



Sex, Dissidence, and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages

Jeffrey Richards

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For the potentates of medieval Europe (of both Church and State) dissent struck at the roots of their ordered settled world. To allow a single heretic or free spirit to escape just punishment would, they believed, doom the whole structure of society to decay and dissolution. So dissent was extirpated, first by reason, then by argument, and then with increasing savagery. Dissent was to be removed from the face of the Earth by fire and the sword, by strangulation and the ultimate refinements of torture. But why was the danger felt to be so great and so immediate, from a small minority of mostly poor and powerless individuals? Jeffrey Richards has looked at the persecuted lives of heretics, witches, Jews, prostitutes, lepers and homosexuals, and discovered a common motive for their sufferings. The chief link is sexual aberrance. The Church sought to tighten and regulate even the most intimate details of human life, but without much success. Tacitly, unofficial sexual practices were tolerated. But progressively, deviance was seen as having a malign influence not just in an individual life, but in the world at large. At a time when the Second Coming was expected, men and women were expected to lead godly lives - anything less was an outrage. And as the power structures of society solidified, the deviants became convenient scapegoats. The rise of Islam, the spread of disease, especially the Black Death, were laid at their door. They became the scapegoats for a fearful world. Jeffrey Richards charts the shifting perceptions of sex, dissidence and damnation throughout the Middle Ages, and enables readers to form their own judgements.

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