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VADE-MECUM OF THE HISTORY
OF MEDIEVAL SEXUALITY

(Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe. Doing unto Others*, New York-London 2005, Routledge, 200 pp.)

In any discussion of "sexuality" in the Middle Ages account has to be taken of several important problems. First of all, the term "sexuality", understood — in short — as the entirety of human behaviour, attitudes and feelings that stem from sex drive, did not begin to emerge until the late 18th century and it was not until the beginning of the next century that the concept was fully formulated. Medieval sources contain numerous terms which refer to different aspects of sexual relations, such as promiscuity, unchastity (*luxuria*), adultery (*adulterium*), concubinage (*concupinatus*), fornication (*fornicatio*), prostitution (*meretricatio*), marital life (*matrimonium*), and many more. What is missing, however, is a term and some general reflection on the entirety of human sexual life and activity. Speaking of erotic behaviour of medieval people, one has to put aside the contemporary academic thought concerning human sexuality and address the problem of sexuality as seen through the culture of the time. For it is obvious that sexuality exists as a phenomenon independent of any culture and manifests itself in every human community and almost in every situation. The problem is that not every culture and civilization attaches the same level of importance to the role of sexes and erotic behaviour. Similar behaviours and manifestations of sex drive and affection can be perceived in different ways. Sex drive is a species-specific, biological phenomenon, whereas sexuality is determined culturally in every society. Therefore, sex

as a somatic fact has no history; the history of sexuality, that is a cultural fact, can be studied.

These studies have a short history. A major breakthrough came with Michel Foucault's important, already classic, work *Histoire de la sexualité* from 1976. Before its publication, scholars examined individual phenomena associated with human sexual activity such as marriage, virginity, prostitution, celibacy, etc. The first scientific attempt to examine medieval sexuality on the basis of Polish sources is Adam Krąwiec's book (*Seksualność w średniowiecznej Polsce* [*Sexuality in Medieval Poland*], Poznań 2000) which also includes the author's brief outline of the views of medieval churchmen on various aspects of sexual life. This dissertation sparked a heated debate, which proves that the problem of sexuality is an interesting field of study for Polish medievalists. When it comes to different aspects of sexuality, we are limited to information, interpretation and postulates left to us in various written works by theologians, preachers or lawyers engaged in codifying legal systems, as well as artists in their works. It is extremely difficult for us to reconstruct today any views that were characteristic of the so-called ordinary people.

The Middle Ages (to put it very simply: the period between ca 500 and 1500) is not only a period when the culture and the society of modern Western civilization took shape, but also an era in which a number of behavioural patterns and legal norms as well as sexual taboos originated. This was the period in which Western Christianity established limits of both proper and forbidden behaviour. One cannot forget, however, that theology, philosophy and law of the Christian Middle Ages were profoundly influenced by Jewish, Greek and Roman as well as Germanic and Slavic sources. The Christian thought dealing with sexual relations (very diversified and often contradictory in the first centuries AD) began to exert a strong influence on the society as the new religion was officially recognized and its rules were "squeezed" into the framework of the Roman state system. St. Augustine believed that sexual life was vile and regarded it as a sign of rebellion against the will of God. He obviously accepted marriage as the only institution within which one could have sex. According to him, the only purpose of marital sex was procreation; man and wife were to remain faithful to one another and marriage was indissoluble. More rigorous opinions were voiced

by St. Jerome, who considered any carnal intercourse as sinful and suggested avoiding it even in marriage. The era of the Fathers of the Church is also the time from which comes the dictate (increasingly expanded throughout the Middle Ages) to avoid marital sex during fast days, penance, holidays, menstruation, etc.

In the early Middle Ages in post-Roman Europe all manifestations of sexual activity were regarded as disgraceful and triggering God's anger. Even wet dreams required acts of penance, and a woman having her period could not receive the Eucharist. The Old Testament understanding of ritual impurity induced rulers to impose severe punishments on all sorts of extramarital sexual activity in order to avoid God's anger, which could affect the whole state and its subjects. More repressive were the newly Christianized states, where harsher punishment for sins of sexual nature was often inflicted. We should remember that Boleslaus the Brave ordered adulterers and lechers to be nailed to bridges by their testicles. Such sinners were handed knives and had a choice of either dying of hunger or castrating themselves.

