

## Carnal Knowledge: Regulating Sex in England, 1470–1600

**Review Number:** 2178

**Publish date:** Thursday, 19 October, 2017

**Author:** Martin Ingram

**ISBN:** 9781316631737

**Date of Publication:** 2016

**Price:** £64.99

**Pages:** 340pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/carnal-knowledge/A2B64ECB536F3FC1E3CEF666FEF214F>

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Charmian Mansell

Martin Ingram's 1987 book *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* is celebrated for many reasons.<sup>(1)</sup> Not least, it is recognised for its importance in rescuing ecclesiastical courts from previous unfavourable assessments that branded them corrupt and inefficient. By emphasising the achievements of the church courts in upholding accepted standards in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, Ingram paved the way for a burgeoning scholarship over the last few decades of the 'bawdy court' and its records. Importantly, this book also served as a critical study of how sexual behaviour in early modern England was controlled and regulated through ecclesiastical law. The fundamental questions of how, why and to what extent institutions regulated social behaviour in early modern England have remained at the heart of Ingram's work over the last 30 years. *Carnal Knowledge: Regulating Sex in England, 1470–1600* represents an important culmination of this work. Ecclesiastical court records of the late 16th and early 17th centuries took centre stage in Ingram's earlier book. *Carnal Knowledge* sits alongside this work as a 'companion' (p. xi), shifting in chronology back to the late 15th century and adopting a comparative approach that assesses the policing of non-conformist sexual behaviour by both secular and ecclesiastical authorities. This book makes a significant and definitive contribution to our understanding of sexual regulation in late medieval and early modern England.

This is the type of book that will undoubtedly yield something new upon each fresh reading and true merit lies in the impressive amount of ground covered and material consulted. But its key intervention in the scholarship of early modern social discipline is in its methodical and comprehensive interrogation of the widely-held premise that the Reformation marked a new or uniquely intensive approach to the regulation of sex. Ingram notes that late medieval attempts to prosecute sexual offenders are often seen as half-hearted by comparison. It is taken as axiomatic that the Reformation was a watershed in the regulation of sexual behaviour. The central thesis of *Carnal Knowledge* is to challenge this assumption and uncover a 'more precise and nuanced picture' (p. 390) by systematically assessing patterns of activity in the regulation of sex between 1470 and 1600. This timeframe makes it possible to trace changes in patterns of prosecution of sexual offences and the punishments that were meted out.

The main sources that Ingram uses in this book are records of secular and ecclesiastical courts. The benefits of this approach are both clear and enormous: focusing on just one court or institution neglects shared areas

of jurisdiction and can lead to a distorted or underestimated impression of the level of sexual regulation. Ingram's comparative study instead highlights shared interests and approaches of ecclesiastical and secular institutions, while also pointing to areas of tension, discord and difference between them. Rural England is represented in this book primarily by the records of Leicestershire and West Sussex, while the records of provincial towns including Exeter, Colchester and Leicester are compared with those of the urban metropolis of London. Ingram analyses an impressive body of data, persuasively showing the involvement of lay and ecclesiastical authorities in controlling, regulating and prosecuting against sexual deviancy. Although survival of records is patchy, with detailed analysis of particular court activities sometimes possible for only one or two years at a time, Ingram's sensitivity to this and his meticulous methodology leaves the reader in no doubt that that no stone has been left unturned.

The book follows a chronological structure. The first two chapters establish the historiographical and thematic contexts that come to bear upon Ingram's study, considering how sexual relations have been approached by historians and exploring the contemporary significance of sexual reputation and honour in early modern England. Throughout the book, Ingram considers the types of behaviour that were most frequently prosecuted against, the ways in which illicit activities were brought to the attention of authorities and how they were punished. Although fragmentary survival of records makes it virtually impossible to systematically quantify patterns of prosecution and punishment for sexual transgression across the different courts, Ingram's study nonetheless compares numbers where possible. Chapters three to seven focus on pre-Reformation regulation of sex, considering the operation of church courts in rural areas, and secular and ecclesiastical courts in provincial towns before 1530. Regulation of prostitution in the Southwark stews and sexual offences in other parts of the metropolis are considered as well as the activities and attitudes of lay and church courts in Yorkist and early Tudor London. Chapter eight examines the extent to which immorality on the part of the clergy was regulated and exposes the persistent problem authorities in rural areas, provincial towns and London faced in controlling such behaviour. Ingram underlines the intensity of anti-clerical resentment amongst the lay population in response to their illicit sexual activity. It is at this point that he attends to regulatory activities against sexual offenders in the Reformation period, again comparing measures undertaken in the provinces with those in London (chapters nine to 11). The final chapter of the book serves as both a conclusion and a starting point for future research, as Ingram proposes how his findings come to bear on later approaches to the regulation of sexual behaviour.

One of the key contributions of this book lies in its commitment to unpicking the connection between official and unofficial attitudes to sexual morality. The importance of dual surveillance and reporting of sexual misdemeanours by community members and authorities is stressed by Ingram for both town and country. Official drives to uncover sexual immorality can be found in the church court visitation system as well as in the efforts or campaigns led by the secular courts and institutions. But in imposing certain standards of behaviour, both ecclesiastical and secular courts also relied on the support of the populace. The importance of good reputation in early modern England, particularly sexual reputation, cannot be overstated. Resentments could be vocalised in the streets, with defamation leading to the identification of sexual offenders. Simultaneously, sexual immorality was clearly so abhorrent that some saw it as their moral duty to directly report their observations. Local surveillance was central to many prosecutions and sexual regulation, Ingram argues, was not simply a 'top down' process. Ingram is convincing in his argument that lay attitudes to sexual behaviour were roughly in line with institutional perspectives.

