge collection. In other words, Pauli has apparently nothing specifically to say against prostitutes since they are, so it seems, ordinary members of their society, sinful, foolish, or witty.

In another case (no. 407), a merchant is completely enthralled by a prostitute who has only one eye, which he does not seem to notice at all, although it disfigures her. His friends are mightily displeased with this relationship and manage to send him away to another city in the hope that he might forget his girlfriend in the meantime during his absence. Once he has returned after several years at his distant post, he runs into the prostitute and suddenly notices that she has only one eye. He points this out to her, but she only responds that nothing has happened to her since his departure; the only difference would be that he has become alienated from her and now realizes her medical issue (242). The narrator points out that before he had been blind out of love for her, which apparently is no longer the case.

Would this woman have to be identified as a whore? The narrator calls her, like all the other loose women discussed here, a “Metze[]” (242), the typical word for a prostitute. She is the merchant’s mistress and deeply loved by him. Pauli explains at the end that he was inspired to write this account by some comment provided by the famous Italian Renaissance poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374). But both his source and this version address only the consequences of ardent, passionate love, so there are no specific evaluative remarks about the status of prostitutes.

The merchant’s friends are concerned for his social well-being due to his obsession with that woman, so they manage to send him away. There is no indication that the protagonist might ever marry this woman, so she was more like a concubine, simply a more respectable term for a prostitute. We are not informed about whether she has had other customers since his departure, but the fact that he suddenly realizes her physical shortcoming indicates that his feelings for her have cooled down. In other words, the fact that he had never noticed her loss of an eye is the only point of the poet’s satirical remarks since he wants to ridicule the merchant’s overly emotional reaction.

The final story dealing with prostitution, tale no 408, pursues a different perspective because the young woman in this story, the wife of a carpenter, is actually not a prostitute but becomes the object of a rich man’s erotic pursuit. In order to achieve his goal to seduce the object of his desires, he hires an old woman as a go-between, a very common figure in medieval literature. (Dangler 2001; Mieszkowski 2006) This dubious person then visits the young woman and relates to her that a rich man desires her and would give her many valuable gifts if she granted her love to him. The wife only retorts that she would take those if she could preserve her honor. When the go-between later manages to force the young woman to attend a dinner with the rich man, the latter desperately comes up with a rhetorical trick that allows her to leave unscathed. The key words used by the narrator speak a clear language as to the purpose by the rich man, that is, to prostitute her for his own desires. The victim realizes that she is “verkaufft” (243; sold), but by pretending that she needs to leave for now to return for sure the next Sunday, she manages to get away from this dangerous place.

The next time the go-between appears to take her to the place of appointment, the young woman asks her to come with her to her bedroom and help her get properly dressed. There, however, three other women are hiding who quickly come out when the two enter, strip the old woman of her clothing, and give her a terrible beating.

The narrator only comments in the end that the carpenter’s wife earned much praise for her skillfulness in gaining profit from the old man without having lost her own honor: “Das

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was ein frume Frau.” (243; That was a virtuous woman) Again, there are no further comments, and we are forced to examine the narrator’s words closely to gain a better understanding of the storyteller’s intention regarding prostitution. In contrast to the previous story, here a rich man tries to seduce a married woman by means of his money and a go-between, but she manages to defeat him in his devious planning, taking his gifts but without returning them with her sexual favors. And the go-between is badly punished.

The poet presents this case as a warning for young women in general not be deceived by gifts granted by wealthy old men - he is identified as a “witling” (243; widower) - who intend to seduce them and to purchase their sexual favors. The old go-between receives the punishment that she deserves, and the carpenter’s wife emerges unscathed and yet enriched. Whereas in all the previous examples, here the woman is the target of enforced prostitution, which she resists successfully. The narrator condemns the rich man’s efforts because the woman of his dreams is not a professional prostitute; instead, she is honorably married and does not want to be abused sexually for money. Whereas we learn hardly anything about the widower, the go-between becomes the poet’s strongest criticism, and hence we are not supposed to feel any pity for her when she is so badly beaten in the end.

