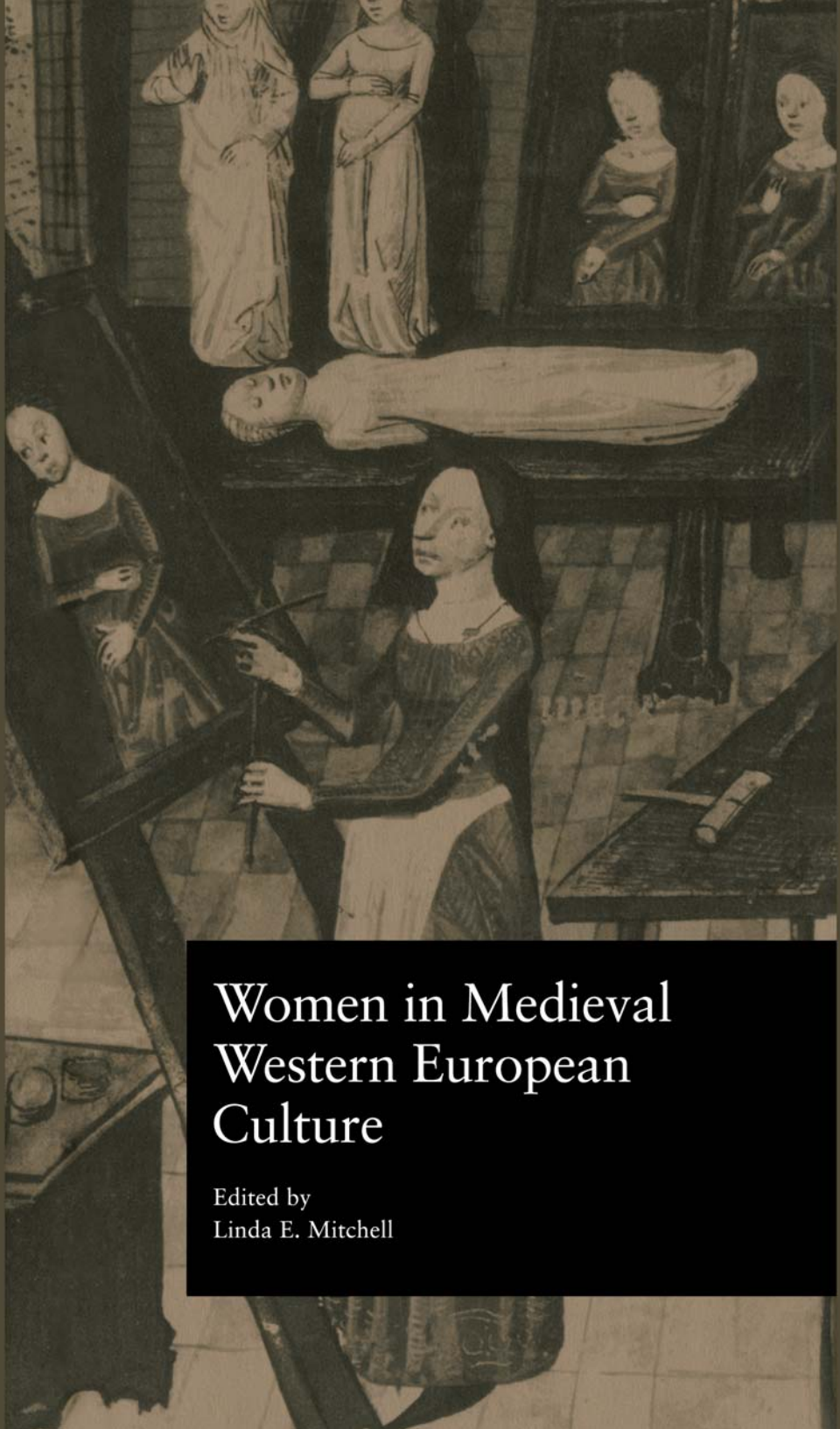

Women in Medieval Western European Culture

Edited by
Linda E. Mitchell

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent.

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Introduction

Sources for the History of Medieval Women

Linda E. Mitchell

Women's history is a fairly new field; most of the major works have been written within the last twenty years. The sources for such history, however, have existed in various forms for hundreds of years. Sometimes it is hard to find female voices in the documents and literatures of past eras. Sometimes the voices are overlaid with male voices or hemmed in by the structures of male discourse. But those voices exist and they can be heard. The authors of this volume of essays have unearthed, uncovered, and revealed the voices of medieval women from the wilds of northern England to the luxuries of medieval Constantinople. They have articulated the activities and ambitions of women from all walks of life—queen, noblewoman, urban matron, and peasant. They have also revealed the ways in which male authors and masculine social systems subtly (and not so subtly) limited and restricted female expression during the Middle Ages. This pressure to remain silent and private has led some historians of the medieval world to claim that women are invisible in the records of European culture. The authors of this volume show that women were far from invisible as long as one knows where to look.

The sources for women's history are many and varied. There are the sources used by the political and the legal historian: works of theory, legal treatises and teaching texts, documents of litigation and court cases, contracts, and so on. There are the sources used by the cultural historian: works of literature, letters, works of art, and the like. And there are the sources used by the social and the economic historian: baptismal registers, financial lists, tax rolls, recipe books, manuals for housewives and for estate managers, household accounts,

wills, and public fiscal documents. This volume contains essays which have made use of all of these kinds of sources and more. The purpose of this essay is to introduce the reader to the kinds of sources encountered by the medieval historian and to suggest what the researcher might find in them.

PUBLIC DOCUMENTS

As mentioned in several of the articles that follow, the presence of women's activities in public documents is often tangential, even hidden, because women's names are often excised from the record. Many women appear, but they are often referred to as "daughter of X" or "wife of Y" or even "widow of Z." Often, the only named women in public records are noblewomen: women whose wealth and social standing made them different from the rank and file and, thus, deserving of a name.

Even though many, if not most, women are anonymous in these documents, they are not invisible. Although the variety and quantity of public documents changes both with time and with place in the medieval world, there is not a region in Europe that did not preserve some documentary evidence from the past—and in all of it women appear.

What are public documents? They are the physical evidence amassed by governments and administrations, treasuries, courts of law, and notarial offices. Public documents include sealed letters (usually called "writs") written by, or dictated by, kings and noblemen to their retainers and followers. Documents which describe the litigation of the medieval courts of law are also public documents as are chancery and financial records of debt, litigation over debt, money payments made to kings and lords, and other financial transactions of medieval administration. Public documents are not only those which passed through the hands of a king's chancery clerk, however. They are also the documents which describe the goings-on of the local, county, and manorial courts and the financial records of these local administrations.

What does the researcher find in such documents? In fact, public documents comprise a significant arsenal of material for the historian of medieval women. Although incomplete, even sketchy, these documents reveal aspects of individual women's interactions with the central government, with their families, with their neighbors, and with their local governments. Public documents make it possible for historians to

study not only noblewomen but also women of the urban classes and peasant women, thus presenting a perspective on medieval society that can be more inclusive than that found in more literary sources.

A single example suffices: a student of mine wanted to study the incidence of violent criminal activity just before, during, and just after the outbreak of the Black Death in England (1347-1349). This student chose to read the *petitions for commissions of oyer and terminer* which appear on the *dorse* (the reverse side) of the rolls of Letters Patent. The Patent Rolls are translated into English and published by the Public Record Office in London. Thus, this student was able to use medieval chancery records to trace the prevalence of criminal violence in the period under study, even though the student did not read Latin. Such sources are invaluable for the student reader because they are readily available, are usually indexed, and provide significant information on a great variety of issues.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SOURCES

Most public documents tell us a great deal about the everyday dealings of members of the social elite—the nobility, the knightly class, and the free peasants. Other kinds of documentary sources can expand our understanding of those social classes, but they can also tell us something about the people who did not appear before the king or the royal courts—the bonded peasantry, the poor urban laborer, the underclass of the medieval world. Such sources are incredibly varied, and their accessibilty and availability is also vastly different depending on the time, place, and circumstances. Nonetheless, these sources, even as scattered as they sometimes are, can give us a view of medieval women's lives that no other source can provide.

Manorial accounts, urban tax rolls, parish registers, and similar sources provide the researcher with information on the financial circumstances of medieval people of all social classes. These kinds of sources range from the yearly tallys of isolated manors in England to the detailed tax records of the Florentine *catasto*. Domesday Book falls into this category, since it is a record of landownership which included not only the nobility in its assessment but the peasants who lived and worked on the land as well.

Collections of letters appear for the later Middle Ages, among them the letters of the Paston family and the Lisle family in England and the letters of Italian merchant families during the Renaissance.

While specifically focused on particular times and places, these letters preserve some of the most authentic descriptions of female activity available. As such, these kinds of collections provide important and unique information for the researcher, especially those whose work focuses on the late medieval urban elite and the lower nobility.

Another group of documents begins to appear in the late Middle Ages: enrollments of births or baptisms, marriages, and deaths in parish and county registry offices in England and on the continent. Although usually not translated, compiled, and printed as are many public documents, these sources are nonetheless often accessible (if one is willing to travel) and are, in fact, used widely among people who today are trying to trace their family genealogies.

THEORETICAL SOURCES

The medieval intellectual world was overwhelmingly male, but the subjects of their discourse—law, religion, philosophy, science, and society—included issues relating to women. From the legal treatises such as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (The Body of Roman Civil Law compiled by jurists in the late sixth century) and the works of English common law known as Glanville and Bracton, to political theory, to philosophical texts, to works of theology, all reflected (predominantly male) medieval social attitudes toward women and toward their activities, rights, privileges, personalities, and physical natures. These sources provide the researcher with important and significant information on how the intelligentsia viewed women. While theoretical in focus, these attitudes were very influential in later periods in forming more common social attitudes toward women as public figures, as members of society, and as family members.

In most cases, these texts are hostile to the idea of female activity in public life but sympathetic to and respectful of women's private and family functions. For example, the important legal treatise written in England in the thirteenth century (attributed to Henry de Bracton, chief justice of the King's Bench in the reign of Henry III) stipulates that women should be concerned with maintaining the household and with raising their children, which prevents them from participating in politics in a direct fashion, but that responsibility toward home and hearth also justifies women's access to property and the right to inherit and hold land. In religious texts, women are bitterly denounced if they engage in public activity but applauded if they assiduously apply

themselves to their household and family duties, which included the early religious teaching of the children. Although the ideal woman is a virgin, the wife and the widow are respected persons in religious texts as long as they do not try to break free from their assigned place in the social world.

Thus, theoretical texts can provide an important perspective on the debate about women, but it is a perspective that is predominantly male centered, patriarchal, and to some extent elitist. Theoretical texts tell us how the intellectual elite felt about women's roles and position in society, but they do not necessarily reflect the "reality" of the medieval world, in which many women were publicly active through informal and unofficial networks. Used in combination with other kinds of sources, such as public documents, a more complete picture of medieval male attitudes toward women emerges.

LITERARY SOURCES

The literature of the medieval period is rich, varied, and abundant. Ranging from histories, sagas, and epics describing early Germanic culture, to romances, Arthurian stories, and heroic tales, to folk literature and popular stories, the literature of medieval Europe describes and depicts women of all walks of life and in many different circumstances. Like theoretical sources, however, the views of women depicted in medieval literature are usually those of male "eyes." While there were female authors in the Middle Ages, such as Marie de France and Christine de Pizan, and while noblewomen of the High Middle Ages acted as patrons for such male authors as Chretièn de Troyes and, perhaps, shaped the development of the romance genre, the vast majority of literary texts were written by men, and largely for a male—or a mixed-audience. As such, they reflect masculine themes, male-dominated discourse, and male perspectives.

While many male authors are seen as somewhat sympathetic to women, such as Chaucer and Chretièn, many of the depictions of women reflect the ambivalence of the medieval intellectual world toward female participation. Women are frequently silent or unnamed in these texts or they are stereotyped—the lusty widow, the greedy and acquisitive peasant woman, the submissive and courtly noblewoman. These texts tend to reflect negative social attitudes toward women even when they extoll the (again, traditional) virtues of particular types, such as the innocent virgin, the devoted mother, and the devout nun.

The exceptions to this are in the literature written by women. In these texts, women tend to be depicted heroically, whether it is in the religious dramas of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim or in the biographies of women who dwell in Christine de Pizan's City of Ladies. Although the conventional virtues of motherhood, virginity, and duty to the family are emphasized in these texts, they are not contrasted with other, equally conventional, satirical views of female activity which appear in male-authored texts. The differences are striking, as the two essays appearing later in this volume attest.

Nevertheless, literary sources are invaluable for the things they say—and do not say—about medieval women. Popular views of later periods were often shaped by the literature of the medieval period. While not necessarily a reliable depiction of reality (the debate about Chaucer's Wife of Bath, for example, continues to this day), the depictions of women in literary texts nonetheless give the researcher a much broader perspective of the range of (predominantly male) views on women than can be found in the texts of the intellectual elite.

Thus, the sources for the history of medieval women are many and varied. Some are easily available to the modern-day student or the general interested reader; others are less easily accessed. All, however, reveal women in numerous guises: as noble householders pursuing litigation in courts of law; as wives and mothers caring for their families and their lands; as nuns, abbesses, and anchorites engaged in praying for their own souls and those of their patrons; as queens, landlords, brewers, seamstresses, prostitutes, and laborers. In short, the lives of medieval women, as revealed by contemporary sources, were as rich and complex as the lives of women today.

Women in Medieval Western European Culture

PART I

Women in Medieval Society

INTRODUCTION

The essays in this section focus on the position of women in medieval society. From between roughly 500 C.E. and 1550 C.E., European society was dominated by competing political and social perspectives. On the one hand was the vision of the unified Church, expressed in the concept of Christendom which included not only the Latin but also the Byzantine Christians in its orbit. On the other hand was the developing vision within the varied and fragmented political systems of Europe of a sense of secular sovereignty divorced from religious considerations and, eventually, focused on the ideal of the nation-state (although this idea was in its infancy for the entire length of the medieval period). Just as there was conflict between the centralizing emphasis of the Church and the growing sense of sovereign difference on the part of the State, so, too was there conflict between senses of cultural unity and the very real separateness and specificity of the class construction of medieval society. The different social classes were not only aware of the nature of social stratification; they usually upheld such social distinctions as appropriate and rational. Underpinned by the Church's own pyramidal structure, the class structure of medieval Europe—the nobility, the urban classes, and the peasantry—sustained itself despite political upheavals, war, and plague. Only in isolated circumstances did a revolutionary thinker decry the stratification of medieval society: "when Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" John Ball asked in the late fourteenth century, but he was executed as a traitor and his concept of equality under the law of nature was not voiced again until the writings of John Locke and the Scientific Revolution.

In the twelfth century, several intellectuals of the cathedral schools of France posited that medieval society was divided into three "orders": those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor. These distinctions, while perhaps having some political meaning, had little economic relevance. Those who pray—the clergy and the monastic community—were made up almost entirely of the aristocracy, who also comprised the category "those who fight." Those who labor encompassed an enormous and diverse population, ranging from the peasant bonded in semi-slavery to the land to the wealthy merchant who could command more moveable wealth even than the nobility. Moreover, the distinctions made by the "three orders" were not entirely accurate in fact. By the end of the Middle Ages, most of the armies contained infantry drawn from the peasant classes and from the urban populations of Europe, and the role of the mounted knight, while still important, was soon eclipsed by the role of the professional soldier and the mercenary, drawn from every walk of life and not bound by the traditional structure of the "three orders." In addition, this design for medieval society failed to include an essential component of the medieval world: the women of each social class, who prayed but could not become priests, who ruled over land but could not become knights, and who worked alongside their husbands, fathers, and brothers but could not hold official positions of mastery on the manor or in the guild. Finally, such distinctions entirely left out the non-Christian populations of medieval Europe, both Jews, who comprised a significant and important minority in all parts of Europe, and Muslims, who had assumed control over most of the Byzantine Empire, North Africa, and Spain by the end of the eighth century.

Thus, it is necessary to redesign the image of medieval society so that it encompasses a wider and more diverse group of people. The essays which follow do just that: outline in broad terms the positions and roles of women from various parts of the medieval world and in various social circumstances. Amy Livingstone focuses on noblewomen, predominantly in northern Europe and England during the High Middle Ages. She outlines the many roles which noblewomen played as they moved from the status of daughter to that of wife and, perhaps, widow in the course of their lives. Barbara Hanawalt and Anna Dronzek outline the position of women in the urban communities of high medieval Europe and discuss the remarkable variety of urban women's experiences in the economic, familial, and social roles which they played. Madonna Hettinger gives a glimpse of the peasant

woman's day and suggests that the many duties which devolved onto women of the peasant classes required them to "strategize" in order to get everything accomplished that needed doing. Judith Baskin presents a view of Jewish women in Europe, in both Sephardic (southern) and Ashkenazic (eastern) communities. Angeliki Laiou outlines the position of women in the Byzantine Empire, from royal women to working women. Finally, Jonathan Berkey discusses the roles and activities of women in the Islamic communities of the Near East.

CHAPTER 1

Powerful Allies and Dangerous Adversaries

Noblewomen in Medieval Society

Amy Livingstone

> He [Erec] could not keep from kissing her; eagerly he drew near to her. Looking at her restored and delighted him; he kept looking at her blonde hair, her laughing eyes and unclouded brow, her nose and face and mouth; and from this a great affection touched his heart. He admired everything, down to her hips: her chin and her white throat, her flanks and sides, her arms and hands.
>
> But the damsel [Enide], for her part, looked at the knight no less than he looked at her, with favorable eye and loyal heart, in eager emulation. They would not have accepted a ransom to leave off looking at one another. *They were very well and evenly matched in courtliness, in beauty, and in great nobility. They were so similar, of one character and of one essence, that no one wanting to speak truly could have chosen the better one or the more beautiful or the wiser. They were very equal in spirit and very well suited to one another.*[1] [emphasis mine]

The quotation above is from *Erec and Enide*, an early Arthurian romance written in the second half of the twelfth century. The stories in this literary genre sung the praises of knights and their fair ladies and wove tales of bravery, valor, and love. Chrétien de Troyes, the author of this romance, clearly believed that these two nobles were equal in beauty, wisdom, and nobility. Indeed, based solely on this passage, one might be tempted to assume noblewomen were the "equals" of their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. But equality is a modern

construct with little applicability to the people of the medieval period, although it is clear from this passage that this twelfth-century poet believed that Erec and Enide enjoyed some sort of parity. Was such parity an artifice of medieval literature or did the "real" Enides of the High Middle Ages (1000-1300) enjoy status and power in their society? Many historians believe that the latter was indeed the case. The renowned medievalist Eileen Power characterized women's position in medieval society as one of "rough and ready equality." Similarly, the French medieval historian, Robert Fossier, has described the Central Middle Ages as a "matriarchal phase" in the history of Europe.[2]

What sorts of powers and responsibilities did noblewomen exercise that has led two such esteemed scholars to describe the experience of women in the "dark ages" so positively? In this essay I will examine the stages of a noblewoman's life in the Middle Ages. What relationships were important to her? What rights and responsibilities did noblewomen have during the course of their lives? What did they do for fun? By analyzing the life experience of women throughout western Europe over several centuries, I hope that the richness of their lives and their powerful and fundamentally crucial role in medieval society will become apparent.

Before discussing the life experiences of noblewomen, it is necessary to summarize the developments of the medieval period and how they affected women's lives. Was the parity between Erec and Enide, as described by Chrétien de Troyes, the first time women had enjoyed such status? The answer is no. The High Middle Ages did not see an abrupt increase or expansion in the rights, position, and activities of noblewomen but saw rather a continuation of an earlier pattern and practice. In many ways the women of this period owed a debt to these earlier centuries, for without certain legal, social, economic, and political developments, their experience might have been drastically different.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, western Europe devolved into a series of successor states of Germanic kingdoms. The Germans valued women and set heavy fines and *wergelds* (the monetary value put on a person's life) for the death, abduction, or violation of daughters, wives, and sisters. In the sixth century, the kingdom of the Franks began to emerge as one of the most powerful of these successor states. At the same time, Christianity was making inroads among the previously pagan Germans, and, in many cases, royal spouses were the channel through which Christianity came to these Germanic tribes.

Noblewomen also found many opportunities within the church as well, acting as patronesses of new monastic foundations and, in some cases, even as the abbesses of these houses. But the tenuous unity forged among the Franks did not last very long, and the Frankish kingdom broke apart and became subject to violent and often brutal infighting among the royal and noble families. Women took their place among the bloody annals of this period. The slave and concubine Fredgond used her wiles to have King Chilperic murder his wife. The Queens Brunhilda and Bathilda acted as powerful regents for their sons and often engaged in violence to secure or promote their sons' positions. While historians of this period record the contributions of many royal women in these affairs of state, their inclusion was based upon their sometimes tenuous relationship with husbands or sons. In short, their power and status was not formally recognized by early medieval society.

The period of the eighth and ninth centuries represented an important time for noblewomen. On the continent, Charlemagne established order and forged an empire where the western reaches of the Roman Empire had once existed. Accompanying the creation of this empire were certain important legal reforms, among them the recognition of women's legal rights to land. Daughters could now share in the family inheritance and widows could control their husband's or son's property. Another development that increased noblewomen's status was the recognition of the queen as head of the royal household. In this role, a queen administered the royal lands and treasury—a considerable responsibility that entailed many different kinds of powers. This position was formally acknowledged when queens underwent the ceremony of anointing along with their royal husbands and sons. Certain changes in government worked to the detriment of noblewomen's power, however. As part of his attempt to rule his empire effectively, Charlemagne delegated certain responsibilities to officials such as *missi dominici* and counts. Although the queen ran the royal household, women were not candidates for these official positions. Perhaps fortunately for noblewomen, this formalization of government did not last much past the death of Charlemagne himself.

During the late ninth and tenth centuries and for most of the eleventh, the centralized system of government that Charlemagne envisaged crumbled. In its place local strongmen, who may have been counts and dukes under Charlemagne, or their descendants, assumed responsibility for providing stability, protection, and justice for a

dependent population. Those not descended from counts or dukes (often called *castellans* because of their control of castles) established alliances with powerful lords. Counts, dukes, and *castellans* alike bound warriors of a lesser status through the process of granting out fiefs. As power localized and central authority weakened, distinctions between private and public power blurred. Families who controlled fiefs came to provide services, such as justice, that in modern times are associated with public authority. Noble families established powerful dynasties that ruled western continental Europe for generations, and women, as members of these families, shared in this power and prestige. The contributions of the Carolingian period assured them a right to inherit a portion of their family estate and accorded them the position of estate manager. Since husbands were often away on military campaign in such turbulent times, the management and defense of the family home was left in the capable hands of their wives.

The experience of noblewomen in Anglo-Saxon England was somewhat different from that of their continental counterparts. In the early Middle Ages, England was made up of a series of kingdoms that coalesced into one royal house only in the tenth century. Anglo-Saxon queens were extremely influential and, like continental queens, played an important part in the spread of Christianity in England. Noblewomen enjoyed many of the same rights to property that Charlemagne's reforms ensured for women in his empire, although they gained them somewhat earlier. A survey of Anglo-Saxon wills reveals that noblewomen controlled significant portions of property and that there was no apparent preference shown to males as heirs. One important difference between the women of the continent and Anglo-Saxon women was that the latter could rule territory in their own right. While there were many highly visible Frankish queens, they ruled usually in the name of their sons or as counterparts to their husbands. In contrast, Ethelflaed, the daughter of Alfred the Great, king of Wessex, became the "lady of the Mercians" upon the death of her husband, the lord of Mercia. Ethelflaed ruled for many years and was succeeded, albeit briefly, by her daughter. Anglo-Saxon women continued to be recognized as powerful members of aristocratic society through the eleventh century. With the coming of the Normans, however, Anglo-Saxon women were dispossessed of their lands, and their rights of inheritance were sharply curtailed.

In the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, medieval society underwent a series of important transformations. Chief among them

was the resurrection on the continent of effective monarchical leadership and the co-opting of noblemen into the royal household and into appointed offices such as seneschal to the king. In some cases, dynastic control over these offices was established. Noblewomen, however, were not considered viable candidates for such positions. Nevertheless, women still remained vital to noble families as managers of estates, as fellow investors in the economic expansion of the high medieval cities, and as consumers and patrons of cultural and artistic movements that developed with the expansion of moveable wealth.

Like secular society, the church also underwent a period of renewal during the High Middle Ages. Dedicated churchmen attempted to expunge the corrupt secular elements from the church and to elevate the power of the pope. While many of the church's changes were detrimental to women, particularly the insistence on clerical celibacy, reform also offered opportunities for noblewomen. For example, noblewomen were inspired by reformers to establish and support new ecclesiastical foundations aimed at instituting the new reformist zeal.

Central to the question of a noblewoman's station and power was her family. If born into a powerful family, a noblewoman could expect great wealth, a share of the inheritance, and many opportunities for herself and any children she might have. If not so lucky, a noblewoman's quest for power might have been considerably more difficult, but it was still not without possibilities. When the centralizing power of the monarchy was at a low point and noble families held more or less sovereign authority, women achieved the most formal power. As medieval society became more organized and bureaucratic, women's access to authority was more difficult. Yet while their access to some sorts of authority may have been curtailed, noblewomen continued to exercise influence through other channels.

STAGES OF LIFE: DAUGHTER, WIFE AND MOTHER, WIDOW

What was it like to be an aristocratic woman growing up in the Middle Ages? A girl's immediate environment would consist of a small room adjacent to the great hall in her family's castle. Castles of this period were designed for their military advantages rather than for creature comforts. As a consequence, the bailey, keep, or dungeon in which the family resided was likely square or perhaps round in shape. The ground level was used for storage of food stuffs and household necessities or

perhaps for billeting warriors. The second level consisted of a great hall that served many functions. It was here that the family, servants, dependents, and any visitors would eat. The lord of the castle would convene his law court here and oversee cases involving various disputes. The great hall was also where many of the family servants and retainers would sleep. The children of the noble family slept with their parents and kin in a chamber off the main hall or perhaps in a separate chamber with their nurse once they were old enough. The castle itself, likely made of wood, or perhaps stone, was cold and very drafty.

The needs of noble daughters were met by mother and nurse. If there was an older sister in residence, she, too, might help supervise the child. Infants tended to be nursed by a wet nurse rather than the mother. The relationship between wet nurse and charge was vital to the well-being of the child, and wills and other testaments indicate that the bond was a strong and affectionate one. The immediate noble family was nuclear, consisting of a mother, father, and siblings. The number of children varied between four and six, and child mortality was very high. It has been estimated that 29 percent of female noble children and 36 percent of males died before the age of five. Although absent from the household, extended kin played an important role in the life of a noble child. An aunt, uncle or cousin might act as god-parent. In addition to the immediate family and nurse, the child would be surrounded by the *familia*. While similar to the modern "family," the *familia* was a broader term which included servants, extended kin, and dependents.

If a daughter survived childhood, she could expect to be trained in the skills and arts that would befit her position and be useful in her life as a member of a noble family. Mothers were responsible for educating their young children. A noble daughter would be introduced to sewing as well as to the skills necessary for the effective management of an estate. In order to accomplish such varied tasks, a noblewoman needed to be literate, at least in her vernacular tongue, and girls learned how to read and write either from the resident priest or their mothers or they might be sent to a local convent. While few nobles were probably educated extensively in the "liberal arts," most probably did have rudimentary literacy. Because of her role as estate manager, it was more likely for a noblewoman to be literate than a nobleman throughout the Middle Ages. The example of Heloise, who was tutored by the great teacher Abelard, indicates that some young women did

enjoy access to a more complete education in the classics of Antiquity and the Christian past.

Daughters could expect to inherit a portion of the family land. In some cases a girl's share of the patrimony took the form of a dowry, a gift made by her family at her marriage. Other daughters received both a dowry and a share of their family's property. As mentioned above, Anglo-Saxon parents did not prefer sons to daughters in their testamentary bequests. At the end of the thirteenth century, the inheritance custom of the county of Champagne in northeastern France stated: "If there are sisters, each will have one-half a brother's share of the plain land, but if there are more houses than brothers, the sisters will take their share of the houses in addition to plain land [so that each child would have a residence]. If there are only sisters, they will share the inheritance equally."[3] In addition to sharing the property that their families controlled outright, noble daughters also inherited fiefs. Like noble sons, daughters assumed responsibility for vassals and participated in the ceremonies of homage and fealty associated with receiving a fief and becoming a vassal. In the duchy of Austria in the middle of the twelfth century, for example, daughters and sons would both inherit the duchy held in fief by the duke and duchess. In Champagne, noblewomen received fiefs and did homage to the count or countess for them.

As a daughter, a noblewoman was initiated into a complex family network. While a child, her world was somewhat confined to that of her immediate family and servants. Yet a daughter was undoubtedly aware of the bonds of blood, vassalage, and shared interests which tied her immediate family to her extended kin, other noble families, local lords, and the church. She was also aware of the wider world around her as she traveled with her family from estate to estate and to local monasteries to visit kin and assent to donations. As she reached maturity, marital arrangements were made or initiated and she began the next stage of her life as a wife and mother.

A young noblewoman would probably live with her natal family until she was in her early or late teens, at which time she either married or joined the church. Some noble daughters were betrothed at quite young ages and would be sent to live with their prospective in-laws. Elizabeth of Hungary was betrothed at the age of four to the duke of Thuringia and was sent to live with her affinal family in Germany until she married ten years later. However, this example of a betrothal and marriage at so young an age was the exception rather than the rule.

Most noble daughters were married in their late teens, unlike their brothers who tended to marry a bit later.

Neither noble son nor daughter had much say in determining their future spouse. Marriages were arranged by mothers, fathers, and other senior family members. Marriage was an important life passage for the newlyweds, but it was also of vital interest to their families as a tool for building political alliances, elevating their social status, and improving their economic standing. Modern concerns of "love" were of little consequence to the creation of such matches, although families were concerned that the couple be compatible to avoid any future trouble. In addition, the birth of children insured that the family would continue into the next generation. Noble families recognized and valued the lines and relatives of both husbands and wives. As a consequence, grandchildren could expect to exercise some right or claim to the property of their maternal family. Thus, although most noble wives moved to their husbands' homes, they still maintained important and close contact with their own families.

Becoming a wife marked a vital transition in the life of a medieval noblewoman. No longer was she a daughter of the house; rather she became the mistress of the household. Moreover, for the first time in her life, a noblewomen was granted property specifically for her support. At marriage, brides were granted a dowry and/or a dower. The dowry was provided by the bride's family, while the dower was given by the groom. In some cases, aristocratic women might receive both. Dowries and dowers consisted of various types of property and revenue, and in France the wife's authority over these properties remained constant in the High Middle Ages. However, in England, women had no control over their dowers during marriage. Only as a widow could a woman expect to have any active role in managing or determining the fate of this property. In Italy, too, women had no control over their dowries while their husbands were still alive. Yet Italian women did have the right to protect the property that had been given to them in dowry if their husbands died insolvent. In other words, a woman had the right to reclaim her dowry, or its equivalent, from her husband's estate, and it was not to be attached by her late husband's creditors.

After marriage, a woman would most likely move into her husband's place of residence where she would assume responsibility for overseeing the estates of her husband and keeping track of the revenue and income generated by these properties. One can imagine

that a new bride charged with considerable responsibilities was thankful for the lessons on budgets and household finance instilled by her mother. In her advice booklet to noblewomen, Christine de Pizan encourages noble wives to be well versed in monetary matters and experienced in creating and following a budget, because frugal women run their estates more efficiently and are less vulnerable to unscrupulous stewards or businessmen. Medieval noblewomen were in charge, in some cases, of vast properties, often scattered all over the country. They oversaw the collection of dues, tolls, and taxes from their dependents. They were responsible for making sure other investments, such as mills, were built and maintained and that they paid their fair share to the lord's household. They had to insure that their land was cultivated properly. Even queens were concerned with the mundane realities of estate management. Queen Edith of the Anglo-Saxons complained of a certain Wudumann, "to whom I entrusted my horses and who has withheld from me for six years my rent both in honey and in cash" and petitioned that a "just judgment" be passed on this tardy tenant.[4]

Although a wife became intricately involved in the supervision of her own estates as well as those of her husband, close contact with her natal family was maintained. Married daughters continued to participate in transactions with their natal kin and appear as codonors, consenters, signers, and witnesses in family documents. Frequently, her husband and children would also act in these capacities. The charters from north-central France indicate that the nobility traveled frequently, which is apparent in their participation at feudal courts, ecclesiastical courts, and their possession of estates scattered throughout the region. Travel was a reality of noble life, and a noblewoman might likely visit her natal kin as she moved about the countryside. Moreover, the fostering of sons and the arranging of marriage alliances and of ecclesiastical placements for her children provided avenues of contact between a noblewoman and her family.

Marriage brought another important role to noblewomen, that of mother. Whether an actual birth mother or a second wife taking on supervision of any young stepchildren, noblewomen had a profound impact upon the next generation. While most mothers engaged a wet-nurse, some noblewomen did nurse their children. The influential cleric, Bernard of Clairvaux, was proud of the fact that his mother did not let anyone else nurse her children. Countess Ida of Boulougne was supposedly so outraged when one of her sons was nursed by another

woman that she shook her child until he vomited up the other woman's milk. Noble mothers were neither absent nor detached. The Carolingian noblewomen Dhuoda was so concerned for the proper upbringing of her son that she composed a manual that provided him with instruction on everything from religion to the proper relationship with his lord to family dynamics. While some medieval mother-child relationships may have been characterized by "tough love," there can be no doubt of the affection and care—if somewhat removed from twentieth-century parenting aesthetics—that these women bestowed upon their children. Perhaps this affection is best revealed in the following account of a young noble mother leaving her infant son:

> She had an infant in the cradle and she wanted to see him before she left home. When she beheld him she kissed him and the babe began to smile. She moved away from the cradle in order to leave the room, but retraced her footsteps again and approached the babe. He again smiled and this happened several times more. She could not leave him. [5]

Mothers were vital in determining the futures of their children. They were responsible for inculcating proper virtues and manners in their children, much as mothers continue to be today, and participated in arranging advantageous marriages or religious careers for their daughters and sons. Guibert of Nogent, a twelfth-century French monk, felt indebted to his mother for placing him in the church. He believed that, had his father lived, he would have been forced into knighthood—an occupation for which he was unsuited. Other male ecclesiastics also found a champion in their mothers. St. Hugh, the abbot of Cluny, was the son of a very prominent noble family and his father had determined that Hugh was to become a knight even though young Hugh had no interest in the life of a warrior. His mother realized this and placed him in the church.

As mothers, noblewomen played important and influential roles in medieval noble society. Did wives enjoy a similar status? In his romance *Erec and Enide*, Chrétien de Troyes indicates that his hero and heroine were "very equal in spirit." Other evidence suggests that indeed noble husbands and wives were "evenly matched . . . in great nobility."

Wives ran medieval households and estates, a position which accorded them significant influence. In addition to managing family properties, wives were also involved in matters concerning the control

and disposition of family fiefs as well as legal issues pertaining to them. During the Middle Ages the distinction between private and public power was often blurred. Because noble families controlled the *ban*, a constellation of what might in the modern world would be termed "public" powers, family dynamics often involved intersection with the "public" world. The issue of succession and division of family property from one generation to another would, at first glance, appear to be a strictly "family" matter. But it was a far more complicated matter in the medieval world. Fathers were lords and provided public services, such as justice and protection, to their dependents. Hence, the question of who would become the next lord was of public concern. As a consequence, "private" matters such as marriage, succession and inheritance overlapped with public duties.

Noble husbands were often away on Crusade, royal and other business, or war. During their absence, their wives assumed control of the family offices, lands, and responsibilities. As wives, aristocratic women commanded a wide range of powers and were involved in many different facets of medieval life. In addition to such responsibilities, women also shaped and influenced the culture of their time. Marie de Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII of France, was vital to the development and spread of the romance and the idea of courtly love throughout Europe. Chrètien de Troyes dedicated his works to Marie and stated that she had been instrumental in supporting his efforts. The romance represented a departure from previous literary genres, most of which were *chansons de geste* or songs of deeds that sung the praises of warriors and were concerned solely with military feats. Such material may not have held much appeal for women and the more genteel nobility of the twelfth century. The romance continued to include warriors and battles, but the object of such action became the pursuit of honor and loyalty to one's lady *and* lord. Other noblewomen became directly involved in culture as poets, writers, and artists. Marie de France, for instance, wrote a series of short poems called *lais*. As sponsors and as active participants, noblewomen played an important role in shaping and determining cultural expressions in the Middle Ages.

Because noblemen were warriors and thus subject to violent death, women could expect to be married more than once. This was compounded by the difference in ages between husband and wife. Some women found themselves married to men much older than themselves, although the literature of the time suggests that such

marriages were frowned upon. In addition to the death of a spouse, noble marriages could be dissolved by repudiating a wife or by petitioning for an annulment or divorce. Noble families tended to view marriages as "disposable" and might take action to dissolve a union if a better opportunity or match surfaced; hence, a noblewoman could find herself in the precarious position of being put aside by her husband. The church attempted to restrict men from easily discarding their wives but had limited success in enforcing its will upon the medieval nobility. At the end of the eleventh century, Count Galeran of Meulan put aside his wife, perhaps to pursue a more advantageous match. His wife took refuge in the church, and Galeran attempted to remarry. Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, however, kept advising Galeran that he could not take another wife while the first one was still living. Galeran replied that his wife had run away and asked Fulbert to help to return her to him. Galeran's wife refused to go back to her husband, most likely out of fear for her safety, and Bishop Fulbert refused to force her to reconcile with Galeran. The count of Meulan was not the only noble of the period to view marriage as a political convenience. Count Geoffrey Martel of Anjou married and repudiated five wives during this same period.

Marriage could thus be an impermanent state for noblewomen, either through repudiation or widowhood. Noble families actively resisted the clergy's attempts to regulate marriage and to impose certain canonical regulations on whom they could marry. Nevertheless, the church was eventually successful in asserting its will over the nobility and made marriages more difficult to dissolve.

Although most daughters, as mentioned above, had little influence in the choice of a marriage partner, some women, usually widows or divorced wives, did manage to exert their will over the selection of subsequent spouses. In the eleventh century, Countess Mathilda of Tuscany personally chose her future mate, the Duke of Bavaria, who was many years her junior. Eleanor of Aquitaine, two months after her divorce from King Louis VII of France, decided to marry Henry of Anjou, who would eventually become Henry II of England. Constance, the granddaughter of King Baldwin II of Jerusalem, similarly selected her own mate. Although advised by her father to remarry, Constance refused since she "dreaded the yoke of marriage." Eventually, however, Constance did select another husband, a common knight, which prompted William of Tyre, a twelfth-century historian, to remark: "Many there were . . . who marveled that a woman so eminent, so

distinguished and powerful, who had been the wife of a very illustrious man, should stoop to marry an ordinary knight."[6]

During their married lives, most noble ladies enjoyed considerable influence over hearth, home, and family. Except in England, noble wives were prominent in the control of public powers as well. They controlled knights, held courts to settle legal disputes, and engaged in military defense of their homes; some even were extremely violent and disruptive elements of medieval society. Did women's life experience a change once their marriage ended? The experience of widowed women depended to a large extent on time and place. In some cases they did not experience a dramatic change in the powers and responsibilities that they enjoyed as wives, while in others widowhood was the first time a noblewoman enjoyed independence.

Widowhood represented a crucial life stage, particularly for English aristocratic women. As unmarried daughters, English noblewomen were under the control of their fathers or guardian. Once married, their experience did not appreciably improve, since a wife's property became part of her husband's possessions. Widows, in contrast, enjoyed a different legal status. After the death of her husband, a woman received her dower, which consisted of one-third of her husband's holdings. Her control of this property was autonomous and did not require a guardian to help her manage her estates. Dower portions could consist of considerable lands and estates, depending upon the wealth of the husband. Power over land gave medieval English widows access to the political realm and control over family matters.[7] These women acted as lords and enjoyed the responsibilities that lordship entailed. They controlled tenants and even knights, litigated disputes that arose among their dependents, and appointed estate officials. In other words they enjoyed the same prerogatives as a male lord.

Relations between widows and family members varied from benevolence to acrimony. The basis for conflict among a widow and her children, stepchildren, and in-laws was her dower property. Joan de la Pole had her dower lands besieged by her mother-in-law, Hawise. William de Breouse attempted to force his stepmother to take care of debts incurred by his father out of the property she had received from her husband. In both cases, only the intervention of the king resolved these conflicts between widows and their affinal families. Not all women had such a difficult time with their relatives. Widows often were granted the wardship of their children's lands. Alice de Lacy

enjoyed a warm relationship with her son, who eventually became the earl of Lincoln. When absent, he entrusted his mother with overseeing the earldom, an indication of his esteem for her.

In other regions of Europe, noblewomen enjoyed somewhat different experiences as widows. In Italy, widows remained disadvantaged and were regarded by families with a great deal of suspicion. Widows in Catalonia experienced no such restriction. Countess Ermessend reigned over the county of Barcelona as the guardian of her son and, later, of her grandson. Like their counterparts to the south, French widows maintained the prominent position they had enjoyed in both family and society as married women. In the region of Blois-Chartres, several important lordships were controlled by widows during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Indeed, the county itself was capably governed by Countess Adela for a decade. Even when her son Thibaut came of age and became count, Adela continued to play a vital role as his advisor and mentor. Like Adela, Mahild of Alluyes, Philippa of Courville, and Helisend of Chartres became the guardians of their minor children and ruled as lords. A charter datable to 1094 makes it clear that Philippa had taken on her husband's duties and responsibilities. She states in this act that she and her son give the *ban* over the village of Pomerae, which their predecessors Lord Ivo and Lord Gerogius had passed down to them. This document makes explicit that Philippa exercised the same rights and prerogatives that all other previous lords of Courville had enjoyed. Even though Gerogius had four brothers who could have easily assumed responsibility for the lordship, Philippa's right to act as lord and guardian went unchallenged.

Another responsibility that often fell to widows was arranging the futures of their children or, in some cases, grandchildren. There were essentially two futures open to children of the aristocracy: marriage or the church. If left with minor children, a widow would be responsible for arranging a marriage alliance. As part of the noble family complex, a widow was sensitive to the political ramifications of marriage as well as the current status of power in the region and sought to create alliances that would serve the best interest of her immediate family. Unlike widows in England who had to purchase the right of wardship for their children or those in Italy who were denied this right, French noble widows assumed control of their children, family lands, honors, and offices seemingly without opposition from their natal or affinal families or their lords.

After running a lordship or county and raising and marrying off several children, many noblewomen retired to convents at the end of their lives. They also made arrangements to leave their property to their heirs and loved ones through wills or testaments. Anglo-Saxon England is perhaps unusual for the number of wills that have survived. Of these extant documents, more than a quarter were issued by noblewomen. A certain Aeoelflaed was granted "the estate at Ebbesborne and the title-deed as a perpetual inheritance to dispose of as she pleases."[8] The ability to dispose of their property as they saw fit is borne out in the experience of women in France as well. Women of various social status arranged that portions of their property be granted to the church upon their deaths. In arranging these transactions, their relatives—sons, daughters, in-laws, husbands and siblings—frequently consented to the arrangements made by their kinswomen. While the approval of such kin was necessary, these women still disposed of their property as they liked. In the thirteenth century, several aristocratic women made testaments that included pious bequests to the church. In 1228 Lady Elizabeth of Broyes-Commercy made a very generous gift to the abbey of Clairvaux to benefit the poor of the community. Specifically she gave the revenue from a tollgate, which was to be used to provide clothing for the poor. Like Anglo-Saxon noblewomen, those of France in the High Middle Ages were able to determine the future and disposition of their property.

Even when their sons or daughters succeeded them to the lordship, widows continued to act in family transactions and to play a vital role in the politics of the region. Widowhood did not mean forced retirement or being placed under the control of a male guardian. Instead they remained active and important members of their family and commanded the same powers and respect that they had as married women.

NOBLEWOMEN AND LAND

Daughters, wives, and widows played an integral part in the control of fiefs, evidenced by their participation in judgments concerning the disposition of such "feudal" properties. Lady Eustachia of Brou, the wife of William Gouet II, often acted with her husband in affirming and consenting to gifts made by their vassals. She also joined with him in hearing matters brought to their court. When Hilduin of Alluyes quitclaimed land and tithes at their court, Eustachia witnessed this act

with William. During her husband's absence on crusade, Eustachia frequently held court and dispensed justice. Her two grown sons witnessed her acts but did not attempt to usurp their mother's authority as feudal lord. When William returned around 1115 he found the family fiefs in good shape and order maintained. Countess Adela of Blois, Chartres, and Meaux, who was a contemporary of Eustachia, also acted with her husband Count Stephen in determining and administering justice and she, too, assumed control of these counties while he was on crusade. Count Stephen, however, died in the East, and Adela remained in control of these counties for well over a decade.

In addition to managing the counties and administering justice, Adela also dictated the political agenda and alliances of her family. During the early twelfth century, the political situation in western central France was complicated and dangerous. Two threats to Adela's power were the neighboring Counts of Anjou and the revitalized monarchy of Louis VI. To remain secure and to counter these threats, Adela pursued political alliances with her natal family, the Anglo-Norman royal house. Not only did these alliances benefit the comital house of Chartres, but they were also important for the power of the Norman monarchs, particularly Henry I (Adela's brother). Henry trusted Adela and she was instrumental in arranging a meeting between him and his estranged Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm of Bec. When their husbands were on crusade or campaign, noblewomen were powerful lords and participated fully in the political life of medieval Europe.

Noblewomen also controlled property independently. Even when married, French aristocratic women maintained independent control of their retainers. The land in question could pertain to dowry or dower or could be her inheritance from her natal family. This independent control of land is evident in women's donations to the church, made on behalf of their souls and those of their loved ones. *Vicedomina* Helisend, for example, made several gifts to the abbey of St. Jean-en-Vallée for the souls of her two husbands and her sons. In the eleventh century, Lady Ermengard of Fréteval gave the church of St. Lubin and pertaining lands to the church. The donation grant states that the gift was made for Ermengard's soul alone and that the church and its appurtenances came from "her patrimony," in other words the land that she had inherited from her natal family. Along with making pious gifts, women arranged distributions of property in other ways. Early in the twelfth century, for example, Mary of Ulmo arranged a mortgage with

the monks of the abbey of St. Père of Chartres. She and the monks agreed that she would give them two measures of her best land in return for sixty shillings.

As well as ruling lands, noblewomen were called upon to defend their property. In the early thirteenth century, Nicolaa de la Haye defended the castle of Lincoln from French invaders. Defending castles and towns was a dangerous business and could have severe consequences if the defender was not successful. For much of his reign, King Edward I of England was at war with the Scots. The countess of Buchan attempted to defend Berwick Castle from the onslaught of the English. She, however, was not successful. To humiliate his vanquished enemy, Edward had the countess placed in a cage that was hung over the walls. The Countess of Brittany was somewhat more successful. In the fourteenth century, she actually led men into battle when Charles of Blois claimed the county. While most noblewomen ruled their lands in peace, on occasion they were forced to defend their holdings. Like their male counterparts, some met with success while others were not so fortunate.

As participants in feudal tenure, women were required to do homage to their lord but also to receive homage from their vassals. In the county of Champagne in the late thirteenth century an inquest was held to determine at what age it was customary for a noblewoman to participate in acts of homage.

> They were asked whether it was the custom of Champagne that a woman who completes her eleventh year and begins her twelfth may do homage, and receive homage from her vassals. Monsieur Gilo of Bricon, knight, speaking for all the sworn and in their presence, said that it is the custom of the region of Champagne, and for the county itself, that a woman who has completed her eleventh year and begins her twelfth may do homage to her lords (seigneurs) and may receive homage [from her vassals]. So it has been in many cases without challenge even though the woman has not completed her twelfth year. [9]

The question of homage to women was of vital interest for the nobles of Champagne, for the county was ruled by countesses for nearly two-thirds of the thirteenth century. Noblewomen in Flanders, France, and parts of Germany did homage for the lands that they inherited and those that made up their dowries and dowers. Only in Norman England were

the rights of heiresses restricted. Here, husbands exercised the rights of their wives to property. Aristocratic women's participation in these matters was, thus, precluded. Only as widows could English noblewomen expect to participate in the control of warriors or the provision of homage.

The use of titles is a further indicator of women's exercise of political power. As wife and as widow, women were often denominated by titles such as *domina*, the female counterpart of lord or *dominus*, and *vicedomina*, the female counterpart of the title held by a secular official appointed by the bishop to help him in administering and protecting his land. Although feminized, these titles embodied the same powers, privileges, and honors as those of their male counterparts. The use of seals also denotes noblewomen's participation in the political realm. Seals were used by lords, both secular and sacred, as a way of indicating their consent and approval of transactions. While queens were the first women to use seals, the practice eventually trickled down to women of the nobility. For example, Countess Blanche of Champagne used seals to verify and affirm her official comital acts. In 1245, when Lady Beatrice of Marnay could not find the letter of credit which she had extended to a local monastery, she sent a letter and "affixed [her] seal to this letter at the request of the abbot and chapter of Saint-Urbain."[10] Women from all over Europe used seals, and their authority through the seal was recognized as appropriate expression of their power. Aristocratic women's participation in the world of vassals and fiefs, the employment of titles, and the use of seals indicate that through most of medieval Europe they were active and recognized participants in the power relationships that defined the medieval world. Because they controlled knights and the resources of lordship, a noblewoman could be either a powerful ally or a dangerous adversary.

NOBLEWOMEN AND THE CHURCH

In the course of a noblewoman's life many forces and relationships were important to her. Connections with family (natal and affinal), lords, and vassals were vital in shaping a woman's life experience. Another important relationship was that between aristocratic women and the church. For some women, the church became a way of life as they became nuns. For others, contact with local ecclesiastical foundations took many forms. Some had aunts, uncles, siblings, or children who were members of the clergy. Others engaged in litigation with the

monks over the possession of property. Still others were important patrons and supporters of the church and zealous advocates of church reform. During a lifetime, the relationship between a woman and a church could include all of the above possibilities.