From the early Middle Ages sexual matters were regarded as something evil and menacing; corporeality in general, not only sexual relations, was evil *ratione peccati*. Between the 5th and 12th centuries, i.e. after the collapse of the ancient approval of sexual pleasure and before the Renaissance return to ancient tradition, Western Europe was dominated by barbarian, "animal" love, which the Church tried to tame and suppress. The views that Christianity took over from the world of antiquity included the views on kinship and the role of men in society. On the other hand, in Germanic societies a significant role was played by matrilineal kinship and women had a high social status in those societies. The few hundred years between the 5th and 12th centuries was a period when a compromise between the ancient (Roman-Christian stemming from Mediterranean traditions) and the barbarian perception of kinship emerged. The canon law prohibited marriage until the seventh degree of kinship and it was not until the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 when the ban was limited to the fourth degree. When over the course of years, from ca the end of the 11th century, the problem of corporeality and sexuality ceased to be demonized by the Church, the rules applying to incest became slightly less strict as well. In the early Middle Ages, also under the Germanic influence, a theory was

formulated according to which a marriage was valid only when it was followed by a sexual intercourse.

In the 11th century there were numerous breakthrough phenomena and processes, e.g. feudal transformation, power struggle between the secular and the ecclesiastical authorities, a shift in the attitude to law, and urban and economic transformations. This was in fact the time when the European civilization was created, when all aspects of human life were named and defined. Thanks to the reform of the Church which was launched at the time the ideal of absolute celibacy of the clergy that had been formulated long before began to be pursued in earnest. Even though the Church eventually solved the problem of priests' marriages, it did not manage, until the end of the Middle Ages, to eliminate concubinage which was still common among the clergy in many areas. In the 11th century the Church also began to shed the Manichaean tradition concerning the views on the sinful nature of all matters carnal. Thanks to this process, Europe could begin to return to ancient tradition in the next century; one could speak and write not only about the love of God but also about the love of a woman. It should be noted that in this century sex began to be associated with deep feelings and emotions. This was the time when the noble and refined courtly love was born. Suggestions were put forward in the twelfth century theological thought that sexual sensations too were given to humans by God. Thus sexual intercourses between husband and wife ceased to be a sin, although, of course, moderation and subordination of sex to procreation were recommended. On the other hand, from the 12th century onwards there was increasing condemnation of extramarital sexual relationships. All such relationships were regarded as crime which should be punished. There were four types of such crimes: fornication (*fornicatio*), adultery (*adulterium*), incest and all sorts of sexual practices *contra naturam*. In the same century a definition of marriage began to develop according to which man and woman first expressed their willingness and consent to enter into marriage and then sealed it with a sexual act. In the 13th century the increasing acceptance of sexual activity within marriage was accompanied by the development of legal and canon laws against sexual "offences". This is where we should look for the sources of the modern aversion to sexual practices *contra naturam*, including homosexual behaviour.

Subsequent important changes in our subject were brought about by modern times, the times of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. An important instrument used by the Church to strengthen the institution of marriage was, for instance, a ban on concubinage among the laity introduced at the beginning of the 16th century. Stricter policies in sexual matters were also associated with increasing suspicion against women and blaming them for enticing men to sin.

When we talk about medieval sexuality, we also have to remember that there is a significant difference in the understanding of the sexual act itself between then and the present. Nowadays, sex is understood as something that happens between two people, whereas in the Middle Ages it was an act during which one person did something to the other. Hence the importance in medieval culture of the division into the active (male) and the passive (female) party — that is why homosexual relations were dangerous to the society, because they disrupted this binary division. The fundamental medieval difference between the “good” and “bad” sexual act was the division into reproductive and non-reproductive sex. In addition, the medieval society was divided into chaste people (virginity and abstinence) and those who were sexually active. All sorts of behaviour which did not aim at procreation were regarded to be against nature (*peccatum contra naturam*), i.e. ones that did not comply with the biblical imperative: “go and multiply”. The synonym for sins against nature was “sodomy”, which referred not only to homosexual behaviour but also to the *coitus interruptus*, interfemoral intercourse, anal intercourse with a woman or masturbation. In other words, any waste of semen was against nature.