Finally, outside of this particular section in Pauli’s *Schimpf und Ernst*, we occasionally also hear about prostitutes, such as in the section dealing with wives (XII). In most cases, the poet reveals a strongly patriarchal attitude, warning women not to oppose their husbands and to obey them in every regard. In cases of conflict, the husband would be fully entitled, according to Pauli, to beat his wife with all his might. But sometimes, the poet also criticizes the men, such as in no. 140, where the husband regularly returns home from heavy drinking and then has double vision, which finally hurts him badly because he falls into the fire and terribly burns his hands. Thereafter, he treats his wife kindly and observes peace with her.

In the story no. 136, a man is married with a woman who refuses to have sex with him. She is ironically called “Goetlerin” (93; an excessively pious woman) because she uses a religious excuse every day not to sleep with her husband. Finally, he is so frustrated that he comes up with an effective strategy. He hires a prostitute (“Metze”) and places her in his bed. When the wife enters the room and catches sight of the other woman, she immediately wants to beat her up. However, her husband defends the prostitute, emphasizing that she, his wife, is a saintly person, whereas “wir sein arm Suender. Darumb gon ir von unß!” (93; we are poor sinners. Hence, go away from us). Thereafter, the wife never resorts to a religious excuse again and sleeps with her husband whenever he desires it.

Several observations can be made here. First, this Franciscan preacher regarded marital sex as very normal and even necessary. If the husband would not get relief, he should (!) resort to a prostitute. Second, the story implies that it was easy for him to hire a professional sex worker, a “Metze,” or a prostitute. Third, the wife felt terribly dumped by her husband and finally realized and accepted that she had to be available for him at night. Religion was, fourth, not a valid excuse not to practice marital sex. Of course, Pauli then puts a veil of silence over the entire situation because it would be proper to talk about sex only during the confession. And, subsequently, he earnestly advises wives to obey their husbands, to listen instead of talking back to them, to avoid bickering and to submit to him; otherwise, the husband might resort to violence, hitting her face. Yet, the key point here in our context is that the husband could find a prostitute and bring her home without problems. The narrator does not say anything negative about that profession and implicitly acknowledged the existence of prostitutes as an ordinary aspect in daily life.

Conclusion

We can now observe that Pauli, in his indefatigable eagerness to collect as many stories as possible for his *Schimpf und Ernst*, turned his attention to virtually all social classes, genders, age groups, economic sections, and hence also to prostitutes. He certainly identifies them as morally suspect, but he never condemns them or criticizes them in their professional activities, although we might have expected that considering his position as a Franciscan preacher who was deeply concerned with public and private morality. Instead, here we can identify a highly popular anthology of tales in which prostitutes also figure openly like everyone else. The only time Pauli voices strong concerns is when the rich man tries to buy a wife's sexual favors, but she knows how to defend herself against his evil intentions. And the go-between is badly punished anyway. In sum, Pauli's various comments about individual prostitutes indicate that he regarded them as ordinary members of urban communities. Only if a married woman faced the danger of being prostituted did Pauli raise his voice warning about obvious sinfulness.

Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* became a role model and great source of inspiration for many subsequent writers of jest narratives, such as Georg Wickram, Hans-Wilhelm Kirchhof, or Michael Lindener (all second half of the sixteenth century). (cf. Classen 2009) Not surprisingly, in their anthologies of similar tales, we find many comparable examples of prostitutes, concubines, go-betweens, and madams. Undoubtedly, despite the great efforts by the Protestant Church to institute a new level of public morality, prostitution did not simply disappear, although the rise of syphilis since the late fifteenth century had a highly negative impact on this sex business. Pauli composed the stock of his tales already in 1519, so two years after Luther had published his 99 theses, and the book appeared in print in 1522, the same year Luther published his September Testament. In other words, the Protestant Reformation was already fully on its way, but Pauli's social, moral, ethical, and religious comments did not put him into any strong opposition to the reformers.

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