Noblewomen were often generous patrons of local ecclesiastical foundations and gave land, revenues, and other resources vital to the interest of the monks and nuns. Such women frequently enjoyed cordial—indeed warm—relationships with the clerics of the region which, on occasion, compelled them to act as intercessors between their families and the local ecclesiastical institutions. In these cases, the intersection between private and public powers becomes particularly apparent. During the eleventh century, Adelaide of Le Puiset, the daughter of Viscount Evrard I of Chartres, attempted to cultivate a friendly relationship between her husband Roger Montgomery and the church. The eleventh-century Norman historian Orderic Vitalis says that she was "remarkable in her gentleness and piety, and continued to encourage her husband to befriend the monks and protect the poor."[11] Twelfth-century noblewomen from the families of lords and viscounts in the French counties of Blois and Chartres also played the role of mediator between their families and the church. For instance, in 1145 the bishop of Chartres excommunicated the viscount of Chateaudun, his sons, and their "castle" for their actions against the monks of Tiron. After the viscount died, his widow Heloise and his son appealed to the monks for peace. They promised to restore all that had been usurped by the viscount, with the *proviso* that if any later claims were made, the sentence of excommunication would be reinstated. While this act of excommunication had grave consequences for Heloise's immediate family, there were also public ramifications. Not only was the vicecomital family denied church offices but so, too, were their dependents. Heloise interceded between the church and her family, which testifies to her concern for her family but also the more public influence that she exercised both within her family and medieval society.

Along with their role of intermediary and patron of the church, noblewomen were also vital allies in the attempts to reform the church. During the second half of the eleventh century and much of the twelfth, western Europe was consumed by a wave of reform within the Church which attempted to restore the authority of the papacy and to expunge secular influence. Countess Mathilda of Tuscany was instrumental in supporting the reform popes of the eleventh century in their battle

against the Holy Roman Emperor. On her death in 1102 she left the papacy her extensive holdings. As part of this increased commitment to reform, pious ecclesiastics attempted to establish communities far away from the corrupting influences of secular society. This message of reform found a supportive and enthusiastic audience among the land-owning elite of western Europe. Newly reformed foundations sprang up all over Europe. Noblewomen were instrumental in gaining their family's support for these newly founded or reformed foundations. In the region of the Chartrain, the abbey of St. Jean-en-Vallée, while founded in the eleventh century, was reformed in the early twelfth through the joint cooperation of Bishop Ivo of Chartres and Countess Adela and was supported generously by other noble families of the region as well.

A lack of support or enthusiasm by powerful women could also obstruct a foundation. In the first third of the twelfth century the ascetic Bernard of Tiron ventured into the wilds of the Perche to found a community of reformed monks. Count Rotrou of Perche was impressed by Bernard and gave him and his followers generous portions of land close to his comital seat. This plan was soon scuttled, however, by Count Rotrou's mother, Beatrice. The Countess strenuously objected to the location of this new religious center. She claimed it was too close to St. Denis of Nogent-le-Rotrou, the abbey that the comital family had traditionally favored and supported. Beatrice feared that Bernard's new foundation would provide undue competition for the monks of St. Denis and, hence, work to their disadvantage. Rotrou was persuaded by his mother to move the proposed foundation to the forest of Tiron, where he gave Bernard and his disciples generous lands. Beatrice's intervention reflects the powerful role that noblewomen played as fierce protectors of their favored ecclesiastical foundations. The community of Tiron was undoubtedly distressed by her opposition, but the monks of St. Denis were surely grateful for the countess's support and protection.

Noblewomen could also be counted upon to intervene in disputes between the monks and their children. Sometime in the first third of the twelfth century, Ivo of Courville refused to abandon certain customs that his father and mother had levied on the abbey of St. Père. As she was dying, his mother, Philippa, called Ivo to her side and exhorted him to cease these customs. She confessed that the customs had not been granted either to herself or to her husband and admitted that they had usurped them, making the family's possession of them unjust. Ivo,

however, had a "heart of a youth" and did not follow his mother's advice. Although Ivo ignored Philippa's counsel, it is clear that Philippa tried to intercede between her son and the church. That Ivo did not take his mother's advice was due not to its lack of value but to his own bad judgment. Indeed Ivo's self-criticism is apparent in the charter, and it is later made clear that he wished he had followed his mother's counsel.

As well as being powerful allies of the monks, noblewomen could also be dangerous adversaries. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries, women became involved in altercations with the church over the dispersal of ecclesiastical offices and the control of property. In the eleventh century, a violent conflict erupted between the bishop of Chartres and the family of the bishop of Senlis over the office of subdeacon of the cathedral. The bishop of Senlis's family had proposed that the bishop's younger brother assume this office, but Bishop Fulbert of Chartres rejected him as a candidate and the office went to another cleric. The family was so incensed by this action that mother and sons began planning a violent revenge upon the new subdeacon. They conspired and arranged to have some of their henchmen go to Chartres and "during the day they remained in hiding; going out in the dark of night, they butchered in the very forecourt of the cathedral that holy priest, who was coming to the church as usual, with spears, falicons and swords as if he were a fierce wolf."[12] Yet another woman from the north of France caused trouble for Bishop Fulbert. In 1023 the bishop of Paris wrote to Fulbert asking him to excommunicate a certain "noblewoman of Lâon" who was ravaging the church's possessions. Fulbert was reluctant to pronounce this sentence, his primary reservation being that no one would dare notify this woman that she had been excommunicated.[13] English noblewomen were also, especially as widows, active in both the support of and opposition to, ecclesiastical foundations. In 1238, for example, Lady Agnes de Vescy went to war with the priory at Malton. The dispute between Agnes and the monks involved several acts of violence committed by her and her retainers. First, her men attacked brothers of the priory while they were traveling on a public road; next she and her male followers attacked the priory itself, where they stole livestock from the abbey. Finally, she had her men stop the monks from working their fields. Agnes' attack, the prior of Malton Priory asserted, was completely unprovoked and without justification.[14] These women were all powerful adversaries who used violence, cunning, and brute force (just as their male counterparts did) to gain land, offices, and power. Their actions disrupted medieval society and caused the church no end of trouble.

While most daughters of noble houses married, others found careers in the church. If a family decided that a daughter was destined to be a nun, they would provide her with a gift when she entered the convent. These daughters were sent to convents at a young age and were raised by the nuns. Opportunities for advancement within the church abounded for young noblewomen. In many cases, daughters were placed in religious houses with which their families had a long tradition; in some cases, the convent itself may have been founded or constructed through family patronage. The office of abbot or abbess was often filled by a child of the founding family. Many a novice had her aunt as abbess. In fact, parents might place a daughter in a convent with the intention that she eventually succeed her aunt as abbess. Although a member of the church, a nun maintained contact with her natal family and could expect to see them when they came to the abbey to make donations, settle disputes, and celebrate religious holidays.

The decision of where to place a child oblate—male or female—was an important one for the family. Selection of a particular monastery or nunnery had important political, social, and economic implications for the family. Usually if a child were placed in a monastery or nunnery, the family would continue to give generously to the foundation. Patronage patterns changed over the course of a family's history and noblewomen were instrumental in determining which houses would receive family support. Moreover, as mentioned above, the development of new or reformed monastic houses might change a noble family's donation practices or provide competition for the more established foundations in the region. Pious donations were vitally important to both secular and sacred interests. Determining where a child would be placed had significant long-term repercussions for the noble family and monastery alike.

Medieval noblewomen lived active, rich, and sometimes tragic lives. While it is impossible to determine the exact age of most noblewomen at death, it appears that many lived into their sixties and others into their seventies and even eighties. During their lives, they were important members of their community and contributed to their family and society in many ways. These were not women confined to castles or subordinated by men. Instead they participated in virtually all of same activities as noblemen. They went to war, on Crusade, and on pilgrimage. They acted as lords, adjudicated disputes, and appointed estate officials. They managed their homes and educated their children. Contact was maintained with their birth families. While the selection of

their husbands was not always motivated by love, many noble husbands and wives did grow to love each other and to mourn the death of their spouses. Toward the end of their lives, many women opted to join nunneries to live out their days in the service of God. Others remained in the world and probably died surrounded by family and dependents in a home that was long familiar to them. The experience of noblewomen differed depending on place and time. And, while some women did suffer restriction at the hands of male relatives or a male-dominated society, the evidence suggests that women found innovative or less formal ways of subtly exercising their influence. Historians rightly warn of generalizing the history of women across centuries and place, but the experiences of women as diverse as Queen Clothilde of the Franks, Elizabeth of Hungary, Guibert of Nogent's mother, Countess Adela of Blois-Chartres, Countess Blanche of Champagne, Eustachia Gouet, Agnes de Vescy, Niccolaa de la Haye, Helisend of Chartres, Alice of Antioch, and Countess Ermessend of Catalonia demonstrate that noblewomen from different times and places exercised considerable power in their own right. These women left an indelible mark upon medieval Europe, one which scholars are only beginning to appreciate. Noblewomen could be powerful allies to the church, king, lord, or their family. At the same time, their control of land, tenants and armed retainers could also make them the scourge of the neighborhood and dangerous adversaries. It would appear then, that Chrétien de Troyes was accurate in describing noblewomen and men as "evenly matched in courtliness" and "equal in spirit."

NOTES

1. Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. by William W. Kibler and Carelton W. Carroll (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 56. Italics are added.

2. Eileen Power, "The Position of Women" in *The Legacy of the Middle Ages,* ed. by C. G. Crump and E. F. Jacob (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926), 403-433; Robert Fossier, *Le moyen âge*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Colin, 1982), 2:321-324.

3. Theodore Evergates, ed. and trans., *Feudal Society in Medieval France: Documents from the County of Champagne* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 52.

4. Quoted in Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 94.

5. Quoted in Shulamath Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, Chaya Galai, tr. (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983), 145.

6. William of Tyre, *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, Emily Babcock and August Krey, eds. and trans., 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 2: 224.

7. Linda Mitchell, "The Lady Is a Lord: Widows and Land in Thirteenth-Century England," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 18 (1992): 71-97.

8. Quoted in Fell, 95.

9. Evergates, 56

10. Evergates, 90.

11. Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. by Marjorie Chibnall, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969-1980), 3: 138.

12. Frederick Behrends, ed. and trans., *The Letters and Poems of Fulbert of Chartres* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), no. 29, 53-55.

13. Behrends, no. 79, 139-41.

14. Mitchell, 71.

CHAPTER 2

Women in Medieval Urban Society

Barbara A. Hanawalt and Anna Dronzek

Studying the lives of urban women in medieval Europe is still an ongoing process in modern scholarship. The pronounced differences between women's legal rights and family circumstances in northern and southern Europe are still to be explored. Not only regional differences but also local ones affected women, since urban laws varied from town to town. Each new study, therefore, continues to add to our knowledge of urban women's lived experiences. Several basic questions dominate the discussion. Their legal standing in relation to property is crucial to understanding their roles: Were they given property to take into marriage (dowry) and did they retain control over it? Did they receive a dower (a portion of the husband's property for their life use should they outlive him)? Did they gain control over the persons and wealth of their children? Women's participation in the market economy has also dominated much of the discussion. An ongoing debate over the effects of depopulation as a result of the Black Death of 1348-49 pits those who think that it benefited women against those who think that their positions in life remained substantially unchanged. Even with such major debates in the field, there are whole areas that remain unexplored in urban women's lives because so little has been researched and so little may ever be known. While men wrote memoirs, letters, personal accounts, and books, few women made such personal recordings, or, if they did, they have not been preserved. We must assume that much of women's daily life was carried on in such a way that only impermanent scribblings of accounts on wax tablets, oral transactions, female traditions, or personal reminiscences passed on to another generation recorded them. These media of preservation were too shortlived for historians to recapture. In this essay, we will look at women in terms of

their childhood and education, marriage and remarriage, motherhood, and participation in the work force.

For any class of medieval women, the process of normal child-bearing did not receive attention in medical tracts or literature because birthing was exclusively a female ritual until late in the seventeenth century, when the forceps began to offer male doctors the possibility of entering into the lucrative business that midwives had held in their exclusive control. Various references enumerate who attended to women at this crucial point in their lives—skilled older women who acted as midwives as well as female relatives and friends who played the supporting roles of heating water to bathe the mother and child and offering encouragement, advice, and gifts. If the delivery was complicated, the midwife might call in a physician and, therefore, the only accounts that physicians' tracts reveal were of unusual births and cesarean sections rather than of normal ones.

A female child entering the world might be greatly loved by her father and mother but the realities of her treatment placed her at some risk of an early death. Nursing was the most important part of a child's survival during the period from birth to early childhood. Breast feeding was crucial, because other forms of feeding were so unsanitary that a child could easily die from infections from dirty feeding tubes and bottles as well as indigestible animal milk. The practice of breast feeding varied among urban women across Europe by place and by class. Upper-bourgeois Florentine women did not nurse their children and may have had little influence on the selection of a nurse for them. It is the husband's notebooks that record the price he paid for nursing, the quality of nurse he sought, and the length of time the child nursed. For the most part he paid more for the nursing of male than of female children. If male children were nursed two to three years and females only one to two years, then female children ran greater risks of infection and death. Even in London, for which there is scant evidence of placing children out to a wetnurse, the survival rate for male children as opposed to females suggests that even when mothers nursed their own children, they did not nurse their daughters as long as their sons. Among orphans coming into the mayor's court for protection of their goods and for placement of themselves with guardians, 60 percent were males and 40 percent were females. The difference in treatment between males and females suggests, but does not prove, that male children were more valued in the urban milieu than were female children.

Urban centers, however, did place a value on caring for young male and female children, particularly those who were left without parents to oversee their rearing. Florence established foundling homes that provided wetnurses, and Montpellier had a system of city-supported wetnurses by the fourteenth century. London had elaborate laws to protect the survival and inheritances of citizens' orphaned children (meaning that they had most likely lost their fathers but not their mothers) and Ghent insured that children would be reared by the father's family. Laws across Europe made an effort to protect and provide for children, although those with wealth tended to fare better, and males were given better treatment than females.

The early education which both male and female children received was primarily from their mothers and other women around them. They taught them elementary speech and motor skills, such as walking, dressing, and eating. For almost all girls, education remained home based and informal throughout most of their lives. As with so many other aspects of women's lives, this informal education is difficult to uncover in the sources available to us. Urban women had some opportunities for education that their rural counterparts may have lacked, however.

The most elementary level of organized education available was that of the day school, which might be quite informal. These schools might be organized on an as-needed basis by a local priest or scrivener. As they were rarely attached to an official institution, we know about them only through offhand references to them in civic records, and it is, therefore, difficult to estimate how many children might have attended them. One testimony to their existence is a statute in late medieval England trying to regulate education for the lower classes, which suggests that such education was actually taking place. The purpose of these elementary schools was to teach the vernacular, and boys and girls both attended them. Another form of elementary education, the song school, was designed to teach children to sing so that they might take part in church rituals in exchange for a grammar school education. Girls did not attend these.

Very few girls attended formal schooling beyond the elementary level. In England, the next level of education was the grammar school, but the grammar these schools taught was exclusively Latin and, as such, largely barred to girls. From grammar school, boys might continue on to university. This educational path was entirely closed to girls, as pursuing a university degree meant taking minor clerical

orders, something women could not do. In Italy, by the end of the Middle Ages, more advanced schooling which focused on the vernacular began to appear, but girls were still underrepresented. In Venice in the early sixteenth century, only 1 percent of girls received formal schooling. Although the opportunities for girls narrowed drastically at higher levels of formal education, it is important to remember that the percentage of boys who went on to higher education, although larger than that of girls, was not necessarily very high: only 14.5 percent of Venetian children overall were going to school. Formal education was expensive, and Latin, which dominated the higher levels, was not necessary for most urban occupations.

Apprenticeship was another route to education for both males and females. By the age of fourteen to eighteen, when young people entered apprenticeships in the late Middle Ages, they probably knew how to cast accounts, to recognize if not to read legal documents in Latin, and to read vernacular languages. Many occupations either required a certain amount of education of their apprentices or undertook to provide it for them. Girls as well as boys entering into an apprenticeship might have these rudimentary skills or acquire them in the course of an apprenticeship. For girls, the records of apprenticeship are less frequent than for boys, but they did enter into such training contracts. They learned such trades as embroidery, dressmaking, silk-thread making, brewing, and polishing and finishing various items for trade such as gold and silver vessels. Usually they were apprenticed to the wife of a craftsman.

For most young women who completed apprenticeships, their training was an added attraction to a potential husband. In addition to a dowry, perhaps earned during an apprenticeship or by working after completion of it, they could offer a prospective husband a lucrative side business to supplement the income of the household. Other women carried on their own businesses and remained single.

Girls who were not formally apprenticed, however, could still learn a great deal in an informal way through their employment. Girls who migrated to the cities seeking employment as servants might learn how to run a household from their mistresses. There is evidence that some mistresses took their charges seriously and read edifying works such as devotional texts and conduct books to the girls in their care in order that they might receive a moral education. Again, the household was the center of economic production, and girls working as servants in a

household could also learn a great deal about the trade to which that household was devoted.

Educational opportunities did not remain static throughout the Middle Ages. The number of educational establishments grew in the later Middle Ages, and education increasingly became the province of the laity, focusing more on vernacular concerns. Both trends benefited women. While we will probably never be able to provide accurate estimates of the numbers of women who received formal education, those numbers surely grew, even if they were receiving most of their education in their homes. From surviving book manuscripts it is apparent that many wealthy homes had collections of stories, verses, religious treatises, recipes, and deportment tracts. Women in these homes had access to these family collections.

Women's literacy is perhaps as difficult to estimate as their educational opportunities for a number of reasons. First, to be considered literate in the Middle Ages—a *literatus*—meant that the individual knew Latin, which, as we have already seen, was not expected of women. Second, literacy comes in degrees. A woman marrying into the merchant class or into one of the powerful trades might know how to cast accounts, read the vernacular language of her region, and recognize legal Latin documents. That did not imply that she could write in the vernacular much less in Latin. When women sent letters or, like Margery Kempe, wrote memoirs, they dictated them to an amanuensus. While a very few elite women in towns might compose poetry, others had enough command of the vernacular to enjoy reading for recreational purposes and developed a taste for different kinds of literature. For instance, a rector in London, William Palmere, left his copy of *Piers Plowman* to Agnes Eggesfeld in 1400. Women in the Middle Ages could attain this degree of literacy, as their commissions of books attest, although noblewomen more typically commissioned books than did urban women. Women also left books as bequests to people in their wills, suggesting a certain amount of recreational reading. Books included courtesy manuals that descended from mother to daughter, romances, and devotional literature.

What one historian has dubbed "pragmatic" literacy is extremely difficult to measure, particularly because reading and writing were separable skills in the Middle Ages. In an era of hand-trimmed quill pens, homemade inks, parchment made of stretched and scraped animal skins or (towards the end of the Middle Ages) scratchy, soft paper (neither of which came lined), writing was a technology that required a

great deal of training to master. It was also expensive. Nevertheless, some women in Paris, for instance, did participate in the book trade with their husbands and continued to manage the shops as widows. They certainly did book illuminations and may have done some of the printing as well.

The other difficulty in measuring women's literacy stems from the wide variety of methods historians have used. One historian, for instance, has tried to estimate literacy at the end of the Middle Ages by looking at how many people signed their name to official documents and how many chose simply to make their mark. This method, however, does not take into account those people who had some basic reading ability but could not write at all or were simply unused to writing and chose, under the stress of an official setting, to make their mark, which was easier and just as effective as a signature. Other historians have counted wills and calculated the numbers of people who bequeathed their books and how many books they owned. The problem with this method, however, is that there is no guarantee that the books mentioned in a will represent the testator's entire collection; where there is other evidence of a person's book ownership, the bequests frequently make up only a portion of the library. Such researches provide the historian with valuable information but do not yield reliable numbers about general literacy. Their ability to provide statistics about women's literacy is even more hampered by the fact that women are underrepresented in the documents, such as wills, to which historians have traditionally referred.

Several discussions about women's literacy suggest that women were reading, at least in the vernacular. People debated whether or not women actually should learn to read. While the very existence of a debate points out that women were in fact reading, it also suggests widespread suspicion of such activity. One common thread to many of the religious heresies of the late Middle Ages was the desire for vernacular translations of the bible so that more people might read it. Such heresies also had a strong female membership, suggesting greater opportunities for women to learn to read the vernacular. Lollard women in England, for instance, were clearly familiar with the Bible.

The training that young women received, whether it was in reading, in learning a trade, or in running a household, usually prepared them for marriage. Only a very few women entered into nunneries, although, if they did, they were much more likely to learn to read and write. They might even learn Latin in a nunnery. Urban nunneries and

hospitals played an important role in the lives of widows across Europe. Some women would also remain single as servants in households or as independent business women. But for the majority of women, marriage marked the transition into adult life.

The formation of marriage is crucial to understanding the experience of women in urban centers. It is perhaps in marriage and in the remarriage of widows that one can see the enormous influence that this exchange of women and wealth had on urban social structure. There are two basic models, one for southern Europe and one for northern Europe. In southern Europe the bride and her family presented the groom and his family with a substantial dowry. The dowry became so expensive that fathers lamented the birth of many daughters because it meant a substantial drain on their capital. It is perhaps for this reason that female children were not nursed as long as males in Florence. So important was this dowry for the marriage of women, that Florence actually set up a sort of bank in which one could deposit savings toward a daughter's dowry or deposit money for charitable gifts for dowries for poor girls. It was common all over Europe for people to leave bequests toward the marriage of poor women. Masters who had sexually abused their female servants frequently arranged dowries for them to marry. In the northern European pattern, the bride and her family brought a dowry to the groom, but the groom and his family promised something toward her widowhood (the dower or jointure). In the negotiations for the marriage, the groom agreed to endow his wife with real property, often a third of his holdings, for her life use. The agreement would be read at the church door when the couple was married.

In addition to the differences in property distribution north and south, there was also a difference in age of marriage. Women in the Mediterranean region tended to marry in their teens, while women in northern Europe were in their late teens or early twenties when they married. There was also a social class difference in the age of marriage as well, with women who worked as servants and laborers marrying later than women born with ample dowries because working women had to accumulate sufficient wages to have a dowry. In general, the women in urban centers were marrying men older than themselves. In the Italian cities the men were in their thirties, while in northern Europe they were more likely to be in their late twenties. Thus the ages of a couple at first marriage tended to be closer in northern Europe. In all of the European towns, a number of the population never married, either because they were servants and remained unmarried, or because they

returned to their villages to marry, or because they chose not to marry or could not produce the necessary dowry. One basic caution to what appears to be a simple northern/southern European split is that there were many local variations in the marriage patterns. In Douai, in northern France, for instance, the marriage custom moved over the course of the Middle Ages from joint marital property to a system of dowry and dower that was less favorable to the wife.

Marriage meant the establishment of a household in which the dowry that the woman brought, usually in the form of goods and capital, would help the couple furnish a house and give a capital infusion to a business. If the arrangement sounds more like a business partnership, in some respects it was. The goal of a marriage might be less the happiness of the couple than their material success, either through simply working hard enough to survive or in increasing their wealth and lavishing it on conspicuous consumption. Not only the capital but the labor of both husband and wife was assumed necessary to make a successful marriage. Among the artisan group, the wife's labor might include an independent trade or it might entail helping the husband. Among the upper-class urbanites, her work would be managing the house or participating in social activities to maintain the family's social status. The marriages were also undertaken to produce children: heirs to the family fortunes, such as they were.

The establishment of a family unit also had repercussions for the keeper of the family's wealth at the death of one of the partners. In the Florentine model, the bride's family could reclaim her dowry if her husband predeceased her, but if the woman had children, the groom's family could claim it. In Venice, however, women seemed to retain some control over their dowry and were able to distribute it to favored kin. For the most part, the dowry benefited the husband and his lineage more than the wife. In northern Europe, the dowry was distributed among the children of the marriage if there were any. If the husband predeceased his wife, then the dowry and dower, along with the inheritance of the children of the marriage, provided a living for the widow and orphans.

The redistribution of a widow's dowry and dower resulted in surprising differences among the cities of London, Florence, and Ghent. In Florence the widow either stayed with her husband's family or returned to her natal home. To preserve the capital of the dowry, she usually was not permitted to remarry. In London, on the other hand, the widow had her dower for life use and was also favored with the custody

of her children and their inheritance until they reached the age of majority. With this wealth widows were very much in demand and tended to remarry. In Ghent women had very much the same benefits of dower as they did in London, but they did not have custody over their children, who were raised by the husband's kin. The customs of remarriage had a profound effect on family structure in that the Florentine and Italian system tended to preserve the patrilineage (or lineage reckoned through the male line) of families, whereas the London system moved widows and their children into new marriages that weakened the patrilineage. In Ghent the patrilineage was preserved, because the children were reared by the father's kin, but the women remarried away from the patrilineage and might have other children. In summary, in London the dower tended to undermine the patrilineage because women, goods, and children moved to another patrilineage; in Ghent the dower moved to another husband but the children stayed in the patrilineage; and in Florence the dowry, the widow, and the children stayed with the patrilineage.

One of the reasons that there was such an eager concern to have women marry, in spite of the expense of the dowry, is that both men and women feared that women outside marriage would fall into prostitution. There may have been an overbalance of women in the period following the Black Death of 1348-49, as there is some evidence that the plague spared more women than men. The evidence is not strong, but several indicators point to a surplus of women. One is the number of women, particularly in the Low Countries and the Rhineland of northern Europe who became Beguines, women who did not take the vows of a nun, instead living together in urban homes earning a living through cloth work and spending their spare time on charity. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the regulation of brothels for prostitution also became a major urban preoccupation. City fathers throughout Europe regulated the clothing, the housing, and areas where prostitutes could ply their trade.

The economic activities of most urban women, however, were not tied either to prostitution or to chaste weaving and charity. Most of women's work was related to their traditional roles within the family household. Women were frequently employed in the textile industry. The distaff for spinning thread was the universal symbol of women in the Middle Ages, and, in fact, the term "spinster," meaning literally someone who spins, came to mean a single woman precisely because so many single women in the Middle Ages made their living by

spinning. It is hardly surprising to find that women's domestic duty to spin was taken up into the textile industry as a whole. Women appear in all stages of cloth production, from the earlier, less-skilled stages such as carding and combing wool or unwrapping silk cocoons to the more advanced stages requiring fine embroidery skills, such as creating fine goods for headgear or silk points for lace. Women, however, tended not to do commercial weaving with large looms or dying, fulling, and finishing woolen cloth. Some textile crafts were worked only by women; in thirteenth-century France, for instance, the trades of silk spinning with small and large spindles, ribbon making, and millinery were women's trades. By the fifteenth century, London women dominated the silk spinning and weaving crafts, and the women of Cologne controlled the trades of silkmaking, linen yarn finishing, and gold thread spinning.

Women were also well represented in victualling trades that involved providing food. They were particularly common as brewsters, making their own ale to sell, and tapsters, selling other brewers' ales. Ale and beer were most people's daily beverages in the Middle Ages, and brewing was an industry which could be carried out in the home, using ordinary pots and vats. Women's involvement in the brewing industry also led to their participation in running taverns and hostels where they could retail their brew. They were also active as hucksters in such small retail trades as street vendors of eggs, butter, cheese, bread, beer, fruit, vegetables, fish, poultry, and other items. Many worked as bakers.

Women's physical differences from men led to their involvement in occupations such as wetnursing, nursing (meaning general care of children and the elderly), and midwifery. Although men could physically perform the latter two of these professions, there is little evidence that they did so in the Middle Ages. Interestingly, wetnurses and nurses are far more common in southern Europe than in northern Europe; wetnursing was a profitable, organized, and commercialized activity in Italian cities such as Florence, while England records few instances of commercial wetnursing. The sources remaining from these two regions, however, differ significantly; it may be that the northern sources simply do not record instances of wetnursing. Another occupation related to women is prostitution. While women who engaged in prostitution were frequently contributing to an illegal urban economy, many cities actually allowed and encouraged prostitution—if properly regulated—as a necessary evil. Without access to prostitutes,

the medieval theory held, otherwise respectable men might corrupt honest women or turn to sodomy to relieve their sexual desires.

Women also made up the majority of urban servants across Europe. While service could provide a woman with stable employment and a home, she might also face the possibility of harsh discipline from a brutal employer, sexual exploitation, or wage disputes which might leave her unpaid for work rendered. Women's experiences as servants differed, depending on their position within the household. In Italy female servants played an important role in the honor of the household. They, like the daughters of the family, were under the protection of the family patriarch. Their sexual dishonor besmirched the honor of the entire household; attacks, sexual or otherwise, on a family's servants were considered attacks on the entire family. At the same time, wealthy Italian households employed female slaves who were fair game for the men of the household and even for their friends. Italian slaves usually came from eastern Europe, where slavery continued throughout the Middle Ages. Both servants and slaves were usually women, and as the slave trade declined over the thirteenth century, the incidence of service contracts increased.

Finally, women regularly engaged in commerce and finance. Usually they had not started these businesses on their own but had received them as part of their dowers from their husbands in northern Europe or as inheritances in southern Europe. While many of these women remarried, some did continue to run the businesses on their own, hiring male factors to trade at cloth fairs or go to markets to purchase items such as wine. Some women even made these trips themselves, although this was rather rare. In London married women could run their own businesses as if they were unmarried (as *femes soles*). Mostly these women were in the silk-producing industry. Because of their dowers, women had access to real estate that could enrich them through rents. Women were frequently involved in lending and borrowing, although usually on a small scale. Much of women's participation in the commercial businesses is hidden because they participated with their husbands or sons rather than running the businesses alone.

For the most part, women's work was the type that could fit within the economic goals of the household. Spinning was always an option for extra income, but women also did much of the finishing work on articles of trade that their husbands produced. Daughters and female servants also learned to participate in these activities. Furthermore, the

economic activities women could perform on their own to gain extra income were extensions of tasks they performed in the household. Providing ready-cooked items for sale and even brewing involved skills that every housewife learned.

As is common in many societies, medieval women's work was an economy of makeshift. Women changed occupations more frequently than men, changing their work according to the stage in their life-cycle. Servants were generally young women who had not yet married, so they were free to take up residence in another person's home. Their goal was usually to earn enough money to form their own household at marriage. Once the servant and her future husband had enough money to marry, the woman's work as a servant would end. Brewing, on the other hand, was a profession mainly carried out by married women (the term alewife is an accurate one), since commercial brewing was an expensive business that might require household economic investment. Women's work in the victualling trade in general drew on family resources, as the goods a woman sold were usually the surplus from those produced for her family. Prostitution was a profession a woman might turn to at any point in her life if she needed money she could not get any other way, but younger women were far more likely to be prostitutes than older women, who were more likely to work as procurers (and consequently received more severe legal penalties when prosecuted). Wetnursing was clearly an occupation a woman could take up only after having children of her own. Finally, as a widow, a woman might find herself in a privileged legal position, with greater access to land or wealth through the northern European practice of dower that enabled her to participate more actively in trade and business. Alternatively, she could find herself living as an outsider in her husband's family in Italy. Or she could be very poor in either northern or southern Europe if her husband had been an artisan or laborer and his labor had been her chief support.

Because women had to accommodate shifts in work frequently, they rarely stayed in one occupation for much of their lives, and consequently, unlike men, they failed to develop a strong work identity. Contributing to women's weak work identity was the fact that, for many women, economic opportunity resulted from their relationship to a man. The household was the center of economic activity in the Middle Ages, with most trades being run out of the home. Therefore, women often learned and participated in their master's, father's, or husband's occupation as part of their household responsibilities. Many

trades recognized this participation and drew up regulations stating that only women who were married to members of that trade could formally enter the trade guild. Although many guilds permitted widows of members to continue to practice that trade, these privileges ended if the widow married a man of a different occupation. Other guilds did not recognize women's participation at all, with the result that, on her husband's death, a woman could find herself with no way to practice the only trade she knew. And even those trades that recognized the work of wives and widows allowed no opportunity to single women. Determining a woman's occupation on the basis of whether or not she were married and to whom thus contributed to weaker work identities for women.

Although urban women had a variety of economic opportunities open to them, many historians have pointed out that, in comparison to men, women tended to be concentrated in jobs that required few trained skills and which yielded little pay. In the textile industry, for instance, women often worked in the initial stages of cleaning, carding, and spinning the raw material to be worked, but then the wool left their hands and went to shops in which men did the skilled labor with equipment that required more capital. Working lower-skilled, lower-paying jobs often resulted in women's work enjoying less prestige than men's. For instance, the terms "huckster" and "regrator," which referred to individuals selling or reselling food, were frequently used to refer to women in a derogatory way.

Another way in which women's work differed from men's was that women's occupations were less organized and regulated. On the one hand, this meant that women were not subject to guild regulation. On the other hand, it also meant they did not have the support of an official body and the legal recognition that went along with it. The guilds of women silk workers in France were significant exceptions. Even in these guilds, however, the officials responsible for overseeing women's work were usually men. Some women were guild mistresses but usually only in conjunction with guild masters.

Both geography and local custom influenced the economic roles that women could perform, but social class was also of major importance. While in general elite women in Florence seem not to have participated in trade, those in Milan might very well have done. While London women did not go to cloth fairs, some of those in Flanders did. Women who had to work for their living as servants had about the same conditions everywhere. The historian must also assume individual

differences among the initiatives that women took. The existence of a large collection of contracts and notarial records for one woman in southern France does not imply that all women of her region and social status engaged in commercial activities to the same extent. Furthermore, the cultural attitudes toward women had some consistency throughout Europe in discouraging women from actively participating in trade, crafts, city government, guilds, and public events.

As mentioned earlier, the severe demographic losses caused by the Black Death dislocated the economy of Europe and may have been differentially devastating to the male population. Some historians argue that, with the sharp decline in population and consequent scarcity of labor, women found more economic opportunities open to them. They have argued that the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a golden age for women. The employment opportunities appeared first in the fields in which women traditionally worked but as the population was slow to recover throughout the fifteenth century, women began to move into jobs traditionally occupied by men. As the population increased in the late fifteenth century these new options quickly disappeared. Other historians argue that greater participation in the work force was not very significant in evaluating the status of women because the nature of women's work—underskilled and underpaid—did not change. More women may have been working, but their work continued to be undervalued compared to men's. Women did move in greater numbers into service occupations, including some previously performed by men, but they did not move into apprenticeships for the more prestigious positions in crafts or commerce. Furthermore, guild regulations and urban laws in the fifteenth century tended to restrict women from entering more advantageous positions. No longer could women outside the immediate family of the craftsman—his wife and daughters—help in his trade. Women also lost status in the few occupations, such as brewing, where they had once played a more major role. Men took over commercial beer brewing and women were relegated to local production of ale or to retailing. More research, however, is necessary to try to resolve this debate.

In studying urban women we feel that it is important to emphasize that comparisons and generalizations are very difficult. There are several reasons for this. First, urban customs were not uniform across Europe. Roman law played a larger role in southern Europe than it did in northern Europe. Second, cities were very individualistic in how they modified their laws. While legal structures tended to be regional, wide

differences existed between individual cities. If legal codes could differ, so, too, could social customs. An Italian traveling to England in the sixteenth century, for instance, was shocked that London women greeted men by an open kiss on the mouth. He was accustomed to a society in which women were more likely to be secluded or at least formally distant from visitors to their houses. Finally, the records that historians use to study women in different urban environments vary radically from city to city. In France, Italy, and the Low Countries, in addition to laws, the basic records for women's lives are notarial contracts which record the private transactions of individuals. These provide a wealth of daily economic agreements, transfers of land, and marriage settlements. In the rest of northern Europe, including England and Germany, the laws are supplemented by court cases including violations of laws but also of individual contracts. Notarial records are sparse as are private charters and contracts. Wills are among the few universal records for all of Europe, but most of them are from the late medieval period. Comparison of the activities of women in different cities may well tell us more about the sources available to historians than about differences in actual practices.

CHAPTER 3

So Strategize

The Demands in the Day of the Peasant Woman in Medieval Europe

Madonna J. Hettinger

A lesson for the wife.

> . . . [It] May fortune sometime, that thou shalt have so many things to do, that thou shalt not well know where is best to begin. Then take heed, which thing should be the greatest loss, if it were not done, and in what space it would be done: then think what is the greatest loss, and there begin. But in case that thing, that is of greatest loss, will be long in doing, and thou mightest do three or four other things in the meanwhile, then look well, if all these things were set together, which of them were the greatest loss; and if all these things be of greater loss, and may be all done in as short space, as the other, then do the many things first.
>
> Anthony Fitzherbert, *The Boke of Husbandry,* 1523[1]

In other words, there will always be more tasks to do than there is time to do them—*so strategize.*

The "lesson for the wife" given by Anthony Fitzherbert in his *Boke of Husbandry* should be treated with skepticism on many levels. The first, and for our purposes least significant, concern is that there is some question whether this treatise on agriculture, or husbandry, as it was called in medieval England, was composed by Anthony Fitzherbert, a justice of the Court of Common Pleas, or by his brother, John Fitzherbert of Norbury. That debate troubles our investigation of the

lives of country women in medieval Europe very little. Both Anthony and John Fitzherbert were male members of an educated land-owning class in late medieval England. Regardless of whether it was Anthony or John who actually penned the above advice to women responsible for agricultural households, the Fiztherberts' position as male members of a class that as a whole did not sweep their own floors, produce and prepare their own food, or tend to their own livestock or children should trouble us more. The Fitzherberts, as wealthy men, were twice removed from the realities of daily life for peasant women. *The Book of Husbandry* was largely an academic exercise for its author. Nonetheless, it is valuable for us to dissect Fitzherbert's instructions for the husbandman's wife. By doing so, we learn much about the position of women, and peasants, and *peasant women* in the larger social and economic structures of Europe.

Critical to the success of an agricultural enterprise in the Middle Ages was the contribution of the "husbandman's" wife. After some 140 chapters devoted to the tasks of the male head of household, Fitzherbert reminds the husbandman that, for all his labors, "there are other things that must need be done, or else thou shalt not thrive." What Fitzherbert is referring to is "women's work." In this essay we will raise questions about those "other things that must need be done" and the women who did them. Like the husbandman's wife who found herself faced with more tasks than time, we may find ourselves faced with more questions than answers. The problems of interpretation we encounter in such sources as *The Boke of Husbandry* illustrate why we generally know less about the lives of peasant women than we know about the lives of other people in medieval society. Moreover, an exploration of these questions reminds us that the contributions of peasant women were essential not only to the success of their own households, but to the well-being of the village community and the whole of the medieval economy. Without the "women's work" being done in peasant households, little else in medieval society could have been done.

> Now thou wife, I trust to shew to thee divers occupations, works, and labours, that thou shalt not need to be idle no time of the yere.

The advice to wives in *The Boke of Husbandry* includes a detailed list of the daily and seasonal chores essential to the smooth workings of the agricultural household. The list ranges from moral obligations to husband and God to the more mundane chores of cooking, cleaning,

taking care of animals, and producing items for the market. While Fitzherbert lists such chores as milking cows, keeping hens, making cheese and butter, winnowing corn, and making cloth, he gives few details regarding how a woman is to accomplish these tasks. As the author admits, when it comes to women in agriculture, he has "not experience of all their occupations and works." Fitzherbert does, however, interrupt his recitation of the wife's house, farmyard, and market duties long enough to issue his formula for determining which job to do first, that is, which task, if left undone, would be the greatest loss. In a straightforward, though not unsympathetic fashion, Fitzherbert tells wives in agricultural households that time management and the prioritization of tasks may keep them one precious step ahead of crisis management. Given the unpredictability of natural forces and the precarious economic status of many rural households, crisis—be it in the shape of harvest failure, famine, disease, or new economic or legal impositions on the household resources—was always a very real threat. Even without disaster at the door, the agricultural household could find itself in crisis simply through bad management of its limited resources. Those resources were the skills, labor, land access rights, and movable goods that women and men brought to the economic enterprise that historian Barbara Hanawalt has termed the "partnership marriage" of the medieval peasantry.[2] In that partnership the work of women was centered on the house, garden, and production of goods for the market while the work of men was centered on the fields.

> Here beginneth the book of husbandry, and first whereby husbandmen do live.

The Boke of Husbandry is ostensibly addressed to those who tilled the fields, for "the plough is the most necessary instrument that an husband can occupy." To English people in the Middle Ages the term "husband" or "husbandman" referred most often to those who ploughed relatively small plots of land, usually less than thirty acres and often as little as five acres. These "ploughmen" gained access to the land either by renting it as free tenants or through the labor services they owed to their manorial lords as unfree villeins. Whether free or unfree, these peasant-producers were by far the majority of the population. It was through their labors that the great noble and ecclesiastical landlords and the merchant class of the growing towns of the later Middle Ages were supplied with all manner of food and other goods. When Fitzherbert

took on the subject of husbandry, though his interests were those of a landlord, he was describing the survival tasks that kept over 90 percent of the population occupied on small, hard-worked plots of land from one generation to the next. Some peasant families were more successful than others and even enjoyed a degree of local prestige as officers of their village governing structures or employers of their poorer neighbors. Regardless, however, of the internal stratification among these members of agricultural communities, all knew first-hand the combination of labor, skill, and luck that went into the art of husbandry. Moreover, all villeins, tenants, and rural wage-laborers knew the differences between their legal, economic, and social conditions and the conditions that members of the land-owning class enjoyed.

While *The Boke of Husbandry* purports to be speaking to all tillers of the soil, it more often assumes a literate, fairly wealthy, land-owning class as its audience. As the author reveals in the chapter devoted to the names of the many parts of a plough, "men that be no husbands may fortune to read this book, that know not which is the ploughbeam, the share-beam, the plough-sheath, the plough-tail, the stilt, the rest, the shield-board. . . . " Clearly, anyone who actually had driven a plough for a living would know the difference between one end of a plough and the other. For Fitzherbert's primary audience then, agriculture—the *art* of husbandry—might have been an academic or an economic enterprise in which they had a vested interest as owners of estates but not a direct interest as the actual tillers of the soil. Earlier authors, many of them responsible for overseeing estates owned by the church, had similarly addressed the problems of agriculture from a managerial perspective. Most of these treatises allowed their readers to approach the problem of ploughing from the comfort of their armchairs rather than from behind a plough. Further evidence of the distance between the author and reading audience of *The Boke of Husbandry* and its mundane subject is obvious when Fitzherbert addresses a short chapter to "a young gentleman," advising him to "get a copy of this present book" so that he may "according to the season of the year, read to his servants what chapter he wilt."

So much for the reading audience of *The Boke of Husbandry*; their interest was clearly in the management of large agricultural estates. The same interest dominates most of the medieval records on which our knowledge of peasant life is based and thus complicates our investigation of peasant women. Inventories such as the "polyptychs" of the Abbey of Saint-Germain des Prés in France and the numerous

manorial records, including account books and court rolls, that survive for many English manors were written with the interests of the landlord in mind.[3] It is primarily by extrapolating from their lists of the dues and services owed by free and customary (i.e. unfree) tenants that historians have been able to reconstruct the lives of peasants in the Middle Ages. These documents obviously identify the peasants only for what they owe the landlords. Manorial documents say little or nothing about what peasants thought about these obligations to the lord and the complex survival challenges of their own lives. Moreover, evidence from these documents is often fragmented and incomplete. Rather than the whole story of any individual peasant's life, through quantitative and qualitative analysis of estate documents, historians develop a composite picture of peasant life. The task of sketching out the parameters of female peasants' lives from such documentation is even more difficult. Most manorial exchanges and legal proceedings were transacted in the name of the male head of household. While some women, especially widows and the single daughters of tenants who had no male heirs, do appear in wills, account books, and manorial court rolls, both custom and the law favored male representation in legal transactions. Aside from these documents, few medieval sources deal with the lives of peasants as anything other than a backdrop for romanticized tales of knightly valor. When less romantic literary sources, especially advice manuals such as *The Boke of Husbandry*, do attempt to describe rural life, they usually do it through the "young gentleman's" or the estate manager's point of view. As in the manorial documents, there is a problematic discrepancy between the author's, or the landlord's, perspective on rural life and that of his tenants. We can expect to find even further distance between the landlord's perspective and that of his female tenants.

Let's return now to the hearing audience, male and female, to whom Fitzherbert's "young gentleman" was supposed to read, the *working* audience of *The Boke*.

> The plough-car is made of three pieces of iron, nailed fast unto the right side of the plough beam. And poor men have a crooked piece of wood pinned fast to the plough beam.

The ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and livestock-raising tasks that Fitzherbert describes are indeed those of working husbandmen, even of "poor men" who must substitute wood for the iron parts of their

ploughs. We might question, however, whether agricultural servants or tenants or "poor men" needed to have Fitzherbert's various chapters read aloud to them at appropriate times of the year. Most male members of rural communities learned these agricultural tasks over a long course of on-the-job training that began in childhood when they followed their fathers to the fields. They gained full community recognition as husbandmen when, through labor services or rent, they gained access to a few acres of land, married, and became heads of their own households. Given this long apprenticeship in agriculture, few true husbandmen would have needed a manual to tell them when or how to plough, to reap, or to butcher their valuable livestock.

Having established the moot authority of Fitzherbert's manual for the true husbandman, how then, do we assess Fitzherbert's advice to the husbandman's wife?

> Thou must make butter, and cheese when thou mayest, serve thy swine both morning and evening, and give thy poultry meat in the morning.... And also in March is time to sow flax ... and therof may they make sheets, broadcloths, towels, shirts, smocks, and such other necessaries, and therefor let thy distaff be always ready for pastime, that thou not be idle. And undoubted a woman cannot get her living honestly with spinning on the distaff, but it stoppeth a gap, and must needs be had.

What kind of woman did the author include in his audience? The "young gentleman's" wife might have had her own troubles with servants, in-laws, and estate managers but seldom would have had to heed personally Fitzherbert's reminder to "serve" her swine twice a day. Although the spinning of thread for cloth was a skill practiced by women of all socio-economic levels in the Middle Ages, it seems unlikely that the wife of a landed gentleman would have had to rely on spinning as a way to "get her living" or even as a stop-gap method of supplementing the family income.

Fitzherbert continues: "It is a wife's occupation to winnow all manner of corns, to make malt, to wash and wring, to make hay, shear corn, and in time of need to help her husband to fill the muck-wain or dung cart, drive the plough, to load hay, corn, and such other." Considering the tasks described, it seems that Fitzherbert was speaking *about* the more ordinary rural wife, who would have to complete most of her household tasks with her own hands, who would occasionally be

called upon to help her husband in the fields, and who would in most circumstances not enjoy a sense of economic security. But was Fitzherbert giving *needed* advice to the husbandman's wife or merely describing the tedious chores of the overburdened rural housewife for the edification, amusement, or bemused relief of those who would never have to sweep a dirt floor, milk a cow, weed a vegetable garden, load a dung cart, or harvest flax for linen, or wool from sheep with their own hands? Like the true husbandman, the true husbandman's wife would have learned all of these tasks through hands-on experience. As a child she would have been initiated gradually to the responsibilities of the household by her mother. As a teenager she may well have worked for wages or lived-in as an agricultural or domestic servant in the household of a slightly more prosperous member of the community. From other women in the community she might have received further training in the production of marketable goods critical to the cash flow of the peasant household and village. As a young wife she would have maintained the house, cared for livestock, joined her husband in the field-work, and produced a wide range of goods for the market, usually without the assistance of servants and with the added burden of young children. The true husbandman's wife did not need Fitzherbert to tell her how to prioritize these tasks. Careful time management and task-oriented strategies were already part of the rhythm of her day.

The problems we encounter with Fitzherbert's *Boke of Husbandry* as a source on agricultural life, especially on the life of women in agricultural households, serve as a good example of the perennial problem historians face when they try to find out about the lives of ordinary people in the Middle Ages. Yet, in spite of the interpretive difficulties of sources written from the landlord's distant perspective, questions about women's participation in the economic and social life of medieval rural communities have attracted a great deal of interest in the past two decades. Although we still have no diaries, letters, or autobiographies that give us the story straight from the peasant woman's mouth, historians have developed strategies that do give us access to the concerns that dominated the lives of peasant women. Through careful examination of manorial accounts and court rolls, wills, records of accidental deaths, tax records, and literary sources, scholars have outlined the legal restrictions, the social customs, and the economic challenges and opportunities that governed the lives of peasant women. Through these studies, both romanticized myths and depressing stereotypes about peasant women have been put aside.

Perhaps the best way to summarize the general findings of these studies is to follow Fitzherbert's more general advice: get a clear understanding of the priorities of the husbandman's wife and in doing so follow her through the demands in her day.

The specific tasks in any woman's day obviously would vary according to the size of her family, the extent of her material resources, and the ages of her children. Tasks related to the production of food and textiles would also vary according to the seasons of the year, the climate, and the geographical location of the woman's household. In northern Europe, grain production would be central to the agricultural economy, while in some regions in southern Europe, the maintenance of vineyards and olive groves might call for other specialized skills. Regardless of these personal, seasonal, and regional differences in tasks, the intensity of the demands in a woman's day varied little. Moreover, this intensity was a constant not only for most of the woman's life, but also for centuries of peasant women's experience. Although Fitzherbert's manual was written late in the medieval period, we may safely assume that the chores of peasant women had changed little over the past few centuries. Responsible for husband, children, animals, food preparation, and textile production, the medieval peasant women would find little help from technological innovations or labor-saving devices. The demands in her day were a reality she shared with peasant women over several centuries.

At any given point in the peasant woman's day she simultaneously had to consider the requirements of her family, the standards of her community, and the demands of her landlord. Her home was no refuge from the pace and politics of the working world; rather, it *was* a workplace. Just as there was no separation of the spheres of work and home, there was no compartmentalization of the activities a woman pursued to satisfy the needs of family, community, or landlord. The agricultural household was an integrated economic enterprise. While there were gendered divisions of labor, the husband's work more often situated in the fields and the wife's more often centered on the house and yard, the boundaries between inside work and outside work were porous. Products such as wheat, rye, or barley that began in the fields were often processed in the yard and house before being taken to mill or market in the form of grain, flour, bread, or ale. Although centered in the home, the wife did not work in isolation from other members of her family or the larger community.

