

Although the blood libels and ritual murder accusations arose first in West Europe in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, these remained largely local, with a limited distribution in the monastic chronicles where they were recorded. In contrast, the advent of the printing press together with the extensive legal documentation of the trial of the Jews of Trent led to an early modern explosion of false news. The telling and retelling of the gruesome legends led to their entrenchment in European culture, including for the first time the papacy's backing of the beatification of two dead children as saints. The tide only began to turn in the eighteenth century with the report of Cardinal Gangellani, which reinstated the medieval papal position on the falsity of the blood libel except for these two saints. Yet Gangellani's report largely remained secret until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Jewish leaders pressed for its verification by the Vatican. The slow waning of the blood libel in the modern period has not led to its disappearance, as most readers will know. These myths are currently circulating among neo-Nazi and other alt-right groups and have spread beyond the European cultural sphere.

*Blood Libel* is an exhaustive empirical study and will remain a standard work for generations. But a couple of critical points might be raised for researchers as well as for readers. First and foremost, the book skates over that small but all-important question – why? Teter's emphasis on the role of the printing press in the dissemination of the blood libel is a major insight. But why do these tales metamorphize as they do? Early ritual murder cases do not include the gory false charge of consuming Christian blood. Why, then, does the fable of Christian blood used in Passover matza emerge? Even more, why do these stories begin to be told at all? This is the real question and a difficult one. Teter's meticulous, careful, and extensive research on the arguments for and against the blood libel explain well how and why it keeps going once started. But why does it start? And finally, this reader wishes that Teter had taken up the theoretical question of conceptual terminology. The term "blood libel" makes it absolutely clear that these tales are false. Well and good. But using "blood libel" for both ritual murder and consumption of blood glosses over the differences in the tales and pushes aside other fantastical libels like well poisonings and host desecrations. Even more, should medieval and early modern antisemitism be limited to these myths alone, or broadened to include a whole range of other aspects – like the myth of Jewish usury? Despite these lingering questions, Teter's book is a *tour de force* that will be a monumental work in the field for decades to come.

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## Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany

**By Jamie Page. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 164. Cloth £65.00. ISBN: 978-0198862789.**

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Prostitution is not a rare phenomenon, and neither are studies in its history. As far as institutional settings, regulations, and policing are concerned, we are fairly well informed. But when it comes to the lives and working conditions, self-images and social interactions of the prostitutes themselves, both within the milieu of prostitution and beyond, the sources tend to be reticent and relevant ego-documents are lacking. This has been deplored many

times, and Jamie Page's book, initially his Ph.D. thesis at the University of St Andrews, takes it as a starting point for an impressive attempt to recover the "voices" of late medieval German prostitutes. The author does not only intend to overcome the current collective notion ("the prostitutes"), but also to replace the perspective of victimhood, so often adopted in historiography, by emphasizing the women's agency in shaping their identities and leading their lives. Undeniably – and also according to Page's archival findings – prostitutes became victims of violence, rumours, poverty, and so forth, and their lives tended to be regarded as shameful, disreputable, or sinful. But until the sixteenth century, historiographical concepts of deviance, criminalization, or marginalization are not fully applicable apparently, and questions about integration and exclusion do not lead to clear-cut answers. This is reflected in the ambiguities of late medieval categorizations as "public" or "secret" woman, "whore," or German "Dirne" (meaning both maid and prostitute). Hence the author's central questions: what impact did these labels have, and what kinds of agency did women apply in order to influence the labelling?

Apart from an extensive introduction on the relevant topics of historiography and methodology, the book consists of three microhistorical case studies based on files from legal investigations. The first one is located in Zurich in 1392 and, in fact, investigates a case of alleged infanticide. An unmarried woman named Replin, who shared a house with another woman and lived next to the place where a dead baby had been found, was suspected. The testimonies of a dozen witnesses from her neighbourhood, interrogated by members of the city council, yielded that Replin had not hidden her pregnancy but openly communicated it even to some of her various sexual partners whose testimonies revealed a variety of degrees of intimacy in their relationship with Replin. Whether she gave birth to her child outside Zurich and left the baby with his godfather, as she was reported to have told a neighbour, remains as impossible to know as the question whether she really worked as a prostitute. But this is exactly what indicates that, in her neighbourhood, her promiscuity was accepted to a degree that she was not labelled a "secret woman" or "whore," which apparently was due to Replin's ability to adapt her doings and statements. Unfortunately, no report of her interrogation is extant, and the case ended without a final summary, because Replin seems to have died in prison.