Ingram's first line of enquiry is to consider patterns of regulation of sexual misdemeanour in the pre-Reformation period. Regulation of sex in rural areas, he argues, can largely be attributed to the ecclesiastical courts, while in provincial towns he finds clear evidence of the involvement of secular authorities not only in legislating against sexual offences but also in prosecuting and punishing offenders. Ingram shows that while maintenance of public order was of primary concern to the secular courts, church courts sought to regulate 'lapses in Christian morality' (p. 129) which could take place in more private forums. Rural and urban profiles of sexual transgression and the sites in which offences took place therefore differed somewhat. In towns, alehouses and inns presented more persistent problems. Town ordinances reveal concerns with controlling the sex trade that largely operated in these ill-regulated establishments and households. Ingram

argues that evidence from the courts of Westminster, Southwark and London suburbs show that it is too simplistic to assume that illicit sex was only half-heartedly regulated in the metropolis before 1530. While prostitution in the Southwark stews was legitimised, both lay and ecclesiastical authorities placed considerable pressure upon stewholders to ensure that they conformed to customary regulations. Ingram implies that those responsible for the temporary closure of the stews in 1506 shared the same attitudes as those who brought about their eventual permanent closure 40 years later. Prosecutions against whoredom and bawdry outside the stews was also at the forefront of ecclesiastical regulatory agendas. Ingram notes that the intensity of prosecution in the church courts of early 16th-century London far exceeded that found in the rural ecclesiastical courts during the same period.

The Reformation, Ingram shows, brought new developments and changes in the extent of sexual regulation. He situates post-Reformation developments in how sex was regulated within a new social and cultural context of population increase by the turn of the 17th century. The economic pressures of illegitimate children brought about by population increase led to changes in the types of sexual activity that became most heavily regulated. Before the Reformation, adultery, the conduct of household heads and prostitution were at the heart of secular and ecclesiastical regulatory activity but by 1600, sex between unmarried couples was a more primary concern. While Ingram acknowledges that sexual regulation became more intense over the period, his central argument is that the social, religious and economic climate was very different and to compare pre-Reformation attitudes and approaches to the regulation of illicit sex with the later period 'is to judge by anachronistic standards' (p. 174). While the scale of regulation increased, he argues, the practices or forms of prosecution and punishment were in many ways consistent with previous methods.

This argument is convincingly made in the Ingram's chapter on the role of the Bridewell in the regulation of sex in London upon its foundation in 1553. Ingram shows that the zeal with which Bridewell approached the regulation of sexual transgression in the 16th-century metropolis should not be seen in isolation from previous and parallel attempts to combat sexual vice. Rather, he argues, the activities of Bridewell governors should be understood within the context of London's traditional regulatory measures; Bridewell supplemented, reinforced and systematised disciplinary procedures against sexual offenders that were already in place. The innovative and sometimes draconian policies of Bridewell do not therefore represent a complete departure from traditional attempts to deal with sexual transgression but fall within an existing framework of attending to idleness, vice and sin within the city.

Geographical, chronological and institutional differences too can be found in the punishments associated with sexual offences. Ingram notes that while the threatened punishment in church courts was public penance, urban secular authorities more typically levied financial sanctions. Public shaming, Ingram finds, was perhaps more common in larger urban settlements where sexual offenders might be more frequently subject to being whipped or carted around the town. Punitive measures also changed across the period. Ingram argues that punishment of offenders was much harsher in the 15th century than 100 years later. Punishments became more lenient with an increase in the payment of monetary fines in lieu of the performance of penance by the late 15th century. But by the mid-16th century, harsh punishment of offenders was renewed, particularly for those prosecuted by the London courts. Draconian forms of punishments were not, Ingram argues, new and innovative features of an Elizabethan Protestant regime. Rather, they had their roots in traditional punishments doled out in the years of Yorkist and early Tudor rule if not earlier.

In the final chapter of his book, Ingram situates his findings in a broader context, outlining sexual regulatory practices from the late 16th century up to the Civil War. Ingram suggests that metropolitan regulation of sex declined from the last decades of the 16th century in both secular and ecclesiastical courts: the courts of aldermen and wardmotes, the Bridewell and the church courts all handled significantly fewer cases than they had previously. In provincial England, on the other hand, campaigns for sexual morality did not slacken but in some places intensified. The reasons for such regional discrepancy in approaches to illicit sex are not explored here and might be a fruitful area of enquiry for future research.

Particularly in the second half of the book, analysis is weighted towards the activities of London authorities. Given that population increase was felt more acutely in the metropolis, the book might leave the reader still unsure of the extent to which changes in approach to sexual transgression between 1470 and 1600 occurred in other understudied localities beyond the capital. In many ways, however, this question only reinforces the importance of Ingram's work as the first of its kind in interrogating the traditional narrative of sexual regulation in early modern England. Certainly, this book is an essential read for all scholars of early modern social, cultural and gender history. Most of the comments made here reflect a desire for Ingram to have added even more to what is already an impressively vast volume. As with all of Ingram's work, the research is painstakingly careful and meticulous and the analysis rich and illuminating. So full of detail, *Carnal Knowledge* is a book that the reader will find him or herself returning to time and again.

## Notes

1. Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2178>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/272457>