The day began early in an agricultural household, and the woman's day began before anyone else's. Fitzherbert recommended prayer as the wife's first act of the day for both religious and practical reasons: "if thou say a *Pater Noster*, and a *Credo*, and remember thy maker, thou shalt speed much the better." Speed would have been a valuable asset given the tasks a woman was expected to complete before breakfast. Although Fitzherbert listed sweeping, setting up the table, milking cows, tending suckling calves, straining milk, dressing children, and preparing the husband's meals as early-morning duties, he left out two of the most essential and difficult chores. Lighting the fire and drawing water were tasks so basic to the day's activities that little else could have been done without them. As Barbara Hanawalt discovered in her investigation of coroners' reports of accidental deaths in medieval England, these two chores were also dangerous. Gathering kindling for the fire required women to venture outside to the yard, to the barn, or to the woods in the early morning hours when such hazards as ladders, falling limbs, and uneven terrain lurked in the darkness. Drawing water from wells, ponds, and streams was similarly a risky business where wet rocks and slippery ground could cause women to lose their balance, fall in and drown.[4] The physical dangers of these two essential chores suggest that there was much more to the preparations for a day's work in the peasant household than someone like Fitzherbert could have imagined.

With the fire started, animals tended, husband and children fed their morning meal, and both dishes and the table set away to make room for other work, the agricultural wife turned her home and her attention to matters of production. According to the season of the year, the availability of materials, and the potential of the market, the home became a processing site for a wide range of products. Fitzherbert, basing his knowledge on what he had "heard old housewives say," listed fifteen separate steps in the preparation of flax for linen and even then he left out the process of dyeing the cloth. The processing of wool from sheep was similarly labor intensive. With increasing urbanization and commercial development in the later Middle Ages, the weaving of woolen cloth tended to become men's work and was governed by guilds. The spinning of wool, however, remained the work of the peasant woman, and the "distaff" with which she weighted the yarn spun between her fingers became a standard symbol of women's work.

Besides the textile skills that allowed women to produce goods simultaneously for home and for market, many peasant women took up

other labor-intensive activities as time and resources either allowed or necessitated. The best example we have of this type of occasional specialization comes from Judith Bennett's work on the brewing industry of medieval England.[5] Using documents from the manorial courts that met every three weeks to record economic transactions and fines for infractions of laws regulating the sale of such staples as bread and ale, Bennett has found that the brewing of ale was an activity that a few peasant women specialized in and many women took up occasionally. The nature of medieval ale made it a particularly problematic staple of the English diet. Ale was a very labor-intensive product and yet it spoiled quickly and thus had to be made frequently. The spoilage problem of ale and the time involved in brewing made it convenient for peasants to brew batches larger than the family could use and then offer the rest for sale. While Bennett found that some women were repeatedly active as producers and sellers of ale, thus suggesting a specialization, most households had the equipment and the knowledge necessary for occasional ale production. When we consider the many steps required to turn grain into ale, it is all the more remarkable that the tools and skills required for such a labor-intensive process were present in most peasant homes. Brewing required pots, ladles, and vats so large that we find evidence in the coroner's records of women accidentally falling in and drowning.[6] Even barring such misadventure, brewing was an arduous task. Grain had to be soaked, drained and germinated to start the malt which, once dried and ground, was poured into the vats of boiling water for fermentation. Finally, the hot wort was drained, a process that again shows up in the coroner's records because of the danger of scalding, and herbs were added. All this labor was required for a product that soured within a few days. If we followed the processing of grain from field to flour to bread, we would similarly find women responsible for many of the stages of production, though the final baking was usually done by a semi-professional baker because of the capital investment necessary for the large ovens.

The bread and ale that was not needed for immediate family consumption was usually sold to neighbors or taken to market along with any extra thread, eggs, milk, butter, cheese, vegetables, or herbs the woman had produced in her workshop of house and garden. The peasant household was not a self-sufficient unit, and buying and selling goods and services reinforced the family's ties to the community. Carrying the finished ale and other marketable products to market was

frequently the woman's responsibility. Small gains or losses in the market could make a big difference in the household economy. Fitzherbert exhorted the wife to keep careful accounts of what she sold and bought "and to make a true reckoning and account to her husband." In a surprising challenge to the system of patriarchy that governed medieval society, Fitzherbert likewise told husbands to report all their buying and selling activities to their wives because "they must be true either to other."

In many ways, the peasant woman answered not only to her husband for her economic activities but also to her landlord. Her sales of bread and ale were taxed by the manorial court as were the wanderings of her pigs and other animals when they strayed into the lord's forests or pastures. The chickens she raised and eggs she collected were often included as part of the package of services and goods that comprised the dues owed to the lord in exchange for access to the land. A survey of the manor of Alwalton in 1279 lists "3 hens and 1 cock yearly and 5 eggs at Easter," in the regular dues expected from all villeins, including widows.[7] In the customals, or lists of yearly dues, for estates in medieval Germany, payment in chickens was likewise common and peasant families were exempted only when the wife was pregnant.[8]

Chickens and eggs were not the only manorial dues expected from peasant women. In circumstances in which a woman held the tenancy in her own name, she owed the same labor dues as male tenants. Thus in Alwalton Sara, the widow of Matthew Miller, paid four pence a year for the right to her cottage and one-eighth of an acre of land; she was also required to show up with one additional worker for three days of carrying hay for the lord and one day of cutting grain. Although it was common for a woman in Sara's position to hire a man to take her place in these labors owed to the lord, it was not unheard of for women to fulfill these obligations themselves. Even when the tenancy was held in the husband's name, as was more often the case, women worked in carting and field-work as the weather and the demands of the landlord dictated. Women usually were required in the fields during the harvest season, but sympathetic depictions in medieval literature also put them there in the spring ploughing season. William Langland, a medieval poet remarkable for his understanding of peasant life, described the ploughman and wife: "Wading in mud . . . /His wife walked beside him, with long ox goad,/In a clouted coat cut short to the knee,/Wrapped in a winnowing sheet to keep out the weather."[9]

In addition to the labors devoted to the landlord's requirements and the family's fields, some women worked for wages. This was especially true for unmarried women but married women and widows were not barred from the labor market. In England, evidence of women's work for wages comes from the courts that fined them for laboring in violation of the wage restrictions set by the Statute of Laborers. The Statute was the English Parliament's response to the labor shortage created by the devastating plague that beset all of Europe in the middle of the fourteenth century. Although the Statute attempted to force laborers, both male and female, to work for the same wages that they had received before the plague, most workers found employers ready to pay twice the statutory wage rates at critical points in the agricultural calendar. In the court records we find women representing only about 6 percent of the laborers fined for offenses against the statute. Moreover, the women who received "excess" wages in the lucrative post-plague labor market were paid on average about half of what men were paid for a day's work. Two factors influence this wage disparity. First, women, because of their duties in the home, were somewhat less free to travel outside the village in search of higher wages. The second factor concerns the kinds of work available to women. While men could hire out as ploughmen, thatchers, and carpenters, all skilled occupations commanding a higher wage, women were hired most often as general household hands or as reapers or binders of hay, jobs that were considered less skilled and thus received lower wages.[10]

Regardless of the level of wages, the fact that women did find employment outside the home, often in occupations similar to the tasks that were part of their contribution to the household economy, again suggests that "women's work" had a recognized value in medieval communities. Because of the wage disparity one must admit that peasant women's work was undervalued compared to the work of male peasants. Nonetheless, the simple fact that there was a standard rate for milkmaids, spinners of thread, and general female servants stands as evidence that the skills a woman employed in her own home were also recognized as marketable skills outside her home.

One of the chief reasons why relatively few peasant women could take advantage of the high wages that were available to wandering laborers after the plague was that their most important area of specialization, childrearing, kept them close to home. While the production of food and textiles could demand a woman's attention on

any given day, reproduction dominated many years in her life cycle. Inheritance patterns, contracts with manorial lords, and the need for labor made children a value asset in the peasant household. This is not to suggest that peasant families were large. Infant mortality rates as high as 50 percent tended to keep families relatively small, with an average household size of only about five in the nuclear family. That same harsh mortality figure also made women's reproductive and childrearing activities all the more valuable. Nurturing, protecting, and training children, the family's future labor force, constituted the most persistent of the demands in the woman's day. Unlike the spinning or brewing that could be put quietly aside when other duties called, childrearing was a constant activity. Because children often began making their own small contributions to the household economy around the age of seven, women spent much of their time teaching and supervising the future work force. Children were introduced to increasingly difficult chores related to house, yard, and fields as their physical development permitted. All of this required patience and organization on the part of the peasant woman who might well have thought that it was easier to do a job herself than to teach a child how to do it. In addition to the training of older children, infants and toddlers too young to help were a constant concern for mothers who were called to the fields. In Langland's *Piers Ploughman's Crede* the muddy ploughman and his shivering wife led the ox through the field while " a little child lapped in cloths" and two toddlers sat by the field and "all sang a song that sorrowful was to hear."[11]

Thus far our discussion of peasant women has centered on the husbandman's wife. Because of the necessity of complementary male and female skills in the household economy of the Middle Ages, most women and men did marry. Single women, even those who might have been fortunate enough to inherit their father's rights of access to a plot of land, were at a serious disadvantage in the social and legal structures that governed medieval communities. Single men, though less encumbered by custom and legal restrictions, were economically dependent on the skills a woman brought to the agricultural household. While pressure to marry came from the church for scriptural reasons, pressure to marry also came from the community, the landlord, and the family. All of these constituencies had a vested interest in the success of the peasant house as an economic unit.

When we do encounter single women in the documents they are most often employed as servants or wage-workers. Especially for

poorer women, service in another household was not only a way to make a living but a way to acquire a dowry and thus a degree of security. For this reason we typically find younger women engaged in this type of service. Widows, especially those who inherited their late husbands' claims to land, might not have needed wage labor to supplement their income, but they, too, might have looked to marriage, or re-marriage, for greater security. The services that tenants owed in exchange for land rights were usually measured in terms of ploughing days and other types of "men's work." Widows thus might have found a second marriage the surest way to fulfill those obligations.

The economic benefits of marriage were not without their cost. Once married, even in the clear economic partnership of peasant marriage, the woman gained a certain amount of security but lost her legal identity to a significant degree. Always mentioned in the documents as "wife of" and almost never standing in court to represent her own economic or legal interests, the married peasant woman virtually disappears behind her husband's name in the records. The degree to which this obvious inequality in legal representation was matched by a similar inequality in the household has been the subject of a very fruitful debate.

Two important questions frame the debate on the *relative* condition of peasant women in the Middle Ages. The first question, one that has inspired lively discussion in recent years, concerns whether or not medieval women of all classes experienced a relatively greater degree of economic importance and legal recognition than did women in the Early Modern period. That debate is discussed elsewhere in this volume and we need not review it here. The second question concerns whether peasant women in the Middle Ages enjoyed a relatively greater degree of economic and legal independence than did noble women.

In another late medieval advice book, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, we find the following assessment of the relative condition of peasant women: "Although they are commonly raised on black bread, salt pork, and gruel, with only water to drink, and they work very hard, their lives are more secure and more abundant in essentials than the lives of some who are placed very high."[12] Christine de Pizan, the first professional woman writer in France, may have had reason to romanticize the security and the "abundant" essentials possessed by peasant women. Like Fitzherbert, she was a member of a class that enjoyed the luxury of literacy and was well connected to noble, even royal households. Unlike Fitzherbert, she was a young widow with

children and in-laws to support and had no large estates at her disposal. Her familiarity with the legal limitations and social burdens placed on women in noble households and her own experience as a widow with few resources other than her social connections and her prose, undoubtedly gave her a critical insider's view of the life of the lady. It was only through that perspective that she could have imagined the peasant woman to have greater security.

Romanticizing the lives of women of any social class in any historical period can only be done by one standing safely outside that experience. Even Fitzherbert, with his limited knowledge of agricultural women's work, might have had pause about Christine de Pizan's somewhat wistful depiction of peasant women. Christine's image of peasant life does, however, recognize the value that the medieval peasant community placed on women's work. Moreover, she admitted the more general social and economic value of this "labour, which is for the sustenance, life and nourishment of every human being."[13] The relative economic power that peasant women may have had compared to noblewomen in the Middle Ages, stemmed directly from the very responsibilities Fitzherbert merely listed and the husbandman's wife truly carried. The same chores that required such careful management and prioritization were, after all, tasks associated with the production of goods and services that were marketable. Not merely part of an invisible economy, the labors of the peasant woman had a market value and, thus, gave her a degree of economic recognition and the potential for decision-making power within the household. Whether that economic clout gave her any greater access to personal independence is questionable.

Peasant women, for all their economic importance, lived in a world bounded by social custom and by legal restrictions. While the husbandman's wife may have produced and sold marketable goods, we have no evidence that suggests that she had control over her own profits. The recognition that her labor received in the household economy and in the market did not necessarily translate into economic independence. The decision-making and management skills she may have practiced in the workshop of her home were not necessarily welcome in business transactions outside her home.

Standing counter to Christine's romanticization of the peasant woman's security, and equally misleading, is the more common stereotype that too often colors our picture of peasants in general. Langland's description of the poorest peasant couple, ploughing while

their children cried at the edge of the field, should not be taken as the standard lot of all peasants. It is as inappropriate to imagine peasants as all alike, all ultimately dependent on the lord, all equally poor and illiterate, and all bound to traditional ways of economic and social organization, as it is to romanticize the economic self-sufficiency of peasant women. Fitzherbert, simply because of his interest in management, may have inadvertently cleaned up both the romance and the stereotype a bit. By portraying the husbandman's wife as the sturdy, tidy manager of house, yard, chickens, cows, pigs, grains, textiles, and children, he did credit her contribution to the agricultural economy. Fitzherbert could not, however, imagine the wife as independent in these economic pursuits. In his emphasis on the reason for good household management, Fitzherbert clearly counted on this efficient woman to apply her skills in her husband's interest.

Obviously, neither a romanticized picture of independent, decision-making, free-thinking medieval peasant women nor a stereotype of dependent, oppressed, unthinking medieval peasant women does justice to the experiences of women in agricultural households. Yet, some of the attributes in both the romanticized version and the stereotype can be found in legal and economic records and literature relating to the lives of medieval women. Peasant women in the Middle Ages differed as much as women in any other class in any other historical period. Though the task of tracing their lives through the records is somewhat less demanding than the work that filled a peasant woman's day, much remains to be done.

NOTES

1. Anthony Fitzherbert, *The Boke of Husbandry*, 1523, in *English Historical Documents*, vol. V, 1485-1558, ed. C. H. Williams, gen. ed. David C. Douglas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 917-925. I would like to thank Linda E. Mitchell for her comments and her patience on this project. I also want to acknowledge the contributions of Matthew Scott and Catherine Swartz, two fine undergraduate research assistants at The College of Wooster. Their technical assistance and good humor helped me juggle the demands in the day.

2. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See especially Chapter 13 on "The Partnership Marriage," 205-219.

3. *Polyptyque de l'abbaye de Saint-Germain des Prés*, 2 vols., ed. A. Longnon (Paris, 1886, 1896); a number of manorial documents are available in print. A particularly useful example is the series: *Court Rolls of the Manor of Wakefield*, vols. I-V, *Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series*, numbers 29 (1901), 36 (1906), 57 (1917), 78 (1930), and 109 (1945).

4. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 147.

5. Judith M. Bennett, "The Village Ale-Wife: Women and Brewing in Fourteenth-Century England," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 20-36. See, also, Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6. Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 148-149. Approximately 5 percent of women's accidental deaths occurred because of brewing mishaps, according to Hanawalt.

7. An excerpt of Edward P. Cheyney's translation of the Alwalton court roll can be found in Emilie Amt, ed., *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 182-184.

8. Werner Rösener, *Peasants in the Middle Ages*, tr. Alexander Stützer (Urbana,IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 183.

9. William Langland, *Piers Plowman's Crede*, ed. W. W. Skeat, *Early English Text Society* (London, 1867), 17.

10. The figures provided here are from my own research on the enforcement of the Statute of Laborers in East Anglia and are drawn from documents classified in the Public Record Office in London as Ancient Indictments, KB 9/80 and KB 9/115, for Norfolk and Suffolk, respectively.

11. Langland, *Piers Plowman's Crede*, 17.

12. Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*, tr. Sarah Lawson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 176.

13. Christine de Pizan, 176.

CHAPTER 4

Medieval Jewish Women[1]

Judith R. Baskin

The main expectations for a Jewish woman of the Middle Ages were domestic: "May she sew, spin, weave, and be brought up to a life of good deeds" is the prayer with which one set of parents in medieval Northern Europe recorded their daughter's birth. By adding the desire, expressed in another milieu of the Jewish Middle Ages, Muslim Egypt, that a newborn daughter "might come into a blessed and auspicious home," that is, marry well, the essential hopes for medieval Jewish women can be expressed. Yet the evidence shows, particularly in Christian Europe, that women were also active in economic endeavors, sometimes supporting their husbands and families, and fulfilled religious leadership roles such as teaching other women and leading them in prayer.

During the Middle Ages most Jews lived outside the land of Israel, with significant populations in the Muslim worlds of Egypt, North Africa, the Middle East, and Spain; far smaller numbers of Jews lived in Christian Europe. In both environments Jewish communities were granted internal autonomy, as long as taxes to the political authorities were paid. Jewish self-government, across geographical and political boundaries, was based on the dictates of the *Babylonian Talmud*, the comprehensive legal and ethical compendium codified in Baghdad in the mid-sixth century C.E. which provided a uniform pattern for Jewish family, business, community, and religious life. Rabbinic Judaism, as this form of Jewish belief and practice is known, is quite rigid in the separation of roles and religious obligations it ordains for men and women. While the dictates of the *Talmud* recognize women's human rights and physical and emotional needs, generally females are relegated to secondary enabling positions in most aspects of life, while men

are seen as the essential subjects in the central relationship between human beings and the divine. However, the *Talmud* was not the only determinant in the status or activities of medieval Jewish women. The norms and customs of local environments also played a vital part in the ways Jewish social and family life developed and diverged from place to place, since Jews tended to assume the language, dress, and many of the mores—among them the prevailing cultural attitudes towards appropriate female behavior—of their gentile neighbors. Although a variety of sources survive which tell us about medieval Jewish women's activities, recovering indications of women's personal aspirations or spirituality is all but impossible since almost no documents written by Jewish women themselves are extant. Rather, our primary texts reveal male understandings of what women's roles should be and occasionally offer praise for exemplary women who have fulfilled these criteria.

JEWISH WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Modern scholars have garnered an abundance of information about medieval Jewish society and institutions under Islam from the Cairo *genizah* documents.[2] A genizah is a storeroom where unusable sacred writings are placed in order to preserve them from desecration. The Cairo genizah was found when the ancient synagogue to which it was attached was being demolished to build a new structure, shortly before 1890. While much of the unearthed material had a religious or literary character, the Cairo genizah also included a huge quantity of discarded secular writings such as official, business, learned, and private correspondence, court records, contracts, and other legal documents; these are mostly in Arabic, the language of Jewish everyday life in this milieu.

The *genizah* documents are most relevant to Jewish life in the Islamic world from the ninth to the twelfth century, a period when conditions tended to be peaceful and prosperous. Jews did not have the full rights of Muslims, but, like Christians, they were tolerated and protected from persecution, so long as they paid substantial taxes. Many of these mostly urban Mediterranean Jews were involved in trade, and their undertakings often involved overseas travel. While some Jews became quite wealthy, Jewish communities were largely middle class; there were also Jews at the lower end of the social ladder. Social life was strongly influenced by Islamic norms. Thus, polygyny

was not uncommon and, while Jewish women of prosperous families were not literally isolated in women's quarters as were Muslim women of comparable social status, community norms dictated that women should remain out of the public eye. The twelfth century Jewish traveller, Petachia of Ratisbon, wrote of the Jewish community of Baghdad, "Nobody sees there any woman, nor does anybody go into the house of his friend, lest he should see the wife of his neighbor. But he knocks with a tin knocker, and the other comes forth and speaks to him."[3] The observation of the preeminent sage of medieval Judaism, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who lived much of his life in Cairo, that "There is nothing more beautiful for a wife than sitting in the corner of her house," reflects the high degree of Jewish acculturation to Islamic custom. Maimonides, however, did allow that a woman is not a prisoner to be prevented from going and coming, although he suggested that outside visits to family and friends should not exceed one or two a month. In fact, however, Jewish women usually insisted on freedom of movement and many genizah records of marital squabbles make this an explicit right for the wife if reconciliation is to be achieved.

A woman's life was determined by the marriage her parents arranged for her when she was thirteen or fourteen, usually to a considerably older man. The community, following talmudic norms, took it for granted that marriage was the natural state for both men and women. A sermon, found in the *genizah*, explains that the wife is a wall around her husband, bringing atonement for his sins and peace to his home. Marriage, the text continues, preserves a man from sin and, through sons who study sacred texts and fulfill the commandments, ensures physical and spiritual continuity. The first preference for a spouse, generally a first cousin or other suitable relative, was intended to preserve prosperity within the extended family while also offering security and familiarity to a young bride. Marrying outside the family, however, was an opportunity for merchant families to widen their connections and enhance their strength. It was not uncommon for marriages to be arranged between young men in Iran and young girls from Syria or Egypt in order to strengthen business ties between two trading houses by establishing family alliances. Sometimes young businessmen from abroad would endeavor to marry into a successful local family as a way of establishing a foothold and eventually attaining a prominent position in the new country.

The marriage contract, or *ketubah*, was a prerequisite for marriage since it was regarded as an economic agreement in which, first and

foremost, the husband obligated himself to provide his wife with food and clothing and to maintain her in general. Following biblical custom, Jewish grooms in the Muslim milieu also contributed a marriage gift (*mohar*), part of which was payable to the bride's father at the time of the wedding, with a portion reserved for the bride in the event of a divorce or her husband's death. Similarly, the bride brought property into the marriage in the form of her dowry. This dowry, which was also to be returned to the wife in case of divorce or her husband's death, was generally far more valuable than the husband's marriage gift and gave the bride's family "significant leverage in finding her a suitable match and insuring her proper treatment during marriage."[4] The dowry constituted a form of protection for the bride; the expense of repaying it would provide a safeguard against an impulsive divorce on the part of her husband. The value of the dowry, which could include items such as gold and silver jewelry, clothing, household goods such as bedding, copper, carpets, and hangings, as well as other possessions of the bride, such as real estate holdings, one or more maidservants, and occasionally books, was carefully evaluated by professional assessors and an itemized list was attached to the marriage contract.

A marriage contract might also contain various social safeguards protecting the wife. These were a way of effecting alterations in Jewish laws and practices which were unfavorable to women, particularly in the areas of divorce (which was solely a male prerogative) and desertion (a deserted wife, an *agunah*, was considered "bound" to her missing husband and could never remarry unless testimony to his death was accepted in a rabbinic court). Such additions to the standard contract also attempted to provide security against many of the known pitfalls of married life and might include guarantees that, in case of separation, a divorce document freeing the wife would be produced by her husband without delay, that the husband would not marry another wife, that he would not beat his wife, separate her against her will from her parents, or travel anywhere without her consent. Quite frequently, the contract also stipulated that the husband would write a conditional bill of divorce before setting out on a journey so that his wife would be free to remarry should he fail to return after a specified length of time; he might also be required to deposit the delayed installment of her marriage gift, as well as the sums needed for her maintenance during his absence. In addition to the unilateral *ketubah* issued in the husband's name, which has generally been the norm in Jewish practice, the *genizah* has also yielded evidence of a very different *ketubah* form,

written according to the custom of the land of Israel, which is based on a statement of mutual obligations by groom and bride. These documents define marriage as a partnership and promise the wife the right to initiate divorce proceedings against her husband if she finds herself unable to live with him.

Although a Jewish husband was obligated to support his wife by the marriage contract he had signed, it was not unusual for women to earn money, most often through needlework, especially embroidery. Usually a wife was permitted to keep her earnings for private use, although clauses in some marriage agreements stipulate that she provide her own clothing out of her earnings. Often these earnings were a source of marital friction. In a petition to a rabbinical court in the twelfth century, the wife of Abu 'l-Hasan, a miller, requests that her husband not have the right to tell her to do embroidery in the houses of other people and bring him her earnings, and if she does choose to work, she requests that she be permitted to retain her wages.[5] While the poorest women might find it necessary to sell wares or produce in the marketplace, a wealthy wife's economic worth would probably be based on her property, including gifts and inheritances she received during her married life. There are many records of quite substantial women of property who handled their own financial affairs and represented themselves in court.

It would be wrong to think of marriages as solely financial arrangements. Although brides were typically considerably younger than their husbands, through the passage of years and the development of shared concerns a marriage could grow into a warm and meaningful bond. As S. D. Goitein has written, "When Genizah husbands speak of love, we should take them seriously. They were not people from another planet."[6] Still, divorce was not unusual in this time and place in Jewish history. Not only did Islamic social custom also accept divorce, but arranged marriages, geographic mobility, and the "greater attentiveness to a wife's sufferings to be expected in a cosmopolitan bourgeois society" all contributed to marital strife.[7] Some divorced women, particularly if they had desired the divorce and had support from prosperous families, were able to remarry without difficulty. Less fortunate divorcées were left in want and joined society's other outcast females, the widowed and the abandoned, who were dependent on public charity.

A series of legal inquiries to Maimonides tells of one deserted wife who was able to make herself independent by running a school, assisted

by her elder son. After some years her husband reappeared and demanded that she give up the school because it injured his dignity for his wife to be a teacher and, besides, he had no one to serve him. He insisted that she give up her teaching and stay with him; otherwise, he sought permission to take a second wife. The wife, in turn, argued that her husband had been repeatedly undependable in the past, that she had built up her student clientele over time, and that were she to give up her teaching she would not easily be able to resume her school should her husband again disappear. Maimonides's remedy is that the Jewish rabbinical court compel the husband to divorce his independent wife on the grounds that he has not fulfilled his legal obligation to support her. After that, Maimonides says, "She will have disposition over herself, she may teach what she likes, and do what she likes," but he rules that "if she stays with her husband, he has the right to forbid her to teach."[8]

This incident raises questions about Jewish women's education and their involvement in Jewish communal religious life. This schoolmistress had certainly received an elementary education from someone, possibly from her unworthy husband, perhaps in her childhood home. Nor was she unique in her learning, however limited. A twelfth-century Jewish traveller reported that a community leader in Baghdad, Samuel ben Ali, had no sons, but only one daughter who was expert in the Scriptures and *Talmud*. He wrote that "She gives instruction in Scripture to young men through a window. She herself is within the building, whilst the disciples are below outside and do not see her."[9] On the whole, however, in line with traditional rabbinic norms and the practice of the surrounding Muslim environment, significant learning among Jewish women was rare. In all the Cairo genizah, there is no single piece of writing, beyond letters (which were most often dictated to professional scribes), which may be attributed with certainty to a woman. Yet, despite their general lack of learning, references in genizah documents report that Jewish women were pious in their observance of the home-based laws incumbent upon them and there are many indications that their attendance at synagogue, where they prayed in a separate women's gallery, was regular. Prosperous women often donated Torah scrolls for the service, provided oil and books for study, and left legacies for the upkeep of the synagogue; these actions, also found among Jewish women in Christian Europe, can be seen as female strategies for imprinting their existences on a realm of activity in which they were otherwise secondary. Still, it was as a mother of sons learned

in Jewish law and literature that the Jewish woman in the Islamic world earned her spiritual reward in the eyes of her family and her society.

JEWISH WOMEN'S LIVES IN CHRISTIAN EUROPE

Jews began settling in western Europe in Roman times, primarily as merchants and traders. As Europe became Christian, Jews found themselves subject to increasing legal disabilities, a process which continued throughout the medieval period. With the advent of the Crusades at the end of the eleventh century, Jews began to be barred from virtually any source of livelihood but moneylending. They were often compelled to wear distinctive clothing and badges, and, ultimately, towards the end of the Middle Ages, they were either expelled altogether from areas where they had long lived or were forced to live in crowded and unpleasant ghettoes. There were far fewer Jews in western Europe than in the Muslim world and European Jews lived in tiny communities in towns a great deal smaller than the cities of the East. Despite the legal disabilities they suffered and their ultimate insecurity as to property and life, these Jews tended to be quite prosperous and enjoyed a standard of living comparable to the Christian lower nobility and upper bourgeoisie. Significant Jewish acculturation to Christian society and language is evident in such common women's names as Alemandina, Belassez, Blanche, Brunetta, Chera, Columbina, Duzelina, Fleur de Lys, Floretta, Glorietta, and the like.

Jewish women were active participants in the family economy and their status was higher than that of Jewish women in the Islamic milieu; this is indicated, in part, by the large dowries they brought into marriage. Similarly, like the Christian women among whom they lived, Jewish women had significantly more freedom of movement than women in the Muslim world. Jewish girls in this society, despite rabbinic prohibitions to the contrary, were betrothed very young, often at the age of eight or nine. A young woman might be married at eleven or twelve, while her husband would be almost the same age. One young woman, an orphan whose brothers had arranged her engagement, married and established her own household while she was still eleven and one-half years old. A year later, "when she reached her majority [according to Jewish law, twelve and one-half] she sued her brothers for her proper share of her father's estate."[10]

Why were children married so young? One talmudic commentary of the thirteenth century gives the following explanation:

> The reason we nowadays are accustomed to betroth our daughters even while they are minors is that our life in the diaspora [the world outside the land of Israel] is becoming harder; consequently, if a person is now in a financial position to give his daughter an adequate dowry, he is apprehensive lest after the lapse of some years he will be in no position to do so and his daughter will remain unwed forever.[11]

But there were other, less negative motivations as well, such as the religious desire to remove young people from the sexual tensions and temptations which might lead to sin. Economic factors were also operative. Favorable business conditions meant that a well-dowered young couple could support themselves immediately, learning the business at the same time. Moreover, marriage could form an enduring and profitable partnership between two wealthy families, contributing to the prosperity of all. Marriages might also have a social aspect, for settling a young daughter well proved her desirability and increased her family's prestige.

Daughters were given large portions of their parents' property as dowries; the size of the dowry could serve to enhance the social standing of the bride's relations. Since the capital with which a young couple started life had its origin mainly in the bride's portion, parents demanded strong guarantees in the marriage contract that the bride would be treated with respect, that her marriage would have some permanence, and that she would have financial security. Thus, the high level of dowries could assure a wife a prominent position in her household. As a tenth-century rabbi remarked in a legal ruling, "It is the custom of men to appoint their wives as masters over their possessions."[12] A further recognition of the high status accorded to Jewish women in this milieu as well as an indication of the influence of the prevailing mores of the Christian environment is the eleventh-century rabbinic ruling forbidding polygyny for Jews in Christian countries. This change in traditional Jewish law is attributed to Rabbi Gershom ben Judah (c. 960-1028), the first great rabbinic authority of western European (Ashkenazic) Jewry, who is also credited with the even more significant pronouncement that no woman could be divorced against her will. In fact, divorce appears to have been less common among Jews in medieval Christian Europe than in the Muslim milieu, perhaps because it was not a sanctioned act within Christian society. Nevertheless, it was also the custom here for husbands to leave their wives with a conditional divorce document when they set out on

journeys so that their wives would be free to remarry should they fail to return.

Most medieval Jewish writers viewed marital sexuality extremely positively. Maimonides wrote that a man should make his cohabitation with his wife into an act of mutual joy and all writers saw sexual satisfaction as essential for both husband and wife. Mutuality and harmony were particularly valued in the conjugal relationship. Pleasurable sexual activity was seen as a marital good within itself, and such attitudes apparently explain the willingness of various twelfth- and thirteenth-century rabbinic authorities to allow the use of the *mokh*, a cervical sponge or cap, for marital intercourse without fear of pregnancy.

These positive Jewish attitudes towards marriage and sexuality were at odds with medieval Christian teachings which enjoined celibacy on the representatives of the Church and taught that the only purpose of sexual activity should be procreation. It is not surprising that Christian writers criticized Jewish sexual behavior, real and imagined. Influence from the Christian environment may account for the ambivalence towards sexuality characteristic of the German-Jewish pietists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, whose writings express not only an obsessive concern with the ubiquity of extramarital sexual temptations but also a profound ambivalence about the joys of licensed sexual activities. Although a happy marital relationship would lessen the likelihood of involvement in illicit sexual temptation or activity outside marriage and was, therefore, a good thing, they were concerned that it might also distract a man from God, who should be the focus of his greatest and most intense devotion.

Before the modern period, there was no such thing as civil marriage; all marriages were religious acts, at least in as much as they were public events following the formalized rituals developed by specific religious communities. Thus, in medieval times a publicly recognized marriage between a Jew and a Christian or a Jew and a Muslim would have been a virtual impossibility. Moreover, during the Middle Ages such marriages were generally forbidden by religious and secular law in both Muslim and Christian realms. This is not to say that liaisons between Jews and non-Jews did not exist—they were common and had many different levels of intensity—but for a romance between a Jew and a non-Jew to progress to a recognized marriage, one of the parties to the relationship would have had to convert. Generally speaking it was the woman who did so. An eleventh-century letter

found in the Cairo *genizah*, probably from Monieux, France, sought economic support for a convert who had left a noble, wealthy Christian family to become a Jew. She married a Rabbi David Todros in Narbonne and they fled to Monieux to escape pursuit by her relatives. Six years later, her husband was killed in an attack on the community, her two older children were taken captive, and she was left bereft with an infant. It is not clear from the letter, however, if this woman's conversion was prompted by a prior relationship with the man who became her husband or if the relationship came afterwards. Even without the possibility of marriage, Jews and gentiles entered into a variety of sexual relationships with each other in both Muslim and Christian realms, ranging from visits to prostitutes, involvements with maidservants, recognized relationships with a mistress or lover, to common-law marriages. All of these relationships were decried by both Jewish and non-Jewish authorities alike and offenders, particularly those involved in permanent or semi-permanent relationships, were sometimes prosecuted by Church authorities, occasionally receiving the death penalty. There was more tolerance on the Church's part for Christian men having affairs with Jewish women, probably because Jewish mistresses were likely to adopt their lover's faith. Not surprisingly, such relationships were condemned by Jewish authorities far more strenuously than the much more common occurrence of Jewish men keeping Christian or Muslim mistresses or maintaining sexual involvements with non-Jewish servants. Relationships which crossed religious boundaries were probably particularly common in areas where social relations between Jews and gentiles were friendly, such as in Spain, Provence, and Italy.

An intriguing and ultimately tragic instance of one such liaison is that of Polcelina, the Jewish mistress of Count Theobald of Blois. In 1171, she was executed together with thirty other Jews as the result of a baseless accusation of ritual murder brought against the Jewish community of Blois. This blatantly false charge was apparently fueled by jealousy and intrigue against Polcelina in Theobald's court. There is no doubt that concern about such Jewish-Christian sexual liaisons was among the factors leading to efforts by the Church to isolate Jews from Christians by whatever means possible, ultimately resulting in the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the establishment of the ghetto elsewhere at the end of the Middle Ages. The fear of sexual contact between Christians and Jews is probably behind Church legislation forcing Jewish women to wear a distinguishing badge at a

younger age than was required for Jewish men and the occasional insistence that Jewish women wear humiliating attire, such as one red slipper and one black one.

Jewish women everywhere were actively involved in economic activities, and often they supplied a part or even the whole of the family income, sometimes allowing their husbands to devote themselves to study. During their husbands' absences on business, women ran the family's affairs. Women engaged in all kinds of commercial operations and occupations, but moneylending was especially preferred; widows would frequently continue their financial activities, occasionally in partnership with another woman. Such undertakings, which could be extremely complex, required literacy in the vernacular and training in mathematics and bookkeeping skills. An example of a highly successful Jewish business woman in medieval England was Licoricia of Winchester who had direct business dealings with the king. She was twice imprisoned on charges that were later dismissed and made large contributions towards the building of Westminster Abbey. Her five sons, who described themselves as "sons of Licoricia," also became moneylenders, continuing their mother's business after her murder in 1277. Some women were probably involved in craft activities they learned from their fathers or husbands as well, and there are also some references in Christian sources to independent Jewish women who practiced medicine. Jewish women who worked as midwives and wetnurses, often for non-Jews, are well documented in Spain and the existence of several medieval obstetrical treatises in Hebrew, apparently intended for female midwives, indicates that at least some women involved in medical practice were literate in that language.

All Jewish women acquired domestic skills in childhood. These included not only the rudiments of cooking, needlework, and household management but also the rules of rabbinic Judaism applicable to home and marriage. Basic religious training was considered essential so that a woman would know how to observe dietary laws, domestic regulations pertaining to the Sabbath and festivals, and the other commandments relevant to her family life. While most Jewish boys were literate in Hebrew, and some became quite learned, these higher educational standards only rarely applied to girls and then only to those from elite families which were distinguished for their learning.

Some of these learned women led prayers for the other women of their communities. Among women who are described as women's prayer leaders are Urania of Worms of the thirteenth century, whose

headstone epitaph commemorates her as "the daughter of the chief of the synagogue singers. His prayer for his people rose up to glory. And as to her, she, too, with sweet tunefulness officiated before the women to whom she sang the hymnal portions." A Latin letter in the archive of the Crown of Aragon, dating from 1325, refers to a certain Çeti of Zaragoza as a "*rabissa*," who is said to have served as a salaried synagogue leader of Jewish women for twenty years, although whether this title means that Çeti was a women's prayer leader or simply an attendant for the women's section of the synagogue and the ritual bath is impossible to determine. From the male point of view, however, these roles of learned Jewish women always remained secondary to mainstream Jewish religious life.

Since most ordinary Jewish women were cut off from the knowledge of Hebrew which would have enabled them to read the traditional liturgy and holy books and since women, unlike men, were not obligated to participate in communal synagogue services which followed a set order of prayer, many women recited prayers at home in the vernacular Judaeo-German dialect, a practice sanctioned by the rabbinic leadership. While many of these prayers, some of which were written by women, closely followed the synagogue liturgy, others were composed for events particular to women's lives such as baking the Sabbath loaves or immersion in the ritual bath. With the invention of printing at the end of the Middle Ages, this women's vernacular literature of supplicatory prayers (*t'hinnot*), together with simplified "women's bibles" and ethical writings, began to be available more widely. Many of these volumes also had great appeal for less educated male members of the Jewish community.

Jewish women appear to have been less likely than men to choose the always available option of conversion to Christianity, perhaps because the benefits conversion offered a woman were far fewer than those available to a man. A number of legal queries to rabbinic leaders deal with the question of the divorce of a Jewish wife from a converted husband. The rabbinic authorities did everything possible to free a Jewish wife from such a marriage and to guarantee the return of her property so that a remarriage might occur. Many women were also steadfast in their devotion to their people during times of crisis. When the fervor of the Crusades swept France and Germany, beginning in 1096, many Jewish communities were slaughtered by Crusaders because they refused to convert. Hebrew Crusade chronicles document the devotion of Jewish women who preferred death for themselves and

their children to apostasy, as in this instance in the Rhineland city of Mainz: "There the women girt their loins with strength and slew their sons and daughters and then themselves. . . . The tender and delicate woman slaughtered her darling child. . . . See, O Lord, what we do for the sanctification of your great name."[13]

Many ideals of medieval Jewish family life, including the value placed on education, are evident in the medieval ethical will. Such moral testaments, left by a parent for his or her children, sum up the author's life's experience and values and advise offspring on the proper conduct of their lives. A good example of such a document is the fourteenth-century will of Eleazar ben Samuel of Mainz. Eleazar's will urges all his children to attend synagogue in the morning and evening and to occupy themselves a little afterwards with "Torah, the Psalms or with works of charity." His daughters are particularly requested to obey the laws applying to women: "modesty, sanctity, and reverence should mark their married lives," and they must "respect their husbands and be invariably amiable to them." Daughters, as well as sons, are admonished to live in communities among other Jews so that their children may learn the ways of Judaism and, significantly, he insists that "they must not let the young, of either sex, go without instruction in the Torah." Marriages should be celebrated as early as possible, according to Eleazar, and prospective spouses should come from respectable families. Eleazar specifically requests that his daughters prepare beautiful candles for the Sabbath and that they refrain from risking money in games of chance, although they may amuse themselves for trifling stakes on New Moons, days customarily celebrated as holidays by Jewish women. He urges his children to avoid "mixed bathing and mixed dancing and all frivolous conversation" and says that his daughters "ought to be always at home and not be gadding about." Nor should they stand at the door, watching whatever passes: "I ask, I command, that the daughters of my house be never without work to do, for idleness leads first to boredom, then to sin. But let them spin, cook, or sew."[14]

The esteem granted a beloved wife, as well as a description of her activities, is found in the lament of an important spiritual leader, R. Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, known as the Roqeah, for his exemplary wife, Dolce, and his two daughters, killed by intruders in 1196. He relates that Dolce, who supported her family and her husband's students through her business ventures, was also involved in religious activities, attending synagogue regularly, sewing together forty Torah

scrolls, making wicks for the synagogue candles, and instructing other women and leading their prayers. Of his thirteen-year old daughter, the father wrote that she had "learned all the prayers and melodies from her mother. She was pious and wise, a beautiful virgin. She prepared my bed and pulled off my boots every night. Bellette was nimble about the house, and spoke only truth, serving her Maker and spinning and sewing and embroidering."[15]

JEWISH WOMEN IN SPAIN

Spain was ruled by both Muslims and Christians during the course of the Middle Ages and Spanish (Sephardic) Jewry, as did Spanish culture in general, incorporated features of both Muslim and Christian life. Significant Muslim influence was evident in the attitude that women should remain at home, a feature of Sephardic life well into the Early Modern period even when Jews lived in very different locations following the expulsion from Spain in 1492. The Muslim practice of polygyny also had a significant impact on Spanish Jewry, who never wholly accepted Rabbi Gershom's ban on the practice. Even under Christian rulers, Jews who wished to take second wives, usually as a result of fertility problems or unhappy relationships with their first spouse, could obtain special royal permission by paying a fee. While second marriages were more frequent among the wealthy, who could most easily afford the expenses of an expanded household, their prevalence indicates the lower status of Sephardic women as compared to Jewish women in the rest of Europe.

Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Spain had a long history of relatively friendly intermingling in both social and economic settings. Thus, it is not surprising that there is ample documentation from Spain of sexual liaisons between men and women of the different religious communities. Jewish women would have had frequent, presumably friendly contact with Muslim and Christian women at the springs where they obtained drinking and cooking water, while doing their laundry, when using communal ovens and water mills, and while spinning and weaving in courtyards. Municipal bathhouses were also used by Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women at the same time, at the hours reserved for women although the men of the different faiths bathed separately.

Jewish women in Spain, as elsewhere in the medieval world, engaged in a variety of profitable occupations, including needlework, midwifery, and medicine, as well as merchant and moneylending

activity. Widows, especially those who benefitted from Jewish adoption of the generous inheritance laws of Christian Spain for surviving wives, were often in control of significant resources. Some powerful Sephardic widows, such as Benvenida Abarvanel and Dona Gracia Nasi, both of the sixteenth century, continued their deceased husbands' businesses successfully, intervened with rulers on behalf of threatened Jewish communities, and were renowned for their philanthropy and for their support of Jewish culture and learning.

Beginning with the forced mass conversions of Spanish Jewry to Christianity in 1391 and particularly after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, many women preserved their Jewish identities and practices in secret, passing on Jewish rituals and prayers to their children, however minimally, despite significant risk. Many crypto-Jewish women in Spain and in the New World gave up their lives, enduring the Inquisition's torture and facing public execution unrepentant for their loyalty to their people and faith.

Jewish women in the Middle Ages, whether in the Muslim or Christian world, were part of an often persecuted minority group; their welfare and fate were always dependent on forces beyond their own control. They were, as well, second-class citizens in a Jewish cultural tradition which tended to keep women separate from the intellectual pursuits which were the main paths to public status and leadership. Nevertheless, as this essay has indicated, medieval Jewish women were active participants in the domestic, economic, and social lives of their time and place, loyal to their traditions, and central to Jewish survival in numerous fundamental ways.

NOTES

1. This chapter is a revised version of "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages," which appeared in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 94-114. Readers should consult the original essay for more detailed documentation than the present format allows.

2. See S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), esp. v. 3, *The Family*.

3. *Travels of Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon*, ed. and trans. A. Benisch, 2nd ed. (London: Trubner, 1861).

4. Mordechai A. Friedman, "Marriage as an Institution: Jewry under Islam," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, ed. David Kraemer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 33.

5. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, 3:133.

6. *Ibid.*, 3:165.

7. *Ibid.*, 3:263.

8. For a translation and analysis of these documents, see Renée Levine Melammed, "He Said, She Said: The Case of a Woman Teacher in Maimonides' Twelfth Century Cairo," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 22 (1997).

9. Benisch, ed., *Travels*, 19.

10. Irving Agus, *The Heroic Ages of Franco-German Jewry* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1969), 278.

11. Agus, *Heroic Age*, 281, citing *tosaphot* (thirteenth-century Talmudic commentary) to Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 41a.

12. Rabbi Meshullam b. Kalonymus (c. 910-85), cited in Irving Agus, *Urban Civilization in Pre-Crusade Europe*, 2 vols. (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1965), 2:607.

13. See Shlomo Noble, "The Jewish Woman in Medieval Martyrology," in *Studies in Jewish Bibliography in History and Literature*, ed. C. Berlin (New York: Ktav Publshing House, 1971), 349.

14. Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1926), 207-218.

15. A full translation appears in Ivan Marcus, "Mothers, Martyrs, and Moneymakers: Some Jewish Women in Medieval Europe," *Conservative Judaism* 38 (1986), 41-42.

CHAPTER 5

Women in Byzantine Society

Angeliki E. Laiou

Although the Byzantine Empire formally was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the eastern provinces, geography and chronology transformed it into a state quite different from the old Roman Empire. These transformations led to the development of a medieval society which resembled, in some ways, other medieval European societies but in other ways differed from them significantly. Geography, that is to say, the location of the Empire in the eastern Mediterranean, with Constantinople as its capital, meant that the population consisted of Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Egyptians, Syrians, and others, while the dominant language and culture was Greek. In terms of chronology, the Empire lasted for over one thousand years, from 330 C.E., when the new capital was inaugurated, until the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. This very long history entailed the transfiguration of society along with a series of important changes in the boundaries and the composition of the state. Perhaps the most decisive series of changes came in the seventh century, when the eastern provinces (Egypt, Syria, and Palestine) fell to the Arabs, while the northern areas witnessed the attacks and settlement of Slavs, followed by the settlement of the Bulgars in what today is Bulgaria. As far as the structure of the state is concerned, Byzantium remained, for a very long time, highly centralized, with the Emperor functioning as Vice-Regent of God on earth—the source of law and authority. This was a tax-gathering state with a command economy and an efficient administration. The capital city, the palace, and the Patriarchate of Constantinople were important loci of power and wealth. Such was the case until the early thirteenth century, when decentralization began to create different conditions. As for the development of both culture and

society, the spread of Christianity and its acceptance as the official religion in the late fourth century created one of the fundamental parameters.

Inevitably, the role of women in Byzantine society was a function of all these factors: the structure of political power, the influence of Roman legal practice and Greek or other legal customs, the needs of the economy, the ideological force of Christianity as well as of older, powerful ideological models. The discussion that follows will be focused primarily on the central period from the ninth through the twelfth century, although references will be made to other periods as well.

WOMEN AND POLITICS

Formally, the imperial bureaucratic system which ran the government, administered the treasury, and oversaw and regulated the legal system—i.e., the administration—as well as the army and the hierarchy of the secular church were all male preserves. In these public domains, women functioned under certain incapacities, some of which were embedded into the legal system itself. Women could not and did not hold administrative office. They were prohibited by law from exercising the profession of banking. They were not permitted to act as witnesses, for they were thought to be easily influenced, thus making their testimony suspect. It was valid only in cases where a man's testimony was impossible, primarily in matters touching the intimate life of a woman, such as what took place in the birthing-chamber or in tests of virginity. In practice, we do find some women witnessing documents, but the cases are extremely rare. The army, too, was a male monopoly (as it was in most pre-modern societies).

As for the church, women could be and were heads of convents. There are women founders of monasteries who established the rules of the foundation and held virtually all the offices, with some exceptions, such as that of priest. The steward was also frequently a man, since he had to have contact with the outside world, and the doctor was often a eunuch. For aristocratic ladies, the convent could become a preserve of the female members of the family. Such was the case of the monastery of Kecharitomene, founded in the twelfth century by the Empress Irene Doukaina. She oversaw the governance of the convent and maintained firm control of its material and spiritual life. She ordered that after her death the convent should be ruled by her daughters, then her grand-

daughters, and then the female descendants of her daughter Anna Komnene. Should the direct female line become extinct, the office of *hegoumene* (the equivalent of "abbess") would go to the daughters-in-law of Anna Komnene and, after them, to the most illustrious lateral female relatives. It is obvious that there is, here, a pride of lineage that makes of the monastery a place where power could be exercised by the women of the family or, in this case, of the Komnenian clan. Although such could be the case in monasteries, in the secular church women did not impinge on the male prerogative of office.

Given the importance of the church, the administration, and the army, these were important incapacities. Women's influence in the public domain was primarily, although not solely, exercised through their influence on their husbands, sons, brothers, and other male kin. This could be very significant, even at the highest, imperial level. The Empress Theodora, wife of Justinian I (527-565), was very powerful indeed. Her ninth-century namesake, wife of the Emperor Theophilos and regent for her son, played a decisive role in the affairs of the state. She was responsible for the peaceful restoration of the cult of images after the death of her husband. Moreover, she ran the financial affairs of the Empire so well that she left a considerable surplus at the end of her administration. During much of the eleventh century, the succession of Emperors to the throne took place primarily though marriage to, or adoption by, women of the imperial family or imperial widows. At times, women occupied the throne in their own right: such was the case of the Empress Irene (797-802) and the Empresses Zoe and Theodora (1042, 1055-56), last scions of the Macedonian dynasty. Anna Komnene (1083-1153/54), daughter of the Emperor Alexios I, sought unsuccessfully, with her mother's help, to change the line of succession so that her husband, rather than her brother, would occupy the throne.

In sum, the role of women in the political life of the Empire was rarely direct. Indirectly, however, women exercised very considerable power and influence. Given the structure of the Byzantine state and society, the political role of women was limited to imperial kin and members of the aristocracy. With men, this was not the case since, until the eleventh century (and to a lesser degree even thereafter), men from lower social strata could rise into positions of power in the army, the administration, and the church.

