

## Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others

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**Reviewer:** Vern Bullough

As a reviewer who regards himself as a pioneer in the study of medieval sexuality, I judge this book as the best short introduction to medieval sexuality that I have read. The first chapter is an outstanding examination of the problems of writing about sex in medieval Europe. The comparative lack of sources for medieval sexual conduct is compounded by the fact that the sources themselves differ. One view, mainly promulgated by extant church writing, is a negative view regarding sex as a pollutant and a threat to the soul. Opposed to this strict and sin-wracked image stands an earthier one. Lusty priests seduce the women who confess to them; noblemen keep mistresses; monks and nuns engage in secret liaisons while peasant couples copulate behind the hedgerows: such texts present a lustful, playful version of sex. For Karras, both views are true.

Both views are also heavily gendered, and Karras feels that the more negative ideas were especially prevalent in discussion of women. In recounting medieval sexuality, Karras is an advocate of social constructionism, if only because it is more helpful when describing a past in which sexual issues were seen from an entirely different viewpoint from that of the twenty-first-century. An essentialist, for example, would argue that a pederast is a pederast wherever and whenever such individuals are found while the social constructionist would hold that the sexual and social identity of a man who has sex with underage boys depends on the culture in which he lives. By looking at sex in its social context, she can give readers a useful understanding of sexuality within the context of the wider medieval society.

She also holds that to look at the medieval evidence for particular forms of sexuality is to open a can of worms. The bulk of the extant documents surviving from the Middle Ages were written by monks and clergyman who had taken vows of chastity and did not have the same views of sex as the non clergy. Thus most of what we know is what theologians and canon lawyers thought, and not what the sexually active common people thought and did. In addition to the legal and religious writings, however, there are also other viewpoints. There are, for example, a number of medical texts, although it is also true that many of the medical writers were also members of religious orders. This meant that medicine was never entirely separate from theology. Still other information sources come from artistic illustrations, but it is not always possible to know the meaning. In the Bayeux tapestry, for example, a man with an erection is portrayed chasing a naked woman. What does it mean? Is the man threatening the woman or are they engaged in foreplay? What did those who embroidered the tapestry think, especially since they might well have been nuns? We are also not sure how medieval people would have interpreted this illustration.

Medieval people also tended to write with an emotionality that would seem out of place in discussions between lovers, simply because they understood the bonds of love and friendship differently from the way

we do today. They regarded sex acts as a transitive activity, something someone did to someone else, and not a mutual thing, a point emphasised by Karras in her subtitle *Doing Unto Others*. Gender, nonetheless, placed a fundamental organising role in medieval sexuality. The experience of any heterosexual act was different for the man and the woman because they were conceived of as doing different things.

In discussing medieval sex, it is also important to keep in mind that attitudes towards sex changed during the course of the Middle Ages. There was far more regulation in the later Middle Ages than the earlier. It is also important to recognise that there were a variety of peoples in the medieval period and not all people were Christian. Some were Christian heretics, but others were members of the Orthodox Church, or were Jewish, or were Muslim. One of the things that Karras does is to look at variations. Though eastern European Catholic sources are even scarcer than their western counterparts, there are still enough to find differences. Orthodox Christianity, if only because priests were married, has quite different ideas from Roman Catholic Christianity, or, for that matter, from Judaism and Islam. Islam, especially in Spain, was part of the Christian West while Jewish groups were widely dispersed. How did each religion influence the other? The one thing that all three groups agreed upon was that sexual relations between members of the different groups were to be discouraged, although the Christian exempla are full of stories of men marrying and converting Jewish and even Saracen women.

