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Review of Jamie Page, *Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval
Germany*

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JAMIE PAGE, *Prostitution and Subjectivity in Late Medieval Germany*, Studies in German History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 176 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 86278 9. £65.00

Prostitution in the late Middle Ages has been a regular theme of historical scholarship, especially from the late 1970s onwards, with both broad overviews and a variety of local studies. Prostitution played an important role in the gender discourse of medieval society. On the one hand, the prostitute was a symbol of female sinfulness and depravity, but on the other, prostitutes provided a sexual outlet for unmarried men to prevent bigger evils – an idea borrowed loosely from St Augustine. Evidence of this ambivalent attitude towards prostitution can be seen in the institutionalization of public brothels in numerous towns in the German-language area and across Europe in the course of the fifteenth century and, in contrast, in the prosecution of so-called secret prostitutes. The date range of Jamie Page's study is from the late fourteenth century to the years shortly before 1500, although he limits his research to three microhistorical case studies in Zurich, Nördlingen, and Augsburg.

Page's research puts the focus on individual women, although sources in which prostitutes themselves openly discuss their life situation are few and far between. Personal testimony generally only comes to light in sources when these women came into contact with municipal justice. However, judicial sources are somewhat problematic. First, the statements made by prostitutes are not reproduced unfiltered, but are recorded in the words of the court clerk in an edited form. Second, sources from courts are very often biased, meaning they were written with a specific intent, for example to portray delinquents as obviously guilty. Therefore, court sources can only be considered ego-documents to a limited extent. Despite this problem, which Page discusses in detail in his introductory chapter with reference to existing historiography, the author has written an impressive study which offers a deep insight into the actions and everyday lives of late medieval prostitutes. Their living conditions were influenced by their individual situations as either unofficial or public prostitutes,

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and above all by circumstances inherent to their sex, like possible pregnancy. The linked themes of abortion and infanticide are also addressed in some depth. As the Nördlingen example shows, brothel-keepers must at times have wielded extreme violence in controlling the prostitutes employed in the public brothels licensed by various cities. Yet the extent to which Nördlingen may be typical of conditions in public brothels in the late Middle Ages is anyone's guess due to a lack of further contemporary sources from local authorities.

Ideally, Page would have also published his main sources in Middle High German, even if only in an appendix, as this would have offered German-speaking readers the opportunity to verify them in the original language. That said, Page often includes quotations in Middle High German within his text, after paraphrasing them in English. Yet despite this minor objection, the study offers a profound and very nuanced insight into the world of late medieval prostitution and convincingly shows the freedoms enjoyed by prostitutes, along with the constraints placed upon them, in the misogynistic world of the late Middle Ages.

OLIVER LANDOLT is Director of the Stadtarchiv Schaffhausen and a historian of Swiss history of the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Among his more recent publications is *Adel und Patriziat in der Zentralschweiz vom Mittelalter bis in die Neuzeit* (2017).