The role of women in Byzantine society was exercised primarily within the institution of the family and, to a much smaller degree,

within the monastery which provided a milieu that was both in opposition to the family and, in some ways, a reproduction of it.

WOMEN AND THE FAMILY

While in the public realm the role of women was restricted, the private realm of the family was one in which women enjoyed considerable personal and economic protection which was also guaranteed by law. The familial domain encompassed many activities, including economic ones, and it was here that women were expected to be active. Furthermore, Byzantine ideology, continuing in this respect the ideological norms of the classical period and reinforced by Christian morals, placed a good woman firmly within the family and the household. The society was very conservative in ideological terms and that was particularly the case with the role of women. Ideological conservatism, however, often masks reality, and significant changes in the structuring of the family and the women's position in it.

With regard to institutions, there are two major sets of conditions which are of primary importance for the role of women in the family. One is the fact that in Byzantium there was a system of bilateral inheritance, where both sons and daughters had the right to share the property of their parents. While the details of the system are very complex, the salient fact is that Byzantium never knew primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest son), and the parental property was subdivided among members of the next generation, male or female. Parents could make arrangements whereby one or more of their children received preferential treatment, but all children were entitled to a share and, in the absence of specific arrangements, the shares were equal. The surviving documentary evidence shows that preferential treatment was extended to daughters as well as to sons. Thus, women could and did own property, including landed property, and the transfer of property took place along both the male and the female lines. Women held some property absolutely; other property might derive from gifts, from the woman's own labor, or from inheritance. Dowry property was protected in certain ways. For example, debts against it had precedence over virtually all other debts. It also could not be sold, except in cases of obvious and dire need, a rule which constitutes both a restriction and a protection. Although ownership of dowry goods was vested in the woman, the husband was entrusted with their

administration which, generally speaking, reduced the woman's possibilities for economic independence.

The strictures on and the protection accorded to the dowry appear to vary in place and time. In fourteenth-century Asia Minor, there is evidence that the woman's share of the parental property was given in full ownership rather than as dowry at the insistence of the bridegroom. In late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Constantinople, we find cases where women had both the usufruct (lifetime use) and the ownership of their dowry. In such cases, women might and did invest their funds in trade or artisanal activities. The fact that much of this (in any case sparse) information comes from areas or periods of economic crisis may indicate simply that dowry goods became liquid capital when necessity so required.

Widows, if they did not remarry, retained the right of ownership and administration of family property, including dowry goods. Among peasant households in fourteenth-century Macedonia, a not inconsiderable proportion—20 percent—were headed by women. We cannot be certain of the details of the administration of the household property. It is, however, certain that the Fisc (the imperial treasury) considered these widows, not their male relatives, to be responsible for the payment of taxes.

The possibility and reality of women's ownership of property is one of the fundamental aspects of the Byzantine family. Among other things, it might affect relations between spouses. Although the Byzantine ideological view of the family hierarchy was that "the man governs the woman," a woman of property who married a poorer man might taunt him with such caustic words as those of a twelfth-century literary wife encountered in the poems of Ptochoprodomos:

> I was a woman of position and you a pole-bearer.
> I was a noble one and you a poor citizen.
> . . . you used to sleep on a mat and I on a bed.
> I had a great dowry and you had drinking money;
> I had gold and silver, you had tubs and basins, a kneading trough and
> an oven.
> You sit in my house and pay no rent.
> . . . If you wanted to boast, to swagger, to lead astray
> You should have married one like you
> The daughter of a tavern-keeper,
> Some doxy, poor, naked,

Or a hawker of wild greens. . . .
Sir, what have you added [to the household]? What have you acquired? What dress have you made for me? What double-weave cloth?
What embroidered-hem clothes have I worn because of you? I have never seen Easter raiment.
Twelve cold and miserable years have I been with you,
And from your work I have never put a shoe on my foot;
Nor on my back a silken dress; I've not seen a ring on my finger,
Nor did you ever bring me a bracelet to wear;
Strangers divide up my own clothes, brought from my family,
And I remain naked and bemoaning my fate.

The other foundation-stone of the Byzantine family was the valorization of marriage, a development that is less obvious than one might think at first sight. There are two strands in that development which, in combination, serve to make the single, monogamous marriage a norm that was not only prevalent but accorded the highest possible value by church and state. One was the removal of a number of impediments to a valid marriage which had existed under the Roman Empire. The second was the recognition, by the Christian church, of marriage not only as a necessary institution (a recognition that came rather early) but also as the proper and blessed state for a women.

The valorization of marriage in legal terms came in the eighth century, not coincidentally, perhaps, a time of demographic crisis. The law code issued by the reforming Isaurian Emperors, the *Ecloga* (publ. 741), is based on Roman law and introduces few real innovations. These innovations, however, are important; furthermore, this short and highly usable manual is organized very differently from the large compilations of Roman law and, through the re-organizing and regrouping of topics, both clarifies and interprets the law. In the *Ecloga*, the chapters on betrothal and marriage come at the very beginning of the compilation, undoubtedly an expression of the legislators' interest in the institution. The conditions of a valid marriage are considerably simplified. Class distinction between man and woman no longer functions as an impediment to marriage. On the other hand, a consanguineous relationship, up to the sixth degree (second cousin), becomes an impediment under the influence of the Christian church which will eventually extend the prohibited degrees of relationship, whether by consanguinity or affinity.

In the *Ecloga,* valid marriage requires, above all, the free consent of the two parties and their parents. A dowry, church benediction, or even simply the presence of witnesses is sufficient to create a marriage as long as the contracting parties and their parents give their consent. The last type of ceremony—with the presence of witnesses—is clearly one which permits even very poor individuals to form a proper and valid marriage. In chapter 2.6 of the *Ecloga,* the legislator makes a provision which legitimates a kind of quasi-marriage: if a man has taken a free woman into his home, has entrusted her with the administration of his household, and has had sexual relations with her, the arrangement is considered equivalent to marriage, even in the absence of children. This measure, along with the fact that property arrangements are made in the case of the dissolution of such a union, affords considerable protection to women, especially to poor and otherwise unprotected ones. The same law code affords a high degree of protection to women against rape and abduction; marriage is encouraged as a remedy to the seduction of a girl if the seduction took place with her consent.

Although the role of women as guardians of their children had been expanded and enhanced ever since the fourth century, the position of women within and after marriage was further enhanced by the *Ecloga,* which attenuated the Roman patriarchal system. The widowed mother, if she does not remarry, retains the right to administer the family property as well as the right and the obligation to educate her children and to make arrangements for their marriages. The children, in return, owe her full honor and obedience.

As far as the state was concerned, the family created by marriage became and remained the most important social institution—the unit of production and reproduction—in which the state had an interest that remained unabated into the late period. The Emperor Leo VI (886-912) stated this unequivocally in one of his *Novels* (new legislation): "Marriage is an important and most valuable gift, given by God, the Creator, to mankind; in fact, marriage not only brings aid to human nature, which is exhausted by death, by not permitting the human race to disappear; it also brings men great joy through the children which are born in it. What is sweeter and more pleasant to the human heart than the joy that comes from children?" For the woman, the valorization of marriage meant that her own role was recognized and given importance and it entered the ideological discourse: discussions of marriage center around the harmonious couple, to which the man

and the woman contribute equally. For the full evolution of this concept to appear, the other normative authority, the church, had to give its blessing.

The development of the position of the church was more nuanced than that of the state. There was an evident tension, clearest in the early centuries of Christianity and recurring in the writings of rigorists, between marriage and virginity, that is, between the acceptance of a controlled sexuality and its total rejection. In this duality, the woman is seen as the temptress, who does not permit a more perfect state to prevail. The trajectory of the position of the church is long and complex. For our topic, what is important is the evolution of a model that gives woman a positive role within the institution of marriage, an evolution that may most easily be seen in the changing concept of female holiness.

In the early period, the church made it easier for women to exist outside marriage. Women who either refused to marry or, once married, refused sexual intercourse or, in one way or another, broke the bonds of marriage and the family were held to a model of female sanctity. In the fourth century, the church provided for the subsistence of women, unmarried or widowed, who lived outside marriage and even outside the convent. As for the model of sanctity, until the tenth century, female saints were either unmarried virgins or women whose families had been dissolved. An example is St. Theodora of Thessaloniki (ca. 812-892) who, after the death of her husband and two of their children, entered a convent along with her youngest daughter at the age of twenty-five. Even in the convent she affirmed the dissolution of the family, having been forced to break all contact with her daughter. The fact that St. Theodora had close family connections with the local church hierarchy, which no doubt influenced her choice of that particular convent, does not affect the ideological position. A variant theme appears in the *Life* of the sixth-century St. Matrona, who, to escape her husband, spent a good deal of her life disguised as a man and, moreover, declared herself happy at the death of her child, since it left her unentangled and free to pursue her monastic career.

It is only with the late ninth century that we begin to see the possibility of sanctity for a woman who is and remains married. There is a small cluster of female saints, all of whom lived in the late ninth to the first half of the tenth century, although some of the *Vitae* (saints' lives) were written much later. The most developed story is that of St. Mary the Younger (d. ca. 903). Daughter of a military man and wife of

another, Mary was a pious and charitable woman. She had four children, two of whom died very young. Eventually, she was accused of adultery with a slave and also of squandering the property of her husband in works of charity. Her husband beat her, which eventually brought about her death. That she was venerated as a saint in her town of Vizye (in Thrace) owes a great deal to the efforts of her family to promote her cult. Even so, there was opposition from some members of the established church, who argued that a married woman who continued to live in the world and to have intercourse with her husband could not attain sanctity. The posthumous miracles of Mary carried the day, but the objections are interesting. For what distinguishes Mary the Younger (as well as St. Thomais of Lesbos) is precisely the fact that the married state (an unhappy one, to be sure), with all that it entails, is no obstacle to sainthood.[1] As Mary's biographer says,

> [A]lthough she was a woman, although she was married and bore children, nothing hindered her in any way from finding favor with God: neither the weakness of female nature, nor the annoyances of wedlock, nor the needs and cares of child-rearing. To the contrary, it was these things which gave her the occasion to find favor with God, and thus proved that those who believe and claim that such things form an obstacle to virtue are foolish and create pretexts for sins.

The number of women who became saints while remaining married is too small and too concentrated chronologically to allow us to speak of a model. Nevertheless, this is an interesting stage in the evolution of concepts regarding women and marriage. The next stage is for marriage and the good life in a secular context to become the ideal for a woman. There were very few new female saints in Byzantium after the mid-tenth century, although male saints continued to proliferate, especially in the Palaiologan period. Instead, there is much praise of the good wife and mother, the pious laywoman who engages in charitable works. Michael Psellos was one of the most important intellectuals of the eleventh century as well as an imperial official who at times exercised extraordinary power. He wrote a funeral oration for his mother which has very pronounced traits of hagiographic writing; it reads almost like a saint's life, although the virtues which distinguished the subject were the secular virtues of obedience to her husband, care for her children, charity, and piety. The model for a woman's life very clearly had become that of a good wife and mother. This evolution was

possible because the church had accepted fully, since at least the ninth century, both marriage and the sexual relations it entails.

This development is concomitant with the Christianization of marriage. Whereas in the *Ecloga* a marriage could be perfectly valid without any involvement on the part of the church, in the early tenth century the Emperor Leo VI made a religious ceremony a necessary prerequisite of a valid marriage. The same emperor changed betrothal from a civil contract to an act virtually equivalent to marriage if it was done with church benediction. From that moment on, the church, which had already been involved with regulating marriage, became even more active in such matters. In return, it accepted the sexual aspects of marriage and individual churchmen might even extol the sexual pleasures that unite married partners.

What this meant for women was that their lives, firmly situated within the family, were under considerable control exercised by their parents, the church, and the state in everything that had to do with the formation and the dissolution of the marriage bond (unless the dissolution came about by death). At the same time, however, their roles as wives and mothers were exalted. The perception of the woman as a temptress, who leads men to sin, was too powerful and too ancient to disappear. It persisted, but we see it surfacing primarily with women who were poor and defenseless, who lived outside the protective circle of family and marriage.

WOMEN'S LABOR AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The realities of everyday life were governed by three factors: ideology (which owed much to ancient Greek principles changed or reinforced by Christianity), social class (which introduced the element of differentiation), and economic necessity (which often went counter to ideology).

The ideological constructs were conservative, powerful, and preserved in part through the practices affecting marriage. Women married young: they could contract a valid marriage at thirteen, and most were married by the age of fifteen although betrothals could take place much earlier. Thus, the girls went from the parental household into the marital home; sometimes the two could be identical, as in the case of heiresses, whose parents had no sons, and thus the husband entered the wife's household. Most often, they moved into the home of the husband or that of the father-in-law or into a new home. As in all

Mediterranean cultures, the honor of the family was vested in the women; therefore, virginity was highly prized. The young girl's virginity was carefully, although not always successfully, protected and so was the virtue of the wife. Hence the very powerful and long-lived ideological precept that women should stay within the protective world of the home. This has led some modern scholars to the belief that women were secluded, that they never left the home except in highly unusual, indeed, disastrous circumstances. The paradigm is untrue: those sources which describe realities rather than cultural norms depict women walking in the streets of the cities, going to church, attending litanies, tending to the poor, buying and selling, even participating in riots. The visibility of women outside the home varies not only according to social class but also according to chronology: in the central period of Byzantine history, from the ninth century on, but especially in the eleventh century and after, women's lives were more complex and varied than they had been in the seventh and eighth centuries.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries were of particular importance in this development. This is partly the result of the emergence of a solid and self-conscious aristocratic class. Women, as the carriers of lineage and property, played a major role. Female literacy, at least among women of the upper class, was also on the increase, and we find women functioning not only as patrons of the arts but also as practitioners. Anna Komnene is the only woman historian of the Middle Ages and a very good one at that. Aristocratic women had the governance of the household, which consisted of very extensive properties, and were actively involved in the affairs of government, sometimes officially (as when they functioned as regents or vice-regents), often unofficially. Women who belonged to lower social strata also seem to have been considerably involved in economic activities. Sometimes we find them defending their rights in court. Occasionally, too, a male voice was heard to proclaim the equality of man and woman, such as that of John Apokaukos in the early thirteenth century. The dominant ideology, however, still expected women to defer to men, who were the recognized heads of the family and the sources of authority.

When one examines the economic activities of women, ideology and practice sometimes reinforce each other and at other times are at odds. A very strong ideological position was that the place of a woman was in the home and that her labor was to be reserved for her own household. The system of devolution of property described above

undoubtedly influenced this position. A woman who had received a dowry had already made her contribution to the family's finances; if she had to work over and above that, especially in order to earn a living outside the household, it reflected dishonor on both her parents and her husband. Thus the ideal woman's labor consisted of the time-honored tasks associated with the making of cloth—always for the needs of the household. The image of the woman with her spindle or at the loom recurs in literature and in art. This is the image of the protected female and the self-sufficient household, both highly prized ideological constructs but both hard to achieve in practice. It is certainly true that women controlled much of the household production of cloth as well as some of the cloth sold in the marketplace. Therefore, ideology and reality coincide to some extent. They diverge on two points: first, not only women but men, too, were involved in the process of cloth-making with some occupations, such as dyeing wool, constituting specifically male labor; secondly, women, in fact, did engage in other economic activities.

We are poorly informed about the participation of women in agricultural labor, although a general picture can be formed. Ploughing was clearly men's work. Women did take part in the harvest and in threshing, and they worked in the vineyards. Sheep herding was not women's work; it must be assumed that women raised the barnyard animals that every peasant household had. Despite the realities of the situation, working in the fields or in the vineyards was considered an activity in which women should not engage, partly, perhaps, because it took them quite a long way outside the protected space of the household.

In the cities, women were engaged in numerous trade, artisanal, and professional activities. We find women doctors, midwives, tavern keepers, cloth makers (even as members of a guild), and servants. Women appear primarily as retail merchants of cloth and food, selling in the marketplace the cloth they manufactured (a phenomenon both of the late Antique and of the Byzantine period) and the food they prepared. Women tavern keepers and inn keepers were not uncommon, but the occupation was a dishonorable one and its practitioners were considered to be not much better than prostitutes.

The marked presence of women in retail trades, a phenomenon known to other medieval societies as well, is most visible after the eleventh century; this is due in part to the development of the urban economy, but it is also an accident of the survival of sources. The fact

that women could and did own property was a pre-condition of their involvement in trade and artisanal activities above the level of the street-hawker. They invested their funds in shops and, sometimes, in trade and quite frequently they lent money to others. We even know of a woman who, in the mid-fifteenth century, was involved in two partnerships for the exploitation of mines. In the late period, as investment in trade became one of the few avenues for the use of funds, women's participation in the urban economy increased; among other things, we find them investing dowry money in trade, even though such risky use of the dowry was, theoretically, not permitted.

Women, then, were neither secluded in their homes nor incapable of participating in the affairs of society—quite the opposite was true. But the particularities of their everyday lives depended above all on the social class to which they belonged. Women of the aristocracy could command power, prestige, honor, and respect and could behave in ways that transcended the ideological restrictions, although never entirely. The wives and daughters of middle level officials were probably the women whose lives most closely approximated the ideological norms. As for poor women, they could not afford to follow the ideological norms at least insofar as economic activities were concerned. They were also the most vulnerable to social stigmatization.

The women of the countryside, for example, shared some of the same conditions as urban and aristocratic women but also had greater disabilities. They, too, benefited from the system of inheritance. We find, among the peasantry, cases where property and names are transferred along the female line. Here, too, there were women of strong personality who ran the affairs of their household and their family. However, their possibilities were limited by poverty, which allowed prejudices and negative ideological attitudes to affect their lives very considerably. A story from eastern Macedonia during the early thirteenth century will illustrate the point. A potter, named Chrysos, left the city of Kastoria during a time of famine and moved to Ochrid. Although he already had a wife in Kastoria, he moved in with a Vlach woman, named Tzola, with whom he lived for a fairly long time. She seems to have been a hardworking woman and together the couple accumulated some property: animals, bedclothes, perhaps some fields. At a certain point, Chrysos's wife found him out and claimed her rights in court. The archbishop who heard the case was very strict towards Tzola. She would be allowed to retain a part of the property of the couple but only if she promised never to see Chrysos again. Otherwise,

she would lose everything: the two pigs, the cow and her calf, the woolen blanket, and so on. The archbishop referred to Tzola in an almost scandalously contemptuous manner: she was the kind of female that was guilty of all the sins, who could attract the eyes and hearts of men through diabolical machinations. In short, Tzola is presented as embodying all the qualities of which a woman could be guilty: she was beautiful, she was seductive, she was living with a man without benefit of marriage, she must have been the devil's instrument. Chrysos, on the other hand, is presented as an innocent man who had sinned despite himself and who generously left to this woman some property to repay her for the years of living with him and for her labor. According to the laws, Chrysos should have been punished by whipping for his fornication, but it is clear that the law was applied differentially.

Women in Byzantium enjoyed much protection, both legal and social, and played an important role in the economic, cultural, religious, and even the political life of the Empire. The limitations, however, embodied in the ideological norms and in social attitudes affected their lives very differently, depending on where and when they lived, and what social position they occupied.

NOTE

1. For a recent English version of these Byzantine saints' *Lives*, see Alice-Mary Talbot, ed. *Holy Women of Byzantium: Ten Saints' Lives in English Translation* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1996).

CHAPTER 6

Women in Medieval Islamic Society

Jonathan Berkey

BOUNDARIES

Almost certainly, the question of women and their social role excites the curiosity and elicits the condemnation of a western audience more easily than any other issue concerning Islam and Islamic societies. Any honest discussion of the question should begin with this admission, and with an attempt to uncover the roots of the fascination and the revulsion which grip so many western observers of the Islamic world. A good deal of the western fascination is of a prurient nature. The Orientalist tradition in art, literature, perhaps even music (if one thinks, for example, of Rimsky-Korsakov's symphonic meditation on the heroine of the *Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade) is obsessed with the female image. This image, as reflected in artifacts of western culture, is by no means uniform, but one of its most salient features is the presumed voluptuousness of the eastern woman. The paintings of the French painter Jean Léon Gerôme (1824-1904), for example, are replete with depictions of sensual odalisques cavorting in erotic splendor or nude slave girls being probed and examined by lascivious prospective owners. To be sure, there is plenty in Near Eastern cultural traditions to fan the flames of this fire: the *Thousand and One Nights* itself is a treasure trove of erotic stories, many of them based on the assumption that women are possessed of an insatiable sexual appetite. But the way in which westerners have studied and understood Near Eastern societies and cultures has highlighted and accentuated these elements: one need only think, for example, of the Orientalist and adventurer Sir Richard Burton, whose English edition of the *Thousand*

and One Nights certainly reveled in the work's sexual themes, and who also sought out and translated erotica ranging from the famous Sanskrit work, the *Kama Sutra*, to a sixteenth-century Arabic treatise on sexuality, *The Perfumed Garden.*

Another theme of western discussions of women in Near Eastern societies, and one that is not altogether consistent with the first, is that of oppression, of women as repressed, both socially and sexually. The issues of equality and the extent of women's participation in social, political, and economic life are of course real, and much will be said about them below. But here, too, the common western image is a product not simply of Near Eastern realities but of their intersection with the dynamics of political relations between the nations of the West and the peoples of the Near East over the last two centuries. An outstanding example is that of Evelyn Baring, Lord Cromer, who dominated Egyptian affairs as the British Consul General in Cairo at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries during the period of Britain's "veiled protectorate" over Egypt. Cromer took a dim and condescending view of Egyptian society and blamed its shortcomings largely on Islam. And among Islam's most regressive characteristics, he felt, was its treatment of women. Identifying the reasons why "Islam as a social system has been a complete failure," he remarked that, "first and foremost, Islam keeps women in a position of marked inferiority."[1] Despite his imperial confidence, the position of women in the Islamic societies of the Near East was considerably more complex and nuanced than Cromer supposed. After all, it was only in the last years of the nineteenth century that Anglo-American jurisdictions, through the Married Women's Property Acts, recognized the right of a married woman to own and control property in her own right, a right which had been enshrined in virtually all schools of Islamic law from its very inception.

So we should be careful in our investigation of women in the medieval Islamic societies of the Near East and aware that the preconceptions which most of us have absorbed through our participation in a cultural tradition which has constructed its own image of the condition of Muslim women may obscure the truth. That said, there can be no doubt that the question of women and their place in medieval Islamic societies is both fascinating in its own right and also revealing of broader themes of Islamic social structures and cultural values. The societies of the medieval Islamic Near East were considerably more complex than those of, say, Latin Europe. From the very beginning of

the Islamic period, Egypt, Syria, and the other lands which came to form the heart of the Muslim world were characterized by a high degree of social, ethnic, and sectarian heterogeneity. Coping with that confusion required both flexibility and tolerance and also a reasonably clear set of social identities as well as the hierarchies which, in a pre-modern society, they inevitably spawned.

There is a strong egalitarian streak at the heart of the Quran's message, reflected in the commonly held Muslim principle that all believers are equal in the eyes of God, and this principle has, in turn, encouraged efforts by contemporary Muslim feminists to reinterpret the Islamic tradition in such a way as to eliminate from it any trace of patriarchy. Nonetheless, the medieval Muslim societies of the Near East, like most others of the pre-modern period, were undeniably criss-crossed by a number of social boundaries which gave social relations a distinctly hierarchical character. The principle of equality applied, it has been said, as long as one was free, male, and Muslim. To be a slave, a woman, or a member of one of the protected but inferior communities of non-Muslims (the *dhimmis*) was to suffer from a variety of restrictions and inequalities stipulated by the terms of Islamic law, the *Shari`a*.

Arguably, the gender boundary was the most important of the three and not only because fully half of society suffered from its ensuing restrictions. After all, a Christian or Jew could always convert to Islam and so escape the restrictions imposed upon *dhimmis*; slaves might be, and very often were, freed by their masters. In a pre-modern society, however, the gender boundary could not generally be transcended, at least not permanently. The lawyers who fashioned the *Shari`a* were consequently preoccupied with women, and large portions of the text-books and treatises which form the fabric of the *Shari`a* are devoted to issues that involved association and interaction between the sexes such as marriage, divorce, sexual relations and adultery. But women complicated other matters, too, posing delicate questions which the jurists had to address. For example, were the prayers of a man valid if he said them while standing behind a woman? What about a woman who had recently given birth, and thus found herself in a state of ritual impurity: were the five daily prayers obligatory or even possible for her? In the area of inheritance, Islamic law laid down precise rules governing the proportions of an estate to be received by male and female heirs, in general assigning to a man twice the portion of a woman. The gender boundary, of course, could complicate others, such as that of religion.

Could a Christian man marry a Muslim woman? Could a Muslim man marry a Jewish woman? If they did, how would their children be raised?

The emphasis which the *Shari`a*, and those who administered it, placed on the gender boundary may be most evident in one group which threatened to make the boundary permeable: hermaphrodites. As a recent study has shown, the Islamic lawyers went to great lengths to shore up the gender boundary by resolving the inherent ambiguity posed by those who apparently possessed the physical characteristics of both men and women.[2] It was absolutely necessary to determine whether the individual in question was "in fact" a male or a female, both on a theological level (since the gender difference was a feature of God's creation) and a more practical one (since the law itself was so concerned with distinguishing male prerogatives and female responsibilities). If the hermaphrodite proved to have predominantly male or female characteristics, then identifying its gender was relatively easy. In more ambiguous cases, the lawyers developed the principle that "the judgment is given to the urinary orifice": that is, that the manner of urination revealed the underlying sex of the individual. Where it urinated as both a male and a female, then the lawyers looked to which "place of urination" was used first, or to which produced a greater quantity of urine. Where these and other indicators proved indeterminate, the lawyers were left with what they called a "problem hermaphrodite." It was not that the individual did not have a gender—the world had been gendered by God—but rather that humans were unable to perceive its true condition. Even so, somehow the ambiguity had to be resolved. Where, for example, was the hermaphrodite to pray: in front of an assembly, with the men, or behind, with the women? Perhaps not surprisingly, the answer was to place the individual between the rows of men and those of women, to ensure that, if the hermaphrodite were in fact a woman, no men would pray behind her and thereby have their prayers invalidated. In this way the Shari`a both reaffirmed a threatened boundary and shored up the underlying hierarchy.

The example of hermaphrodites and the close attention paid by the jurists to them and to the problems their condition raised indicate the importance of the gender boundary to medieval Muslims. At least for those involved in formulating the law, determining the sex of an individual was not just a fancy intellectual exercise: it was a question of preserving a boundary which was integral to the fundamental order of

the universe. Since God had gendered the universe and since many aspects of Islamic law had a gender component, it was absolutely essential to determine whether an individual were a male or female. Gender in this sense is clearly a social construction, but one that is central to understanding the ordering of medieval Islamic societies.

THE COMING OF ISLAM

Much ink has been spilt on the question of whether the coming of Islam in the early seventh century C.E. improved the status of women in Arabian society or subjected them to new and more onerous social restrictions. The question has an obvious interest for both historians and polemicists, although it is unlikely that a definitive answer is possible. Take, for example, the question of the number of wives to whom a man may be married at any one time. The operative Quranic verse is found in the fourth *sura* (chapter): "If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, then marry the women [among them] who seem good to you, two, three, or four; but if you fear you can not deal with them equitably, then marry only one, or those whom your right hands possess [i.e., captives]—that makes it less likely you will be unjust" (*sura* 4, verse 3). On one hand, that can be read as a limitation on what was, apparently, at least for men, a much freer situation in pre-Islamic Arabian society—that is, a man could take no more than four wives, whereas before there might have been no limit—and, indeed, Islamic law eventually came to recognize a binding limit of four wives. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that this verse does not so much place a limit on a previously unrestricted polygyny as it encourages men, under certain conditions, to marry up to four women. The actual situation in pre-Islamic Arabia was, as might be expected, complex and, given the paucity of evidence, uncertain. On the matter of marriage, for example, there is evidence that women were treated in some cases as chattel, so that marriage was, in essence, a form of purchase. On the other hand, there are also indications that, at least among some tribes, polyandry (in addition to polygyny) may have been practiced.

Just as the situation in Arabia before the coming of Islam is clouded, so, too, was the impact of the new religion on the lives and status of women. On a fundamental matter, the practice of female infanticide, which was not unknown in Arabia, the Quran speaks with a clear voice, condemning the practice (*sura* 17, verse 31). In the earliest

years of the Islamic era, adult women may have had opportunities for public activity which, as Islamic civilization expanded and developed, were increasingly restricted. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, married a wealthy widow several years his senior named Khadija, who had employed him as a business agent: she seems to have had control over her own property, and according to tradition herself proposed marriage with Muhammad. In the earliest days of the new religion, women may have taken active part in public acts of worship, although the stories about the deeds and sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) which, together with the Quran form both an important basis of Islamic law and the primary source for early Islamic history, indicate that from an early stage there were attempts to discourage and restrict their participation. Indeed, the *hadith*, many of which were in fact produced after the Prophet's death and so reflect the positions of competing interest groups within the new community, indicate a struggle among the early Muslims to define the acceptable parameters of female participation in public life. One of the primary collections of *hadith*, for example, that of the ninth-century scholar al-Bukhari, records that "the Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*," i.e., the direction faced by the worshipper, the implication being that dogs, donkeys, and women were "unclean" and so would invalidate a man's prayers. Yet al-Bukhari also includes in his collection a story about Aisha, Muhammad's favorite wife and one of the most important sources of information on the Prophet's words and deeds, who responded directly to this challenge: "You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the *qibla*. And in order not to disturb him, I didn't move."

It is perhaps easier to identify broader trends which the coming of Islam established or at least confirmed. Perhaps the most important is a gradual (and never complete) shift to an ethical system which emphasized individual, rather than collective or tribal, responsibility. A religious viewpoint which asserts that the individual human, standing alone before God, bears the primary moral responsibility for his or her decisions and actions is a characteristic feature of Near Eastern monotheism, of which Islam is perhaps the fullest, if not the latest expression. On the one hand, this understanding of moral responsibility tended to decrease the importance of gender by focusing on personal

characteristics which men and women might share, or lack, in equal proportion. As the Quran says in a famous passage,

> Men and women who have surrendered [i.e., to God], believing men and believing women, obedient men and obedient women, truthful men and truthful women, enduring men and enduring women, humble men and humble women, men and women who give in charity, men who fast and women who fast, men and women who guard their private parts, men and women who remember God oft—for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty wage. (*sura* 33, verse 35)

On the other hand, certain ethical principles introduced or stressed by Islam made the whole arena of social relationships—that is, the terms under which women might interact with men—much more critical and sensitive. For example, fornication (i.e., sex outside of recognized channels) was no longer simply a potential source of shame; Islam made it a sin, an affront to God as well as to family honor. Under those circumstances, a society which sought to control sexual expression largely by controlling access to women might well seek to circumscribe even more carefully the public lives of its female members.

A second development involved the spread of Islam outside of western Arabia, where it saw its inception. Muhammad died in the year 632; within a few decades, the Muslim Arabs had conquered Egypt and Syria, provinces of the Roman (Byzantine) Empire, and had eliminated the Sassanian Empire of Iran and pushed well into central Asia. In conquering and absorbing lands which for millennia had known advanced urban civilization, the Muslims found themselves confronted by cultural ideas and practices which were more firmly rooted than their own, and, like many conquering groups before and since, they largely absorbed them. It is a mistake to see Islam as originally a product of the unsophisticated bedouin in the desert: Muhammad lived the bulk of his life in an urban not a nomadic setting, and although bedouin influence was still strong in Arabian cities like Mecca, nonetheless they had already to some extent come to participate in the nexus of urban culture which dominated the northern countries of the Near East. Moreover, the newly converted Arabs were deeply impressed by the ancient civilizations of the countries they conquered and quickly adopted many of their ideals and customs. In the cities of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, the subordination of women and, in

particular, restrictions on their public activities, were more complete and institutionalized than in early seventh-century Arabia. Veiling, for example, and the seclusion of women more generally, was probably more common among the inhabitants of cities such as Damascus (at least among the upper and middle classes) and those of the Sassanian Empire than in Arabia although it was not unknown there. Nowhere does the Quran demand the veiling of women; what it requires is that women be modest in their dress, appearance, and comportment.

> And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or what their right hands own [i.e., their slaves], or such men as attend them, nor having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts; nor let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers; haply so you will prosper. (*sura* 33, verse 35)

The Prophet's own wives, it is true, were required to veil and seclude themselves, but they were recognized even in their own lifetimes as special, and the restrictions placed on them were not explicitly extended to Muslim women as a whole. But veiling and seclusion were marks of respectability among the Byzantine and Sassanian upper classes and the Muslim Arabs, who in the conquered provinces came to form a ruling elite, quite naturally adopted the practice as their own. Ironically, the spread of the practice among broader segments of the urban community during the Islamic Middle Ages may have been a product of the relative egalitarianism of Islam, which encouraged a certain cultural uniformity among the varying socio-economic strata of the population.

The gradual restriction of the public lives of women was reinforced by a third general trend, the absorption of Islam into broader patterns of Mediterranean culture, one of which was a latent suspicion of the intellectual and moral character of women. Women, according to this view, are deficient in reason, more susceptible to disruptive emotion and, especially, sexual temptation. This attitude is reflected in a famous

hadith attributed to the Prophet (although it probably dates to later period), to the effect that most of the inhabitants of Hell are women. The idea parallels, and may historically be related to, the misogyny which is familiar to students of Late Antique Mediterranean civilization and early Christianity. In any case, it soon found expression in various streams of Islamic culture. The Quranic version of the story of the Biblical patriarch Joseph, for example, in which his master's wife is clearly the sexual aggressor, furnished plenty of material for medieval exegetes to expand upon the weakness of and danger posed by women. Commentaries on the Quranic text stressed the deceitfulness of Joseph's would-be lover (given the name Zulaykha by popular tradition, although not by the Quran itself), and thus of women generally. When, according to the Quranic story, her female friends whispered among themselves about her "manifest error" in pressuring Joseph to engage in sexual relations, she responded by presenting Joseph to them; at the sight of him, the women were overcome by his beauty, proclaimed Joseph not a mortal but a "noble angel," and in a mark of their extreme agitation cut their hands with knives (*sura* 12). The story is a rich one and is susceptible to a variety of esoteric and psychological interpretations, but most agreed that it offered convincing proof that women were cunning, prone to sexual excitement, and above all a source of *fitna*, of trial or temptation to men. Stereotypes about the qualities and inferior character of women worked their way into the fabric of the law, too; for example, in the *Shari`a*'s formal estimation that the testimony in court of a woman was equal only to half that of a man. In other areas of social life, the assumption that women were more prone to sexual temptation and transgression could have disastrous consequences. It stood behind the practice variously known as excision, clitoridectomy, or (somewhat improperly) female circumcision. The custom of removing all or part of a girl's external genitalia, usually just before the onset of puberty, was by no means universal in the medieval Islamic world although it was common in certain regions, especially Egypt. Its roots there lay not in Islam but in pre-Islamic practice, but its survival under the new religious dispensation resulted from the fusion of ancient misogyny with the concerns of the new faith to regulate and circumscribe sexual expression, especially that of women. A variety of concerns informed its practitioners, including a belief that the operation was necessary to ensure a girl's ritual cleanliness, but the jurists who justified it did so

on the assumption that it would limit a woman's sexual desire and, therefore, her propensity to sexual misconduct.[3]

The most important point, however, is that the restrictions on the lives of women and misogynistic attitudes which may be common elements of medieval Islamic societies are not features peculiar to the religion of Islam. Rather, they are the result of its interaction with broader cultural patterns, patterns which grew out of Late Antique Mediterranean and Near Eastern civilization and which had an impact on non-Islamic medieval and modern societies. Indeed, there are strong indications that, as a general rule, Islamic societies in the later Middle Ages placed heavier restrictions on their women than did the community of the Prophet and his immediate successors. There is, consequently, room for contemporary Muslim feminists to attempt a reinterpretation of the Quran and of Muslim tradition which eliminates from that tradition its misogynist and patriarchal features. On the other hand, as an historical matter, women in medieval Islamic societies did suffer from a variety of legal disabilities and restrictions on the scope of their public activity, and it is to these matters that we turn now.

WOMEN AND MARRIAGE

The most important institution which a medieval woman would confront over the course of her life was that of marriage, and marriages among Muslims were strictly regulated by the *Shari`a*. Of course, the formal, ideal precepts of the law do not necessarily shed light on actual experience, although the connection is probably especially close in the case of marriage, since the Quran itself is so full of specific regulations regarding marriage, divorce, and related concerns and since matters of personal status became more closely identified with what it meant to be a Muslim than any others. In any case, the Muslim institution of marriage is a fundamentally sexual one, the technical term *nikah* having as its original meaning sexual intercourse. On the whole, Islam takes a rather positive, even permissive view of sex. The Muslim view, unlike the Christian, is that sex is unambiguously good. Consequently, there has never been much emphasis in Islam on celibacy, except perhaps in some of the more extreme mystical movements. Sex will apparently even be one of the delights afforded those who earn admission to paradise, a point which distinguishes Islam sharply from the eschatological vision of, say, St Paul. To be sure, fornication is condemned and punished severely, but, as a result of an incident in

which Muhammad's wife Aisha was falsely accused of infidelity, the evidentiary requirements to sustain an allegation of adultery are especially steep. In the absence of confession, conviction requires the testimony of four adult male witnesses, who must, moreover, have observed the act itself and not merely suspicious behavior.

Sex is good, but it is allowed only within certain legal boundaries. The first and most important is, of course, marriage itself, and here an undeniable imbalance enters the picture. As we have seen, the consensus of the jurists interpreted a particular verse of the Quran to allow a man to have up to four wives at any one time. He might marry more sequentially but only after his previous wives had either died or been divorced. By contrast, a woman could be married to only one man at any given moment. The actual number of men who married multiple wives was probably limited. Marriage was not inexpensive: a groom was required to pay his bride (*not* her family) a bride-price commensurate with her social and economic status, and, of course, additional wives could lead to domestic tension. But men could also supplement their marital condition by purchasing female slaves, selected for their beauty or perceived sexual attraction, as concubines. Concubinage was apparently quite common: indeed, medieval authors composed lengthy discussions on the merits of the women of different ethnic groups and their suitability as sexual partners. Since Islamic law attached no stigma to the offspring of such a union—they were free and fully legitimate, just as were those of a marital relationship—some even preferred concubinage to marriage as an institution for reproduction: the Abbasid caliphs who reigned in Baghdad in the ninth, tenth, and later centuries, for example, were almost uniformly the children of earlier caliphs' concubines, rather than of their wives. Women, however, were denied this channel of sexual expression. While a man could take as many concubines as he could afford, a free woman who engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage was guilty of fornication. Among Shi`i Muslims, one additional legal category of sexual relationship existed. *Mut`a* marriage is essentially a temporary but legal sexual relationship: a man and woman contract to marry, usually in exchange for a consideration paid by the man, for a fixed term, ranging from a few hours to many years. Shi`is defend the institution as one that was practiced in the Prophet's day; Sunnis, however, at least since the time of the second caliph, Umar (d. 644), have rejected it as a form of legalized prostitution.

Marriage was essentially a contract and as such afforded a woman certain limited protections. A valid marriage required the bride's consent although her consent might be indicated by mere silence, and, in any case, girls were often married during their teenage years and their decisions would surely not always have been deliberate and free. Moreover, as already mentioned, the law stipulated that the bride-price had to be paid to the bride herself rather than to her family, a significant departure from the practice of many other pre-modern societies. Once it was in her possession, her husband could not legally touch the money, even to pay for the family's expenses; on the contrary, the law made it his responsibility to ensure that his wife was suitably maintained according to the standards to which she was accustomed. The actual amount of the bride-price would be fixed in the marriage contract, settled between the groom and the bride's guardian (usually her father or other close male relative). It was possible, too, to stipulate in the contract that a portion of the agreed sum not be handed over to the bride right away but rather be reserved for payment in the event of a divorce, a practice which amounted to a mechanism to discourage husbands from gratuitously separating from their wives.

Once marriaged, a woman's position was equivocal. There is no question that the religious law regarded the male as the head of the family. "Men are in charge of women," says the Quran, "because God has made the one to excel over the other, and because men spend their wealth [to support their women]. And so good women are obedient" (*sura* 4, verse 34). What this meant in practice, of course, would vary widely depending upon personal circumstance; here again, actual practice depended far more upon particular social, cultural, and economic factors than upon the formal dictates of religion. But there is little doubt that a woman's greatest liability lay in the area of divorce. It is true that Islam expressly discourages divorce (*talaq*, from a root meaning to untether a camel, and thus, by extension, to repudiate a wife). According to a *hadith*, the Prophet declared that, of all permissible actions, divorce is the most detested by God. On the other hand, Islamic law generally recognized a man's right to divorce his wife more or less at will. By contrast, unless a woman had stipulated in her marriage contract that her husband would repudiate her under certain conditions (e.g., if he beat her), she had to petition a *qadi* (judge) for a divorce and could do so under only very limited circumstances: according to some schools, if the husband failed to maintain her properly and, according to others, if he proved impotent.

The foregoing is a sketch, one that aims to present a generalized picture of the situation according to Islamic law. It does not take into account variations which existed among the various schools of Sunni law, nor, in general, does it seek to confirm the model with reference to actual practice in particular medieval Islamic societies, which must have varied widely. The latter is, of course, an interesting question, but answering it is difficult, given the nature of the surviving records. There are plenty of sources which discuss the lives of women in medieval Islamic societies, but almost all of them were written by men, so few allow women to speak for themselves, either directly or indirectly. One source that is especially revealing of the lives of women and their experience in marriage is the *genizah*, a storehouse of documents (including marriage contracts, trousseau lists, and personal correspondence) preserved by the Jewish community of Cairo over the Middle Ages (mentioned in Baskin). The picture that emerges from the *genizah* is one in which extended rather than nuclear families formed the principal basis of social life. Even when all the members of the family did not necessarily live under the same roof, they often had residences next door to one another or at least in the same urban quarter. A young girl leaving such a setting to take up residence with her husband's family undertook enormous risks, since she depended entirely on her father, brothers, uncles, and other male relations for support and protection. Consequently the marriage contracts preserved in the *genizah* frequently contain a stipulation, no doubt inserted at the insistence of the bride or her family, that the new couple not take up permanent residence in a distant town or that the bride be allowed regular visits to and from her relations. For similar reasons, the preferred form of marriage was (and remains in many parts of the Near East) endogamous, with a young man having a prescriptive right to marry his father's brother's daughter. Marriage to close relations provided not only a means of keeping wealth in the family but also protection for a young wife who, in the event of an abusive marriage, could more easily reach out for support from her male relatives.

ASPECTS OF SOCIAL LIFE

In other areas of social activity women led restricted lives, although the restrictions, of course, varied considerably depending upon time, place, and personal circumstance. Often, higher income and social status meant a more restricted life, as a family could afford such

accoutrements as large and separate private apartments within a domestic establishment and eunuchs (castrated male slaves) who performed the joint task of guarding the women of the household from extrafamilial males and serving as intermediaries between them and the outside world. These women lived within what is called the "harem," but it is important to distinguish the actual institution from the lascivious playground of sexual fantasy which is more a product of the Western imagination than an accurate reflection of Islamic social practice. The harem was essentially the private space within a household, that space in which the women and young children lived and to which only closely related males (husbands, fathers, uncles, sons, as well as any domestic servants) had access. The word comes from a root which means "to be forbidden, prohibited, unlawful," and, by extension, "sacrosanct, holy, taboo." It is directly related to another word which Muslims use to refer to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, so that the seclusion of women within the harem should be thought of (at least on an ideological level) as structurally parallel to the custom of excluding non-Muslims from the holy cities: both, that is, serve to guard that which is sacred and worthy of protection. The seclusion of women within the harem was rarely, of course, complete. Among poorer families, women participated more fully in social life out of economic necessity; this was especially true in rural agricultural communities, where women formed an important component of collective labor. It is clear from historical sources and prescriptive treatises as well as from imaginative literature such as the *Thousand and One Nights* that in fact women were often active participants in the economic and social life of Islamic cities, sometimes to the dismay of religious leaders who worried about the relatively unchecked mixing of men and women in the city streets and markets. When, in 1438, Cairo was wracked by plague and famine, the Sultan ordered that the women remain home and no longer appear in the streets; in doing so, he acted upon the advice of the religious scholars, who felt that the moral laxity suggested by the open social intercourse of women lay at the root of God's anger with the people of the city. The frequency with which such prohibitions appeared over the Middle Ages, however, suggest that they were, by and large, ineffectual.

In economic matters, women played a not insignificant role. It bears repeating that women could inherit and own property in their own right. Muslims had before them the example of Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, who is described in the sources as a business woman, and

who first encountered Muhammad when she employed him as her agent. By the later Middle Ages, women who engaged directly in major business affairs were no doubt less common, but nonetheless many did possess property, much of it real estate, and some took an active role in its management. Not a few women (mostly from the ruling classes) possessed enough wealth to construct and endow religious institutions, such as mosques or schools, an act which was one of the standard expressions of medieval Muslim piety. Women would quite naturally make significant contributions to the domestic economies of most households, for example by baking or sewing, and working-class women might hire out their labor as, say, seamstresses. There were also some occupations in which women specialized although opportunities were limited and most dealt specifically with women's own affairs or, in various ways, served to reinforce social boundaries based on gender: midwives, wet nurses, tattooers, coiffeuses, bath-house attendants, and professional match-makers.

In the religious sphere, too, women were able to carve out sizeable niches in which they could play a significant role. Islam, unlike Christianity, recognizes no priestly order. There are prayer leaders and preachers, of course, but such individuals do not represent a caste of men distinguished from others by their sacerdotal status. Instead, the religious elite is marked by its possession of *`ilm*, religious knowledge and knowledge of the holy law; collectively, that elite is known as the *`ulama*, "those who know." It was possible for a woman to acquire a level of expertise in one of the religious sciences which effectively qualified her as a member of this group. In large part, this was due to the personal and informal character of the transmission of religious knowledge in medieval Islam: one's status as a scholar depended not upon any degree but upon the status of one's own teachers and the public reputation which one acquired for learning. If a woman could claim some special qualification—for example, being the last surviving individual to have studied some text with its author or with a particularly esteemed teacher—then she too might become a link in the chain of transmitters through whom *`ilm* was passed from one generation to the next. There were limits, to be sure: it was relatively rare for a woman to become a specialist in Islamic law and virtually unheard of that she should act as a *qadi* or other religious official. But in some fields, especially the transmission of the Prophetic sayings, a number of women became quite prominent. In other areas of religious endeavor, women were even more conspicuous. Muslims drawn to Sufi

mysticism had before them the example of Rabi`a of Basra (d. circa 801), one of the most famous of the early "saints" of Islam. Cairo, Mecca, and other Islamic cities boasted a number of institutions especially established to house and support female mystics. One of the most common expressions of popular piety in the Islamic Near East was the cult of the saints and the visitation of the tombs of the pious dead. This practice was controversial and frequently earned the condemnation of those scholars who posed as guardians of the Islamic tradition; one of the reasons they objected to it was the prominence of women in the funerary and memorial celebrations and the various activities associated with them.

In the political sphere, however, the Islamic tradition radically circumscribed the role of women, despite references in the Quran to the Queen of Sheba and the historical fact of the rule of a woman, Zenobia, in northern Arabia in the late third century. Aisha, the Prophet's wife, found herself at the center of several controversies after Muhammad's death and, indeed, led a rebellion against the authority of the fourth caliph, Ali ibn Abi Talib. That insurrection, however, proved unsuccessful, and over the centuries the figure of Aisha, in the hands of the men who shaped the Islamic cultural legacy, became an example of the chaos that resulted from the meddling of women in political affairs.[4] The famous Nizam al-Mulk, vizier to the Seljuk sultans of Iraq and Iran in the eleventh century, was particularly scathing in his dismissal of women from the political realm. "They are wearers of the veil," he advised his rulers, "and have not complete intelligence. . . . In all ages, nothing but disgrace, infamy, discord and corruption have followed when kings have been dominated by their wives."[5] Nizam al-Mulk was reponding to what he perceived as the unfortunate political influence of the sultan's wife; on a formal level, however, women's exclusion from the political realm was, in the Middle Ages, almost complete. For a short period in the middle of the thirteenth century, a woman ruled over Egypt and Syria. Shajar al-Durr, widow of the previous sultan, took power in the year 1250 and issued decrees in her own name although her uncontested rule lasted less than three months. At the end of that time she was replaced by a prominent warrior, whom she married and with whom, effectively, she shared power for the next several years (until she arranged for his murder, in revenge for which she herself lost her life). But Shajar al-Durr's example is virtually unique in the medieval Islamic Near East. Only in the seventeenth century, in the Ottoman Empire, did women effectively rule a major

Islamic state, although even there they did so not in their own names, but as wives, concubines, and mothers of reigning princes.

The example of politics, however, is perhaps the wrong one with which to close, as its public nature made it least accessible to women. The actual position of women in the medieval Islamic societies of the Near East was in fact considerably more complex than the prevailing western stereotypes allow. Certainly women were subject to a variety of restrictions and limitations, many of them grounded in the religious world-view which produced Islam, confirmed and strengthened by various provisions of Islamic law. At the same time, the system itself provided certain safeguards as well as opportunities, of which women were able to take advantage to establish for themselves meaningful, if circumscribed, social lives.

NOTES

1. Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer), *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 2:134.

2. Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 74-95.

3. Jonathan P. Berkey, "Circumcision Circumscribed: Female Excision and Cultural Accommodation in the Medieval Near East" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 19-38.

4. See Denise A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The Legacy of A'isha bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Nabia Abbott, *Aishah, the Beloved of Mohammed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

5. Quoted in John A. Williams, *Themes of Islamic Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 105.

PART II

Women and Law in the Middle Ages

INTRODUCTION

Although one might not think of it this way, the Middle Ages was probably the most significant period of time in the development of law and legal institutions that the West has ever experienced. Even more than the Roman period, the medieval age created, analysed, utilized, and altered law and the way western civilization viewed the relationship between law and the individual. The medieval obsession with law increased over the years; the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were eras of legal evolution unmatched by any other time. In those two hundred years, Roman civil law was "rediscovered" and adapted to meet the needs of the day; kingdom-wide systems of "common" law were being developed in England, in Sicily and southern Italy, and in Christian Spain; and France was centralizing its legal institutions to help in centralizing political authority. Another legal development of the period had international consequences: the codification and rationalization of the law of the Christian church in the West or canon law.