Despite the fact that all kinds of sexual intercourse were regarded in the Middle Ages as sinful (which was the legacy of Adam and Eve’s sin and their expulsion from Paradise), we can observe a kind of sexual promiscuity, and the society did not begin to be more repressive until the mid-13th century, which was associated both with the codification of canon law and the synthesizing of theological knowledge, the best example of which is the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. As the role of towns in medieval societies grew, different manifestations of sexual activity, e.g. prostitution and fornication, also became regulated. We have to remember, however, that prostitution — although con-

demned — was largely tolerated as an activity that prevented even greater sins and misdeeds. Let us also remind ourselves that Dante treated lechers quite leniently in his *Divine Comedy*.

People's sexual needs were not given priority in the Middle Ages. As far as physical needs were concerned, getting food and relieving hunger were of the utmost importance. The Middle Ages were obviously the times of Faith and concern about salvation. During its earthly journey the soul stayed in the body, hence the clergy's great interest in the body and sin, including all sorts of sexual activity. Satisfying one's sexual desire led to all sorts of actions, but we cannot forget, however, that during the period discussed here it was not carnal pleasures that were the most important goal and the biggest concern, but food in earthly life and salvation after death and eternal life. There is no doubt that in the life of medieval people Eros was defeated by Thanatos.

Ruth Mazo Karras is a history professor at the University of Minnesota and has been exploring medieval sexuality and gender issues for a long time. The results of these interests are monographs devoted to prostitution in medieval England and the (social) maturing of men, as well as numerous detailed studies. Karras is a disciple of the precursor of studies on medieval homosexuality and one of the precursors of studies on the history of sexuality in general, John Boswell, to the memory of whom the book discussed here is dedicated. It has to be noted, however, that in many important matters regarding medieval sodomy Karras' views are remote from Boswell's conclusions.

The author begins her work with a general, and therefore necessarily rather superficial, characteristic of the most significant features of medieval sexuality (*Sex and the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–27) to move on to a more comprehensive discussion of a few detailed issues which — according to the scholar — are of key importance to the understanding of the sexuality of medieval people. In the second chapter (*The Sexuality of Chastity*, pp. 28–58) the author begins her considerations with stressing the significant dualism in the thinking of medieval people, namely the fact that what was spiritual was good, whereas corporeality was evil and sinful. The key terms in this part of the book are: chastity, celibacy, sexual abstinence and virginity — all the institutions that were there to help people avoid carnal lust. Karras also discusses the role of chastity in monasticism, em-

phasizing at the same time that although monks were not fathers of families and did not participate in wars, in short: they rejected the traditional attributes of medieval "masculinity", it does not mean that they were considered to be no-men. They simply chose a different way of being men whose strength was manifested in self-control over temptations to which their sinful bodies were permanently exposed. As of the 11th century (thanks to the Gregorian reform), the monks were gradually joined by lay clergymen, who were increasingly required by the Church to live in celibacy. From the following century onwards we can already speak of a division of the medieval society into the clergy and the laity, primarily based on their sexual activity. Of course, it was not only monks, nuns and priests who chose to live in sexual chastity, but also a number of lay people. It is worth noting that sexual abstinence was almost always emphasized in the lives of those saints who were not churchmen. Such people were driven by a general rule that self-control over the needs of their bodies (that would refer not only to sex but also food and sleep) would let them focus on what was spiritual and get closer to God.

The central part of the book is the following chapter devoted to marriage, that is the only institution within sexual needs could be legitimately satisfied according to the Church (*Sex and Marriage*, pp. 59–86). Karras estimates that only 15% of people in the Middle Ages did not get married for a variety of reasons. This rate, however, seems to have been much bigger, e.g. in the late medieval Florence where only 25% men between the ages of 18 and 32 were married (according to the cadastre of 1427, David Herlihy, *Viellir à Florence au Quattrocento*, "Annales ESC", vol. XXIV, 1969, 6, pp. 1340, 1344, 1346, 1348). As mentioned above, the ideal medieval society was divided into the sexually active and the sexually abstinent; this division can be well replaced with another pair of terms: married men and "virgins". Karras repeatedly stresses that in the Middle Ages there was no consent to any sexual activity outside marriage, even though, of course, everyday practice was considerably different from the norms set by theologians, philosophers and lawyers. The author describes how the understanding of the term "marriage" changed over the centuries and what conditions had to be fulfilled to make the union between a man and a woman valid. Karras also reminds us that irrespective of the changes in the attitude towards

marriage and love between spouses, which took place in the Middle Ages, it was procreation that still remained the most important aspect of matrimony.