In contrast, the second case is unmistakably related to the milieu of prostitution, this time centred at the municipal brothel of Nördlingen in 1471-1472. Institutionalized public brothels – within the purview of the town council and run by brothel-keepers bound by oath – could be found in numerous fifteenth-century towns, until they were abandoned almost completely within a few decades after 1500. They fit into the policies of late medieval town councils regulating the social and economic order of their communities and establishing institutions serving the "common good." Hence, "public women" had their defined position in an urban society, symbolically represented by their taking part in processions and festivities and legally regulated by town council ordinances – at least in theory. The records of the Nördlingen case offer plenty of insight into the practices of brothel-keepers as well as the agency of prostitutes. The details about migration and trafficking, about the ways of binding prostitutes to a brothel by keeping them debt-strapped and exposed to other forms of violence and ill-treatment from the brothel-keeper, stunningly resemble reports written by critics of the police-controlled "brothel systems" in nineteenth-century metropolises. What made the Nördlingen case a legal issue, however, was an abortion caused by a potion which the brothel-keeper had forced a pregnant prostitute to drink. This utmost act of taking the prostitute's body into possession meant crossing a threshold, as Page points out, and in his close reading of the sources he shows how the incident was communicated among the prostitutes with trust and (not least emotional) solidarity, how it became "public" among the brothel's clients, and how the prostitutes stepped forward in the town council chamber in order to voice their complaints which lead to a detailed investigation, to the brothel-keeper's punishment, and to the promulgation of a new brothel ordinance as a result of the women's collective action.

How – in the third case study – Gerdrut Birckin caught the attention of Augsburg authorities in 1497 remains as unclear as the outcome of her interrogation. She seems to have come to Augsburg from nearby Kaufbeuren, where, according to her testimony, she had been a servant in the house of the executioner. She admitted that the items which had been found in her possession were stolen or rather (in her opinion) taken as recompense for the wages her employer had denied her, and she explained the company of a Hans Schlosser by claiming that she had joined him only for the journey to the city. But in her second interrogation, she was forced to concede, albeit in ambivalent terms, that she had worked as a prostitute in the brothel overseen by the executioner. Her testimony remains vague about Schlosser's role, whether he was a brothel client helping her out or a pimp transporting her to Augsburg. The woman's agency obviously collapsed under the pressure of the interrogation. Jamie Page places the case in the well-known frame of a waxing urban policy of the Augsburg city council aimed at controlling, regulating, and disciplining people who were not integrated in the structures of social control (or were so only to a small degree) or who, by their behaviour, undermined the ideal of a well-ordered, morally upright body of citizens i.e., migrants, beggars, and clandestine prostitutes. In addition, Page brings in the reports of other cases which give detailed evidence of how young men as well as procuresses described their doings and statements in order to avert an accusation of illicit sexual actions by implicitly assigning the label of "whore" to the women involved – hence marking the limitations of the young women's agency. Since there is no final judgment in Gerdrut's case, it remains open whether the report's summary should be read as a verdict or a statement of compassion that circumstances had dragged her into a "shamful life."

The book clearly demonstrates the necessity and the means by which we can change our historical perspectives from an objectifying narrative based on norms and elite discourses to the identities, self-perceptions, and scopes of action of late medieval women who would not be categorized as virgin, wife, or widow. It also gives plenty of evidence that things prove much more complex at the level of everyday life and the practices of social interaction. In his analyses of the doings and statements contained in the interrogation reports, Page never forgets that his sources cause some methodological problems, which have to be kept in mind when dissecting the "voices" of the women and witnesses involved. Rather than overstressing his interpretations of the wording (which nevertheless happens e.g., with reference to the term "flesh and blood" [102-103]), the author extensively and scrupulously discusses the ambiguities of what has been recorded. By bringing in bits and pieces of the contemporary legal, theological, and medical discourses, he deepens his detailed reading of the testimonies, and by tracing the archival records of both the women and the witnesses, he is even able to reconstruct the social context of the Zurich and Nördlingen cases, as far as the sources allow. Thus, he arrives at an unexpectedly complex and rich diversity of facets. But this also makes reading the book a bit cumbersome, as it lacks an explicit theoretical underpinning. The author sometimes refers to subject theory and other times to historical praxeology, but without making either a tool of analysis that would guide the author (and the reader) through the case studies. Conceptualizing terms like "subjectivity" or "complex subject" more might have helped. Thus, we end up with a rather impressionistic triptych. The few pages of the conclusion do not really present tangible results. But the book points in the right direction for further research and rewards the reader with a multitude of interesting, colourful insights.

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