Legal sources are among those most often used for the history of women in the Middle Ages. They vary greatly in style and subject, can provide information both on theory as regards to women and on the actual practice of the law as it pertained to women, and are abundant for most sections of medieval Europe. The legal position of women in Europe changed significantly from time to time and from place to place. Because of the very complex arrangement of legal systems, a woman travelling from Italy to Germany, or from England to

Constantinople, could experience a wide range of legal disabilities or privileges. Medieval Europe did not have a single legal system. In fact, the individual regions themselves accommodated a welter of legal systems, ranging from Roman civil law to common law to local custom. The Germanic peoples who migrated into western Europe from the second century to the sixth century C.E. brought with them their own legal systems, which they then combined with the laws of the Roman Empire. With the separation of the two halves of the Roman Empire, law developed differently: Roman law continued to flourish in the Byzantine Empire while a hybrid of Roman, Germanic, and local law developed in the west. England remained relatively untouched by legal developments on the continent until the late twelfth or thirteenth century, and the development of English common law continued with little significant influence from Roman law. Islamic law replaced much of Roman and Visigothic law in Spain after the establishment of the Abbasid caliphate of Cordova. In most of Europe, legal institutions and legal systems were highly localized, with an incredible—and very confusing—variety of customs, laws, and procedures. In fact, because of the sheer variety of legal codes in the Holy Roman Empire, there is no way to discuss in any systematic fashion the legal situation for women in medieval Germany. Indeed, unlike legal scholars in other parts of Europe, there is no one well enough versed in the complexities of Germanic legal systems to attempt an essay for this volume! Even in the later Middle Ages, when an increased emphasis on Roman civil law encouraged the development of kingdom-wide legal systems and when the law of the church, canon law, reflected this growing interest in creating uniformity under Roman legal procedure, private law—the laws pertaining to land, family, and personal relationships—remained largely Germanic and largely local in scope.

There are thus very few universally applicable issues with respect to women and medieval law. In fact, there is only one legal situation which might be considered universal with respect to women: their disability under public law in all places and at all times. Although women did participate in the legal systems of all the medieval regions, they did not have any formal rights in the context of public legal institutions. Women could not be justices in the law courts; they could not be members of juries; they could not accuse another person of a felony (except the murder of their husband); they could not, in most places (England was the exception), be appointed as an attorney (even when the position was not a professional one). In criminal cases, wives

were not responsible for their husbands' felonious activities. A wife, for example, could not be named as an accessory to robbery unless she had placed the stolen goods in her own storeroom for which she, alone, held the keys. On the other hand, in many cases a husband was either fully or partially responsible for a wife's criminal activities, in much the same way that fathers were legally responsible for the activities of minor children. Thus, in public law, medieval women had little or no legal "personality."

This situation was in stark contrast to women's positions under private law. If it involved land, the family, or personal relationships of almost any kind, women could—and did—participate fully in the process of the law. Women, despite the restrictions of primogeniture (inheritance by the eldest son) which were common in much of Europe from about the eleventh century, could and did inherit land. They acquired property in the form of dowry from their natal families and dower from their late husbands if and when they were widowed. Women in some parts of Europe could be executors of other peoples' wills; they could be tutors or guardians of their minor children (and of other minor heirs); they could pursue suits in the law courts against family, neighbors, enemies, and friends. In short, under private law women could expect a position of relative parity with men (at least in contrast to their almost complete disability under public law). This wide-ranging legal "personality" provided women with the means to gain access, through informal channels, to political and economic power which was forbidden to them through more formal means. Thus, the seemingly firm line between public and private activity was not nearly as firm as one might believe.

The essays in this section range from those which discuss the legal position of women in private law, especially their relation to land, in England, France, and Italy, to the law of the Church. Janet Loengard outlines the position of women with respect to common law in England. Kathryn Reyerson and Thomas Kuehn focus on France and Italy, respectively, in an overview of women within continental legal traditions. Finally, Linda Mitchell treats the position of women within canon law and its effect on the development of Roman-based law on the continent.

CHAPTER 7

Common Law For Margery

Separate But Not Equal

Janet S. Loengard

This essay begins with a series of disclaimers, the kind that advertisements for bank loans and automobile rentals put in small print.[1] First of all, I will put forth no new arguments and present no newly-found evidence on any point. What follows is intended as a primer, a starting place for study, and it relies heavily on other people's research and writing. Second, and related to that, an essay so brief and widely focussed necessarily deals in generalizations but everyone knows that generalizations can—and should—be qualified. "Generally," "usually," "most" have to be understood as hovering at the edges of (almost) all pronouncements. But most important of all, one cannot speak simply of "women" and their relation to the medieval English common law; for our purposes there is no such being as a "medieval Englishwoman." That is the underlying theme of what follows.

Let us take a hypothetical female; let us name her Margery and plant her firmly in the thirteenth century.[2] Let us ask the nearest thirteenth-century lawyer about Margery's rights and responsibilities with regard to owning land, to inheriting a diamond necklace, to making a will, to carrying on a trade, to entering an agreement to buy a horse or rent a room or enter employment, to annoying her neighbour by keeping pigs, to being sued for a debt .... "Stop, stop!" cries our lawyer in some agitation. "How should I know? Who is this Margery? Is she a free woman? Is she of full age? Is she a religious [that is, a professed nun]? Is she married? Is she a widow? Does she live in a city, and if so which one? By what tenure does she propose to hold land? Does she have a brother? ... " Now it is our turn to be agitated. Probably we are a little bit annoyed: does this lawyer mean to confuse

us? Is he officious or simply unbelievably nosy? Do all these bits of Margery's personal history matter, when we have asked a series of simple questions? Of course they do. To a great extent, Margery's legal rights and responsibilities with respect to her family, her neighbours, her creditors, and the king himself turn on, and are defined by, her age and marital and social status and even her place of residence.

What an incredibly daunting thought, and how tempting to end this essay at once! But medieval women—and men—would have been quite used to the neat pigeonholing necessary before any such questions could be answered. The first and most important division might have been one based on personal freedom: free or unfree? Free women and villein women (that is, semi-free peasants) shared many rights and obligations at what we would call the criminal law, at least theoretically, although the place of enforcement and means of trial might vary. But they had little in common so far as the private or civil law, the non-criminal law, affected them. The landholding and inheritance and employment and petty wrongdoing of unfree women, like those of unfree men, were governed largely not by the common law but by custom of the manor on which they lived. Issues arising in these matters did not go into the king's courts but into a manorial court presided over by an official of the lord of the manor. By its terms, then, this essay does not have to deal with villein women except insofar as it touches on issues involving them which the king's courts were willing to adjudicate using the common law; most of those were called pleas of the crown and we would think of them as criminal. For example, in most instances a woman of unfree status who was accused of killing or seriously wounding another person or who suffered rape would find herself before the quarter sessions of the Justices of the Peace or the assizes when the royal justices came into the county on one of their periodic visits.

We have just dismissed from consideration perhaps a majority of medieval English women (at least in the thirteenth and earlier centuries). Let us dismiss as well a much smaller group, professed religious women, since by the rules of the church itself and the vows they took they did not act as individuals to work at a trade or hold property or sue their neighbours.

We are left with free laywomen. The criterion most significant in determining their rights and responsibilities was undoubtedly marital status. Indeed, it was more important even than age. One hundred years ago, Maitland wrote that while women had virtually no public functions

except to pay taxes, at private law they were in general on a par with men. A woman could hold land (though disadvantaged to some extent by the rules of inheritance), own chattels, make a will, make a contract, sue and be sued. Splendid, we think, until we get to the final paragraph of the section: "We have been speaking of women who are sole, who are spinsters or widows. Women who have husbands are in a different position."[3] Indeed they were. It is necessary to ascertain a woman's marital status before assessing her ability, or inability, to buy a diamond necklace or borrow money or make a will or lease a field or sue for personal injury. To further complicate categorization, marital status turned on the existence of a valid marriage and that might not depend on common law at all but on canon law, the law of the church.

Nonetheless, certainly age must be considered in examining the rights and liabilities of our Englishwoman: whether a person—male or female—was a minor or of age obviously had bearing on the ability to contract marriage, or hold land, or incur a debt. Indeed, the twin institutions of wardship and marriage meant that age was even more important a legal factor than it is today, because a third party might have a financial interest in a minor's property or choice of spouse. Infancy is less significant in the area of criminal law, perhaps because its effects were severely limited; the most that can be said is that a child of "tender" age could not usually be held guilty of a felony, at least until the age of seven.

The easiest way to deal with so complex a subject in so short a space, then, is probably to take up various significant legal topics and examine them with regard to different categories of free laywomen: single or married, minor or of age, urban or rural, noble or bourgeois-whatever categories seem relevant.

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD: PROPERTY

The first topic must be land and landholding, because that was economically and socially so important. The vast majority of cases in the plea rolls—the legal records of cases brought into the king's courts and decided by the rules of common law—touch on land: who inherited it, who held it and how, who was able to do what with it. There was an array of recognized possible ways, or tenures, in which free laypeople could hold land: by chivalric or military tenure (that is, by knight service), grand serjeanty, petty serjeanty, socage, burgage tenure. Each had its own rules and its own consequences. What is more, there was an

array of possible estates a person could have in that land. For example, one might hold it in fee, which meant that one's heir would inherit it; or for life; or for the life of another person; or for a term of years (which was not seen as a freehold estate at all, but that need not concern us here).

Women could hold in all these tenures and have any of these estates. But to hold land one must first inherit it, buy it, or be given it as a present. For women, and probably for men, gifts at marriage and inheritance were the more common ways of acquiring land. Throughout the Middle Ages, common law did not permit the transfer of freehold estates in land by will (although some cities made exceptions under their own laws). The freehold a man or woman held at his or her death went to the person whom the law saw as entitled to it under the terms of rather elaborate rules known as the canons of descent; that person was called the heir at law.

Women, both single and married, could and did become heirs or, more accurately, heiresses. But it was not easy. Even without the increasingly intricate arrangements devised to exclude them, they were at a disadvantage because women inherited only in the absence of an appropriate male: a son. Already in the twelfth century, England practiced both non-partible inheritance and (male) primogeniture. Put in its most simple terms that meant that where there were two or three or four sons, the oldest inherited all the freehold land and the rest none. The same was true where one or more of the younger children were daughters. Where the oldest child was a daughter followed by one or more sons, the oldest son took the entire inheritance. Only where there were no sons did a daughter inherit and if there were several daughters, they inherited jointly; primogeniture did not apply to female heirship. There were additional rules for cases involving collateral relatives such as cousins and these again were designed to keep land out of the hands of women (many of these formulae existed until 1925; English books on property law often included tables setting out the canons of descent).

But even the undisputed heiress was usually not able to call her land her own in the sense of having control over it. The twin institutions known as wardship and marriage meant that she might never do so. At English law, a child—male or female—whose father had died and who thereby had inherited freehold land needed a guardian whether or not his or her mother was alive. The choice of guardian depended on the form of tenure of the inherited land. If the land was socage land, the guardian was the child's closest relative who

could not inherit it, often the mother, sometimes a maternal uncle. But the guardian of a child who inherited land held by knight tenure or grand serjeanty was usually his or her dead father's lord. The guardian could use the rents and profits of the land for his own benefit until the child's majority, so long as he did not commit waste—substantially injure the land—and did provide for the child's maintenance. When a male heir turned twenty-one, he reached his majority, and the lord was obliged to turn the land over to him.

It was different for girls. Whatever the rule before 1275, the Statute of Westminster I of that year included a provision that a guardian could legitimately hold an heiress's land only until she was fourteen, when by implication she should be married. If she were not married by the time she was sixteen, she could bring an action against the guardian to recover her inheritance. That must have happened very rarely, because it was in the guardian's interest to marry off his ward. Just as wardship of lands held in knight tenure did not resemble the modern institution we know by the same name neither did marriage. A guardian had the right to marry off an heir or heiress for his, the guardian's, own profit. He could not choose someone legally or socially unsuitable—that was called "disparaging the ward"—but he did have the right to pick a socially suitable husband or wife for his male or female ward and to profit from the choice: men paid good money to marry themselves or their children to heirs or heiresses of substantial lands and the money went into the guardian's coffers. It was otherwise with socage tenure; a guardian had the right to marry off a ward, but the profits, if any, went to the child.

Marriage did not affect the young heir's rights to his land, but it entirely altered the heiress's. When she was married, her lands went with her, out of the hands of her guardian—and into the hands of her husband. But so did every woman's; a married woman could not control even lands which she had held independently before marriage (as she would have if she were a middle-aged widow who remarried), and that was true of all estates and all tenures. A husband was said to hold "in right of his wife." The law did not give title to the husband. But he could do almost anything with his wife's land except sell it or give it away without her consent. He could lease it out, mortgage it, enjoy all the profits from it. Quite possibly, in other words, a woman might never be the mistress of her own lands.

On the other hand, she might outlive her husband, and a surviving wife's land was supposed to return to her immediately upon her

husband's death. But surviving meant even more than getting her own land back. A widow was supposed to receive a life interest in a portion of her late spouse's lands under the institution called dower. Before the end of the thirteenth century, the fraction was settled at common law as one-third of all freehold land held by the husband at any time during the marriage. At common law, a later marriage by the widow did not affect her rights, but various towns, cities, and counties had different rules. By their custom, the share might be greater or less and it might be terminated by remarriage. The Custom of London, for example, used as a measure one-third of the land of which the husband had died seised [possessed] but declared dower forfeit in the event a woman took a new husband or had a child by anybody other than her dead husband. By the custom of the county of Kent a widow got half the lands her husband had held in Kentish gavelkind (a form of tenure unique to Kent) but lost them "if she commit fornication in her widowhood or take a husband after. . . ."[4]

Dower was meant to support the widow and her younger children, since primogeniture meant the heir or his guardian immediately took all the rest of the late husband's lands. It was obviously important to her. But it tended to fragment an inheritance (at least temporarily), and husbands more concerned about keeping land safely together for the heir than about their widows' comfort displayed extraordinary ingenuity in devising ways to limit or reduce their wives' dower. Before the end of the fourteenth century, one of the most effective means was for a man to put his land in trust (technically called a use), since the rule was that there could be no dower on a husband's interest as beneficiary under the trust.

It is much easier to speak of a wife's interest in personal property, the "chattels" of medieval life, such as horses, cows, furniture, silverware, jewels, whatever: she had none. Any possessions a woman had when she married, no matter how she had acquired them, whether by purchase or gift or inheritance, or anything she acquired afterwards, immediately became the property of her husband, absolutely. He was free to use them, lend them, sell them, give them away, break them—and they could be used to pay his debts. Not only that, if he died before his wife he could dispose of them by his will and she could do nothing about it. The theory behind this interesting development was that a woman gave herself and all she possessed to her husband at marriage, upon which husband and wife became one person—and that person, as Blackstone suggested in the eighteenth century, was the husband.[5] But

surely not all women were married to men who would take advantage of such laws? Margery, for example, would certainly have had a more loving husband—we will call him Thomas. But Thomas could not alter the legal results of matrimony, for no husband, however loving, could do so in a legally binding fashion. A man could not make an agreement to the contrary with his wife, even before they married, because it would become invalid upon their marriage. Nor—theoretically—could he make her a gift since one cannot make a gift to oneself.

It follows from this that while a single woman could make a will, a married woman could not: she had nothing to leave. There was some dispute on the matter because the church regarded the denial as inequitable and went so far in 1261 and again in 1342 as to threaten with excommunication those who refused to allow married women to make testamentary disposition. But two years later, the Commons in Parliament protested, and the rule enforced by the Common Law courts became that a married woman could make a will only with the consent of her husband, which could be revoked at any time until the will was probated—in other words, until the wife died. Unmarried women, on the other hand, were as capable of making wills as men were. Again, it must be remembered that villein women, single or married, did not have testamentary capacity—but neither did villein men.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET: MARRIED WOMEN, CONTRACTS, AND TORTS

The same reasoning prohibited a married woman from making a contract or acquiring a debt in her own right, although she could do so as attorney (or agent) for her husband. J.H. Baker says it was settled by 1300 that a wife could bind her husband "to a sale of goods which came to his use or profit."[6] But even that was whittled away. By 1500, the husband was bound only if he had given prior permission or had ratified the contract, thereby making it his own. It was an arrangement which led to unlimited difficulty for courts; the problems in proving or disproving either permission or ratification can only be imagined. Obviously if a woman ordered a leg of lamb and her husband ate it for dinner, the case would seem fairly clear. But when the agreement underlying the contract did not work out—when Thomas could have bought at a better price the cloth Margery had ordered for a new dress or when he did not want his daughter to have the lessons his wife had arranged—the story was different. The obvious result should have been

that no merchant or workman could afford to deal with a woman unless he knew her to be unmarried. If his bill was not paid, he could not move against her husband and he could not look to the wife for payment because by law she had nothing with which to pay.

Wives' theoretical inability to make contracts should have been turned into practical reality by tradesmen's prudence. If carried to its logical extremes, this should have meant that women could not so much as buy material for clothing. That this did not happen was probably due to necessity. Even a grand theoretical scheme could not alter the fact that women had to make purchases on behalf of the household. The law devised methods to protect creditors who sold these necessities on credit, speaking of "general authority," presuming in some instances that the wife was acting as her husband's agent—so long as there was no notice to the contrary by the husband. But what of the woman whose husband was ill or away and who might therefore have to arrange all the family's purchases or payments or even make business decisions? Again, the theory of wife as attorney or agent for her husband might have been invoked, but it did not go far enough to protect most creditors. The prudent tradesman might still have refused to deal with a woman he knew to be married, or, more sweeping, with a woman whom he did not know to be single.

Such an arrangement might suffice for the wife of a baron or a country landholder. It did not for the woman in London or other cities who contributed to the family income with her labor, apart from her husband. A more effective way of permitting some women to function in the commercial world was devised by custom rather than by the common law. London, various other cities, and a number of manors knew the institution of the *feme sole*, the married woman engaged in trade with her husband's consent and without his interference in her work, who was treated as a single woman for purposes of the buying and selling concerned with her livelihood.

It goes without saying that single women of full age, whether never married or widowed, were true *femes sole* and ordinarily suffered no theoretical disability by reason of gender which interfered with their ability to borrow, lend, purchase, rent, sell, sue or be sued for debt, and so on. Here again, theory and practice undoubtedly diverged, but an examination of the evidence for that is not within the scope of this essay.

Torts presented yet another problem. Torts are wrongful acts which are not criminal but which cause harm or injury and which, therefore,

may be the subject of a lawsuit. Did a woman's position diverge from a man's when each had committed the same wrongful act? What of someone who allows dirty water from a kitchen to flow across a neighbor's land or deliberately smashes the treasured dishes borrowed from a neighbor, or throws a ball which veers and hits a bystander's head—all of them actions capable of performance by men or women? Whoever the actor, the lawsuit alleged the same injury, offered the same proof, and demanded the same remedy.

The defining fact was not in itself sex. Status in terms of personal freedom mattered more. An unfree woman would have neither sued nor been sued in the king's courts, though manor court rolls are full of the kind of wrongs described above. Among freewomen, marital status once more plays a role: men and unmarried women were sued in their own names. At common law, married women did not sue and were not liable. It would be wrong to say that they were not responsible for their torts in a moral or legal sense. But there would have been little point in making a married woman the sole defendant in a case asking for compensation or damages, because she had nothing with which to pay them. Therefore a suit had to be brought against husband and wife jointly.

The husband was not considered at fault simply because he was married to his wife; he was not at fault unless he was shown to be a participant in the act complained of. But he was liable for any damages awarded as a result of a lawsuit, theoretically because he and his wife were one person according to the law, and practically because chattels of the wife had come into his hands upon their marriage. Similarly, in a suit for injury to a married woman, husband and wife had to bring the action jointly. Nor did compensation for the injury done a wife belong to her; it could not. As soon as it was received, it became the property of her husband just as a gift or an inheritance would have. Margery and Thomas, then, have a legal relationship which in many ways we might find more understandable if it were between a father and his young child. In fact, common law did not mandate that women were perpetual children. But in the case of married women, it rendered them invisible by merging the wife's legal being into that of her husband for many purposes.

FEMALE FELONY: WOMEN, CRIME, AND PUNISHMENT

We have so far been talking about private, not public, law and rights. Ordinarily, women had little or no place in the public sphere. As Maitland put it, "a sure instinct" had already before the end of the thirteenth century guided the law to a general rule which would endure to his own time: as to private rights, unmarried women were "on the same level as men . . . but public functions they have none . . . on the bench, in the jury box there is no place for them."[7]

Given that, it is instructive that the great area in which women's marital status—or indeed their sex—was in theory not usually considered was criminal liability. A married woman who committed a crime not only could answer for it without her husband but was obliged to do so. Practice and theory may have produced different results, but in theory a woman could commit most of the felonies a man could and could be punished for them as he was. That did not mean that the law took no note of the sex of a party. It did. One result was to limit a woman's ability to move against a wrongdoer. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a very common way in which a person was brought to the attention of a court in connection with a criminal act was by another person's appeal; it was essentially a private suit. The accuser (the appellor) appeared, declared that so-and-so (the appellee) had committed such-and-such an act and offered to prove it by his body — that is, to do battle.

Women could not do battle. When they were appealed of a felony, they could be obliged (before 1215) to submit to the ordeal, a means of trial whereby the accused person held a red-hot iron, plunged an arm into boiling water, and so on. If there was no serious injury, it was assumed that God had signified that the person was innocent. Also before 1215, when they appealed someone, the *appellor*, male or female, went to the ordeal. Unsurprisingly, the rule was that a woman could not bring an appeal except for her own rape or for the death of her husband if he had been slain within her arms. After 1215, when by action of the Fourth Lateran Council, the ordeal was abolished, battle remained an alternative for able-bodied men. After a few years of uncertainty, the practice became to try women by jury. Perhaps this is one reason that appeals in general became less frequent and were superseded by indictments and presentments by a grand jury, triable by a petit jury. The prohibition of women as appellors thus became less significant. But women's inability to participate in proceedings went

beyond the appeal. They were neither lawyers (in criminal cases, although women in theory could be appointed as a lawyer in civil cases) nor judges. With one exception—in the case of determining pregnancy—they could not sit on a jury. Indeed, a woman defendant might well find herself the only female present in court.

Women, single or married, could not be outlawed because they were never "in-lawed." That is, they could not participate in the system whereby all men over the age of twelve were gathered in groups of ten called a tithing and were collectively responsible for each other's conduct. But not being outlawed was not particularly useful. Women were waived in cases which would have brought outlawry for a man, with many of the same results.

The married woman's status as *femme couvert* carried a few benefits. Before the end of the Middle Ages, it had been held that a woman could not commit larceny by stealing from her husband; a remarkably literal reading of the wedding ceremony meant that he had endowed her with his worldly goods when he married her. And under some circumstances, she was not liable for her husband's theft even if she knew of it. Bracton suggests that, since the stolen goods were not under her control but in her husband's; she was not expected to accuse her husband or disclose his theft. On the other hand, the benefit may be illusory: she was liable if the goods were found "under her keys," that is, locked up in her chest or store-room, for wifely obedience did not extend to "heinous deeds." It would have been a brave wife who defied a larcenous husband's order to hide purloined goods! Perhaps more significantly, a wife who stole at her husband's command might be acquitted of felony.

Personal innocence could save a wife's life or freedom, but it did not necessarily protect her from economic loss due to her husband's wrongdoing. With the exception of the county of Kent, the spouse of a convicted felon lost her dower, because a felon's lands were forfeited to the king for a year and a day and then went to his lord.

A criminal law so severe as medieval England's not surprisingly developed built-in ways of softening its rigor. One was called benefit of clergy. It developed in the twelfth century out of King Henry II's quarrel with his archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. When, following Becket's murder, Henry II was forced to give way on his claim to try clerics who had committed crimes, the result was that the king's courts could not punish any member of the clergy for an offense carrying the death penalty. Such an offender was to be turned over to

his bishop for disciplinary measures. Since ecclesiastical courts could not decree capital punishment, the penalty for a malefaction was significantly lighter for a clerk than for his lay counterpart. Nor did "clergy" extend only to priests; the position expanded so that in the later Middle Ages, proof of clerical status depended simply on the defendant's being able to read a set piece from the bible, the "neck verse." Thousands of men escaped the noose by reading the magical lines—or reciting them from memory. But women could not be clerks. Reading—and probably few enough could read—helped them not one whit. Although nuns at one time might have been able to claim the privilege, there is no evidence that any made such a claim. Modern writers have noted that women could plead pregnancy—called "benefit of belly"—because pregnancy was a reason for preserving a convicted mother-to-be's life since her unborn child had not offended. But unlike benefit of clergy, pregnancy provided only a temporary respite: once the child was born, the convicted mother could safely be hanged.

One final point must be mentioned: the concept of petty treason. Treason in the ordinary sense was defined in 1352 as encompassing the death of the king or other named members of the royal family, violating the queen or the wife of the heir to the throne, or levying war against the king or adhering to his enemies. But in a hierarchical world, it is not surprising that the idea was expanded. One could commit treason against one's personal sovereign, as it were, against a superior to whom one owed a particular duty of obedience and fidelity. An apprentice who murdered his master was guilty of petty treason. So was a monk who murdered his abbot. And so was a wife who murdered her husband. Leaving aside apprentices and monks, the penalty for a wife found guilty of petty treason was being burned to death. Murdering one's wife, on the other hand, was simply murder—also a capital offense, but in the medieval period the penalty for murder was open to mitigation.

This is not the place to discuss the crimes of which women were most commonly accused or how often they were acquitted or convicted. There has been some debate on the matter, and several excellent monographs and articles have been written on it. But perhaps it should be noted that there seems to be no evidence of prosecution in the secular courts for the crime one expects to see most associated with medieval women: infanticide. This was not because it did not occur, but because prosecution of infanticide was apparently left up to the ecclesiastical courts. The mother (or indeed the father or other person)

guilty of murdering an infant did not face death for the act. In a world which knew nothing of sudden infant death syndrome, that may be just as well.

CONCLUSION

Reading cases, statutes, treatises, one wonders how much they reflected—or determined—the life experiences of most women. Then one thinks of how long the medieval strictures shaped the lives of women: almost until yesterday or the day before that. Were mid-nineteenth century women legally better off than their thirteenth-century counterparts? Widows formally and definitively lost their right to dower in 1833 (although it had been without value for most women long before that); their personal property still belonged absolutely to their husbands; they had no right to the custody of their children; they could not make contracts. Married or single, they could not sit in Parliament; they could not be jurors or judges; they could not vote. The Victorians began to change much of that. It is odd to think about: writing about Margery, our medieval English woman, and the common law is not that different from writing about our own great-great-grandmothers.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Sue Sheridan Walker for reading a draft of this essay and rescuing me from various typos, omissions, and infelicities. All those remaining, together with all errors, are of course my own.

2. The thirteenth, because that is the first century for which there are extensive common law records and also the century when three of the great medieval English treatises on law were written: Bracton's *On the Laws and Customs of England*, Fleta, and Britton. This is also the century in which the legal profession developed.

3. Frederick Pollock and Frederic William Maitland, *The History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I*, 2 vols. 2nd ed. with introduction and bibliography by S.F.C. Milsom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), I:485.

4. Thomas Robinson, *The Common Law of Kent or the Customs of Gavelkind*, new ed. by J.D. Norwood (Ashford, Kent, 1858), 96.

5. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books* (Oxford, 1764-1769; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), I: ch. 15, 442.

6. J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1990), 555.

7. *The History of English Law*, I: 485.

CHAPTER 8

Women and Law in France and Italy

Kathryn Reyerson and Thomas Kuehn

PART 1: MEDIEVAL FRANCE

France was a mosaic of legal practices in the Middle Ages. Changes through time only contributed to differences in practice. Any study of women and law in medieval France must therefore take into account the considerable variety of juridical conditions of women in different regions. In addition, women in urban contexts fared differently under the law than did rural women. A woman's social and legal status—whether she was of noble background, a member of the urban elite, a member of the artisan class, or of dependent peasant background—also affected her legal rights. In general, the written law of the lands of the south was closer to Roman law traditions, while the customary laws of the north were more heavily influenced by Germanic practice. Legal historians agree that women in medieval France were considered to be inferior to men under the law and that women's inferiority was somewhat more pronounced in rural areas compared to urban areas. In general, Christianity had a mitigating effect on the severity of Germanic law in regard to women, because the former emphasized the equality of women and men, rich and poor, before God.

In the early Middle Ages, under the newly codified Germanic laws, women in various parts of medieval France fared differently. In general, women were protected under Germanic law, much as property and possessions were, and compensation was due if women were injured or disgraced. The sharpest contrast in the experience of women in different regions of early medieval France can be drawn through looking at Germanic inheritance practices. The early Salian Franks,

who controlled the northern region, denied women the right of succession in real property (although this was modified in later codifications). In contrast, the Visigoths in the south advocated the equal division of inheritance between male and female heirs.

Inheritance customs are important roadmaps to the status of women under French law in later periods as well. Such practices continued to reflect a great variety of provisions from primogeniture in the male line, which excluded women entirely, to a system of equal division among male and female heirs, to a complex mixed system in the region of Paris which required the return of any property previously obtained before participation at equal levels in the paternal inheritance was possible. In towns of the south of France, urban statutes generally excluded daughters who had already received dowries from further participation in the paternal and maternal inheritance. In all of these cases, statutory or codified law determined the parameters of intestate inheritance. Through the use of last wills and testaments, which were especially common in the south of France in the High and late Middle Ages, the testator could make whatever arrangements he or she wished.

Although initially not intended to be hereditary, the regime of fiefs or benefices which emerged in the ninth century quickly developed into an hereditary system. Women of the nobility in France were able to inherit such fiefs when there was no male heir. The military service they owed was performed by someone else; if the women married—as most did—their husbands fulfilled the military role and took charge of the feudal property. Female heiresses nonetheless swore fealty and did homage, with their husbands if married and independently if single or widowed. Eleanor of Aquitaine did homage for her principality (which contained most of southwestern France) to the king of France, for example. Although heiresses thus had access to often significant landed property, they could also be wards of their overlords (especially if they were unmarried minors) and therefore were subject to the constraints imposed on their actions by their guardians.

If noblewomen had legal inheritance rights in property in medieval France, it is worth noting that, from the early fourteenth century, women were prevented from inheriting the crown or from acting as the conduit through which a royal child could become king. This principle was established with the succession crisis at the death of the last Capetian king in the direct line in 1328, when Edward III of England was denied the inheritance of the French crown because his claim to the throne was through his mother, the French princess and English Queen

Isabella. Thus, the primary role of the French queen became limited to producing a male heir and guaranteeing the succession in that way.

Marriage law had an obvious and enormous impact on women. Georges Duby has outlined competing views of marriage in medieval France: the aristocratic—which used women as pawns in the game of fortune, family, and politics—and the ecclesiastical—which was concerned with the spiritual union of the spouses and, from the twelfth century, required the consent of both parties to a marriage.[1] Church law made divorce difficult, except in certain circumstances such as consanguinity (relationship by blood, marriage, or god-parenthood) or adultery, in which women were generally held to a higher standard than were men. The requirement of a dowry provided for wives who became widows. Germanic traditions of brideprice and morning gift, both of which came from the husband, gradually gave way to the practice of dowry coming from the bride's family to support the newlyweds' household. The husband's gift might then take the form of a dower, which was limited to a percentage of the husband's property.

In marriage women passed from paternal authority to the authority of their husbands to whom they owed respect. The husband had the right to punish his wife for wrongdoing. A woman could inherit her husband's status as head of the household in his absence or by reason of his incapacity. In medieval Provence, the peasant widow inherited the paternal power of the husband at his death, directed the household, and could expel children who did not conform to parental expectations.

Women's ability to control their dowries hurtled against the power of the father in the Midi through the Roman law of *patria potestas*, which made increasing headway in southern French law throughout the Middle Ages and eventually spread to all of France by the sixteenth century. The wife's lineage might exert some counter-influence over these tendencies. Laws which stipulated that the family property was communally owned by both husband and wife provided wives with access to movables and to real property acquired after marriage. In the north of France, the *Grand Coutumier de France* stipulated that a wife's property could not be sold or encumbered by her husband without her consent unless he had power of attorney. The *Coutumes de Beauvaisis* allowed a wife to claim her dower from a husband's property even if he had sold it during their marriage, although after her death the dower property reverted back to the buyer. According to the *Coutumes de Beauvaisis*, movable property was in the husband's control.

Rights of dower often placed noblewomen in charge of fiefs. In her capacity as head of a large fief a woman might issue charters and sit in judgment of matters in dispute. In addition, noblewomen in France could serve as guardians of their sons. Queens could and did serve as regents for their minor sons and might exercise enormous influence over them after they reached adulthood as Blanche of Castile did over Louis IX.

Women's ability to conduct business on their own was also curtailed in the north of France, where contracts made by a woman without her husband's approval were declared to be null and void in some areas such as Normandy. In the south of France, women were able to enter into contracts on behalf of others as was recorded by notaries in their registers because they renounced the Roman law protection of the *Senatusconsultum Velleianum*, which had been devised in the first century C.E. in order to prevent women from "intervening" on another's behalf.[2] Documents of practice show women engaged in a wide range of economic activities, often independent of the oversight of a man. They bought and sold goods, entered into partnerships, invested in real property, and lent money. Women participated in apprenticeships, passing from the power of their fathers into that of their masters. Although women did practice trades, with few exceptions—female guilds in Paris, for example—women did not participate as equals in guild membership, were not part of the sworn governing boards of guilds, and generally could not achieve master status unless, as widows, they inherited the status of their husbands in those cases where they practiced the same trade. Although marriage contracts and apprenticeship contracts found in notarial registers usually showed women accompanied by parents or by a parent and/or male relatives, women (probably widows or single women) did appear alone passing business contracts before the notary.

Married women were also restricted in bringing suits before the law courts, especially if unaccompanied by their husbands. According to the *Etablissements de Saint Louis*, married women could not go alone to court unless they had been beaten. An exception was made for independent tradeswomen who were able to defend themselves in business matters. Generally, women (and men) needed professional representation in court. Women could not participate in the legal or paralegal professions of advocate, lawyer, judge, law professor, or notary. They were denied access to the university training which underpinned these professions.

In many areas of France, women were subject to sumptuary laws limiting the opulence of their clothing as were men, in some instances, and Jews. Church councils were the source of some of these prohibitions. The use of silks had already been limited under the Carolingians (ninth century). Thirteenth-century statutes of Montpellier prohibited the use of some kinds of silk fabric, except as linings, and limited the wearing of gems and jewelry. Furs could also be the subject of controls as could particular colors such as purple. Clerical and royal laws prohibited some types of dress design and might also dictate limits on the length and shape of shoes. The purpose of these laws was to limit the opulence primarily of the middle and lower classes in order to distinguish the social classes from one another. This was considered particularly important when differentiating Jews and prostitutes from the rest of the population.

Women occasionally ran afoul of the law and of contemporary morals. Legislation established by the Capetian kings punished prostitution. Saint Louis advocated moral reform in many areas, and his 1254 ordinance ordered the abolition of prostitution. This was, however, modified by a more moderate 1256 ordinance which favored government control and regulation over outright abolition. In 1272, Philip III issued an ordinance banning prostitution as well as other questionable activities such as gaming and blasphemy. By the time of Philip IV (1285-1314), royal zeal to extirpate prostitution had diminished. Locally, as in towns of the Languedoc region of southern France, prostitution was supervised by municipal officials. At first, "Hot Streets" confined prostitutes to particular areas of town. Later, prostitution was institutionalized with the establishment of municipally run public brothels. Through these legal changes, prostitutes became both more protected and more limited in the scope of their activities.

Medieval French law also addressed the issue of marginal women: the have-nots of Paris, the hangers-on of armies. Certain public spaces, such as inns, were not frequented by women of good character and attracted women of questionable reputation. Women participated in unorthodox religious movements and were condemned as heretics by church authorities and the Inquisition. Politics were sometimes behind such condemnations, as in the case of Joan of Arc, but they could also be the result of women's demands for independence. This situation is epitomized by Beatrice de Planissoles of Montaillou, a follower of the Cathar heresy who followed her heart and ignored legal and religious convention.

In spite of the pitfalls of their inferior juridical status, medieval French women could exert considerable influence over the course of their lives. As landowners, businesswomen, artisans, and prostitutes, and as daughters, wives, mothers, and widows, these women were restricted in their activities by the law but nevertheless were able to find ways around such restrictions.

PART 2: MEDIEVAL ITALY

In the *Corpus iuris civilis*, Rome bequeathed to the Middle Ages and to Italy especially a broader legal personhood for women than was found in the Germanic laws. The Roman woman enjoyed a range of legal capacities and inheritance rights. This is not to say that Roman women were equal to men in law for such was certainly not the case, but women in Roman law stood free of male guardianship and of a masculine bias in property transmission. By the sixth century the major remaining legal disabilities of women revolved around their exclusion from public roles and other spheres deemed appropriate for men only. Women were not to be magistrates or officials, to serve as guardians to children (seen as a public trust or burden), or to serve as legal surety for the debts of others. In all those instances, were they allowed, they might be superior to or even in command of men. Only a man could be a *paterfamilias*, have power over children, or over citizens when serving in public office, and only men transmitted a personhood to their successors who continued their *familia*. Men should give protection; women should be subject to protection.

Separation of spheres did not mean seclusion or disability. That women were quite capable of managing their own affairs was presumed throughout Roman law and captured forcefully in one stereotype of women as cunning and greedy. Stereotypes of women as weak seem to have been imported from the Hellenistic East, and paradoxically embedded in Roman law even as guardianship of women fell into disuse because property became detached from agnatic (paternal line) succession. It is too easy, and false, to read back into Rome the gender prejudices of later western culture, including those of Christianity and Germanic customs.

What the Lombards brought to Italy was the notion of *mundium*, a patrimonial power over a woman. Its holder, the *mundualdus*, most often a woman's father, intervened in all property transactions and was entitled to the "price" of the woman when it came due (as by her death,

injury, or marriage). Women did not inherit from their fathers if there were sons, and mothers did not inherit from their sons. At the time of marriage, however, husbands paid a "bride price" for their spouses and a "morning gift" to them. In contrast, for Roman women the major property settlement at marriage was a dowry from her family to her husband. However, Lombard and Roman legal institutions coexisted and cross-cultural influence resulted. The protective *mundium* mingled with Roman notions of agency, so that male guardians of women were at times termed *defensor* and *advocatus*—terms that denoted a function but not a patrimonial quality. Coupled with notions of female weakness (*imbecillitas* or *fragilitas*), protective guardianship for women, vested mainly in the husband following on agnatic kin, found expression in customs and practices in many areas of northern and central Italy. Meanwhile daughters acquired inheritance rights in the absence of sons.

With the eleventh and twelfth centuries came sweeping changes in the lives and legal experiences of women. As the church developed, it redefined marriage. As population and trade grew, land and title to it emerged as hallmarks of nobility and women's place was redefined in terms of the agnatic lineage, a line of male descent. As one of the foremost historians of the late twentieth century encapsulated these changes,

> Women no longer serve as the nodules through which pass the surest kinship ties. The daughter is treated as a marginal member of her father's lineage, and after her marriage, her children will leave it entirely; their allegiance passes to her husband's line. Women also lose the claim to a full (or at least fair) share with their brothers in the family patrimony.[3]

Women did not cease to be agnate to their fathers and brothers, but their rights were diminished or postponed.

Notions of female weakness served as rationales to a number of measures in canon and civil law. But the revival of civil law at Bologna also reintroduced elaborate concepts of paternal power (*patria potestas*), agnation, and inheritance mechanisms. Perhaps the most important was the Roman notion of dowry, which became incorporated into the customs and, later, into the written statutes, of Italian cities. For many historians, the shift to dowry "implied a loss of positive legal rights for wives."[4] Certainly the entire range of marital property

transfer and presentation, seen in light of the legal controls a husband exercised over it, can be taken as a "gilded cage" for women.[5] But it is also true that the civil law contained safeguards for women in the management of their property, academic jurists disseminated and upheld these mechanisms, and the statutes of cities, for all their agnatic and masculine bias, did not have an interest in impoverishing women.

Dowry was part of a shift in inheritance norms. Civil law, however, did not notably disadvantage women in inheritance, so it was the persistence of Lombard customs in civic statutes throughout northern and central Italy that governed female inheritance. In most of these statutes a woman's dowry became her *legitim*—her share of the patrimony. All else was to go to her brothers or nephews or uncles and so forth in the paternal line. She might realize a greater share of the patrimony only if there were no close male agnates or if the deceased left her a greater share in a will. Even then the will was liable to be contested, although jurists and courts were not reluctant to uphold women's inheritance (which could, after all, also benefit males related to them). Statutes incorporated a sense of *familia* as patrilineage and a need to preserve **patri**mony in the hands of males who thus perpetuated family—women were commonly seen as the "beginning and end" of their family. Nevertheless, women saw their inheritance rights (or men saw rights they claimed through women) upheld by jurists. Civil and canon law texts were not as one-sided to women nor was real life.

It was important, for example, that by civil law married women continued to be under the legal *potestas* of their fathers (if still alive), unless they had been formally emancipated. Legally married women passed into the control of their husbands, to be sure. Jurists described their position as being "*in obsequium viri*"—a situation of respectful subordination derived by analogy from a freed slave before his patron. Women were thus to obey their husbands and to labor for them. They were not generally liable for their husband's debts, however, unless, as some did, they expressly consented to the use of their dowry for debts. Their dowries remained separate in theory from their husbands' other holdings and, although dowries could be squandered by spousal mismanagement, there were some safeguards. A husband could reap the benefit of the dowry of a deceased wife, but if the husband predeceased her (a likely circumstance in view of relative ages at marriage, resulting in numerous widows) the dowry was to be "returned"—not that it always or promptly was. Widows could hope to retrieve their dowries and some might remarry despite immense

familial and religious pressures to remain a widow, especially if there were children, who would remain with the husband's kin and be in need of maternal care. Moreover, the mother's dowry was generally earmarked for her children, equally to both sexes, in inheritance.

Indeed, civil and canon law combined to give mothers a greater role as guardians to their children following the fathers' deaths. Here was one area where canon law influenced civil by stressing the natural care of a mother for her offspring. Jurists generally accorded women the right to act as guardians (*tutrix*) for their children, provided that their husbands had named them as such in their will and that they were not alone in serving in that capacity. There had to be male guardians (*tutores*) as well, and their consent was necessary to transact any legal business regarding their wards' property.

This requirement of male consent in guardianship was simply one extension of the broader cultural presumption, accepted into statutes and learned law both, that women were mentally weak creatures. Some Italian communes, ostensibly in order to protect such women and their families, established rules that at least two kin had to consent to a woman's legal transactions. Florence notably went further (at first glance) by requiring that every woman have the consent of some male for any legal business she wished to conduct. It was assumed that the guarantor would be her husband, if she were married, designated by the old Lombard legal term, *mundualdus*. In point of fact, jurists steadily exempted some legal acts from such requirements and otherwise restricted the scope of their application although they were unable to dispense with them entirely. The Florentine requirement in fact had few "teeth" to it, other than the possibility of voiding a transaction. Women's legal acts, after all, did not occur in a vacuum; others were implicated in them, directly or indirectly, so there was no simple locus of male bias or interest in any particular case. Indeed, a case may give the best illustration of the (often ambiguous) legal situation of Italian women.

In the 1480s a Florentine widow, whose husband, Luca Capponi, had been an insolvent fugitive debtor, had to sue her stepchildren to retrieve her dowry. To do so she needed a male attorney and she found it expedient to retain the services of a local jurist whose expert opinion (known as a *consilium*) won the day. Even so, she had the legal ability to defend her interests. The jurist had to argue that, although her stepsons had deliberately repudiated their father's estate (debt-ridden as it was), they were still obligated to return her dowry because the

stepsons had not been emancipated (that is, they were still under the tutelage of their father and, therefore, liable for their father's transactions under Florentine law) at the time the "debt" (the dowry) was contracted (i.e., the time of their father's remarriage). That the sons had alienated their interests and property to their married sister also did not let them escape. The jurist deemed the gift fraudulent and fictitious because the sister and her husband had promised to return all the property to the brothers. Moreover, the transaction involved closely related persons and had occurred only a few days after the Florentine bankruptcy proceedings had begun, making the transaction even more suspect. Interestingly, sex played no role in this case. It was perfectly consistent that a sister could participate in such a fraud, but it was no more nor less presumed to be fraudulent for her involvement as a woman. The alienation was clearly not for her benefit, but "her person was put down fraudulently and simulatively to deceive and defraud creditors under the shield of the sister."[6] Here the web of interests between men and women in the same family was on display. Here, also, we can see clearly that "norms are thus not homogenous and embodied in an abstract code rigidly applied, but are differentiated and manipulable."[7] The dead Florentine's sons were not his heirs, since they had repudiated his estate, but they tried to perpetrate a fraud in order to retain at least some property in the face of paternal creditors, including their stepmother. She, in turn, used the law to retrieve her rights. Examples to similar effect are not hard to find. They serve to remind us that women's place in the law was worked out in gendered relations with men and other women, not in the abstract and textual world of jurists and legislators.

NOTES

1. Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady, and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

2. See Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 75-77.

3. David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 82.

4. Susan Stuard, "The Dominion of Gender: Women's Fortunes in the High Middle Ages," in *Becoming Visible, Women in European History*, 2nd ed., eds. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 153-72, at 161.

5. Julius Kirshner, "Materials for a Gilded Cage: Non-Dotal Assets in Florence, 1300-1500," in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 184-207.

6. Archivio di Stato, Florence, Carte strozziane, 3rd ser., 41/14, fols. 98r, 101r-9v, written by Antonio Strozzi (1455-1523) concerning events of 1484.

7. David Cohen, *Law, Sexuality, and Society, Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 58.

CHAPTER 9

Women and Medieval Canon Law

Linda E. Mitchell

Medieval people lived under an incredibly varied number of legal systems, all of which differed depending upon the time, the place, the sex of the individual, his or her age (whether a child or an adult), and so on. Law based on custom combined with Roman legal traditions as discussed in the previous essays; local law differed from the law of the king and from feudal law. There was another system, however, that evolved out of a totally different series of contexts: the law of the Christian church or canon law. This development occurred quite late in the history of the church, especially when one compares similar developments in secular law in the early medieval West.

In the Byzantine Empire, canon law was more or less combined with Roman law, since the church was a wing of the government. In contrast, canon law in western Europe developed amid the great diversity of legal systems which characterized the medieval European experience. From the early fourth century, prominent members of the church met in council to discuss the changing needs of the Christian community as it moved from a position of powerlessness to one of domination in the later Roman empire. The rules devised by these church councils, as well as regular pronouncements by the pope and rulings in various papal and diocesan courts, formed the basis for medieval canon law. However, this was a legal system with no uniformity. Each bishop, each kingdom, each region within each kingdom all had their own particular sets of rules and regulations under which the church was governed. This meant that there was a wide disparity in canon law precepts during the early Middle Ages, just as there was a wide disparity between regions when it came to the training

of the clergy, the organization of monastic establishments, and the relationship between clergy and laity.

The period between the late tenth and early twelfth centuries—that is, the great age of clerical reform in the West—was also a period of centralization of the authority of the church in the hands of the papacy. Along with the triumph of Benedictine monasticism over regional forms and the (partial) triumph of the papacy over the governing of the clergy came the triumph of a centralized system of canon law over regional variation. This development culminated in the work of an Italian legalist from Bologna named Gratian who, around the year 1140, compiled, collated, and organized the welter of canon law enactments into his *Concordance of Discordant Canons*. After Gratian, all subsequent compilations of canon law (all integrated roughly into the system called the *corpus iuris canonici*—the body of canon law) began with his text and moved on from there. By the end of the thirteenth century, the canon law of the western church was a complex but relatively coherent body of law complete with extensive annotation and analysis.

So, what is contained in medieval canon law? To whom does it refer and in what circumstances? As might be expected, canon law governed the lives of the professional clergy as well as of the monks, nuns, canons, and friars who populated the monasteries, priories, canonries and chapter houses of Christian medieval Europe. In fact, canon law superceded the king's law, the civil law, or the common law when it came to members of the clergy. Through the system called "benefit of clergy," even clergymen (a designation which *sometimes* included nuns as well as monks and priests) who had committed violent or felonious crimes were subject to the church's law rather than to the law of the secular ruler. Only after condemnation and excommunication by the church could a member of the clergy be subjected to trial and punishment by the secular courts of law.

However, if canon law had regulated only the lives of the clergy, the system would not be nearly as historically significant as it actually is. Canon law also regulated many aspects of the lives of the lay population, especially those aspects which were intersections between one's lay and one's religious obligations: marriage, childbirth, issues of inheritance, donations, and death. It is these intersections which made the relationship between canon and secular law so complicated. Frequently, especially in the case of laws pertaining to marriage, legitimacy, and the making of wills, canon law and secular law

contradicted each other and it was very unclear as to which law should take precedence. The possibilities of manipulating the law were endless in such cases.

Canon laws that referred specifically to women, such as sexual issues, marriage and dowry, inheritance, and bequests, comprise about 10 percent of the total corpus of canon law, according to a recent estimate.[1] This means that canon law (like civil law) was far more engaged in elucidating the relationship between male clergy and the church than in protecting or sanctioning women in medieval society. Similarly, only a small percentage of cases which included women or women's issues (such as marriage or rape) saw their way to the canon law courts. Nevertheless, canon law dictated and determined many of the cultural norms of the position of women in medieval society, and these must be addressed in more detail.

The remainder of this essay will break down the particulars of canon law in two ways. First, I will outline the ways in which nuns and other avowed religious women were subject to canon law. Second, I will discuss the ways in which laywomen were subject to canon law, including issues of heresy and witchcraft which put women at considerable risk in the later Middle Ages.

CANON LAW AND THE NUN

Women who had taken religious vows were subject utterly to the law of the church. While most canon law for the clergy related more to men than to women, since nuns could not engage in the kinds of activities in which monks and priests could (such as becoming a lawyer, performing mass, or presiding over the sacraments), nevertheless nuns were subject to canon law in the broadest of ways.