Chapter four (*Women Outside of Marriage*, pp. 87–119) focuses on the women who lived outside marriage. The prevailing opinion in the Middle Ages was that women were more promiscuous and had bigger sexual needs. For this reason they had to remain under permanent, strict supervision. Karras notes that a man's honour depended on a number of factors, such as nobility, courage, bravery, skills, wisdom, whereas the virtue and honour of a woman resulted primarily from her sexual conduct. A woman's promiscuity was a disgrace to her parents and her husband to a larger extent than a similar conduct of a man. The society and the Church were also much more severe when it came to an act of fornication committed by a woman. Sexual activity of women outside of marriage, mainly during the time before marriage, was not so much accepted as less severely punished and condemned. The author also discusses the lives of medieval concubines (both of laymen and clergymen); she also devotes a lot of attention to prostitution, probably the most extensively researched subject in literature.

Interesting and pioneering is the part of the chapter that examines sexual relations among women. Unlike homosexual behaviour of men, this subject is very little known. The reason may be the nature of medieval sources, which were mainly interested in men and even when they did mention women, this was especially in the context of their conduct towards men. We also have to remember that in the overwhelming majority of cases the authors of these sources were men, usually churchmen. A few early medieval penitentials prescribed penances for the nuns who gratified each other's desires with a false penis; the sources suggest, however, that they did it — according to the authors — due to the lack of men and not because of their passion for each other. In this chapter Karras also analyzes the abductions of women, rapes and acts of incest. Finally, she describes accusations of sorcery levelled at women — when they beguiled men with their sexuality — as well as accusations of witchcraft combined with, among others, accusations of having sexual intercourse with the Devil.

The cases of men who for various reasons did not get married are discussed in the final chapter (*Men Outside of Marriage*, pp. 120–149). Despite widespread condemnation of any extramarital sex, men's offences in this matter were treated relatively leniently. For example, pre-marital visits of young boys to brothels were accepted. The author devotes most of this chapter to homosexual behaviour, discussed in relative detail in various sources, especially those of the High and Late Middle Ages.

Summing up her work (*Afterword: medieval and modern sexuality*, pp. 150–159) Karras describes the most important features of medieval sexuality and compares them with modern, especially American, behaviour and customs. There are in fact plenty of such references to our times throughout the book (e.g. the Clinton scandal), yet they do not spoil the reading and give beginner readers a better understanding of the views and behaviour of medieval people. The monograph ends with a series of bibliographical mini-essays which indicate the most important works concerning issues discussed in the book (*Further reading*, pp. 160–181). The author's selection is apt, in-depth, and does not omit any question addressed in the book. Every such a selection must obviously be incomplete; the present one includes primarily works which inspired Karras in her research. One should, however, point to an important work by Hubertus Luttbach which was omitted from the bibliography (*Sexualität im Mittelalter. Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbüchern des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts*, Köln-Weimar-Wien 1999). The book is supplemented with a comprehensive index of items and people.

As Karras herself remarks, the book is not addressed to specialists and that is why the appurtenances of an academic work are limited here to the minimum. The present reviewer cannot accept this modest assumption. The author's synthetic and condensed remarks are fresh and inspiring even for historians who professionally study various manifestations of sexual activity in the Middle Ages. What is important is the fact that in various cases Karras also discusses the views of the European Jewish and Muslim communities; she also examines fundamental differences in the approach to sexuality between Western and Orthodox Christianity. Karras' book is a synthesis and is meant to serve as a textbook for academic purposes. The author could not, therefore, exhaust all the aspects of human sexuality. It

seems, however, that some more space could have been devoted to the problem of nudity, which — according to churchmen — provoked sinful sexual behaviour. Nudity was supposed to lead to debauchery — and it was *Luxuria* that was often portrayed in the arts as a dancing naked woman. Behaviour in heretic sects or witches' actions were also associated with nudity. The beauty of the human body was not appreciated until the Renaissance, when the artists used motifs of ancient mythology in their works. To conclude, it has to be said that Karras' work is in fact the first scholarly monograph in which an attempt was made to embrace the whole issue of sexuality in the Middle Ages. It is a completely successful and inspiring monograph, and, for less advanced researchers, a perfect point of departure for further studies.

(Translated by Robert Bubczyk)