

Martin Luther, “Warning Against Prostitutes” (May 13, 1543)

Abstract

The world’s oldest profession underwent considerable change in the Early Modern Era, most especially in those areas transformed by the Protestant Reformations. Early Modern prostitution took many forms, both formal and informal, but two factors challenged the prevalent medieval view of prostitution as a “necessary evil”: the Protestant Reformation and the spread of syphilis. Protestant areas introduced increased scrutiny and policing of morals and sexuality, often focused disproportionately on women. Across the German speaking lands as Protestantism took root, city brothels, once run by brothel-keepers who were often required to take an oath of office, closed in response to the new moral priorities of reformers and the laws of the magistrates. Martin Luther was intense in his critique of prostitution, and he viewed prostitutes as akin to murderers. His “Warning Against Prostitutes” made in 1543 to university students in Wittenberg describes the young men who visit prostitutes as “ardent” and the prostitutes themselves as “murderous.”

Source

To the Students of Wittenberg.

Through special enemies of our faith the devil has sent some whores here to ruin our poor young men. As an old and faithful preacher I ask you in fatherly fashion, dear children, that you believe assuredly that the evil spirit sent these whores here and that they are dreadful, shabby, stinking, loathsome, and syphilitic, as daily experience unfortunately demonstrates. Let every good student warn his fellows. Such a syphilitic whore can give her disease to ten, twenty, thirty, and more good people, and so she is to be accounted a murderer, as worse than a poisoner.

[...]

Begone, I advise you, and the sooner the better! Those who cannot live without whores should go home or wherever else they will. Here we have a Christian church and Christian school where God’s Word, decency, and virtue are to be learned. Those who wish to be whoremongers may carry on elsewhere. Our elector did not found this university to serve as a whore house, and so you must accommodate yourselves to the situation.

I must speak plainly. If I were a judge, I would have such venomous, syphilitic whores broken on the wheel and flayed because one cannot estimate the harm such filthy whores do to young men who are so wretchedly ruined and whose blood is contaminated before they have achieved full manhood.

You foolish young men think that you must not suffer, that// as you feel ardent a whore must be found to satisfy you. The old Fathers called it *impatientia libidinis*, inability to endure sexual desire. But it is not necessary to indulge your every passion at once. It is written, ‘Beware, go not after thy lusts’ (Ecclus., ch. 18). Even in the estate of marriage you must restrain yourselves.

In short, beware of whores and pray God to provide you with pious wives. You will have trouble enough as it is.

Further reading

Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Lyndal Roper, "Discipline and Respectability: Prostitution and the Reformation in Augsburg." *History Workshop Journal* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 1985): 3–28.

Iwan Bloch, *Die Prostitution*, 2 Vols. (Berlin 1912, 1925), ii. 260-2.

S. Karant-Nunn, "Continuity and Change: Some Effects of the Reformation on the Women of Zwickau," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 12/2 (1982): 16-42.

Source: *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, ed. G. Tappert. London and Philadelphia, 1955, pp. 292-4.

Recommended Citation: Martin Luther, "Warning Against Prostitutes" (May 13, 1543), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-5450>> [April 02, 2025].