Convents throughout Europe were usually under the more or less direct control of the local bishop, who was charged with visiting the nunneries in his jurisdiction to ensure compliance with the rule of the monastic house (usually the Benedictine rule) and to punish any wrongdoing. What sorts of crimes nuns could, in fact, commit usually involved illicit relationships with men as well as actions contrary to the monastic rule. Nuns were punished through performance of penances and, in cases of serious disobedience, could be expelled from the convent. Thus, canon law, in the person of the bishop, regulated closely the lives of professed nuns in medieval Europe.

Canon law courts often heard cases which involved disputes over land granted to a monastic foundation or a religious house. One of the duties of the abbess or prioress of a female monastic establishment was to protect that house's rights with respect to land grants, to tenants, and to church livings which had been gifted to the house. While some of these cases might take the abbess into a civil or common law court, many times the cases were heard in the church courts, and the rulings were subject to canon law. Thus, abbesses had to be knowledgable of canon laws regarding possession of land, had to be familiar with the procedures of the canon law courts, and had to be able to hire expert legal assistance if they wanted to win their cases. This circumstance brought canon law into the midst of monastic life for women just as similar circumstances in a laywoman's life affected her similarly.

CANON LAW AND THE LAYWOMAN

Canon law affected laywomen profoundly but within a limited scope of activities. Central to the interaction between canon law and laywomen was the issue of marriage (specifically of illicit, incestuous, or bigamous marriages) and procreation (and legitimacy of children). In fact, Gratian, early in his *Decretum*, includes "the union of men and women [and] the succession and rearing of children" as part of "natural" law, the system "common to all nations because it exists everywhere through natural instinct . . . ."[2] Once the church had made marriage a sacrament and had specified that a priest's blessing was essential, the lay control of marriage was weakened. However, the church was also opposed to the dissolving of marriages and so stipulated that a legal marriage required only the free consent of the two partners, did not require any other witnesses, and did not have to be consummated in order to be valid. On the other hand, the church was interested in preventing the marriage of close kin and so proclaimed that people related to each other (initially very distantly—to the seventh degree of kinship—and then not as distantly—to the fourth degree) could not marry. The church also disallowed marriages between step-siblings, between step-children and step-parents, and between godparents and godchildren. Nevertheless, since the principle of undissolvable marriages was central to the church's control of marriage, even if such marriages were illicitly made, despite being contrary to canon law they were nonetheless valid and undissolvable as long as consent of both parties could be proven. As one can imagine,

the contradictions in the canon law of marriage made the business of marriage not only confusing but also highly conflict-ridden. The overwhelming majority of cases brought by laypeople before church courts in the Middle Ages involved marriage: people claiming that they had made valid albeit illicit marriages and so could not honor marriage vows made later in front of a priest, people claiming that their marriages were invalid because they were illicit, people claiming that their partners had contracted bigamous marriages, parents claiming that their children were not properly married, or that they were properly married and so could not contract marriages with other people, and so on.

Marriage litigation did not end there. Not only did canon law contradict itself, it contradicted many civil laws and regional laws regarding marriage. For example, valid marriages in most regions of Europe required the transmission of gifts to the partners (either a dowry, a marriage price, or a gift from the groom to the bride) and also required consummation, thus separating betrothal (which could be dissolved) from marriage (which was more difficult to dissolve). Moreover, most civil forms of marriage recognized divorce and did not cavil at the dissolution of marriages and the remarriage of divorced people. Other issues relating to marriage were equally contradictory. Under most forms of lay law, widows had to wait for a period of time before remarrying; under canon law no waiting period was required. This had a significant impact on royal control of widows' remarriage, and the conflicts between the two communities, lay and clerical, could be severe. Moreover, although canon law did not necessarily deny the validity of second or third marriages, they were not considered to be equal in sanctity to the first marriage or to devoting one's widowhood to celibacy. Civil and common law often encouraged widows to remarry; the laws of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem actually required widows to remarry after the prescribed mourning period, on pain of confiscation of their estates.[3] The competing needs of the lay political community and the salvificatory world of the Church thus dictated two completely different requirements for widowed women (and men as well).

The laws regarding childbirth and children also demonstrate conflicting goals between canon and secular legal systems. According to canon law, illegitimate children could be legitimated (and thus could inherit) if their parents contracted a valid marriage. According to lay law, in particular the common law of England, a marriage subsequent to having illegitimate children did NOT legitimate the children born

before the marriage had taken place, and so those children could not inherit. Various folk beliefs regarding the impurity of women during menstruation and after giving birth, which formed part of the legal systems of the Roman Empire as well as the pre- and early Christian Germanic and Slavic communities of Europe, were negated in canon law. The *Decretum* considered menstruating, post-partum, and lactating women to be perfectly normal, not impure, and therefore permitted them to enter the church and to take communion. This vision of women's bodily functions as part of the normal life cycle, rather than as a disease or a recurring malady (as they were viewed, for example, in the nineteenth century) probably did provide women in medieval Europe with considerable spiritual comfort. In contrast, the canon law of medieval Russia retained the various folk-law restrictions against women entering the church after birth, while lactating, or during menstruation, thus placing the mother on the margins with respect to the "churching" of their newborn infants. As a result, a completely different collection of rituals centering on childbirth and its aftermath developed in Russia.[4]

The ability to make a will was, for most of the medieval period, a sign of legal and political individuality. In most lay law, wives had little or no legal "personality" in marriage; in England wives could not make wills without their husbands' permission because they did not actually control any movable property. Canon law, however, stipulated that a husband who refused to execute his wife's will was subject to punishment because no one should be prevented from making a will. The conflicts which arose, especially in England, between these competing visions of legal right led to a broadening of women's legal capacity in the period between 1200 and 1400, and an apparent lessening of that same legal capacity by the mid-fifteenth century according the the evidence from one important church court.[5]

These examples demonstrate how very complex the relationship was between canon and civil or common law. The fact that most of these sorts of cases did not see completion within the context of the law court and were, rather, ended through compromises and contracts illustrates how the variations and disagreements among the different legal systems with respect to marriage made enormous difficulties for the person—man or woman—who litigated such cases in the courts.

Another aspect of canon law which had a significant impact on medieval laywomen was the way in which the church defined the "deserving" poor and the steps the church took to protect, in particular,

poor women and their children from exploitation and abandonment on the part of lay society. Canon law charged all parish communities with the protection of *miserabiles personae* (destitute persons): people too poor or too powerless to protect themselves. This classification included, above all, widows and orphans (an orphan, in the pre-modern world, was a child who had no father)—even, in some cases, wealthy widows and orphans—because they were perceived as being especially at risk due to the lack of male guidance, control, and protection. The relief of the poor was one of the most important duties of the bishop, who usually allocated a member of his household specifically to the care of the poor and the distribution of alms. Single women, then as now, were often the poorest members of the community and those least able to protect themselves. And, although the assistance provided by the church depended a great deal on the dedication of the bishop and his appointees, the relief of poor women by the church community was vital to their survival.

Canon law defined the poor somewhat differently from civil and common law. For one thing, canon law did not consider poverty to be anything other than an unfortunate economic condition. Secular law tended to think of the poor as somehow inferior biologically to the wealthy and the elite; while church law did not valorize the poor, it did not blame them (usually) for their condition, either. Thus, almsgiving, especially to the working poor and those unable to work, was an act which carried significant sanctity. While this might not have raised the material condition of poor women and children in any significant way, it is probable that canon law attitudes about the poor helped such people survive in the first place. Without such legal definitions and requirements, the poor would have received scarcely any relief at all.

Another aspect of canon law which had an impact on the lives of women was the way that rape was defined by canon law. Civil and common law tended to view rape as a crime against property (in common law in England it was frequently cited as "trespass," an all-inclusive term which ranged from poaching to private warfare), since the rapist damaged the marriageability of some father's daughter or brother's sister or made the legitimacy of some husband's children suspect. In contrast, canon law viewed rape as an act of violence against an individual person. This definition of rape, which had a significant impact on the development of modern social attitudes about rape, made it a very serious crime, indeed, similar to other violent crimes such as treason and murder. Unfortunately, rape cases were

prosecuted only rarely in the canon law courts, and if the rapist agreed to marry his victim (as long as she freely consented to the match and was not herself married), he was not punished at all. Moreover, canon laws regarding marriage defined sexuality within marriage as entirely consensual all the time, which made it impossible for a woman to accuse her husband of rape. Similarly, prostitutes could not charge a man with rape under canon law. In some ways, perhaps, although ideologically unsound, the civil and common law definitions of rape as a crime against property might have been more effective as deterrents to rape than the canon law's definition of it as a crime against a person. Moreover, the civil punishment of rape (usually castration or death) was much more severe than that of the canon law court. While this did not make rape any easier to prosecute in the civil courts, the punishment for rape was certainly harsh, no matter how the civil courts defined it.

CANON LAW AND THE MAINTENANCE OF ORTHODOXY

Matters of religious orthodoxy were, obviously, issues which related directly to the development of canon law. Women participated in Christian practice throughout their lives and it has been suggested by some historians that they were more susceptible to anti-orthodox or heterodox ideas than were men, especially those movements which granted to women a greater freedom of movement and a greater social position. While the suggestion that women were more inclined to heresy than were men has been disputed (and ought to be), women did nevertheless participate in heretical movements, and were accused of heresy. In the late Middle Ages, women were also increasingly accused of being witches, which did not become a crime akin to treason (and therefore punishable by burning) until the period of the Protestant Reformation.

How did canon law courts deal with heresy? The Inquisition, initiated by Pope Innocent III at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to deal with the problem of Catharism in southern France, was in essence a canon law court designed specifically to deal with heresy and witchcraft (which was seen as a form of heresy throughout most of the Middle Ages). Thus, women accused of being heretics were charged and brought before the court of the Inquisition, as were men accused of the same crime. Although the application of torture to extract a confession was not at first allowed, by the later Middle Ages the

Inquisition was permitted to use torture, especially with recalcitrant heretics and those who refused to name other members of their movement.

While many more men were accused of heresy than were women in the Middle Ages, most charges of witchcraft were directed against women. This put specific laywomen at great risk, especially midwives, healers, and wisewomen who peformed much of the health care in medieval peasant communities. Although the church courts could not in fact execute anyone—including condemned heretics and witches—until the later period when they gained the cooperation of the lay courts, the prosecution of heretics and witches in medieval Europe made the careers of some women very risky and endangered the lives of the very women who the church was charged to protect: the poor widows and poor single women who had few resources and who were dependent on charity and their healing skills to survive.

Perhaps the most famous woman tried before a canon law court was Joan of Arc, and her trial aptly demonstrates the ways in which women interacted with the male-dominated church court. Joan was tried as a heretic and as a witch, not because she did not embrace orthodox doctrine but because she refused to conform to the medieval doctrine of *gender*: she dressed in men's clothing, associated almost exclusively with men, fought with male soldiers, and led male armies. Although her situation was clearly more political than it was religious, Joan nonetheless was tried before canon law justices. Her conviction was the result of this refusal to conform—she was given the opportunity to save her life if she "recanted" and never wore male clothing again—and of her firm belief that her personal religious convictions were entirely orthodox, even sanctified.[6] Another late medieval woman who heard voices and received visions—Margery Kempe—was also brought up on charges of heresy (she was accused of being a Lollard) but managed to prove her orthodoxy to the satisfaction of the bishop of Norwich. Margery was considered more of a crackpot than a menace and, unlike Joan, did not have to pay for her eccentricities with her life.

CONCLUSION

Canon law's relationship to medieval women was clearly limited by certain specific circumstances. First, women could not be priests and therefore were not subject to the vast majority of laws and statutes

within the body of canon law. Second, canon law could interact in laypeoples' lives usually only when there was a sacrament involved, which means that laywomen's contact with canon law came only through marriage and widowhood, through childbirth and the death of children, through inheritance and bequests, through sexual violence, and through religious heterodoxy. As important as these passages in a woman's life were, in most aspects of medieval laywomen's lives, civil and common law statutes prevailed.

Another aspect of canon law with relevance to medieval women's experience was the fact of their ambiguous position in the structures of religious life. Although the church maintained the doctrine of spiritual equality as the foundation of its institutions, women nonetheless were profoundly disadvantaged in comparison to men in the structures of everyday life. Women could not assume any significant professional positions in the church other than as abbesses and prioresses, and they could not attend the cathedral schools and universities through which the male clergy gained both education and professional opportunities. In addition, canon law jurists incorporated the ambivalence toward women expressed by medieval intellectual culture into the very fabric of canon law. Alongside declarations of spiritual equality between men and women and the need to protect widows and orphans from exploitation at the hands of powerful males were assumptions of female inferiority, of their predeliction for sin (especially sexual sin), and of the dangers they posed to men. Other than mandating the bride's consent to her marriage and approving a woman's theoretical capacity to make a will, canon law considered women incapable of acting independently—without male representation—in all other things. Thus, the standard restrictions of female activity found in secular legal traditions were incorporated, as well, into medieval canon law.

NOTES

1. See James A. Brundage, "Sex and Canon Law: A Statistical Analysis of Samples of Canon and Civil Law," in Vern L. Bullough and James Brundage, eds. *Sexual Practices and the Medieval Church* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1982), 89-101.

2. Gratian, *The Treatise on Laws*, C. 7.2-3 tr. by Augustine Thompson (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 6-7.

3. See James A. Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law," in Sue Sheridan Walker, ed., *Wife*

and Widow in Medieval England, 17-31 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

4. See Eve Levin, "Childbirth in Pre-Petrine Russia: Canon Law and Popular Traditions," in Barbara Evans Clements, Barbara Alpern Engel, and Christine D. Worobec, eds., *Russia's Women: Accommodation, Resistance, Transformation*, 44-59 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

5. See Richard H. Helmholz, "Married Women's Wills in Later Medieval England," in Walker, *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, 165-182. The most prolific historian who specialized in the development of wills in the Middle Ages is Michael M. Sheehan, whose collected essays, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) includes most of his more famous pieces.

6. An excellent work on Joan is Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc: The Image of Female Heroism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

PART III

Women and the Medieval Political World

INTRODUCTION

The relative position of medieval women with respect to the law was echoed in the capacity (or rather, the *in*capacity) of women to engage overtly and publicly in political actions. In politics, as in society, family connections and social status had a significant influence on a woman's political capacities. Nevertheless, almost all access to political power was through informal means: widows of kings assumed guardianship of and regencies for minor heirs; noble widows took over the political roles of late husbands and fathers; urban women kept their exiled husbands informed of the political doings of the city and advised their sons and nephews in the creation of politically advantageous marriage alliances. While none of these political roles could be called formal, they nevertheless were important components of the political milieu of medieval Europe.

The essential political relationship in the Middle Ages in western Europe was named "feudalism" by the nineteenth-century historians who first explored the political sources of medieval history. This relationship was based on a contractual relationship between a "lord" and a group of knights who served as the lord's "vassals." In exchange for military service and other services, the vassal received the lord's protection and, eventually, a landed estate called a "knight's fee." Although fees were not initially transferrable to the knight's heir, soon after the creation of the system these landed estates became heritable (i.e., they could be passed from one generation to the next) through the form of inheritance known as primogeniture. Although in theory this

relationship should involve only males—lords and knights with only sons inheriting—in fact, women could act as lords, could inherit knight's fees, and could pass such estates to daughters. Thus, the essential political component of medieval Europe, because of female rights under private law, contained the possibility of female action through the connection of feudalism with land. Women's political disadvantages were thus ameliorated somewhat by the concentrations of landholding during the period, even if the means by which women engaged in political activity were largely informal and were gained through private access.

Feudalism was a system for the aristocracy. Other political systems developed in the cities and towns of medieval Europe, especially where the dominant public institution was the commune controlled by the merchant and artisan guilds (or "gilds" when dealing with English and some northern European cities) of the town. As ever, the Byzantine Empire's political institutions were maintained within the context of Roman imperial law. Peasants in western Europe had little, if any, political power and no overt political authority, even when they assumed administrative roles on medieval manors as bailiffs, stewards, haywards, and so on. Perhaps the closest the medieval peasant got to significant political power was when he (and these were always "he") was appointed to a manorial court jury or to act as an investigator in the assize of bread and ale.

The essays in this section have taken a broad view of the idea of political activity. Liz James and Barbara Hill discuss the varieties of women's political experience as members of the imperial family in the Byzantine Empire. Janet Nelson focuses on queenship as a means to political power. Christine Owens explores the political roles of noblewomen and how widowhood could often act as a significantly liberating experience for medieval women of the aristocracy. Louis Haas outlines the many disabilities of urban women with respect to political activity and suggests ways in which women achieved political status through informal means.

CHAPTER 10

Women and Politics in the Byzantine Empire: Imperial Women

Liz James and Barbara Hill

INTRODUCTION

"Byzantine" is often used as a pejorative term, denoting the excessively complicated, devious, and underhand, especially in political terms. However, this is misleading. The Byzantine political system was hierarchical, highly organized, and bureaucratic: it was not so tortuous as to be incomprehensible or ineffective or so corrupt as to fail to function. Indeed, it can be easily summarized: Byzantine political structure revolved around the figure of the emperor. Totalitarian in ambition and ideology, absolute in his power to intervene directly in every aspect of both government and of life itself, he was the beginning and end of all political structures. All other elements of the political system were defined in terms of their relationship with the emperor.

The Byzantine Empire conceived of itself as the heir to the Roman Empire. It was God's Empire on earth; its people were God's Chosen People; its mission was world domination under one ruler. The emperor was the pinnacle of the Byzantine political structure. His position was reflected in every aspect of life. Where Roman emperors had been gods, the Christian Byzantine emperor was God's regent on earth, divinely promoted to his place and held there by God's favor. As ruler of the Chosen People, he was responsible for them before the divinity; his success indicated God's favor and his failure God's wrath. As God's representative, the emperor was in a unique position. He was the source of law but not bound by it; within the church, he was at least

equal to the patriarch, the head of the Orthodox church, and held privileges otherwise restricted to the priesthood; he was commander-in-chief of the army and head of the civil administration.

The state machinery was well developed and efficient. It regimented the population, administered justice, gathered taxes to pay troops and officials. Below the emperor, three strands made up political authority: the civil administration, the army, and the church. The civil administration administered the empire on the emperor's behalf, and indeed, the distinction between state government and imperial household was barely defined. The army was also incorporated within the bureaucracy: as with the civil administration, all jurisdiction fell to the emperor, its commander-in-chief. The church as a political force held no constitutional position though it held a powerful position in its regulation of the emperor's orthodoxy and hence his legitimacy under God. It was administered by the patriarch with its own organizational system but was, in practical terms, nevertheless subservient to the civil administration and hence to the emperor. Byzantium never developed or felt the need to develop a written constitution. The emperor could depose or humiliate the patriarch, confiscate aristocratic estates, and remove generals at will. His behavior was confined (and, to a certain extent, defined) only by custom and tradition; his failure or the wrong sort of behavior, which could vary from sexual misdemeanors to a lack of appropriate piety, led to revolts and his removal from the throne.

What access to politics and political power did this offer women? The short answer is: virtually none. Women could not hold positions in the church because of their sex; they could not join the army because of their sex; they could not hold official positions in the bureaucracy because of their sex. As in Rome, women did not operate in public office.

The reasons for this were primarily ideological. Byzantine society was misogynist. Byzantine ideology placed women in the home. Their primary function was marriage and the bearing of children. Indeed, motherhood—along with virginity and widowhood—was one of the few acceptable Christian roles for women. At home, their lives seem essentially to have been secluded. Legitimate reasons for leaving the home included attendance at church services, visits to the baths, to shrines, to family members, and participation in celebrations marking civil or imperial events. Women outside the home were supposed to be veiled.

Next to motherhood, the most important duty of the woman, of whatever class, was household maintenance. Despite their theoretical subordination to their husbands, women did possess important rights. A woman retained possession of her dowry and could alienate inherited property; widows had authority over their sons; judicial acts reveal women appearing in courts to testify and plead—successfully—for divorce, for the resolution of property disputes and for control over property.[1] Nevertheless, women's status was considerably inferior to men's and prevailing dogma helped to keep them in their place.

This ideology, inherited from the Church Fathers, regarded women, personified in Eve, as the cause of man's Fall and as an ever-present source of temptation. Woman was inferior and weak, liable either to indulge in witchcraft and sorcery or to be possessed by demons. Her greatest threat was through her sexuality and the undermining thereby of male chastity and virtue. Even though the intellectual culture acknowledged that women were also created in God's image and redeemed through Christ, this did not allow them any real say.

Consequently, women's political power in Byzantium was limited. Princesses (indeed any female in the imperial family) were useful for diplomatic marriages. Nuns and abbesses, who were usually noble by birth, might influence religious activity and very occasionally interfered in court politics, usually with little result. Noble ladies held high positions at court in the empress's household. They founded monasteries, organized literary circles, served as patrons of the arts. The sixth-century noblewoman Anicia Juliana, who had close imperial connections, succeeded, by means of her wealth and connections, in disturbing the authority of the emperor Justinian. Juliana also founded several churches and was a noted patron of the arts; she believed herself well able to rule the empire. Had she been a man, she might well have succeeded: as a woman, she got no further than encouraging her husband to seize imperial power, a position he hastily declined.[2] The role of women also increased in times of crisis: they were active in religious conflicts such as the resistance to Iconoclasm, in political rebellions, as when they supported the eleventh-century empress Zoe, and even, on occasion, in the defense of besieged cities.

PART 1: IMPERIAL WOMEN AND POLITICS, FIFTH TO ELEVENTH CENTURIES

Nevertheless, there is one significant female figure who seems to have held some form of political power: the empress, the wife of the emperor. It is unclear, however, as to whether the extent of her power was personal or official. The traditional view of female imperial power says that legally, the empress depended on the emperor but that, in favorable circumstances, she might wield great power. This suggests that the empress's place in politics depended on her own abilities. The examples most often cited in this context are the fourth-century empress Pulcheria, the fifth-century empress Ariadne, Theodora and Sophia in the sixth century, Eirene [Irene] in the eighth, and the empresses Theodora and Theophano in the ninth. A brief look at their biographies provides some sense of what this power was and of how it changed.

Pulcheria ruled the empire in the minority of her brother, Theodosios II. When he came of age, she retained that power as his interests lay elsewhere. On his death, Pulcheria married a military commander by the name of Marcian but continued to rule the empire until her own death in 453. Ariadne was the eldest daughter of Leo I and his wife Verina; the couple had no surviving sons. On Leo's death in 474, Ariadne's son became emperor. When he died at a young age, her husband Zeno, took power. On Zeno's death in 491, Ariadne remarried, choosing Anastasios, a relatively unimportant court official, who then succeeded to the throne. Theodora was the ex-circus dancer who married the future emperor Justinian I in 525; Sophia, her niece, married Justinian's nephew and heir, Justin II. When Justin went mad, Sophia administered the empire on his behalf and, after his death in 578, appointed two successors. The eighth-century empress Eirene was the only woman to rule as sole empress in Byzantine history. After ruling as regent for her underage son for some twenty years, she eventually deposed him and ruled alone for another five. Theodora was another empress who ruled as regent for an underage son from 842 before being deposed in 856 and, later, moved aside into a monastery. After the death of her husband in 963, Theophano also held the position of regent and attempted to safeguard both her own position and that of her underage sons by a series of marriages and intrigues.[3]

What the careers of these empresses reveal is that women had access to political power through their relationship with the emperor.

This might be as sister (Pulcheria), as mother (Eirene, the second Theodora, Theophano), as wife (Ariadne, Theodora, Sophia) or as daughter (Ariadne, whose husbands became emperor through marriage to her). Husbands were not always the most important factor. It was Pulcheria's status as daughter of the previous emperor, Arcadius, that enabled her to rule for her brother. She owed nothing to her husband, whom she married at the end of her life. Her power depended on dynastic succession and the dynastic legitimization of power. The same was true for Ariadne, who was the legitimate successor of her father, Leo I. Her son succeeded his grandfather through his mother. On the child's death, Ariadne's successive husbands were legitimated through her succession to Leo. In these cases, male imperial power depended on the empress; political power was transferred through female inheritance and by female will. It is in this context that we should perhaps consider the question of why the Byzantines never felt the need to introduce an equivalent to the Salic Law which, in late medieval France, prevented royal women and their progeny from inheriting the throne.

Both Pulcheria and Ariadne were heirs by blood to the empire. However, throughout Byzantine history, there are many examples of the empress surviving her husband and the passing of power being dependent on her, thanks not to her birth but to her position as imperial widow. This suggests a formalized role for the empress, an official access to political power that depended on her position, not her personality. Another role that also clearly formed a part of the empress's official position was that of regent when the emperor left an underage heir or, as in the case of Sophia, when the emperor was incapable of ruling. In the absence of an imperial male—the only person in the Byzantine political system who could outrank an empress—this offered her the greatest access to power. Both Pulcheria and Eirene pushed the position of regent as far as possible, never relinquishing the power it offered. Indeed, Eirene went on to remove her son from power and to hold it herself. Least power seems to have been available to empresses such as the first Theodora, who were wives of capable emperors and seem to have relied on their personal influence for authority. The fourth-century empress Eudoxia, wife of Arcadios and mother of Pulcheria, is another such example. She was renowned for her quarrels with the influential patriarch, John Chrysostom and was able to secure his banishment on several occasions.

The kind of power to which these empresses had access is not always clear. Here, personality may play a part. Certainly the civil

government was in the hands of empress-regents: they appointed and dismissed officials and had some control over taxes and the judiciary. However, the army and the church presented more of a problem. To be successful, the empress was obliged to be on good terms with her patriarch; those who were not tended to run into difficulties, as Theophano discovered. As for the army, since women could not command armies, an empress was obliged to keep her successful generals happy or run the risk of being overthrown. This was, perhaps, her greatest problem. Success in war marked out the successful leader, and a successful general was always a threat to imperial power. For a woman, the easiest way around this issue was to marry a general or to appoint one who was loyal. The drawback was that the general might take power for himself. Theophano, who attempted to retain her position by marrying a successful general, was promptly superseded by her new husband; Sophia, who hoped to rule through nominees, was relegated by them to a secondary role. Only Eirene successfully negotiated this issue, by appointing eunuchs to the chief positions of both civil and military authorities. As castrated men, eunuchs were disbarred from seeking imperial power for themselves since the emperor had to be bodily intact, and thus presented a limited threat to the empress's authority.

Usurpation was always the biggest danger for any empress who aspired to political power. Because prevailing custom did not allow women access to the imperial bureaucracy, she was invariably compelled to rule at second-hand through her ministers in a way the emperor did not. This made her position all the more precarious and is what lies behind the belief of modern scholars that it was only exceptional women in exceptional circumstances who wielded power through the force of personality.

There is some truth in this: why were some empresses successful regents and others less so? How did Eirene manage to hang onto power when Theophano could not? Some empresses succeeded in part because the political climate around them opened up a space: Eirene came to power at a time when she could use the Iconoclastic controversy, which had convulsed the Empire for over seventy years, to win support for herself rather than for her son. No such factions were available to Theophano. Similarly, Eirene solved the military problem in a way which retained her generals as hierarchically subordinate; in contrast, through marriage, Theophano raised her husbands to imperial rank. Nevertheless, other factors also played a part. Such a belief in

personality does not always recognize the office of empress as one which had its own powers and authority. Moreover, it also relies on a very particular definition of political power.

It does seem clear that "empress" was an official position in the organizational structure of the empire. Like the emperor, the empress stood outside of the law.[4] If an emperor died leaving a young heir, then it was expected that the child's mother would act as regent; if an emperor was unable to carry out his duties, then his wife stepped in: no emperor ever had a regent who was not a female relative. The office of empress appeared in other areas of public life. Empresses appeared on coins, the most public demonstration of the imperial self-image. In the fourth and fifth centuries, empresses appeared on coins in their own right. From the time of Sophia on, wives and mothers were regularly pictured together with their husbands and sons on coins as family portraits of imperial continuity and of legitimacy. The usurping emperor Phocas (602-610) immediately depicted himself and his wife, Leontia, on coins. The representation of the empress in art also served to emphasize her official role.

Titles were also significant in marking out her role. In the Byzantine political structure, position and hierarchy were all-important. Three different titles existed for the empress, all with different connotations and reflecting different aspects of her authority. *Augusta* is conventionally seen as the most important title. It seems to have been the official title by which any woman who had been crowned—the emperor's wife, mother, sister or daughter—was addressed and how she referred to herself. It suggested a function, the visible honors of being imperial, and the role of ceremonial counterpart to the *Augustus*. *Basilissa* is a more descriptive word, not involving any significant function; it may have been a special title awarded at coronation, possibly of a higher order than *Augusta*. It equates to the male term, *basileus*, or emperor, and is the term used of and by Eirene during her period of sole rule. *Despoina*, finally, means "mistress" or "she who is in charge" and seems to have been another more general term.[5]

The office ensured continuity between different emperors. I have already mentioned the transmission of power by Ariadne; along similar lines, the seventh-century emperor Philippicus married Gordia, the daughter of one of his predecessors. Though we know little of women such as Leontia and Gordia, though they may not themselves have wielded political power as individual women, they were nevertheless significant figures in the Byzantine power structure through their office

and what that office stood for. The office of empress, like that of emperor, was rather more than nominal; it had its own duties and functions connected with it. It is in this context that we should note the ninth-century emperor Leo VI's belief that the empire needed an *Augusta* when he raised his daughter to this position.

It is another truism of Byzantine history that in this period, people were unhappy with the idea of a female ruler. Like most truisms, there is some validity in this view, but it also does not entirely reflect the actual political situation. Women did rule in Byzantium: Pulcheria, Ariadne, Sophia, to name but three. The way in which they ruled was, however, different from the way in which male emperors ruled; it is this difference in power that marks the boundaries between an emperor and an empress. Power is conventionally defined as the ability to produce an effect or to achieve a result. Pauline Stafford, however, has suggested an alternative definition. Moving the emphasis away from the idea of the result, Stafford argues that persons with power are able to wield authority and to influence international affairs. They can act for themselves and take part in events; they have a strategy and can pursue it, but they need not necessarily succeed. Above all, power puts one in a position to influence others and to use the labors of others for one's own prestige. Authority gives one the right to act, gaining obedience without force. Where traditional historians contest that the empress was never in the position to exercise independent sovereign power, though she might be her husband's consort, Stafford's approach allows us to suggest that sovereign power is only one version of power and even that the traditional definition of such power may not be the only definition possible.[6] The empress's power may not be the same as the emperor's, but this is not to say that she is without power or that her power does not come from her office. It is a different power, which may operate and be manifested differently. In extending the definition, as Stafford suggests, it becomes possible to ascribe more weight to imperial women: an empress like Theophano who did not retain power alone for long is nevertheless a powerful figure because she was in a position to act and influence affairs, albeit unsuccessfully.

Political power is conventionally seen as the power through which an empire is run and organized at both the civil and the military level. Political activities include such things as making and ending wars, treating with foreign officials, and raising taxes. However, with Byzantium, we have a society dominated by God, a society whose ethos was Christian, outside of which there was no other ideology or

world view. Everything and everyone in Byzantium gained their rationale from the Christian Byzantine perceptions of God. Under these circumstances, we should add another element to political power: God. This does not refer simply to the church and the emperor's position within the church, significant as that was, but also to the emperor's relationship with God, the need for God's vice-regent on earth to be right with God.

In this way, the corollary to Stafford's definition of power as the ability to take part in events or pursue ambitions is to question what these events or ambitions might be. Our perspective as to what events are important is very different from the Byzantine perspective. To us, dedicating a church or founding a monastery does not necessarily carry the same weight as losing a battle or treating with an enemy. Byzantium was, however, a God-dominated society, God's empire on earth. In this context, dedications to God, interrelationships between imperial figures and God were, in some ways, as indicative of power as interrelationships between imperial figures and men. In defining imperial virtues in terms of victories, foreign policies, and economic reforms, aspects such as piety and philanthropy have, to some extent, been minimized. Rather, different sets of imperial virtues and different spheres of imperial activity exist. The founding of a church by an empress may be as powerful a political act as the declaration of war by an emperor.

In these terms, it is significant that the empress who seems to recur most frequently in Byzantine sources over the centuries is not one of those conventionally seen as powerful. Verina was the wife of the fifth-century emperor, Leo I. They had two surviving daughters (one of whom was the future empress Ariadne). After Leo's death, Verina hoped to rule through her grandson, Leo II. The child's father, Zeno, however, was proclaimed emperor and the boy Leo died eleven months into his reign. Verina then intrigued against Zeno and, until her death in c.484, plotted continuously to regain power but, according to conventional versions of events, without actually achieving anything.

Nevertheless, the figure of Verina appears in a surprisingly wide range of sources. She is mentioned in most Byzantine histories and chronicles which deal with the fifth century. She is even the first empress to whom a sixth-century chronicler gave the title *Augusta*. She also appears in a variety of sources, from an eighth-century guide to the monuments of Constantinople to a tenth-century poem on the wonders of the City. Significantly, all of these references are to her piety. Two

contrasting views are given. On the one hand, she is described as "the most pious empress," responsible for the founding of many churches and a key figure in the establishment of the cult of the Virgin in Constantinople. However, in contrast to this picture of a pious, orthodox new Helena (the mother of Constantine), she is also described as a witch and a successor to the whore of Babylon.

In traditional historical terms, Verina is an unimportant, relatively powerless figure; she does not achieve anything of great significance, being just a failed rebel. Yet, for some reason, she was a significant figure in Byzantine memory: this seems to be related to her religious activity. This, in turn, supports the belief that such activities offered a source of political power. As a note to this, it is worth remembering that much has been made of the perceived special relationship between women and icons, and it is interesting in light of the above discussion that Byzantine sources record women as one of the most consistent and significant groups among the opponents of Iconoclasm. This may reflect a general feeling in Byzantine society that religion was one field where it was appropriate for women to have access to some level of power, so long as it did not interfere with the legitimate (male) organization of the church.

The empress was the only woman in Byzantium with any real access to political power. This came, above all, from her official position within the hierarchy of the Byzantine state machinery. How effective a use she made of her position depended on the opportunities available. However, the extent of the empress's influence on events should be reassessed in the context of questioning assumptions about power and the nature of power. In this way, it becomes possible to open up the ways in which the empress had access to the political structure of Byzantium. Political power in Byzantium has to be seen within the context of Byzantine ideologies of God, state, and empire; the empress had a key role to play in all of these.

PART 2: WOMEN AND POLITICS IN THE ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH CENTURIES

The "Eleventh-Century Crisis" is a chapter heading in many traditional history books about the Byzantine empire, followed by a chapter on the twelfth-century "recovery." The traditional view is that in the eleventh century the empire declined in every way before a period of stability in the twelfth century lead to recovery. Most books imply that the crisis

can be judged by the number of women exercising political power in the eleventh century. Recent research has shown another picture of eleventh-century Byzantium, however. First of all, the empire was healthy economically and financially in this period. Secondly, on the religious front, the mutual excommunication of each other by the pope in Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople in 1054, although dramatic, pushed the situation no further past recovery than it had been during other disputes, which were a fact of everyday religious life until the Fourth Crusade in 1204, when the Latins conquered the Byzantine Empire and ruled from Constantinople for the next sixty years. If these two criteria, that is, economics and religion, are removed from consideration, then, only politics is left. Does the increased participation of women in politics precipitate or denote a crisis? The question is ludicrous to a generation influenced consciously or subconsciously by feminism. We can, however, examine this increased political participation to discover what women were doing to earn so harsh a judgement.

What did "politics" mean in the medieval world of Byzantium? Holding and exercising supreme power was the aim of political activity, as it is today. Few women in the Byzantine empire had that chance. Politics was the art of persuasion and manipulation of support to achieve that aim. Women had a role to play in these matters, since marriage alliances were a favorite method of removing emnity and creating unity. As marriage partners or marriage brokers, women were involved in the building of support groups. For the emperor in power, maintainance of his support group was a priority; from the other side, sabotage or infiltration of the ruling group was the aim. Distribution of available monies was an important component of political power. As in the present day, such distributions were divided into categories: the poor, one's supporters, foreign powers, educational and medical facilities. One very important category which may not be so obvious in this day and age was the church. In any autocracy one person has the authority to decide the fates of the rest to a greater or lesser extent. Much depends on the individual character and strength of that person. Politics was therefore more personal in Byzantium than in a modern multi-party democracy. The power of influence was correspondingly more important and more necessary since there was only one person from whom all blessings and promotions flowed. Women have always been accused of exerting their influence, so it is not surprising that one finds them doing so in Byzantium.

We are, of course, referring to imperial women only. Given the autocracy described above, only those in close contact with the emperor were able to influence him. In earlier centuries there had been two groups of women in this category: those in the emperor's family and holy women. From the ninth century the ideological locus of sanctity had shifted from holy virgins to married women and mothers, decreasing the role of the holy woman at court. The women of the emperor's family were now best placed to affect his decisions. The growing emphasis on family values in the eleventh century increased the influence that members of the family of both sexes could have: women could only benefit from such a trend.[7]

In previous centuries (as mentioned in Part 1) imperial women had been involved in regency and usurpation, two of the ways in which imperial power was passed on through the ages. It is important to remember that Byzantium, unlike the medieval West, was not ruled by a hereditary monarchy. There was no right of primogeniture in Byzantium, because in theory there was no right of succession at all. The empire's political theory was that of the Roman republic, that the best man ruled by right of virtue. Of course, even in Augustus's time this was not true, but it remained the theory. Through the centuries of Byzantine rule, son had often followed father but often had not, due to being underage or poor on the battlefield or opposed by a powerful faction at court which supported another candidate, usually one who could claim military victory. For the qualities necessary for a good emperor, one can read the *basilikos logos*, or speech to the emperor, of a third-century political speech writer called Menander Rhetor. The four most important qualities were courage, righteousness, moderation, and good sense. Courage was given its finest expression on the battlefield, so a general who had just won a great victory had a good chance of claiming the throne. The related tendency, or skill, which the Byzantines demonstrated was an ability to believe in the rightness of imperial rule while rebelling against the current occupier of the imperial throne. This explains the frequency of usurpation in Byzantium as well as the lack of political criticism of the imperial office itself. The success of the victorious usurper was cemented if he could achieve an alliance with the wife or daughter of the former emperor. Violent conflicts were thereby clothed in a garment of legitimacy which supplied the missing continuity of a law of succession. This crucial role was played by women many times throughout Byzantine history but did not automatically grant political influence to

the woman involved unless she herself fought for it. This rule held even when the throne was passed through a daughter in peaceful succession: the most famous example was the princess Zoe.

QUEENS IN THEIR OWN RIGHT

Zoe and her sister, Theodora, were the only two women in Byzantine history to rule in their own right as successors by blood. They were the last of a long and prestigious dynasty which had ruled since 867, notwithstanding a few usurpers who had interrupted its flow briefly. There were no sons to inherit the throne when their father died in 1028. Most of Zoe's career was spent legitimizing a series of emperors (we will consider this role below). For three months in 1042, the two sisters ruled together as sovereign empresses until Zoe seized all power for herself. As supreme rulers, they carried out the functions of government, hearing petitions, dispensing justice from the throne, appointing officials, passing laws. Many of these functions took place in the main halls of the palace where courtiers, soldiers, petitioners, lawyers, and ambassadors gathered to listen and present their reports or requests.[8] The imperial function in Byzantium was a public one, performed in full view of many people. Performance played an important part in Byzantine politics. There was a full round of ceremonial (processions, banquets, festivities, shows) in which the whole court participated, headed by the emperor. This ceremonial both dictated and revealed one's status at court, and at the head of it was the emperor with visible authority and magnificence, untouchable in his majesty. Zoe and Theodora participated in these ceremonies as sovereigns and by doing so participated in the almost divine aura which surrounded emperors.

Their financial affairs followed the pattern of male emperors, including their donations to the church. Zoe's patronage of the church was generous; she was, in fact, accused of overspending. Theodora was also generous, giving land and grants to Nea Moni on the island of Chios, in particular. Zoe was the target of begging courtiers for a longer time than Theodora, who spent a large part of her life in monasteries. Crowned empress with her husband when her father died in 1028, Zoe remained at the hub of power until her death in 1050. During this time she raised three emperors to the throne and was viewed both positively as powerful and negatively as sinister.

Zoe married three times, elevating each husband to the position of emperor, and adopted one son, who also became emperor. Because of the blood that flowed in her veins she had the power to elevate men to the throne who could, therefore, govern the empire. As time went on, Zoe was viewed more and more as the ruler by blood and by inheritance, and her husbands were correspondingly more dependent on her for their right to rule.[9] By marrying, Zoe tried to counter the problem of military leadership which was such a great part of the imperial image. Given the prestige which went with victory on the field, she was vulnerable to the authority of these emperors once she had raised them to the throne. Her sister Theodora, who ruled alone in 1055-6 as sovereign empress after the deaths of Zoe in 1050 and of her last husband in 1055, avoided that trap by not marrying at all.

REGENCY AS ACCESS TO POWER

Zoe and Theodora were in a unique position and were respected because of their ancestry. Yet Theodora spent many years in exile in a monastery, and Zoe was ignored by her husbands or shut up in her rooms and denied access to the treasury and the council chamber. Another empress who could claim a rule of her own was Eudokia Makrembolitissa, the powerful regent for her son, Michael, in 1067-8. Regents filled the same functions as sovereign empresses, among them hearing cases, appointing officials, passing laws, and distributing money. Added to their task, however, was the responsibility of looking after their sons and keeping the throne safe for them. This meant distributing money and positions at court in specific directions to maintain support. Eudokia was appointed regent by her dying husband in 1067 and handled all the affairs of government. She had to guard against her brother-in-law, who would have preferred to be regent himself, and eventually exiled him to his estates. She kept her finger on the pulse of the court successfully but encountered the same problem for women in power that Zoe had: the impossibility of women leading armies into the field of battle. To solve this problem she decided to marry a general who could do the fighting for her. She had two choices, one in far away Antioch and one in disgrace at home. Eudokia decided that the one in disgrace might be easier to handle if she won his gratitude by saving him from execution. She did save him, married him, and elevated him to the throne in 1068, but he disappointed her by becoming arrogant, especially after defeating the Turks. He insulted

her, refused to take her advice, and treated her as of no account. In 1071 he was captured by the Turks after the battle of Mantzikurt, and Eudokia had a choice again. The senators were assembled, and Eudokia's brother-in-law was recalled to help deal with the crisis. At one time it seemed that Eudokia had persuaded them all that she and her son should once again take over the regency, but her brother-in-law managed to persuade an influential section that her son should rule alone. He had an army with him, and, having persuaded enough senators that this was the wisest course, he visited Eudokia, threatening her with violence if she did not leave quietly. With the fear of rape hanging over her head, she fled out of the palace to a monastery and her son was crowned alone.

The empress Zoe and the empress/regent Eudokia were faced with the same problem of military victory, so necessary to the imperial image but so impossible for a woman to perform. Legitimizing a general to do the fighting left them vulnerable to his power once crowned. Zoe could not be removed from the palace because of her link to the prestigious Macedonian dynasty, but Eudokia was defenseless. Legitimizing an emperor was therefore a two-edged sword for a woman interested in exerting political influence.

A later regent, Maria of Antioch, who governed for her son Alexios in 1180-81 after the death of her husband Manuel Komnenos, had an even more adventurous, if less successful, career. Eudokia Makrembolitissa managed to survive to an old age, but Maria was executed. She emulated Theodora's method of non-marriage but without the protection of Theodora's age or blood line and with one difference. Maria took lovers to strengthen her own position. Unfortunately, the men of the court saw her as a bone to be fought over and in their hatred of her lover and their efforts to succeed him, allowed the black sheep of the family to return from exile, bringing with him the promise of legitimacy and a return to stability. He was crowned after deposing his nephew and having Maria murdered; he married the very young imperial widow of his nephew in order to cement his legitimacy.[10] Maria failed to keep the throne safe until her son grew up because she removed herself from the chaste position of mother in an era when there was a large family surrounding the emperor all of whom had a claim to the throne.

MARRIAGE AS NEXUS OF POWER: THE KOMNENOS DYNASTY

When an emperor was deposed, alliances changed quickly as women twisted and turned to keep both themselves and the succession safe. Maria of Alania, who was married to Eudokia's son, Michael, married the general Nikephoros, who had deposed him in 1078. In such a fashion was the usurper Nikephoros given the vital link with the previous dynasty, while Maria and her son Constantine gained a secure status at court. When Nicephoros began to groom his own cousin as successor instead of his step-son, Maria promptly turned to another family, the Komnenoi, who promised to help her son gain his throne and gave them a link with herself and a cast-iron excuse for visiting the palace. One of the Komnenos brothers was married to her cousin, and the other was adopted by her as her son.[11] In 1081 this family staged a rebellion and defeated Nicephoros Botaneiates. They started a dynasty which lasted for a hundred years without diluting the blood of the family.

The story of the success of the Komnenoi is primarily a story of women manipulating events to achieve their aims. In moments of crisis, women typically become visible as historical figures in histories which otherwise are uninterested in them. This is such a universal trend that women are sometimes accused of creating the crises which allowed them to determine the course of events. The revolt of the Komnenoi followed this pattern: it was legitimized by women and orchestrated by women acting in concert. In 1071 the empress-regent Eudokia Makrembolitissa had been forced to flee from the palace to exile when her brother-in-law, John Doukas, seized control because she was bereft of her husband. No matter how unsatisfactory he had been, he had left her in virtual control during his frequent sojourns out of the city to make war. His capture by the Turks, however, had placed Eudokia in a precarious position, one which her brother-in-law used to his own advantage. At the same time as Eudokia's exile, the matriarch of the Komnenos family, Anna Dalassene, was brought to trial on charges of communicating with the deposed emperor, Eudokia's husband. Although Anna protested her innocence, she was found guilty and exiled: she probably was guilty since she had recently married one of her daughters to one of the emperor's sons by his first marriage. The timing of the two exiles suggests that Eudokia and Anna Dalassene were acting together to preserve both families by keeping the deposed

emperor on the throne. Neither of them had anything to gain by the ascendency of John Doukas, Eudokia's brother-in-law. Doukas lost his hold on his nephew, the emperor Michael, to a courtier called Nikephoritzes, who also seems to have favored the Komnenoi. The family was soon back at court and the sons were given military commands in the army.

When Michael himself was deposed by the general Nikephoros, the Komnenoi kept their positions in the army. They were successful on the battlefield, thereby earning both favor and suspicion at court. Their alliance with the empress Maria allowed them to keep abreast of any attempts on their lives by would-be enemies, and when the plots did occur, they were prepared. A series of marriage alliances created by Anna Dalassene had joined most of the influential families of the empire to the Komnenoi, even the Doukas family. It suited these families that Anna's son, Alexios Komnenos, should become emperor, for he had enough support and military glory to succeed, whereas none of the others were powerful enough to stand alone. The Komnenoi also had the support of the previous empress, Maria of Alania, and of Eudokia Makrembolitissa, who had always been a friend of Anna Dalassene. Alexios, of course, promised rewards to those who followed him. After succeeding to the throne he fulfilled these promises, managing to surround himself with a fairly loyal group upon whom he could rely when fighting the empire's enemies on the frontier. To control the civil government in the capital in his absence he made his mother regent.[12]

Anna Dalassene was in charge of the whole civil government, with a decree from the emperor to establish her position. This decree gave her the carte blanche normally extended only to emperors. Her decisons were never to be questioned at any time in the future, and her actions could not be judged by any person at any time. Anna exercised her power for at least a decade before retiring to a monastery which she had founded, the Monastery of Christ Pantepoptes. As well as her secular decisions on civil government, Anna instituted a new regime of pious devotion in the palace, attending church several times a day, praying frequently, giving much money and land to various monastic foundations, feeding monks at her own table, and visiting holy men both inside and outside the city. This reformation was viewed positively by the historians of the time, who saw it as a return to a moral high ground. Anna was also praised for the unity she had

promoted among the members of her own family, thereby making them strong.

Not only secular decisions and appointments were political in Byzantium. Religious matters were equally important given the intellectual world of the Byzantines. Anna's reformation of the palace was one strand of religious politics. Her patronage of monks and monasteries was another. Many of the decrees which bore her name were grants of land to a certain monk, Christodoulos. Anna procured land and tax exemptions for him several times in the 1080s. She also protected the monks of the monastery of Docheiariou from tax demands made by the empire's officials.[13] Authoritative in all areas of government, Anna Dalassene was one of the two most successful and political woman in Byzantine history, equal only to the eighth-century empress Eirene, whose political career is discussed above.

Alexios Komnenos managed to establish a stable rule: this left very little for women to do. After Anna Dalassene retired in dubious (and unclear) circumstances, the day-to-day government of the empire was taken over by men. Later empresses were less visible in the sources of the time. However, there were still two areas in which the political power of women should not be underestimated simply because Byzantine chroniclers and historians did not mention them or lessened their significance. The "recovery" of the twelfth century is not as bereft of women as it may seem. Firstly, the empress could interfere in the course of justice, not because she had any constitutional role but because she could plead directly with the emperor who was the source of ultimate decisions. The historians of the time tended to dismiss this function as female softheartedness and lack of judgement. However, if this role is considered structurally, it shows the empress as a focus of attention for many people in the court who had an interest in reversing the emperor's decisions. In a totalitarian state, it was the equivalent of an Opposition speaker berating the government. Several successful interventions are noted in the sources. The empress Bertha-Eirene was praised for her compassion for those under the threat of death, and Eirene Doukaina pled successfully for the life of Michael Anemas, a rebel.[14] Secondly, religious patronage was of importance in Byzantium, but historians, understanding their own society, tended to minimize the prestige which accrued from generosity to the church. There was a wide range of possible benefits which could be given, from founding new monasteries to embroidering gifts for individual churches. The empresses from 1081 to 1180 participated in the full range of these

activities, although the founding of monasteries declined after an edict from the emperor Manuel forbade it: he was concerned about the amount of power it generated in both earthly and spiritual terms.