Karras argues that medieval attitudes toward sexuality were conflicted and complicated since there was not universal and hegemonic agreement, that the identities in the Middle Ages were different from those of today, that the dichotomy between active and passive partner played a major role in the way that medieval people thought about sexuality. With this as background, Karras explores several ways of looking at sex. One theme is the sexuality of chastity, a life dedicated to not having sex. She uses the term chastity instead of celibacy because technically celibacy means not being married, a condition which in itself does not necessarily imply chastity. Another major discussion is on sex and marriage. Here she points out that degrees of kinship were important since marriages were not to take place unless there were at least four degrees of kinship involved. Marriage without some official church action was not to take place if the couple shared the same great-great grandfather. Decisions about this relationship were to be made before marriage since dissolving a marriage, even an illegal one, was difficult, and spouses could only be allowed to separate if it should not have taken place in the first place. Impotence was a ground for separation but it had to be proven, for example, by testing the husband's ability to get an erection by exposing him to other women. While marriage was regarded only as a second best solution for life's problems, it was still only permitted for those who could not or would not live up to the ideal virtue of chastity. The main purpose of marriage was to reproduce although the church in the West placed limitations on when coitus was allowed. The liturgical calendar was full of feast and fast days on which marital intercourse was forbidden; in addition it was forbidden on Sundays and sometimes other days of the week. Couples were also not supposed to have sex during the woman's menstrual period.

From the medieval medical point of view it was the semen of the man not the penetration that caused sexual pleasure in the female, so that release of semen becomes all important and simple penetration was a minor issue. Men, however, were regarded as active and women as passive. Usually intercourse took place in the dark since candles were expensive and Karras feels this helps explain why there are a number of medieval accounts of 'accidentally' getting into bed with someone who was not their spouse.

The book looks at the sexual activity both within and outside of marriage and points out that standards for females were far stricter than those imposed on males. Women were regarded as preservers of family honour and a woman's misbehaviour reflected on her whole family while that of a man only reflected only upon himself. There were also marriages of convenience, as among the aristocracy, which were made to form alliances and pass on property, and the men in such marriages as well as others often took on concubines in spite of church prohibitions.

Prostitution was omnipresent in the medieval world and although the ecclesiastical and even secular authorities might consider prostitutes fallen and depraved women, their peers among the working people of

the towns did not adopt that attitude. Moreover, church authorities often used prostitutes to act as temptresses in trials of men charged with impotence. While rape undoubtedly occurred frequently, it was not necessarily a matter of great concern. Proving rape was difficult, and implicit in the general sexual understanding of the time was that the idea that the man takes what he wants, and there was not much attention given to whether the woman consented or not. There was also a real fear of women's sexuality, and this ultimately was a factor in the development of the concept of witchcraft which appeared near the end of the medieval period when there was a widespread belief that all witchcraft came from carnal lust.

In her section on male sex life outside of marriage, Karras includes a very intelligent discussion of homosexuality. She points out that often charges of homosexuality were simply charges against the outsider, for example of the English against the Normans or Christians against Muslims. Interestingly, although in her acknowledgments Karras expresses her indebtedness to John Boswell, she basically does not agree with his thesis about church toleration of homosexuality nor with many of his translations of laws and other documents. In fact she more or less ignores him; however, she does mention the possibility of a homosexual marriage (adelphophilia), which Boswell also postulated, but tends to believe it was a kind of brotherhood.

There are many points at which I can disagree with Karras. For example, she says that medieval people delayed marriage until their twenties; while this might be true of the male aristocracy, I am more inclined to accept early marriage or settling in at twelve to fourteen years old for most people, and especially women – the age stipulated by canon law. Interestingly, she ignores the writings of John Riddle who has published widely on birth control and abortion in the medieval period and if she had consulted him she might have give a different interpretation. She does not cover all forms of sexual activity. She ignores sado-masochism, for example, passes lightly over transvestite saints and individuals, mentions but does not develop the attitudes toward masturbation, pays little attention to canon law, and says little about the early Confessional literature. In spite of these and other deficiencies, I hold that she has written a remarkable book and those who read it will have a much better understanding of medieval sexuality than they had before. She also includes a good bibliography.

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