Manuel Komnenos, by restricting new monastic foundations, was dealing with a problem which highlighted anew the personal aspect of imperial rule. The prestige of the individual emperor had to be paramount. Manuel was surrounded by a large family, all with a legitimate claim to the throne. He had to raise his own personal status above that of the family. When the individual emperor was weak for any reason, whether through age or sickness or lack of political interest, women were in a prime position to exercise power. This truism has already been demonstrated in the account of the rise of the Komnenoi to power. Alexios Komnenos was a victim of rheumatism at the end of his reign, and in his physical agony he appointed his wife, Eirene Doukaina, to run the government for him. Eirene favored the succession of her eldest daughter rather than her son and attempted to ensure it while she was empowered by Alexios. She failed but her measures have been recorded by sources of the time and show the extent of her power. For instance, she was able to isolate her son and forbid anyone to visit him and to appoint her daughter's husband to administer justice like an emperor. [15] In 1203, another wife, Euphrosyne Doukaina, exercised secular power through the feeble-mindedness of her husband. His political instinct was not highly developed, and Euphrosyne directed all that he did. Her political qualities were clear: she could communicate well, had a very persuasive tongue, was self-controlled in the matter of revenge, was an organizer, could appoint good ministers, and had the resolution to deal with crises when they occurred. Unfortunately, she was of the wrong sex and her domination of her husband was too blatant. She was criticized savagely by the historians of the time and was exiled by a group of courtiers who managed to inflame her weak-minded husband against her.[16]

CONCLUSION

The fluctuating fortunes of the empresses described in the two parts of this essay must inevitably raise questions about the importance of women in the Byzantine empire. Even when empresses were the link that legitimized an emperor, they could still be mistreated or ignored, like Zoe or Eudokia Makrembolitissa. Even Maria of Alania, who had legitimized two emperors, eventually had no political role to play and

retired to her estates. An empress whose position depended entirely upon that of her husband was more vulnerable still; for example Eirene Doukaina's marriage was on the point of breaking up after the successful Komnenos usurpation, and Euphrosyne Doukaina was exiled by her husband on a whim. Even Anna Dalassene, the mother of Alexios Komnenos and his regent for a decade, retired in obscurity at an unknown time. The position of empress was fragile and was usually dependent on the goodwill of the emperor. Yet, empresses did have access to many different types of political power and exercised that power in very visible ways during the Byzantine empire's existence. In much the same way that the success of an individual emperor depended on his personality, so the activity of an empress depended on her own. She had no constitutional role, but many opportunities became available through her enterprise and interest. It is striking that so many empresses in these later centuries of the empire exploited every chance they had to dictate the political future of the empire. They were aided by the instability of the later eleventh century, which was certainly a time of crisis for male political authority. These speedy changes in political regimes allowed women's participation to be visible. As historians we must wonder whether there would not be more to tell in other centuries if the sources had recorded it. We must not fall into the trap which Byzantium itself has set and regard women as political nonentities in a misogynistic empire. In an imperial system, personal influence is the most powerful tool that anyone of any sex can use, and empresses from their unique position were in an excellent place from which to wield it.

NOTES

1. For women's legal position see J. Beaucamp, "La situation juridique de la femme à Byzance" *Cahiers de Civilisation Medievale* 20 (1977): 145-76.

2. On the career of Anicia Juliana, see R. M. Harrison, *A Temple for Byzantium* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1989).

3. For Pulcheria, see K. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); For Ariadne, see J. B. Bury, *History of the Later Roman Empire*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 1: 390-95, 429-32; for Theodora, see A. M. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); for Sophia, see Cameron, "The Empress Sophia" *Byzantion* 45 (1975): 5-21; for Eirene, see S. Runciman, "The Empress Eirene the Athenian," in Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval*

Women (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); For Theodora II see J. B. Bury, *A History of the Eastern Roman Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 154-61; for Theophano, see R. J. H. Jenkins, *Byzantium: The Imperial Centuries AD 610-1071* (Toronto: University of Toronto/Medieval Academiy Reprints, 1987), 270-302.

4. The role of empress is not mentioned in any surviving law code. J. Beaucamp's *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e-7e siècle), 1. LedDroit impérial* (Paris, 1990) contains next to nothing on empresses because there is so little primary data. I am grateful to Joëlle Beaucamp for her first-hand advice on this topic.

5. See E. Bensammer, "La titulature de L'imperatrice et sa Signification" *Byzantion* 46 (1976): 283.

6. See Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: The King's Wife in the Early Middle Ages* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983) and her recent article in Duggan, ed., *Queens and Queenship*. My debt to Stafford's analysis must be clear.

7. The bibliography on the increase of family values in the eleventh century is large; some suggestions are: M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire 1025-1204. A Political History* (London: Longman, 1984); A. Kazhdan and A. Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); P. Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel Komnenos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

8. M. Psellos, *Chronographia*, tr. E. Renauld, 2 vols. (Paris, 1926-28), Book 6; E. Sewter, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 155-162.

9. B. Hill, L. James and D. C. Smythe, "Zoe and the Rhythm Method of Imperial Renewal," *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal, 4th-13th Centuries*, ed. P. Magdalino (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), 215-229.

10. H. Magoulias, tr. and ed. *O City of Byzantium. The Annals of Niketas Choniates* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).

11. Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, tr. E. Sewter, *The Alexiad of Anna Komnene* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 74.

12. For the revolt and the aftermath, see M. Angold, *The Byzantine Empire*, 92-135.

13. *Acta et diplomata graeca medii aevi sacra et profana*, eds. F. Miklosich and J. Muller, 6 vols. (Vienna, 1866-90), vol. 6, 25-28, 32, 33, 35, 38, 39, 44-49, 79-80.

14. A. Komnene, *Alexiad*, Sewter, 385-386.

15. M. Angold, "Alexios I Komnenos: An Afterword," *Alexios I Komnenos*, 400-402.

16. Magoulias, *Choniates*, 250-251, 252, 253, 266-267.

CHAPTER 11

Medieval Queenship

Janet L. Nelson

PROBLEMS AND PRECONDITIONS[1]

Queenship has often been taken for granted as if it were a natural part of the medieval landscape. In fact, like any other human product, material or social, it was fashioned by men and women in particular times and places. To ask under what conditions it took shape means defining at the outset what is specific about new kinds of power in the first formative period of western European history, that is, the earlier Middle Ages. Studying medieval queenship is salutary, because it requires an inclusive definition of power, one in which the social encompasses the political: it requires attention to gender division but also to the complementarity of women's agency and men's, to informal as well as formal action, to the pursuit of ends that are both personal and political, and, always, to social context.

Although queenship is a modern, not a medieval, term, medieval people were aware of the need to recognize a generalized role for the king's wife. The learned wrote of the queenly "title" (nomen) and prescribed conduct befitting it. Queens, like kings and like the holders of office within the church's hierarchy, were consecrated; these rituals included a declaration that God mandated the queen to share the kingdom with the king. People in general understood, not least by hearing stories of fictional queens, what real-life queens should do, and requests for queenly alms or intercession were shaped by such expectations. This was reinforced by images of the Church as an enthroned and crowned queen and representations of the Virgin Mary as queen-mother with her royal Son. Medieval people, familiar with such images through visual art or through the spoken media of sermons, recitations of saints' lives, songs, and stories, constructed

real-life queenship in the light of these models. Queens themselves did so too.

The focus in this chapter will be on queenship in Latin Christendom, the part of Christendom using the Latin bible, the Latin liturgy for prayer, and church law in Latin. Conditions and traditions varied, and large changes occurred between the fifth century and the fifteenth. Queens in the Middle Ages lived varied lives and did very different things. Nevertheless, there are enough recognizable similarities to constitute something we can call "medieval queenship."

Medieval sources are tricky. The annals and chronicles from which historians have traditionally built their narratives tend to focus on the succession of kings and their wars and battles, and they seldom mention women. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance, covering the period from the fifth century to the twelfth, mentions just twenty women: on the other hand, almost all of these are queens or (in two cases) royal mistresses.[2] The activities of these women were presumably all things of interest to the writer's audience as they are to us. The authors of full-blown Histories (as distinct from brief annals) give queens a place, and even a voice, when that fits into narrative strategies: Paul the Deacon's story about Queen Theodelinda or Froissart's story of Queen Philippa should be set against the fictional queens in *Beowulf*, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (despite its title, more fiction than history), and in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. The Lives of saintly queens are obviously bound by the formal constraints of hagiography. If one looks outside the literary genres, other pictures emerge. Queens are mentioned relatively often in letters and poems, genres flavored with rhetoric, to be sure, but also strongly spiced with strictly contemporary views and concerns. Queens are increasingly prominent in the later Middle Ages in art and in liturgy, revealing of an enhanced symbolic role. Intermittently in the earlier Middle Ages, queens appear in royal charters-grants of land or privilege-as requesters or witnesses. From the twelfth century onwards, such charter appearances become rare, but, as government records start to survive in fuller quantities, queens are mentioned increasingly often in royal financial accounts. In mid-thirteenth-century Castile, the queen's status and functions were actually prescribed in laws issued by Alfonso the Wise. Did a historical reality lie behind the according of legal protection to the king's mistress on almost the same terms as to the queen? In the Siete Partidas, another set of laws issued by the same king soon after, all reference to the king's mistress was dropped. It

might be dangerous to infer any change in practice from this changed prescription.

This bunching of the evidence and these changes in its composition are significant in themselves: on the one hand, queens are conspicuous as patrons of historical writing, poetry, and romances whose production and/or intended audience were centered in courts, and courts were also the focus for literati who wrote letters; on the other hand, the increased production of documents and financial accounts is symptomatic of the proliferation of trained clerks from the twelfth century onwards, the growing preference of regimes for written records, and of increasingly bureaucratized forms of government. The suggestion that, under this new regime, power tended to bypass the court, so marginalizing the queen's sphere of personal influence and reducing her scope for action, is one to which I will return.

Partiality and prejudice in literary texts of all kinds, including histories, is what historians expect and allow for. Thus the queens of the Old Testament, whose images so strongly influenced medieval writers (including female ones), were models of virtue (Esther) or vice (Jezebel, Athaliah). Misogyny can sharpen the criticism of particular queens by medieval men, whether clerical or lay. The violence of such attitudes can sometimes be horrific as in the chronicle account of the tearing apart of Queen Brunhild by wild horses or in the visual depiction of the tearing apart of the Whore of Babylon, represented as a queen, in an illustrated Spanish commentary on the Book of Revelation. Yet recurrent stereotypes and motifs in histories and romances—the queen-poisoner, the lustful queen, the adulterous queen, the queen who gives bad counsel or foments faction—cut both ways, indicating not only the imagined but the actual environments within which real queens operated.

There are three striking differences in the ways political power was wielded in the Roman and the medieval worlds. First, in terms of structure, the central institution of the Middle Ages was kingship not emperorship, meaning not only that plural kingdoms replaced a unitary empire but that within each kingdom power-holding was conceived as being held by a family head, exercised through kin, and transmitted through descent. Second, in terms of organization, the fundamental institution of the Roman Empire was the army. Military organisation was fundamental to medieval kingship, too, but royal warlordship was exercised within kingship's patrimonial context, and the king's military household was lodged, literally, within the royal household itself.

Medieval warriors were often called *pueri*, "the boys": the relationship between the king and his men was modelled on that of father and sons. Third, in terms of ideology, the Roman Empire, despite its trappings, never shed the ideals of citizenship inherited from the Republican period. Republican regimes in ancient city-states distinguished sharply between the public political "outside" world and a private domestic "inside" one. It is no coincidence that the notion of "separate spheres" has been located by modern historians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the very period when citizens consciously sought to recreate the civil societies of classical city-states. Monarchic regimes, by contrast, lack that ideology of civic virtue, and medieval kingship instead located power not in the agora or forum but in the royal home.

These three points had implications for the way power was gendered. Plural kingdoms made possible, even invited, marriages among ruling families; that in turn identified those families and signalled their exclusiveness. Imported princesses tended thus to enhance the status of kingship as well as of queenship. Plural kingdoms also allowed queens important diplomatic roles vis-à-vis other courts; indeed a queen's dual identity as both king's daughter and king's wife made her uniquely qualified to express relations between kingdoms. Further, the centering of a medieval king's power within a primary family unit set a premium on the relationships among the king's wife and her husband and children, because she was responsible for transmitting life and power from one generation to the next. The lodging of young military men and of the military control center within the king's household presupposed a commissariat within the royal palace, where, as in any other household, feeding and nurturing were women's roles. The *pueri* did not inhabit an excusively male world but looked to the king's wife as surrogate mother. Finally, the "separate spheres" of the city-state model confined women to the "inside" world of the domestic but the distinction of public and private spaces and functions did not in fact work for most of Europe during the Middle Ages. Instead, in the king's house, the "private" became the "public" home of man-management and government. This made it possible for female power to become more visible in descriptive texts and more strongly approved in prescriptive ones although most formal treatises on the body politic excluded queens from their accounts of princely education, courts, and counsel, despite the ubiquity of queens in precisely those roles in the authors' contemporary worlds.

Not all monarchic regimes, to be sure, allow women access to political power and status, and not every type of medieval kingship encouraged medieval queenship. We need to look more closely at the conditions under which, in medieval Europe, queens and queenship appear. In reality, queenship was a secondary phenomenon, an offshoot of kingship, and the earliest evidence for medieval kings everywhere predates that for queens. Fifth-century kings, like their kingdoms, were made not born. Election, that is, the choice of warriors and chieftains, had much to do with their making, and their regimes depended on lasting consensus. Yet since the king ruled in and through his household, there was a place, from the outset, for the king's wife. Moreover, an obvious answer to the question of how to transmit kingly power and authority to the next generation was to choose a king's son as his successor.

This was a strategy strongly favored by the Christian church. There was a paradox here, for the church's own rules for the transmission of ecclesiastical authority firmly excluded kinship in favour of a mixture of election and hierarchy. The church set a premium on peace, order, and continuity; in early medieval kingdoms, these could most readily be secured by hereditary kingship. As kingly power became more clearly embedded in institutions of economic management and of law-giving and dispute-settling, and as kingdoms took more permanent shape, kingship tended to become, at varying rates and intensities, increasingly dynastic. The pattern can be seen in the earlier medieval West, and, from the tenth century, in central and northern Europe, as well.

Ideally, elective monarchy would require the succession to be as open as possible. The king's son(s) must have no preemptive claim, hence no special status. An obvious way to deny special status to the king's son would be to deny it to his mother. Hence, in an elective system, queens would be not simply unnecessary but a positive drawback. Conversely, the making of a queen—the elevation of the status of the king's wife to royalty—signalled dynastic intent on the part of the king. In practice, medieval monarchy always contained both elective and hereditary elements, but the earlier medieval trend was for the hereditary to grow stronger. Paradoxically, lack of a son could stimulate kings to provide for a grandson's succession, so that three generations had to be taken into account. In Visigothic Spain, for instance, the most elective of the early medieval kingdoms (bloodbaths at royal successions were so common that a contemporary chronicler,

Fredegar, termed them "the Gothic disease"[3]), the powerful sixth-century king Athanagild, who had no son but did have two daughters, elevated his wife Goiswinth to the position of queen and seems to have intended a grandson as heir. These plans were foiled when Athanagild died and a noble named Leovigild staked his claim to the kingdom by marrying the widowed Goiswinth. As the elective principle predominated in seventh-century Spain, kings' wives seldom had the title of queen and played no significant political role. Early Frankish history, in contrast, was marked by both strong dynasticism and a series of prominent queens. Designated regina, consort, or "king's bedfellow" (the OE word *cwen*, originally meaning just "woman," had acquired its specific modern sense by the ninth century), an early medieval queen was singled out as the bearer and nurturer of a future king. Her existence implied a royal family, a royal household, and a particular royal descent line, since her sons would take precedence over collaterals. As the queen acted over time, sat alongside and sometimes deputized for the king, acquired regular functions, and was the object of people's expectations, her position became, like her husband's, more or less institutionalized.

Two further factors must be considered: inheritance law and marriage. From the fourth century onwards, the pre-Christian inheritance rules of earlier medieval peoples converged with later Roman law to favor the inheritance rights of daughters, wives, and, especially, widows. Sisters might not inherit equally with brothers but they had guaranteed shares; in the absence of brothers, daughters inherited from parents. Wives were endowed by husbands at marriage, and though they might have had little or no say over these resources during the husbands' lives, in widowhood they would acquire, at least in theory, direct control of both their own dower and of the inheritances of minor children. As important as the legal rules governing women's inheritance and widows' provision were those for marriage itself. In classical Rome, divorce was easy and concubinage normal, while beyond the Roman frontiers, polygamy as well as concubinage seems to have been commonly practised by wealthier men. The Christian church set its face firmly against concubinage and divorce, consistently exalted the status of the chaste spouse, and in its teachings and rituals affirmed the divine purpose behind monogamous heterosexual intercourse and procreation: "Go forth and multiply." Though royal polygamy was not incompatible with some form of queenship, the king's mother might tend under such conditions to be more influential

(because of a longer-term position) than the king's transient bedfellows. The king's wife could become a more powerful figure once the church had confirmed her inviolable and permanent status by emphasizing, and consecrating, the king's monogamous marriage.

The new prominence of empresses in Late Antiquity confirms the link between a more clearly dynastic type of monarchy (an important way in which the later empire differed from its earlier incarnation) and the elevation of the status of the ruler's wife. At the same time, these empresses may have helped create the conditions for the emergence of medieval queenship in two ways. First, they provided role models for the wives of early medieval kings in the West: the Frankish Queen Radegund negotiated with the eastern empress Sophia to acquire a relic of the Holy Cross and was hailed soon after her death as a new Helena, recalling Constantine's mother, the re-discoverer of the Cross; Queen Brunhild appealed to the empress Anastasia for co-operation in extending peace. Conversely, a contemporary chronicler paralleled the bad political influence of the Visigothic queen Goiswintha with that of the empress Sophia. Second, the careers of certain late antique empresses were recalled in the ninth century (see below). From the sixth century onwards, writers of historical narratives, like Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon, gave the title of queen to certain wives of kings and reported as admirable the political activities of these same women. Clothild, wife of the Frankish king Clovis, is referred to as *regina* by Gregory of Tours in his *Histories*, and he stresses her key role in persuading her husband to convert to Catholicism.[4] Parallel cases are the Lombard queen Theodelinda and the Kentish queen Bertha: each was addressed by Pope Gregory the Great as regina, as he applauded their efforts to convert their husbands to Christianity. The first medieval saint-queen belongs to this period: Radegund, wife of the Frankish king Lothar I. Concerns over the possibilities of queens transmitting kingdoms to second husbands gave rise to a second phase of queenship's history: one of greater institutionalization. Not only social prominence, but political roles within the royal household and the kingdom came to be recognised as specific to queens. In ninth-century Francia, for the first time, these things were set out by learned writers in treatises and symbolically established and proclaimed through rituals of queen-making. The rituals were later borrowed for use elsewhere too, so that in virtually all medieval kingdoms, queens were typically consecrated alongside their husbands as soon as possible after marriage or, if an already married man succeeded to kingship, his

wife was crowned at the same time as he was. The prayers for the queen's consecration emphatically stated her roles as consort and, still more strongly, as mother of future kings. Occasionally at first, but with increasing regularity and formality later in the Middle Ages, dead queens were buried alongside and commemorated with their husbands, again statements of their incorporation into the royal family and of their maternal function within the kingly line. This dynastic significance in the queenly rites accounts for the fact that once introduced in any given kingdom they continued to be performed. It explains their appearance at a relatively early and still unstable phase of dynastic establishment, when most internal challenges had to be met. It also explains their proliferation into the newly-emergent kingdoms of the central and later Middle Ages. Given that the western Roman empire, by contrast with kingdoms, remained elective, it is no coincidence that medieval empresses were sometimes consecrated long after their imperial marriages, were seldom consecrated alongside their husbands even when already married to them, and not always consecrated at all. In other respects, however, western empresses resembled queens, and during those periods when emperors strove hardest to make the empire hereditary, as in the later tenth and later twelfth centuries, there tended to be marked enhancement of the empress's status, too, through consecration.

The queen whom all medieval people would have acknowledged was the Virgin Mary, the queen of heaven. The dates of Marian feasts were chosen for important ritual events in the lives of Carolingian queens. Later in the Middle Ages, August 15 (the Assumption) was sometimes chosen for a queen's marriage or burial. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Mary's coronation by Christ was portrayed over the doors of cathedrals, while preachers held Mary up as a model for medieval women, not least queens themselves, to imitate: humble and obedient to her Son yet a powerful intercessor in the court of Heaven.

BECOMING A QUEEN

> A wise king should try to have a wife not only noble, beautiful and rich but also chaste, prudent and compliant in holy virtues; for her legal proximity to him [through marriage] makes her have the more influence for ill, if she poisons through her wickedness, or for good, if she makes all sweet through her moral conduct.[5]

Thus the ninth-century Irish emigré-scholar Sedulius, in reminding King Charles the Bald of the influence a queen wielded over her husband, indicated the criteria that should govern his choice of a bride. Few medieval queens were born to queenship or began as queens-in-waiting. Most became queens through marriage to kings. How did a woman qualify? The story of the "beauty parade" is one that recurs from Late Antiquity on: the king orders his envoys to scour the provinces for eligible girls, "eligible" in the medieval context including moral as well as physical qualities and then personally selects the best as his bride. This story has a biblical model: Esther became queen in this way. Such a bride-show may actually have happened occasionally in Byzantium, and even in the West, perhaps organized by an dowager or regent as a means of securing her own longer-term influence over her young son via a compliant daughter-in-law. Both royal parents were sometimes involved in the choice of bride for a prince who married during his father's lifetime. If such a prince flouted parental wishes, that became—so important was the choice of marriage partner—a significant act of rebellion.

A range of factors conditioned reigning kings' choices of brides. In sixth- and seventh-century Francia under the Merovingian dynasty a few kings married foreign princesses, most married aristocratic women, a few married women of low birth. The costs and benefits varied in each case and varied also with the point of view of the parties involved. Foreign marriage brought a useful alliance, prestige, and an infusion of moveable wealth through gifts sent with the bride, and it affirmed the special character of royal blood. On the other hand, a foreign alliance tended to have only short-term and limited political advantage. From the standpoint of the bride and her family, although the affirmation of shared royal rank was a valuable benefit, the foreign bride had to move to a strange land, where she would be relatively isolated, perhaps unable to speak its language, and far away from supportive kin, at worst a virtual hostage. Marriage among the ranks of the kingdom's own aristocracy increased prospective benefits from political alliance for both parties but, from the king-bridegroom's standpoint, mortgaged the future by increasing the influence of the bride's already-powerful kin within the kingdom especially if the bride produced sons. Marriage to a woman of low birth was an option kings seldom chose. If, in a backhanded way, it affirmed the uniqueness of the king's status, it meant foregoing political benefits for the advantage of a wife totally dependent on her husband's favor and unencumbered with powerful

kin. In practice, the significance of a king's choice might be limited by the ease (despite the church's disapproval) with which wives could be discarded and replaced: many of these Merovingians married, one after the other, a whole series of women or even were, it seems, polygamous. This factor, from the viewpoint of the woman herself, meant extreme vulnerability, the more so, perhaps, if she were of foreign birth. Longer-term political survival, though, depended on the queen's ability to produce a son.

In later medieval kingdoms, the growth of the mystique of royalty—a crucial part of the making of a shared European political culture—as well as the development of sharper social divisions, made it impossible for a king to pick a low-born bride and made foreign dynastic marriage nearly always the preferred choice. In the fifteenth century, a king of Poland who married a woman of the Polish aristocracy was severely criticized. So, too, was the English king Edward IV, whose wife Elizabeth Woodville was not lowborn but a descendant of Charlemagne on her mother's side. Edward, sometimes alleged to have married Elizabeth for love, more probably made a shrewd political choice, preferring not to ally himself with the daughter of a great magnate but still achieving more than mere respectability.

As a rule, the medieval bride came to her husband's place of residence rather than the reverse, and the foreign queen, who was invariably a royal woman, highlighted the implications of this. Moving into not merely her husband's home and family but to a strange court in a foreign land meant an initial, sometimes prolonged, experience of isolation. The saintly bishop Hugh of Lincoln, who happened to be in Paris, had to comfort the weeping twelve-year old Blanche of Castile, newly wed to the French prince Louis, in 1200. The shock could be blunted if the bride had been prepared by learning the language and customs of her prospective husband's land. Eleanor of Castile arrived in England as Edward I's bride in 1255 already able to speak the language of the English court for her own mother had been French. The prospective brides of some later medieval Hungarian kings were sent to Buda as little girls to learn Magyar. No bride came to her new land alone: she brought her own ladies-in-waiting, an invaluable support group whose members were likely to acquire political influence of their own through proximity to the queen.

One category of royal bride deserves special reflection: the woman who was already queen, that is, either the widow or the heiress-daughter of the previous king. A widowed queen in remarrying or an

orphaned heiress in marrying would pass from one male authority to another. The widowed Brunhild was quickly taken in marriage by a Merovingian prince eager to claim her late husband's kingdom. When the Danish king Cnut conquered England in the early eleventh century, he married Emma, the widow of King Æthelred, establishing a united kingdom of both the northern region known as the "Danelaw" and the south, ruled by the House of Wessex. A claim by conquest was legitimate but marriage strengthened it. In all these cases, the widowed queen could be seen as in some sense conveying a kingdom from one king to another, even as being the realm's embodiment. The marriage of a king's son to his father's widow, occasionally documented in the early Middle Ages, may have harked back to pre-Christian custom but also reflected the ongoing role of the royal widow as stake-holder and transmitter of the kingdom, roles expressed especially clearly when the widowed queen controlled the regalia and passed these on to her husband's successor. The case of the heiress-daughter also demonstrates the function of the queen as vehicle of power, and this occurred more often beginning in the twelfth century. France was the exception that proved the rule: there, after a long sequence of kings had, by luck and management, secured male heirs for well over three centuries, the succession of a collateral was legitimized in 1328 by the invention of the "Salic Law" that prohibited succession to the kingdom by or through a woman. Elsewhere, as dynastic sentiment grew stronger and aristocrats increasingly inclined to accept female succession to lordships in default of a male heir, cases of queens by inheritance became more frequent. In the twelfth century Matilda of England-Normandy thus claimed to inherit a kingdom; Urraca of Leon-Castile and Melisende of Jerusalem actually did so. Two well-established principles now collided: inheritance by blood-right and divinely approved male authority/patriarchy. In each case, speedy marriage provided the heiress-queen with a ruling king, and the production of sons eventually resolved the problem in the next generation. The heiress who was a king's daughter temporarily embodied the realm, but her own body was, quite literally, the conduit through which the blood-line was transmitted to the next generation: thus Henry II, son of Matilda and Geoffrey of Anjou, though known as "Angevin," claimed the English crown through his mother as grandson of Henry I. "The age of the heiress" was also an age of patriarchy reaffirmed. The full implications of this need to be traced over time, however, and I shall return to them below.

Becoming a queen entailed economic transactions; a royal marriage, like any other, involved two families' mutual benefit, the endowment of the couple, and the separate endowment of the bride (dower) against the possibility of widowhood. Gifts probably always went in several directions. If the king married an aristocratic woman from within his kingdom, the scale of the endowment given to the bride by her family (dowry) might be substantial in terms of land, thus paralleling the *maritagium* (marriage portion) conveyed to a noble woman who married a noble man. But when a king married a foreign bride—and this was increasingly the norm, especially from the twelfth century—while she would certainly bring movable wealth with her, far more valuable and of long-term importance was the endowment she received in her husband's kingdom. This dower was conveyed in formal and public acts that acknowledged and implicitly guaranteed the bride's status. A well-documented early medieval example is the dower of Theophanu, the Byzantine princess who in 973 married Otto II, son of and at that point co-emperor with, Otto I of Germany and Italy. The marriage was solemnised in Rome by the pope, and the terms of the bride's dower were set out in gold letters on an imposing purple-tinted parchment document which still survives. The dower consisted of extensive estates in both Italy and Germany plus three rich nunneries. In practice, this grant was not immune to subsequent diminution: such elaborate lengths were taken to safeguard the widow's property rights precisely because they were vulnerable. The queen's dower constituted an important and ongoing resource for the ruling couple, underpinning the institutional, public character of the royal family. Further, the queen's dower had a twofold symbolic importance: first, it denoted the true wife, marking her off clearly from any concubine(s) and assuring, therefore, the throneworthiness of any future sons she might bear; second, it guaranteed the status of a wife who might find herself, one day, a dowager. In both these senses, there was something about the queen's dower that was specific to her queenship. This seems clear, too, from the continuing importance of the queen's dower even after the twelfth century, when endowment of the noble or royal bride by her parents, through dowry, is increasingly well-documented. Royal marriages from this point also became almost invariably interdynastic and hence involved the passing of the bride to a foreign land. The scale of her dower was an index of the prestige of the bride's own family and was open to negotiation. Alfonso of Castile cavilled over the lands worth a mere 1000 marks (two-thirds of an English pound) offered by

Henry III of England when he first sought Alfonso's daughter Eleanor as a bride for his son the future king Edward I. After lengthy negotiations, the settlement was that Edward on marriage should receive lands worth £10,000 a year from his father—this would endow the new household—while Eleanor should receive as her dower, lands worth £1000 a year (one third more than the 1000 marks originally offered) plus lands in England worth 500 marks when Edward succeeded his father. The importance of the later medieval queen's dower is particularly well illustrated in Scandinavia: there it was so strongly institutionalized as to form an economic basis for the successful reigns of a series of "union-queens," that is, queens in their own right of a United Kingdom of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, the most celebrated being Margaret of Denmark (ruled 1375-1412).

The consent of both parties was theoretically the basis of Christian marriage. Yet the higher the social position, the less evidence for consent there is, especially on the bride's side, even if a determined girl could, perhaps, exercise some kind of veto. Brides and grooms in their early teens were likely to be instruments of parental policy (twelve to fifteen was a normal age for a queenly bride, with evidence from the twelfth century suggesting fifteen as the common age for the start of sexual relations). But given the groom's initiating role, a youth was more likely to have some say of his own; and since royal widowers (unlike widows) normally remarried, unions between an adult king and a much younger bride were common. A discrepancy between the ages of king and queen mirrored, and exaggerated, that between groom and bride at less exalted social levels. If the bride was a "subject," her inferiority was still further underlined; if of royal birth, she was likely to have been brought up from earliest childhood to accept her parents' choice of her spouse. Otto I's experience of being sent two of King Athelstan's sisters so that he could choose whichever he preferred indictaes that the notion of the bride's consent was clearly nominal. The only way a girl could resist parental decision-making and at the same time gain the support of the church was by insisting on living the monastic life. Margaret of Hungary is a spectacular later medieval case of a princess who resolutely preferred the convent life to a royal marriage despite parental efforts. But throughout the Middle Ages, royal parents also chose that consecrated life for one or more of their daughters, the virgin princess symbolizing with peculiar force the intactness of the royal family and of the realm.

Finally, however complex, public, and legally weighty the marital endowment and however imposing the reception given a foreign bride on arrival in her new country, the process whereby the king's bride became a queen was not complete. From the ninth century onwards in Francia and thereafter in other realms too, queenly consecration was combined with the marriage-ceremony itself. These rituals, faithfully mirroring the high-born woman's contradictory experience of superior status and inferior gender, conveyed two-fold meanings. On the one hand they clearly stated, verbally and visually, the queen's unique status as her husband's consort. On the other hand, the texts (as did marriage prayers generally) strongly emphasized fertility and the queen's function as mother of a future king, while the liturgical performance differentiated in subtle ways between king and queen. He was anointed with chrism, that is, oil mixed with aromatics, but the queen was anointed with blessed oil alone, which was not associated with priestly or episcopal ordinations. Further, she received investiture with no insignia except a ring symbolizing faith but also associated with marriage. In later medieval practice, the ambiguities persisted: the queen might be handed a sceptre and/or a rod, but no prayer formula accompanied this. The floriated rod signified mercy and intercession as distinct from the punitive aspect of royal justice signified by the king's sceptre. The later medieval English rite concluded with the queen bowing to the king, in essence as the most prestigious of the king's subjects. Distinctions of gender and office were thus emphatically expressed throughout. Not surprisingly, this important life event made an indelible impression on the recipients themselves: more than one later medieval queen left instructions that she be buried in the dress she had worn at consecration.

THE QUEEN IN THE ROYAL FAMILY

Marriage, first and foremost, placed the queen close to her husband. An astute queen built up this intimacy. Hildegard's ability to sweet-talk Charlemagne was no mere literary device. Edith looked after Edward the Confessor's appearance, making sure he was finely attired; Eleanor of Castile saw to the making of a French version of Vegetius's *Art of War* as a gift for that military enthusiast Edward I (he later gave her a chess set). An astute queen also exploited her sexuality, in part by being sumptuously attired and bejeweled. A close and considerate marital relationship was, so medieval doctors recommended, the best

way to secure the production of a son and heir—the queen's prime function. No matter how many children she might have, however, her relationship with her husband would remain fundamental.

While the good queen, as a woman, must acknowledge her husband's authority, she was also qualified—and obliged—to give him good counsel. Whether or not she travelled with him on his frequent journeys, the queen must be with the king in thought. Charlemagne's one surviving personal letter is addressed to his wife Fastrada: he asks her to organize prayers for his and his army's success, and he expresses concern for her health. Many royal marriages seem to have been genuinely successful: that is, husband and wife cared for each other, and a bereaved spouse genuinely mourned. That companioniate marriage which some Early Modern historians allege to have been invented in their period was enjoyed centuries earlier by royal couples.

Anything more than a short timelag between wedding and pregnancy aroused fears lest the queen prove barren: Eleanor of Provence, married at twelve to Henry III of England, failed to become pregnant for three years, and tongues began to wag. When Eleanor's contemporary, Violante of Castile, failed to conceive after a similar time, her husband, Alfonso the Wise sent for another bride from Norway. (The Norwegian princess arrived in Castile to find that the queen was pregnant and was hastily married off to Alfonso's brother.) A barren queen, or others in her name, could perhaps lay claim to voluntary chastity and seek to gain at least the compensation of religious prestige, as did Queen Kunigunde, wife of Henry II of Germany, or Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor. Most queens prayed for fecundity and accepted repeated pregnancies. The birth of a son, especially after daughters, occasioned relief for the king and for the realm at large but above all for the queen herself. Queens' reproductive histories are instructive: Charlemagne's wife Hildegard produced nine babies (including twins) in twelve years, dying in childbirth in 783; Eleanor of Aquitaine, married at fourteen, produced two daughters in fifteen years, then seven children in the next sixteen years (her last son was born in 1167); Eleanor of Castile who married Edward, son of Henry III of England, just before her thirteenth birthday, produced sixteen babies between 1255 and 1284.

Chastity within marriage was a virtue which queens were especially wise to practise. There could be no doubt of a child's paternity. In thirteenth-century Castile, uniquely, there was actual legislation forbidding queenly adultery (and declaring any illicit partner

guilty of treason) on the grounds that it both dishonored the king and endangered the royal line. Children were crucial to a queen's political influence, even to her survival. The birth of a daughter proved, at least, the queen's fertility; even if no son were born subsequently, the prospect of arranging a daughter's marriage could give the queen important leverage in court and kingdom both during her husband's lifetime and after it. Yet the queen who produced only a daughter risked having no political impact whatsoever. The birth of a son secured a queen's position, immediately enhanced her standing, and offered hope of long-term power within and through the family. Given spouses' likely age difference and women's greater life expectancy (despite the risks of childbirth), a queen might well outlive her husband to become in widowhood regent for a son; at the very least, as dowager and grandmother, she could be an influential figure. At this point, the fuller dimensions of patriarchy assume pressing relevance. An heiress, even though her marriage was often transacted between her father and her prospective father-in-law, was not merely a body but a woman with a mind of her own and in a position to be an active partner in her own marital relationship. The heiress, too, became a parent, and could wield influence over her son(s) in ways that she had lacked as daughter and wife. Along with her husband, alone if she outlived him, she "ruled" her children.

The upbringing of her children during their early years was an important responsibility that belonged partly or primarily to the queen. The Empress Judith received a scholarly tome on world history for use in teaching her son, and she apparently chose his tutor. Queen Margaret of Scotland took responsibility for teaching not only the children but her husband Malcolm as well. Later medieval queens secured funds from the king for the children's maintenance and provided daughters with hunting dogs (as the king provided his sons with falcons). A queen would involve herself in discussions over the children's futures, especially the daughters, whose dynastic marriages would, of course, replicate her own. The mother of Alfred of Wessex famously encouraged her sons in pursuit of knowledge by offering a book of Saxon songs as the prize to "whichever could learn it first."[6]

As is less often noted, Alfred's mother also encouraged her sons to compete. Two or more sons offered the queen, perhaps even more than her husband, opportunities to divide and rule. The royal family (like any family) always carried within it the possibilities both of unity and of difference and conflict. Rival interest groups at court and in the

kingdom at large found their focus in ambitious princes. Some queens were renowned peacemakers, promoting fraternal harmony. Others took sides. Matilda, wife of Henry I of Germany, favored her second son Henry above her firstborn Otto, thus adding to Otto's difficulties early in his reign. Primogeniture had little more sway in thirteenth-century Castile than in tenth-century Germany: Queen Violante, supported by her own natal kin, championed the rights of her younger sons against her own husband King Alfonso who was interested in advancing the claims of the couple's grandsons (sons of their deceased eldest son). Nor did Violante act only from maternal feeling: in excluding her grandsons, she excluded their mother, her daughter-in-law, who happened to be the sister of the French king. Violante, daughter of a king of Aragon, consistently promoted a Castilian-Aragonese alliance and Aragonese influence at the Castilian court. This queen's "personal" preferences were also very public ones, and they had consequences for the whole kingdom of Castile. Better known to English and French readers is the flamboyant Eleanor of Aquitaine. Alleged by some modern historians to have been quite unmaternal in her lack of concern for her children's upbringing, Eleanor favored her second son, Richard, over his brothers. While her rule of Aquitaine in her own right suited her husband Henry II well enough, she became dangerous when she backed the rebellion of Richard and his brothers against their father in 1173. The revolt signaled a breakdown of relationships both between father and sons and between husband and wife. The mother-son bond could count for more than the marital one, and the motivations of medieval women as well as men were deeply affected by lineage consciousness. Given that most queens were the daughters of kings or princes, they could, with cool dignity, avert their eyes from their husbands' liaisons with women of lesser birth. Only in mid-thirteenth-century Castile was it legally prescribed (and by Alfonso the Wise himself!) that the king's wife and the king's mistress should both be honored and guarded.

The most important kind of power sought and wielded by an earlier medieval queen was the power to secure the royal succession of her favored candidate, usually her own son, or of one or more among those. Fredegund, wife of the Merovingian king Chilperic, allegedly contrived the elimination of her stepsons and of a bishop who supported one of them so that her son Clothar would succeed. For Bertrada, mother of Charlemagne and Carloman, her first four years of widowhood, until Carloman's early death, saw her wielding

exceptional power as negotiator and conciliator between her sons. The Anglo-Saxon queen Emma adroitly exploited her motherhood of the sons of different kings, Æthelred and Cnut, by acting as peacekeeper. In fact, Emma's power barely survived the accession of Edward, the son she had implicitly rejected in marrying his father's successor, Cnut. From the twelfth century on, primogeniture became a general rule in royal as in aristocratic succession, but that did not mean that there were no disputes nor that queens ceased to play key roles in them.

A son-less queen, such as Charlemagne's wife Fastrada, might hitch her fortunes to a favored stepson. But a stepson's position was often uncertain when a king remarried after an earlier wife had either been repudiated or had died bringing into the family not only a new wife but the possibility of new sons to claim shares of the inheritance. When the middle-aged Æthelwulf of Wessex married the twelve-year old Carolingian princess Judith, his son Æthelbald revolted and was pacified only with a share of the kingdom. When Æthelwulf died two years later, having produced no other sons, Æthelbald closed the circle by marrying his stepmother. The strengthening of lineal hereditary rights later in the Middle Ages produced several cases of queens who inherited in their own right: the claims of Mary of Hungary were secured by her mother, the dowager and regent Elizabeth of Serbia, who ruthlessly engineered the assassination of a rival male contender (though she herself fell victim to his avengers).

To have a son designated to succeed was no guarantee of peace for his mother within the royal family. The marriage of a son during his father's lifetime meant splitting the royal household. The endowment of the second couple might also cause tension between royal mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. In tenth-century Germany, there were two such cases of long-running disputes over the younger queen's dower. No wonder that the queen-mother might try to ensure, as Brunhild did, that her son's wife had a pliant personality or, if not, to browbeat her, as the Visigothic queen Goiswinth did her stepson's Frankish bride. Sometimes a king's marriage brought his mother's political eclipse: Charles the Bald apparently used the opportunity of his marriage in 842 to plunder his mother of all her wealth and not all of it was reallocated to the new queen. A mother-in-law who had been regent would find it especially hard to co-exist with a new young queen: Blanche, mother of Louis IX of France, never got on well with her daughter-in-law. Thirteenth-century England shows a contrary example, however, in the good working relationship between Eleanor of Provence, wife of Henry

III, and her daughter-in-law Eleanor of Castile. Tact and sympathy could counteract conflicts of interest, but conflict itself was structural to the royal family (as to other families) rather than merely personal.

If a king died leaving a son who was a minor, the child's mother was often, in kingdoms where dynastic descent was well established, the likeliest person to rule as regent. In the singular case of Brunhild in sixth- to seventh-century Francia, regency was exercised for grandsons and a great-grandson too—power across the generations indeed! Brunhild's career as regent, like all regencies, attested to the strength of a dynasty within a kingdom. Yet at the same time, this regency reflected loyalty to a particular descent-line *within* the divided Merovingian dynasty: the succession of Brunhild's young son under her guardianship allowed the persistence of an eastern Frankish kingdom (Austrasia) separate from the western one (Neustria). Brunhild's regency thus represented a convergence of interests between the queen-mother and the aristocracy of her late husband's kingdom, in which Brunhild had clearly built up support. Regency reflected as well as enhanced the queen's exercise of regal power along with her husband. Regency functioned in tenth-century East Francia (Germany) to maintain the unity of the realm against possible fragmentation into its constituent parts. The case of Theophanu, who ruled as mother of the boy-emperor Otto III, is well documented both by admiring contemporary chronicles and by charters, in one of which the masculine title *Imperator augustus* reflected her quite exceptional power. Regencies were established later by king's solemn bequest: in 1190, when Philip Augustus set off on Crusade, he proclaimed a Testament naming his own mother (his wife had just died) regent and guardian of her young grandson, the future Louis VIII, alongside the archbishop of Rheims. In 1226, that same Louis, as he lay dying, left the kingdom to the "tutelage" of his wife Blanche of Castile for her twelve-year-old son Louis. Regency necessarily carried a time limit: the son's coming of age. The ex-regent might retain great influence as Blanche of Castile did over Louis IX. But situations in which the son was less devoted or did not live long exposed the essential weakness of the old queen's position. Brunhild's horrific fate was an extreme. That of Margaret of Anjou (wife of Henry VI of England) was only slightly less tragic when her only son, the Lancastrian Prince Edward, died in battle against his Yorkist rival in 1473: after years of imprisonment, Margaret was sent back to France and died powerless in relative poverty. Her contemporary, Margaret Beaufort, by contrast, acquired enhanced

status and influence in her later years as dowager rather than regent when her son became Henry VII of England, exploiting a claim through her descent from Edward III.

The queen's position during her husband's lifetime necessarily carried a disadvantage—dependence on his favor and concomitant vulnerability should that favor be withdrawn or the husband die without a son (or sons) to offer the widow a substitute power base. Especially in the earlier Middle Ages, queens were quite frequently repudiated, and their subsequent fates nearly always went unrecorded. In some kingdoms, consecration and the recognition implied in documentary titles augmented the queen's status, but they afforded no guarantee against the king's disfavor. Queenly consecration rites had been pioneered in France; yet no fewer than four French kings of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were involved in scandals over rejection of their consecrated wives. In three of these cases, it was the wife's failure to bear a son which determined her fate. The fourth case was the exception that proved the rule: after one night with his bride Ingeborg of Denmark, Philip Augustus refused any further cohabitation with her, but he could afford his apparently sincere revulsion since he already had a son by a previous queen.

Could a queen survive as such without producing children? Canon law insisted that she must, that Christian marriage was lifelong. But canon law and growing papal authority also provided loopholes in the form of annulment on grounds of belatedly-discovered incest or the legitimation of a mistress's offspring. Barren queens could thus be discarded legally. The seventh-century Northumbrian king Ecgfryth needed sons, and so had his own reasons for replacing his barren queen Æthelthryth by another woman. Æthelthryth herself requested this, however, and may have exchanged palace for convent without regret, for the move was a return home to East Anglia, where she founded, richly endowed, and ruled Ely. Nevertheless, some queens held their place in the palace. Queens Edith and Kundegunde in the eleventh century had powerful natal families, and their defenders were able to claim for them, at least posthumously, a voluntarily chosen virginity and so a spiritual marriage. Whatever the church might teach, there are hints that a king's wife without children might have been seen as a contradiction in terms. Charlemagne's last wife, the childless Liutgard, looked after her step-daughters. Yet doubt surrounds Liutgard's status, for though she did queenly things, she is never documented with the title of queen. Other childless royal wives, though they were titled

queens, suffered more than indignities. It seems no coincidence that a series of such women (in the ninth century Theutberga and Richardis, in Capetian France, the early fourteenth-century Joan of Navarre, and in fifteenth-century England, the royal duchess Eleanor Cobham) were exposed to allegations of sexual perversion or witchcraft and subjected to public humiliation. Presumably the women's sterility helped to make the allegations credible, perhaps not least to the husbands in question. But all these cases also hinged on the queen's position not only in the family but in a wider milieu.

THE QUEEN IN COURT AND KINGDOM

The connection between the queen and almsgiving were contexts and connections that would last through the Middle Ages. Christine de Pizan's advice to Isabeau of Bavaria in 1405 dwelled at length on her charitable works towards the poor and needy. Broth was one thing, but a queen's gifts were not always in perishables, nor were they always directed towards the poor. According to the ninth-century treatise *On the Government of the Palace* the queen was also responsible for the king's "royal gear" and for the annual gifts for the king's warriors. Queenly nurturing had not ceased to be important. In ensuring supplies of such gifts and bestowing them on the warriors in the household, a queen would create patron-client relationships with the young nobles at the palace who would in time become the great men of the kingdom. But what is described is not just nurturing transposed into a political key, it is an essentially different and more institutionalized kind of authority. For the king's "royal gear" was comprised of the objects by which he displayed his kingly rank and power. These regalia, especially the crown, had by the ninth century come to symbolize the realm itself. The transmission of the regalia was already becoming a crucial element in the royal succession. That the queen not only oversaw the wherewithal necessary for the king's public self-representation but in some cases took charge of the regalia and saw to their handing-on to a new kin, should be set alongside the queen's potential role as regent. She was capable of acting as stake-holder of the realm, its temporary embodiment. The palace was the hub of politics, and material display and gift-giving were the means of government. Earlier medieval poetry, from Carolingian panegyric to *Beowulf*, shows the queen at the center of courtly life, in processions, at feasts presenting the mead cup, at the hunt offering support and refreshment, and in processions along with

husband, sons and daughters, and great men. Narrative texts show queenly almsgiving and queenly co-operation with the chamberlain in disbursing treasure at court. Charters occasionally reveal the queen at the king's side, confirming gifts of land and privilege in solemn formal terms. Even rarer, but still more significant, are queenly acts of judgment, as when Charlemagne's wife Fastrada ordered the confiscation of the property of a noble who killed a man at court in her presence while Charlemagne himself was away or when the abbess Elvira, aunt of Ramiro III, presided over a judicial assembly at the king's court in his absence or when William the Conqueror's queen, Matilda, deputized for him and gave judgment in England while he was campaigning in Normandy. Exceptional as all these cases are, they show that the queen's status could transcend her gender. True, she did so when the king so willed but did so effectively because powerful men could accept such action as reasonable and authoritative.

Sitting in judgment was a type of queenly activity, always rare, that ceased to be documented in France or England after the twelfth century. Evidence of queenly influence, in contrast, runs through the Middle Ages as a whole. This was how queens had always operated, whether in the hall, the garden, the chamber, or the royal bedroom. The wife of the Carolingian Louis the Pious, Empress Judith, was very influential in the palace, according to the young Lupus of Ferrières. In the late twelfth century, Queen Ingeborg of France mobilized bishops and canonists to campaign against her repudiation. Queens did have especially close dealings with churchmen and churches, acting in their behalf but also seeking their support. The tradition of papal correspondence with queens, soliciting their benign influence on their husbands and/or sons, spanned the entire medieval period, from Gregory the Great (Bertha, Theodelinda) to Leo X (Louise of Savoy, mother of François I). But churchmen were not the only men who sought queenly intercession. In 1382 the citizens of London brought a plea to Queen Anne, the newly-married wife of Richard II, to act as mediator between the city and the king, to fulfill a role they claimed to be traditional among her queenly predecessors. So effective a mediatrix did Anne prove to be over the ensuing decade that the Londoners presented her with a pelican, symbol of self-sacrificing nurture.

Influence was not always exerted behind closed doors. It could also be very public and more or less institutionalized. Christine de Pizan regarded it as an aspect of the good princess's "holy charity" that she act as "advocate and mediator between the prince her husband, or

her son, if she is a widow, and her people, or all those people whom she may be able to help by doing good. . . . "[7] Is this power? Does the queen wield the power of the powerless, authority through humility? Or does she also act more positively, using her own practical wisdom, and powers of persuasion? The images slip readily from one mode to the other.

Of one thing, the evidence allows certainty: intercession was always a possible form of action for medieval queens, the more effective for being rare, dramatic, the reverse of everyday. The Empress Judith, on the battlefield of Fontenoy, begging the life of the treacherous archbishop of Ravenna from her victor-son, or Queen Philippa at Calais, begging the lives of the famous burghers from her victor-husband, Edward III, present identical patterns of queenly conduct. Each functions as a perfect foil for and complement to the king's proud hardness. Less dramatically, and quite regularly, royal charters document queens (among other influential people) as requesters of favors for individuals and churches. The Londoners' plea to Queen Anne was just such a petition writ large, played out more publicly, and with more clearly political effects. So, too, was the act of Violante of Castile in 1264 recorded in a charter of her husband Alfonso: his tax concessions to the towns of Extremadura were granted after consultation with his advisors but also after the queen had interceded on the town's behalf at an assembly in Seville.

Some historians have argued that the queen's caring role—her petitioning and interceding—marginalized and contained her, keeping her out of the political arena and illustrating the deterioration of women's status in the wake of the development of patrilineages and more clearcut inheritance rules of male primogeniture. The evidence has sometimes been misread, often generalized misleadingly. Firstly, charter attestations have been taken to show the attesters' power with respect to the king. For example, French queens occasionally attested royal charters in the eleventh and twelfth centuries but not later, and this has been alleged to indicate a waning of queenly power. Yet changes in diplomatic practice are difficult to calibrate with political change. In the same period, there were more frequent attestations by men around the king as well, yet these need not imply the king's own power was in abeyance. In addition, the number of instances of prominent queens—Blanche, for example, or (for very different reasons) Isabeau of Bavaria—belie the notion of a uniform weakening of queenly power in France after the twelfth century.

Secondly, it has been suggested that queens controlled significant resources, especially through their dower lands, before the twelfth century and became steadily poorer thereafter. But the queen's control of "her" resources was a highly contingent variable and no generalization about this holds true: even the formidable Matilda or Theophanu in tenth-century Germany found difficulty in controlling their dowers in real life whatever customary law said in theory. Earlier medieval queens were, it is true, able to offer bribes and to hire help (such as assassins to extract vengeance), but such roles were hardly institutionalized! From the twelfth century onwards, much depended on where a queen was endowed, and how much of a free hand she had. Again, a husband's absences, or early death, could work in a queen's favor. In fact, evidence of queens lending to their husbands occurs in the late Middle Ages, not earlier. In any case, the queen's resources should not be considered apart from wider issues of the use and control of royal resources as a whole. Provision for kings' sons, recurrent but variable, needs to be considered within the same frame. As in other contexts, the royal family, with the queen at its heart, both held the realm together and divided it.

Thirdly, separate households of king and queen have been said to mean the cramping of the queen's political field of manoeuvre. It is true that separate household accounts survive for the twelfth century, not earlier, but if the Empress Judith, for instance, had her own seneschal, she, too, may have had a household that maintained separate accounts. More importantly, separate households did not necessarily mean real organizational separation. Eleanor of Castile wrote often to Edward I's leading administrators, suggesting close relations between his household and her own. Again, the queen's position needs to be viewed in relation to the king's, not separate from it.

Fourthly, historians of France and England, well documented as those realms are, should beware of using them as shorthand for Latin Christendom or assuming that they were representative. Violante of Castile was a queen-consort who acted publicly as deputy for her husband, put her name to documents, took a leading part in diplomacy-and this was in the 1270s. In 1387 and 1388, respectively, the Danish and Norwegian assemblies of noblemen declared Margaret to be their "principle mistress and householder" of the two realms.[8] It is hard to imagine anything more public, legal, and formal than these pronouncements.

Did the queen's function ever change through the Middle Ages, or was the history of queenship one that stood still? Queenship remained highly personal, changing in style according to individual desires, capacities, and experiences. Yet the same could be said of kingship and perhaps of all monarchy that wields substantial power and is the symbolic focus of a state and people. We should renounce any model of one-way change, just as we should renounce the idea of "medieval" uniformity. If the queen's participation in power has been exaggerated for the earlier period, it has been unduly minimized for the later. It is true that there were changes in the rituals and representations surrounding queens, changes which drew increased attention to the queen's intercessory role, to gendered qualities of justice and mercy, to gendered difference generally. Queenship, however, was always relatively weakly institutionalized and dependent on circumstances which could favor, just as much as they might hamper, queenly influence. The quasi-justiciarship of Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror; the quasi-regency of Matilda, wife of Stephen of England; Blanche's regency in thirteenth-century France; the position of Margaret of Denmark in the late fourteenth century—all came about as a result of peculiar circumstances. Titles might be significant, but they varied from one realm to another, from queen to queen, and from one phase of a queen's life to another. The queen's power was always contingent, which meant that even apparent advantages could become liabilities. The queen's domain was acknowledged to include the king's domestic arrangements, so palace decoration might be hers to organize; yet a foreign queen's taste might become a focus for hostility, as when thirteenth-century Englishmen derided Eleanor of Castile's use of carpets or when fifteenth-century Hungarians denounced the imported finery of Beatrice of Naples. Criticism could become more deadly serious: the queen's nurturing role was inverted when a queen was accused of poisoning her husband or son. The queen's sexuality was essential for her reproductive function, yet she could be ruined by charges of adultery. Intercession was the acceptable face of queenly influence, but it was also easily challenged and denounced. While it was expected that a queen would seek to promote her kin, she-and they-would be fiercely resented if such patronage overstepped convention. In 830, rebellion against Louis the Pious and his queen, Judith, required the removal of the queen's brothers from powerful positions. In the years before the death of Elizabeth Woodville's husband, Edward IV, her relatives, the Ryvers family, were the butt of puns about rivers

rising dangerously high, and their fall was swift when Elizabeth was no longer in a position to protect and promote them. In the end, queenship cannot be understood outside the royal family, in which there was continual change of a cyclical rather than a unilineal sort and always tendencies towards both division and unity.

The conduct expected of queens showed remarkable stability across the medieval centuries, in part because the Christian ideology underpinning those expectations was the basis of medieval culture throughout the period. A clever queen fulfilled expectations, kept her intercessory role uppermost, and plied the churches and churchmen who were often her allies among the powerful at court with almsgiving. The Empress Matilda, notorious as an arrogant virago when she claimed a kingdom in her own right, acquired respectability as a patron of church reform. Also, a queen could influence her husband's choice of religious patronage, and this could become an important way in which she built up a body of political support. The queen trod a tightrope. Never entirely integrated into her husband's family, she could nonetheless win very public esteem when she saw to the commemoration of the souls of her husband and of their children. Piety remained throughout the Middle Ages as the way in which queens publicly demonstrated their virtue in both gendered and ungendered senses. Queenly charity was a universally approved form of conspicuous expenditure, and a strongly gendered form of royal care for the poor. Royally patronized convents, which in some cases were queenly foundations and sometimes constituted part of the queen's dower, could supply life insurance—and psychological and material ballast—for generation after generation of queens; they were places they visited, buried their dead children, and (along with the nuns) prayed for the well-being of the king, his progeny, and his realm. The geography of these places, each sited in close proximity to the king's main seat of power, was an apt sign of the complementarity between the gendered roles of the royal couple in the maintenance of kingdoms.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: THE QUEEN'S TWO BODIES

The plea to Anne of Bohemia of 1382 showed the Londoners asking the queen to act as mediatrix between the king's two bodies—between his role as her husband and his position as head of state. The queen also had two bodies: she was a mortal woman, yet queenship's institutionalization made it immortal. Although a kingdom could, in fact,

continue for a while without a queen, few kings, especially from the twelfth century onwards, remained long without a wife, and the norm of widower remarriage made the position of queen more or less continuously occupied in practice in each kingdom. The queen's association with the household and her literal reproduction of the royal family made her the dynasty's embodiment, even though she was not of its blood. She herself could, in death, become fully naturalized in her husband's kingdom. If earlier medieval queens were guardians of the regalia, all queens were guardians of the royal home and hence, by extension, of the realm. Like the Virgin Mary, the queen was depicted in a domestic interior. Her bedchamber acquired the connotations of an arsenal of power: it was where she gave birth and where she dispensed favors. In time of war, the queen was the home guard, active in building and guarding fortifications, withstanding sieges.

And yet the queen's life was also the reverse of stable. Her gendered life experiences were those of all women: she moved spatially from one family into another and moved temporally through the phases of her life—into fertility, through motherhood, and into the sterility of old age. From the twelfth century, the game of chess, imported from the Muslim world into Latin Christendom, was a popular pastime but with a difference: the piece called "the vizier" was renamed "the queen." What typified the chessboard queen was her mobility. That made her the most powerful piece on the board, thus uniquely dangerous. In medieval French, the verb *mater*—to checkmate—was used only of the queen: she alone could "mate" a king.

Every phase of the queen's life was charged with the ambiguity accentuating that of every woman's life. The queen was also a married-in outsider, marginal, never fully at home in her new family. She was not at the center of politics in the sense that she lacked formal or normal status in the councils of the kingdom. Queenship, weakly institutionalized, remained at bottom intensely personal.

Yet the very qualities of instability and marginality that made the queen weak also made her strong, at once vulnerable and dangerous. The power to straddle, to intercede, to set personal influence against official authority, was the queen's defining trait. It empowered her yet at the same time limited her scope. Her unique influence made her unpredictable, wild, like the chessboard queen. The old queen—the dowager, the regent, the grandmother—embodied female power no longer charged: mother and son were a stable (if asymmetrical) pair in a way that husband and wife were not.

There was no safe queen like a dead queen. Funerary rites and memorialization through funerary art enabled the queen to stand for the realm's eternity. Like the female saint and the virgin, the dead queen could no longer be touched. The right image to end with is one of ambiguity. Medieval queenship was weak and strong, personal and impersonal, embraced life and death. It embodied power by reproducing it, hence by embodying impermanently what would acquire its own independent life. The queen was stable and unstable—a passive body, and at the same time an active one, transmitting life onward. In his will, Alfred of Wessex bequeathed to his wife Eahlswith three estates: the sites of his birth and of his two great victories. Alfred had consistently denied his wife the title of queen, because royal succession in ninth-century Wessex was still only insecurely fixed within one descent line of the royal dynasty. Nevertheless, Eahlswith was to see to Alfred's commemoration at the places which mattered most in his life and in the life of his realm. Their son would in fact inherit the realm. Ealhswith would share Alfred's mausoleum at Winchester, the seat of the realm. Four centuries later, when the realm of Alfred's descendants had been reconfigured, a queen could still be its natural symbol. Eleanor of Castile kept her natal family's obits in her own chapel, but her corpse's last journey was marked by a line of monuments that straddled the heartland of England, while her tomb became part of English monarchy's palladium at Westminster.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Pauline Stafford for generously commenting on this chapter, and for allowing me to see parts of her forthcoming book in advance of publication.

2. The chronicle mentions, for example, that Seaxburg, wife of King Cenwalh, ruled for a year after his death in 672 and that in 957 King Eadwig and his wife, Aelfgifu, were divorced on grounds of consanguinity (being too closely related). There are many versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. One is The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, tr. and collated by Anne Savage (New York: St. Martin's/Marek, 1983).

3. Fredegar, *Chronicle*, Book IV, c. 82 in J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, ed, *The Fourth Book of Fredegar; with its Continuations* (London: Nelson, 1960), 69-70.

4. See Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, tr. and introduction by Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 140-143.

5. Sedulius Scottus, *De rectoribus Christianis: On Christian Rulers*, tr. by Edward Gerard Doyle (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983).

6. See Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, in *Alfred the Great*, tr. Simon Keynes (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 75.

7. Christine de Pizan, *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, tr. S. Lawson (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 49.

8. Quoted from I. Skovgaard-Petersen, "Queenship in Medieval Denmark," in *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 36.

CHAPTER 12

Noblewomen and Political Activity

Christine Owens

When Ela, countess of Salisbury (1189-1261), paid the English king, Henry III, the substantial sum of 500 marks (a mark was two-thirds of a pound) in 1226 for the privilege of holding the powerful, lucrative and highly political public office of sheriff of Wiltshire, she became one of only two women ever to perform the duties of sheriff in all of medieval England. For although Ela's ancestors had performed as the sheriffs of Wiltshire, first as *castellans* of Sarum and later as the earls of Salisbury, since the reign of William the Conqueror, Ela had not been granted the position of sheriff upon her father's death in 1196. Rather, her husband, William Longespee, received the office upon their marriage in 1198. It was not until William's death in 1226 that Ela, in her widowhood, was able to claim, at some expense, the position of sheriff for her own. Thus, despite the fact that she was heiress to the Salisbury earldom, religious attitudes and the legal realities of medieval life conspired to keep Ela of Salisbury—and noblewomen like her—distanced from nearly all forms of public activity.

Notions of what constituted ideal medieval society, something to which both church and state aspired, included the intense need on the part of its members for order. When coupled with the widely held view of the general inferiority of women, medieval society's need to construct and maintain a strict hierarchy among its members acted as a powerful deterrent to any attempts at active participation on the part of medieval noblewomen. For their part, medieval theologians, pointing to the excesses of the biblical Eve as irrefutable evidence of medieval woman's unsuitability for full participation in church and society, emphasized a divinely ordained subordinate role for women and maintained that women best served God by emulating Mary (Eve's

alter ego)—docile, subservient, easily controlled, and apolitical. Medieval law, greatly influenced by such contemporary theology, predictably accorded women only a limited legal identity, one largely characterized by its relationship to and support of the interests of male family members—father, husband, or son. Although inheritance laws varied in place and time throughout the medieval period, noblewomen were generally unable to inherit land except in the absence of a male heir. Only when a medieval noblewoman was widowed was she able to control her own fate and fortune. Furthermore, medieval women were uniformly prohibited from performing the essential public duties required of each landholder by the king. They could not serve on juries, act as judges, or be summoned to court. Noblewomen could not become knights, join military organizations, or participate in any military aspect of medieval society. They were excluded from all forms of formal education as well. Without a position in a worldview whose values were distinctly male, noblewomen found few opportunities to become involved politically in the same ways men were. Even as medieval governments centralized, eroding the power base of both male and female nobles, only men were able to find alternative political avenues as clerics or administrators in the new central government. For without the necessary formal education, medieval noblewomen simply could not compete.

Although contemporary government documents confirm Ela of Salisbury's presence as sheriff at Westminster, chronicles of the same period make no mention of her tenure, choosing to describe her only in terms of her associations with important men of the day. Ela becomes in these sources little more than a footnote to the deeds of her husband, William Longespee (illegitimate half-brother of kings Richard I and John), and of her son, William, who died on crusade in 1250. Historians from more recent times echo the chronicler's commentary and insist that others actually performed her shrieval duties despite evidence to the contrary. All apparently viewed Ela's tenure as a matter existing outside the traditional bounds of history—the odd excursion by a woman into, they were certain, a virtually exclusive male political realm.

That Ela of Salisbury was able to contribute to thirteenth-century political life as sheriff of Wiltshire attests to the fact that women could be active participants in the political world of the day. Moreover, Ela's presence dispels the long-held notions that medieval society was an exclusively male domain, that it was rigid and unyielding to female

influences, and that only male political activity had any true historical value. Such attitudes have been perpetuated by generations of traditional historians who arbitrarily impose an essentially masculine view based on an historical context constructed from patriarchal value systems and prevailing male mythologies and who think that the feudal ideal was, in fact, reality. In doing so, they have in many cases succeeded in limiting the study of history to a narrow analysis of how great men acquired and exercised public authority, be it political, military, religious, or economic. By extension, these historians rationalize, only the activities in which men engaged, such as warfare, jury duty, and service to the king, were political. Because medieval women, even heiresses, were prohibited from personally fulfilling these obligations to the king, they were often not present at the great public events of the day. Therefore, contemporary chroniclers and the political and legal historians who follow have viewed the medieval noblewoman's lack of participation in patriarchal politics as justification for their lack of scholarly interest in her. To these scholars, the legal position of the otherwise invisible medieval woman was relevant only where issues of dower and inheritance were concerned, and she was then viewed only as an impediment to the smooth transfer of property from one generation to the next. Furthermore, the abundance of legal resources available to the medieval scholar tended, by its very nature, to focus the researcher on the legal authority exercised by medieval men over women. Such emphasis on predominantly male expressions of public authority has effectively silenced many of the voices of those thus disenfranchised by law or tradition. Regardless of their actual achievements, medieval noblewomen like Ela of Salisbury survived as caricatures—hopelessly passive individuals incapable of exercising control over their own lives and, therefore, the perfect foils for the public man.

In recent years, however, the renewed interest in women's rights and an accompanying emphasis on the interdisciplinary nature of historical inquiry, has led to a determination on the part of many historians to reexamine traditional approaches to the study of women in history. Few, if any, historians deny that medieval women's lives differed vastly from those of medieval men, but nearly all of these historians concerned with the history of women dispute the ways in which the value of women's activities has been measured. Believing that the lives of medieval women are more than simply events in the destinies of men, they want to identify the strategies by which medieval

women exerted influence over their own lives and the lives of those around them as vital members of a society which depended heavily on their contributions.

At first, this significantly more diverse group of historians, many of whom are women, attempted to separate the activities of medieval women from those of men in order to identify and validate the activities of women. In doing so, however, the separate spheres they created tended to obscure as much as they revealed. For while this binary approach does illuminate certain aspects of women's activities, many historians have found it to be an artificial construct that does not address issues besides gender (such as age or class) and does not allow for the fluidity of gender roles they suspect characterized much of medieval society. They have concluded that forcing medieval women into the role of victim, as this approach did, tends to reinforce the very male conceptual framework these earlier historians sought to displace. Furthermore, victimization permits historians no choice but to view women as largely passive individuals incapable of positive contributions. According to this view, medieval women continue to be regarded in opposition to men and to remain on the outside looking in.

Seeking a more complete picture, more recent historians have begun to draw on a variety of disciplines including anthropology, archaeology, and art history, combining them with a strong emphasis on theory. Scholars also are going back to the primary sources for a new look at the contemporary evidence in search of a more useful understanding of medieval society, one that more closely reflects the reality of the period rather than the idealized notions of past generations of historians. Unconvinced that a feudal society in which women and men inhabited entirely separate spheres of private and public activity was, in fact, the real picture, they focus their interdisciplinary approaches on searching for ways in which the lives of women and men were interdependent.

As scholars reevaluate and redefine the terms, categories, and assumptions by which women's activities have been described and judged in the past, their inquiries quickly focus on developing more precise, more encompassing definitions of the components of political activity—influence, power, and authority. They reason that power and influence often produce similar results and that, when the distinction is made between what constitutes political power or influence and what constitutes political authority, women can be seen as having access to political power and influence while being denied political authority.

Incorporating these findings with tangential issues of kinship, marriage, inheritance, class, age, and gender has produced a broader and more useful historical context, one which more accurately reflects the fluidity of medieval society and allows for the inclusion of the contributions of women. Moreover, as ideas about what could be considered historically significant develop, scholars find the borders between public and private blurring and boundaries between female and male activities becoming more permeable. They conclude that nearly every political event had political consequences for women and that many of the activities performed by women had political implications. As a result, medieval women emerged not as victims but as active participants in feudal society.

Thus, the question facing scholars today is not whether women participated in the political life of medieval Europe. Rather, investigations are focusing on identifying the various ways in which noblewomen made important political contributions and the methods women employed to circumvent the restrictions imposed on them by the patriarchal society in which they lived. For resistance to their subordinate role was, indeed, the most political of events. Then, as now, the personal was political.

Medieval noblewomen did occupy highly visible positions as feudal lords or military leaders—the roles traditionally attributed exclusively to men. So many men died in battle or on crusade that, as Shahar points out, "the inheritance of a fief by daughters was not an extraordinary occurrence."[1] Records from the medieval period in both England and France attest to the fact that noblewomen held and transferred their lands. When noblewomen were able to control their land, their great wealth and high visibility afforded them opportunities to influence the important political battles of the day, ones in which they often had a personal stake. Expected to meet the military requirements for the lands she held, Elizabeth de Burgh supplied troops required by Edward III during the Hundred Year's War between England and France. Noblewomen did not always,however, lend royalist support. Isabella de Fortibus, the wealthy and powerful countess of Devon and Aumale (1237-1293) supported the baronial rebellion against the English king, Henry III, led by Simon de Montfort in the 1260s.

Yet, these roles were often temporary and circumstantial, arising out of the need to protect family and inheritance. In the absence of her husband, Agnes of Dunbar (fl. 1338), daughter of Randolph, earl of

Moray, held Dunbar Castle with her ladies in waiting for King David II of Scotland against the English. Also in the fourteenth century, Jeanne de Montfort, duchess of Brittany, assumed responsibility for military operations when her husband, John IV, was imprisoned in a dispute over control of duchy of Brittany and held her castles until help from England arrived.

Occasionally, medieval noblewomen, such as Beatrice D'Este, played direct political roles as negotiators and intercessors in political disputes. Wife of a fifteenth-century duke of Milan, she not only defended the castello when Milan was threatened, she also acted as an envoy to Venice. Also in the fifteenth century, Anne Neville, duchess of Buckingham, was chosen by the citizens of London to meet with Margaret of Anjou to negotiate favorable terms for the city. Isabella of Portugal, duchess of Burgundy (1397-1471) represented her husband, Philip the Good, during the negotiation of important treaties.

Once widowed, a medieval noblewoman could elect to remain unmarried and many of those who did so took control of their property and their lives on a more permanent basis. These women, such as Mahaut of Artois (c.1270-c.1328) who ruled her vast estates for twenty years after her husband, Othon IV, count of Burgundy, died, were able to make important and lasting contributions to the political, economic, and social fabric of society by virtue of their highly visible position and their great wealth. For her part, Mahaut of Artois promoted the local cloth industry, arts, music, and literature, built a large personal library, and, as a proponent of medical care, was a generous patron of hospitals.

Rarely were these noblewomen on equal footing with men, however. When Ela of Salisbury took control of her inheritance in 1226, she could perform only an oath of fealty for it rather than doing homage as a man would have done. Furthermore, noblewomen frequently relied on an extensive support staff to represent them in court and on the battlefield as well as in the day-to-day interactions with their tenants.

It has been difficult for historians to ignore a countess who was also an active sheriff or lord. Until recently, however, medieval noblewomen's considerable influence in a wide range of more subtle but nonetheless significantly felt political activities has received little attention. Yet, as Carolyn Heilbrun states, power "is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter."[2] To this end, many medieval noblewomen engaged in political activity in ways that were uniquely their own as patrons, powerful abbesses, and as promoters and keepers of the family

legacy. Furthermore, the wide range of ways in which medieval noblewomen contributed to the political life of medieval Europe demonstrates the success with which women were able to construct these alternatives to their publicly sanctioned roles as wife, mother, and widow and, thus, to undermine medieval society's authority over them. The patterns of their involvement reflect the strategies they employed against their institutionalized powerlessness in negotiating important roles within the confines of a society often hostile to their sex, class, and age.

Moreover, noblewomen were able to exert political influence despite the obstacles they faced and in some cases because of them. Responsibility for the welfare of their young children was an accepted role for women as well as one which offered medieval noblewomen an opportunity to control and shape the family's political future. Often the only source of education for female children, noblewomen could educate their young daughters to be capable administrators and, in their turn, transmitters of literacy to the next generation. Widowhood provided the opportunity for noblewomen to act as guardians for their minor children, although in England they were not usually able to obtain guardianship of the heir. Acting as regent for her son, Theobald, Blanche of Navarre fought for twenty-one years to keep Champagne for him, negotiating with the pope and the king of France to recruit support for her son. She won the right to be a direct vassal of the French king, Philip II, even doing homage for her lands and attending parliament in 1213. Regency provided an avenue for political activity for both Blanche and her son.

Marriage was among the most political of events. Successful marriage alliances were the single most important mechanism by which families could advance socially and economically. Noblewomen were frequently involved in the selection of and negotiation for suitable marriage partners for their children. When medieval noblewomen were able to participate in the negotiations, they were contributing directly to the increased economic and political power of their families as well as solidifying the position of the noble class from which they all came. Jeanne de Valois, countess of Hainault (c.1290-c.1352) negotiated her daughter, Philippa's, marriage to Edward III of England (thereby procuring a peace between Philip IV and Edward III!). Marriage alliances between England and the continent were particularly important demonstrations of wealth and position. Isabella, daughter of Richard de Clare, earl of Gloucester, married the marquis of Montferrat

in 1258, a marriage that cost her family 4000 marks. Beatrice of Savoy, countess of Provence (c.1220-1266), arranged politically important marriages for her four daughters by which the duchy of Savoy became allied with the kings of England, France, and Naples.

Medieval noblewomen were often deeply involved in the day-to-day management of their properties whether their husbands were present or not. As effective and efficient administrators, noblewomen could hold considerable economic power and thus have a significant political impact on the surrounding community. Evidence for the active involvement of noblewomen in ongoing administration of their estates can be found in a book compiled by Bishop Robert Grosseteste for Margaret de Lacy, countess of Lincoln (c.1220-1266). *Reules Seynt Robert* contains a wide range of advice for Margaret on the successful and profitable administration of her property. In addition, surviving household accounts, such as those of Elizabeth de Burgh, attest to the complex nature of the successful management of their large and sometimes multiple households. The effective use of local political and economic power generated from the profitable administration of her lands strengthened not only the position of the individual noblewoman but also the position of her family by providing financial resources to maintain family status as well as providing for the successful defense of its borders.

Patronage was an important means by which medieval noblewomen were able to inscribe themselves into the political discourse of the day. The ability to commission or support artisans and writers implied a substantial level of resources and thus enhanced the position of the individual patron as well as her family. Patronage allowed the noblewoman to emphasize her own lineage and offered a means for her to perpetuate her personal influence. Noblewomen supported particular works or projects, embracing causes which were important to them and allowing the voices they had chosen to be heard.

From the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, England produced at least thirty women, excluding queens, who were literary patrons. To participate in the transmission of the written word greatly enhanced the medieval noblewoman's standing and gave greater consequence to her actions. Often the work these noblewomen supported was written in the vernacular rather than in Latin, the language of formal education to which medieval women were denied access. Their support of the vernacular gave female readers access to literature as well as providing female authors, including poets and troubaritz, the opportunity to write.

Despite the fact that women were denied formal education, they did act as founders and patrons to a number of important centers of learning, thus fostering the rise of universities as well as contributing to the decline of the church's control of literacy and the written word. A few examples provide an insight into the range of these women's academic patronage. In France, Jeanne of Navarre founded the College of Navarre. In England, Margaret Beaufort, countess of Richmond and Derby and mother of Henry VII, founded both Christ's College and St. John's College, Cambridge. In Germany, Matilda of Rottenburg, countess Palantine (fl. 1450), who was a literary patron to whom numerous writers dedicated their work, founded Tübingen and Freiburg Universities.

Religious life offered medieval noblewomen a variety of opportunities for political expression. Some, such as Ela, countess of Salisbury, founded their own religious houses. Lacock Abbey served as an important articulation of Ela of Salisbury's personal power and influence, in addition to demonstrating her family's authority and stability. Her foundation at Lacock consisted of lands taken from her inheritance and thus provided her with a way to continue to control and administer a portion of her earldom. Lacock Abbey and other similar monastic foundations offered other noblewomen an alternative to marriage as well as an opportunity for education. Aside from the impact a religious house could have on the local economic and political climate, these foundations often had a wider-ranging influence. When Agnes of Prague founded the convent of Saint Francis in 1231, she not only brought Gothic architecture to eastern Europe, she also introduced the new order of Poor Clares to the region. Moreover, religious noblewomen could play an important role in politics despite the fact that religious life separated them physically from the events of the day. Loretta de Braose, countess of Leicester (m.c.1196-d.c.1270), who spent nearly sixty years as a recluse in Kent, was actively sought out by Simon de Montfort in 1265 for her political advice concerning the baronial rebellion he was leading.

Acts of commemoration were extremely important to noble families. They not only promoted the importance of the family, affirming its honor, traditions and origins, they also defined and continued the family legacy. Frequently, noblewomen were responsible for a variety of means by which their families were so recognized. At the death of William Longespee in 1226, Ela of Salisbury commissioned an elaborate tomb for him in the newly built Trinity Chapel at

Salisbury Cathedral. Invoking the memory of her husband as an important and successful warrior, the recumbent painted stone figure of William in full military array covers the top of the tomb. Ela also organized and led a candlelight procession from her castle at Sarum to Salisbury which accompanied the body of her husband to its final resting place. This event was of sufficient prominence to be recorded by Matthew Paris, a chronicler of the time. The tomb Blanche of Navarre commissioned for her husband, Thibaut III de Champagne, at Saint-Etienne de Troyes expressed the political ambitions she had for herself and her son. Images on each of the four sides demonstrate Blanche's vision for her son as heir to four crowns—France, England, Jerusalem, and Navarre.

As Christiane Klapisch-Zuber points out, "A woman could be called upon to take the place of a man, but the fact that she was a woman was never without consequences."[3] Just what these consequences were and how they reflect the struggle for influence faced by medieval noblewomen is what has become important to today's scholars. Institutionalized powerlessness has been shown to conceal the significant forms of political influence which noblewomen developed through a variety of unofficial means. Research continues to reveal both the asymmetry which characterized the reality of medieval society, as well as important moments of conflict and negotiation between its female and male members. As Penny Schine Gold predicts, "We will see that when we examine the complexity of the interactions between men and women as expressed in both image and experience, the common bond is a pattern of ambivalence and contradiction: ambivalence in the attitudes of men toward women and contradiction within the actuality of women's experience."[4] The networks of female political influence which are emerging continue to suggest the critically important nature of female political participation and the essential part their contributions plays in the successes and failures of medieval politics.

NOTES

1. Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co., 1983), 129.

2. Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 18.

3. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *A History of Women in the West: Silences of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 238-9.

4. Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), xx-xxi.

CHAPTER 13

Women and Politics in the Urban Milieu

Louis Haas

As towns revived during the High Middle Ages, a new social group developed with a new ideology which both challenged and complemented the traditional feudal orders of medieval society, those who worked, those who prayed, those who fought. This was the bourgeoisie—those who manufactured and traded. As a new group, not only did the members of the bourgeoisie have to invent themselves and their ethos, they also had to invent how they would relate to each other and the other orders. In other words, they had to invent politics for themselves. To separate themselves from feudal society and to distinguish themselves from the feudal orders, the bourgeoisie pushed for liberties of person and property and, eventually, for self-government of their towns. These liberties and this self-government would protect the accumulations and profits of their manufacturing and trading. Once they achieved these goals, sometimes through violence and sometimes through peaceful compromise with their feudal lords, the bourgeoisie further refined their self-government.

At no time during the Middle Ages, however, could a city be considered a democracy, and medieval urban politics was ever oligarchical. On the other hand, few cities (Venice is the great exception) ever totally locked out individuals from competing and participating in politics as long as they had the wealth and social standing to do so. Upward social and economic mobility was always possible for a few, who then gained the attendant increase in political rights and responsibilities.

Yet as a consequence of this mobility and competition from new families, and combined with the continuation of the significance of family clans, urban politics were always fractious and factionalized. Violence was typical. Politics in a medieval town were rough and tumble, contentious and confusing, ever changing. If anything, peace and politics never coincided in a medieval city, despite the ironic fact that cities had been founded for the maintenance of peace.

Despite my statement that few cities ever absolutely excluded individuals from participating in politics, one segment of a medieval urban population was utterly excluded from participation in politics, so much so that it is difficult to find any hint of whether or not this segment—the women of the medieval city—even had any political aspirations or roles at all. Despite the substantial power women possessed in the feudal world and despite the significant place women had in the urban economy, they never participated in the public political life of the medieval city, that is, they neither voted nor held office. Why not?

Modern historians have been quick to note the complete absence of women from the political life of a city. Shulamith Shahar has observed that the "restriction of the rights of urban women was reflected primarily in the fact that women played no part in running the town." They appeared neither in assemblies nor councils. Shahar concludes that "within the framework of the history of women in urban society there is no room for discussion of town government."[1] These general observations are confirmed in particular for virtually every geographic area of medieval Europe. In medieval Italy, women could not gain full membership in the guilds which controlled the city governments. In France, they were not able to obtain access to the urban assemblies and councils. In the frontier society of medieval Spain, where one might expect that women's contributions were needed more than they were in the more settled areas of Europe, men nonetheless dominated town assemblies and the city's administrative and judicial offices. In medieval Flanders and Germany, urban women suffered from "political impotence" (to coin David Nicholas's term) even when they might be termed citizens because they were denied any formal political authority. In English towns and villages, politics was also male exclusive.[2]

This laundry list of medieval urban women's political disabilities illustrates two phenomena. First, it seems clear that Shahar's general conclusions about women's lack of political power and participation in

medieval cities is amply supported. Second, and more significant, these observations and conclusions have been made by some of the most prominent and influential historians in the field of women's history in the Middle Ages. They have been at the forefront of this study for decades, and they are quite accomplished and adept at ferreting out and interpreting evidence detailing the lives and significance of women in the Middle Ages. If they cannot find any hints of women's public political power in cities during the Middle Ages, no one can.

It is, of course, perhaps no surprise that they cannot find any evidence of this, for even among contemporaries the concept of women holding public political power in cities seemed almost inconceivable. In fact historians have remarked that their exclusion from urban politics seems so standard and accepted that this exclusion is usually not even remarked upon in medieval urban documents. It seems a given. This sense that the idea of women participating in urban politics and government was inconceivable is amply reflected in the literature of the Renaissance, which represents, at one level, a refined and cumulative interpretation of medieval urban life. In Baldassare Castiglione's *The Courtier* the character Gasparo Pallavicino debates with Giuliano de' Medici about the nature of women and their role in society. At one point Gasparo criticizes Giuliano's desire to see women pursuing a more active role in society than they currently did. He asks sarcastically whether Giuliano intended them to govern cities, make laws, or lead armies. Giuliano's defense of women seemed so illogical to Gasparo that he had to extend his argument to its logical conclusion and thus bring up a virtual impossibility or inconceivability (probably to both of them) to attack it. Others made the same sort of observation regarding the inconceivability of women's role in urban politics and governance. A Venetian ambassador, Giovanni Correr, opined simply that women had no business in urban government, and the Protestant reformer Martin Luther harbored those same thoughts. In 1558 the Scottish Protestant reformer John Knox concluded in his tract, *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, that a woman ruling at any level, including that of a city, was simply a monstrosity, that is, against nature. Shakespeare reflected this sentiment in *A Midsummer's Night Dream.* Even those Renaissance humanists such as Juan Luis Vives and Sir Thomas More, who favored the education of women, agreed that women had no need of rhetoric since they did not possess any sort of public role (as urban politicians and officers had) in which to practice the skills thus gained. The idea of women

participating in urban political life was inconceivable to contemporaries, probably more because women had never possessed such a role (and thus had been invisible) rather than from some vague fear of their threat to the patriarchal order if they ever gained one (though that should not be precluded or seen as having no influence).

Nevertheless, medieval people were fully cognizant that women simply did not act politically in the cities. As Nicolosa Sanuti observed in the middle of the fifteenth century in a complaint of hers against sumptuary legislation in Bologna: "Magistracies are not conceded to women; they do not strive for priesthoods, triumphs, the spoils of war, because these are considered the honors of men. Ornament and apparel, because they are our insignia of worth, we cannot suffer to be taken from us."[3]

This leads us back to our original question of why women did not act politically in medieval cities, which actually leads us to the more fundamental and particular question of why women were **not allowed** to act politically in cities from the rebirth of these cities in the High Middle Ages. Why had they been excluded from urban politics from the start? For excluded they had been, and we sometimes get hints reflecting this, such as this excerpt from a medieval account regarding the three orders of medieval society: "Women must be kept out of all public office."[4] Why?

The medieval city derived from but was not entirely a product of Roman and Late Antique urbanism. Nevertheless, the Roman empire had rested on a foundation composed of cities and women had maintained a fair public presence in these cities. They were priestesses and patrons fulfilling all the public roles associated with those positions. In addition, from the election graffiti preserved on the walls of Pompeii, we know that women supported male political candidates and actively sought financial and other aid for them. Although the evidence is skimpy, we know that some provincial cities even had female magistrates and the offices that they held were not negligible ones, since some of them were eponymous, which meant that local officials and people dated events by identifying them with the holders of the office, in these cases, women.

But the economic problems and political confusion of the Late Empire began to wear excessively upon that urban foundation. By the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, most cities had erected walls for defence. Significantly, the urban area that these walls encompassed was smaller than before. The physical shrinking of the

city reflected the shrinking of its population. As imperial political and economic control decentralized, cities collapsed and the once-elaborate Roman civic administration virtually disappeared. And as this diminished, so, too, must have women's role in the public and political life of cities.

Cities, which had once been economic and residential centers, became primarily military and ecclesiastical administrative centers. The bishop became a central figure in city administration as did the representative of the local military or tribal leader. The rise of the bishop as an urban administrator, with his attendant council, further explains the decline of women's roles in the public and political life of early medieval cities. The patriarchal nature of early Christianity, especially within the hierarchy, was not conducive to seeing women as church officers, one sure avenue into urban administration in the early Middle Ages. On the other hand, we do have some evidence that early in the history of Christian Rome elite women at least publicly voiced their opinion regarding the election of the bishop of Rome (and probably did so regarding other bishops' elections in the cities) by going to the emperors with their opinions.[5] The eventual absence of the emperor in the West coupled with the attendant rise in power of the Bishop of Rome probably curtailed this sort of personal appeal in politics by elite women. Likewise women were not welcomed within the *comitatus*, the warrior band surrounding a Germanic tribal leader or chieftain.

Although many cities of the Roman period completely vanished, a few survived, and, by the High Middle Ages, many had revived and new cities had sprung up. Around 1100 a political revolution occurred in these towns. Where once government authority had lain in the hands of the bishop or local representative of a lay lord, a sworn assembly of the citizens elected an executive body (usually four to twelve men) to rule over them. These were the consuls, a name that reflected the classical heritage of these cities as well as their military needs, and this act represented the birth of the commune. A later addition was an advisory body to the consuls, called the council or senate. This communal development stemmed from the idea of corporate unity, an idea so dominant in urban development that families, guilds (the trade and manufacturing associations of the Middle Ages), and political factions exhibited corporate organization parallel to communal organization. Women, however, did not participate in the councils or serve as consuls.

Communes began to expand their authority and populace beyond their walls and even extended their walls during the High Middle Ages. Port cities benefitted from their contacts with the wider Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Baltic worlds. Smaller towns duplicated the economic activity of the larger ones. Moreover, merchants operated internationally, travelling from town to town and area to area or remaining resident in foreign cities. Women, however, because of the demands of the household never participated in this international trade as resident or traveling partners (as discussed in the essays on urban women that follow). This restricted their potential ability to participate in politics, since these traveling merchants were also the ones who dominated the urban political scene by their wealth and experience.

As the urban elite became wealthier and more numerous, they wanted more of a say in their government, in maintaining peace, in defending their city, in promoting their interests, and in exercising judicial and fiscal authority. Communes directed their grievances against the local lay or ecclesiastical lord, who, in Italy, usually represented the Holy Roman Emperor. Although the transition from lordship to commune could be violent, many times it was not and the bishop or lay lord accepted the authority of the commune or even became its active ally. Communes eventually usurped the lord's rights of coinage, tolls, customs, justice, and war. Communes also instituted political control of the countryside around the city. Efficient control of the countryside guaranteed food, troops, and taxes for the city and eliminated the power of the rural nobility.

As control of trade became crucial for urban development, some cities squabbled over trade routes. This can be seen in the struggles in Italy among Pisa, Genoa, and Venice and in the cities of northern Germany before these joined together to form the Hanseatic League.

Communes also experienced considerable internal strife, particularly between the minor landholding nobility, who had begun to engage in trade, and the major landholding families who had dominated the urban landscape to that point. Both groups clashed with the artisans and strictly urban merchants. Internal disputes based on family, wealth, status, occupation, and residence (quarters and districts developed rivalries) exemplified the complexity and vibrancy of city life. The constant stream of immigration from countryside to city, a result of population growth and the city's control of the countryside, exacerbated these tensions. In Italy, families built defensive towers, which studded the urban landscape; vendettas proliferated. These internal

disputes became a standard feature of urban development throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

First the commune and then, more importantly, the guild became the vehicles generating and organizing medieval urban government. In fact, for many medieval urban historians guilds and urban government were synonymous. For example, although London politics were usually based more on and in the city's wards, the London craft guilds were political clubs. But there is one signal fact about guilds in the Middle Ages: women, "were excluded from all positions of control within the craft organizations, even within those whose workers were mainly female and where a mistress not a master was the head of the workshop."[6] On the surface, this seems strange, since from a number of sources and studies we now know that women were quite active in the medieval urban environment. Moreover, in the Middle Ages many guilds had female members. In thirteenth-century Paris, for instance, of some hundred guilds that we know about, eighty-six had female members and six were entirely female. Never, however, did women serve as officers of medieval guilds; only men did, even for the all-female guilds. It is here that women's participation in politics was blocked, since participation in guild politics and leadership was a virtual requisite for participation in urban politics and leadership once guild-based governments came to power in cities. In medieval Florence, the idea existed that those who had no control within guilds therefore could not have control of a city, which represented "a harmonious correspondence of 'head' to 'members' and 'members' to 'head'."[7] Although this idea was first expressed in 1293 and was intended to explain why nobles were excluded from political power, it certainly applied to women as well. To be politically eligible in the city, one had to be politically eligible in one's guild. What is interesting about the exclusion of women from political power within the guilds is that it parallels the division of guilds into an elite of wealthy and influential men who controlled and participated in politics and the rank and file of middling and lesser men who did not. Women, thus, could be considered members of the rank and file of a guild but never the elite.

Here is one paradox, among many, involving women and urban politics. As the franchise widened and opportunities for urban control increased for men, women were effectively blocked from the main avenue into public and political life in medieval cities. Here at least

also is one facet of the "how" of female exclusion from urban politics, but we have yet to find the "why."

Despite this lack of political control and participation, women were considered citizens of towns, with most of the duties and some of the privileges. Women in virtually all medieval towns possessed the elementary bourgeois liberties of protection of property and person, were able to own property inside the city walls in their own name, and had standing within urban courts. Contracts made with them were valid. Moreover, they had citizen obligations, in that they paid taxes and owed loyalty to the city. Nevertheless, because they could not participate in public politics, their citizenship status was obviously not complete. Several scholars have even termed it "passive citizenship."[8]

The fact that women participated fully in the urban economy, to the extent even of belonging to the rank and file of guilds, and the fact that they were citizens of towns sets up another paradox. Although many urban women possessed the requisite skills, abilities, and even resources to participate in urban politics, they did not.

This inability to participate in politics is reflected in a number of interesting observations made about urban politics outside the guild structure of medieval city governments. For example, during periods of civil strife in medieval Ghent fewer women died overall during these periods than men, suggesting that women were less likely to be involved and thus less likely to be killed in the resultant violence. Because many of these outbreaks of civil strife were economic in origin, one would expect to find women involved in these, especially as members of guilds, but there is no evidence of their participation in these urban riots.[9] Women also rarely suffered banishment and exile from cities during political conflicts. From 1301 to 1302 the government of Pistoia banished 382 opponents, only two of them female. In fact, the property of exiled men was usually left in the care of their wives even if the exile was harsh enough to be extended to their male children. Dante's wife was not exiled with him, nor did she join him in exile voluntarily. Infrequently the target of violence and rarely exiled during periods of urban political crisis, it seems that women were considered noncombatants when it came to the harsher aspects of urban political life. So far, medieval historians have searched in vain for evidence of women's participation—be it formal or informal—in urban riots and revolts. In addition, women never participated in various urban ritual processions and ceremonies except as spectators. Perhaps the best example of this is the public and festive celebration of

San Giovanni at Florence, which reflected Florentine political power (especially over its territorial states); women did not participate in this ritual and parade except as spectators or as mannekins on which the male Florentine mercantile elite could display their own wealth through sumptuous clothing and jewelry.[10]

Some historians have observed that during the first half of the High Middle Ages, women held high-status positions within the workforce, especially when it was still family based. In fact, the family-based nature of urban life during this time (the clans) probably even allowed women a modicum of political power, albeit informally. In the second half of the High Middle Ages and in the late Middle Ages, however, as urban society and economy became less family based with the development of the guilds (and their attendant influence on politics), women became marginalized economically and politically. Women who held these high-status positions, according to Martha Howell, "threatened the patriarchal character of Europe's sex-gender system during the period they held it." By so doing they were "frightening men," especially as their high-status positions in the work force could therefore translate into similar positions in the urban political structure.[11] Thus, guilds began to exclude women from membership, especially as that membership (as guild-based regimes expanded the franchise) might imply women's access to political power. In Leiden, for instance, one guild, as soon as it gained political status, excluded female members, and in fact women were forbidden even to train for that craft.[12] All-female guilds, what few there were, were consistently marginalized. Even the ability of immigrant women to have themselves registered as citizens declined over time. By the early modern period, women were "firmly located in the private realm centered on the patriarchal nuclear family."[13] This diminution of women's power during the transition from the High to the late Middle Ages fits with much of what we know about women and power in the Middle Ages.

Nevertheless, this thesis has some significant weaknesses. First, the reason for women's diminishing place and role in guilds and towns (especially economically) may be related more to a larger phenomenon than a fearful patriarchate: the economic crises of the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period. During the fifteenth century in Ghent, guilds limited mastership to the heirs (both male **and** female) of masters, thus effectively locking immigrants out.[14] This was typical of protectionist reactions to these crises, and perhaps women, as the most marginal of all workers, were likewise seen as the most expendable in periods of

economic downturn. Thus their exclusion from guilds, while certainly having a negative political effect, might have stemmed more from economic reasons than from political ones. Moreover, women's supposed high status in the family-based economic system prior to the development of the guild may be overestimated. Some historians have argued that wage labor had always been the staple labor system of the Middle Ages, not family-based units of production.[15] Historians may also have overestimated women's influence in the family-based political units, the clan. At Ghent the blood-price, the zoen, went to the male members of the clan, not to the widow or immediate family members, as compensation for the male members of the clan losing one of their own. From medieval Florence we have a few documents listing various clan agreements. Women form no part of them, either in the deliberations or in the execution of the documents. Lastly, this thesis never answers the crucial questions: Why had women been excluded from urban politics before the Late Middle Ages? What was it about their participation that men feared?

An obvious reason as to why women were excluded from urban politics is also the main reason why women had limited public roles in medieval (as well as ancient and Early Modern) society as a whole: the dichotomy between public and private life, one organized by and for men, the other for women. That was a simple fact of premodern life. Travel was difficult for women, who were bound to the domestic sphere through their marital and maternal obligations. Women were responsible for most of the domestic duties and hence had little time for public activity—or at least less than men had. In fact, the private work of women, including especially that of serving women, actually facilitated the public role of men. One of the things, therefore, that made women ineligible for politics in a medieval city from early on (and seemed so to the men who ran the towns) was the demands on their time and energy by the private sphere, a structure of their daily life.

There was a particular demand of the public sphere of urban life that especially made women ineligible for politics in a medieval city. Although little understood or even noted by urban historians, towns originated as defensive units and urban society was a military society. As early as 1898 the great English legal historian F. W. Maitland had noted that the early medieval town patriciate had a military function relative to their origin. After defeating the invasion of Champagne (1229-30), Count Thibaut IV granted a number of his towns charters,

giving them elementary bourgeois liberties and a modicum of self-government. In the charter to Troyes, which served as a model for all others, he set out that each town-dwelling "man owes me military service as before. Men over sixty years of age are exempt, but should send a replacement if they are able to."[16] Because nobles and, especially, kings recognized the military value and worth of cities, they tended to grant charters recognizing their liberties in order to have the cities as military allies rather than as military competitors. This has led many urban historians to see towns as more feudal in origin and more a part of the feudal society than as entities standing apart. What conflicts and clashes occurred between townsmen and lords were thus due to competition for feudal power. Chivalric romances even recognized and appreciated the military role of medieval towns. Many studies have shown that most of the first urban consuls came from the knightly class. And guilds fulfilled the military duties of guarding the walls and wards; in fact, most of the urban militias were based on the guilds, which led one historian to refer to medieval city government as "a bourgeois body based on the guilds organized as a military force."[17] Nothing exemplifies the military basis and effectiveness of the guilds better than the Flemish urban militia's smashing victory over French feudal forces in 1302 at Coutrai.

Internally, city conflict reflected this military nature as well. Even the *Ciompi* Revolt at Florence had a military origin; and medieval urban politics, as I have iterated above, always were violent. In 1282 Florence instituted a magistracy called the priors of the guilds, who were given permission to carry arms. In the tense frontier towns of medieval Spain, which lay between two hostile cultures, male and female occupations and duties diverged widely because of the military needs of these islands of defense. One upshot of this was that a military elite of men dominated politics and offices from the beginning in these towns.[18] Urban politics was dangerous in ways that we can barely understand; battle and personal combat in the Middle Ages was violent in ways we simply cannot fathom or even stomach.

Because of the violent nature of urban politics and the harsh dictates of battle and personal conflict in the premodern era, women were simply excluded from formally participating in them. This inability to serve as warriors then made women ineligible for politics in a medieval city. Unfortunately, most historians have failed to generalize from this particular evidence and see from these cases the reason why women were excluded from public political roles in

medieval European cities from the beginning of the revival of these cities.

In addition, some historians are quick to discount a military reason for women's exclusion from urban politics. They argue that women's failure to serve as warriors was not an absolute disqualifier from their gaining political rights in medieval cities since elderly males, who usually did not serve, still had full political rights. Yet they forget one significant military and political fact. While elderly males usually were exempt from military service or could hire substitutes (as women were able to do), they had, once before, even though years before, served. They had that experience with which to enrich their political decision making; they had been there and done that. Women had not. Thus women were perceived as incapable of and ineligible for urban politics, since so much of politics (urban or otherwise) turned on issues of warfare. Medieval urban society was a warrior society, and, as all western warrior societies had done before, this one, too, denied women political rights.

Did women then have any public political influence in medieval cities? In general, the answer is no, but there are always exceptions. In late medieval Germany some widows of minor level urban officials could and did take over their husbands' offices, such as that of tax collector.[19] At Ghent in the fourteenth century the city owned the stalls that guild members used to sell their cloth. Friends of city politicians could receive special favors and deals to set up their shops there. Sometimes women were beneficiaries of these deals, implying that they or their families had provided or would at some point provide these politicians with a political favor or support.[20] Sometimes women as spectators backed factions at various tournaments and games held in cities. In late medieval Paris, for instance, women outfitted themselves in clothing that reflected the colors and hence their support for either Armagnac or Burgundy. And in 1308 some urban women did vote for representatives to Philip IV's assembly at Tours.[21] Perhaps these are all exceptions that prove the rule. Nevertheless, most historians who investigate women in urban society at least concede the logical possibility—nay, probability—that women did influence politics informally. In fact they, especially as wives, widows, and relatives of the elite, probably exercised considerable influence in this way. But since this sort of influence travels along the intimate communication lines of kinship, the scope and significance of this informal political influence lies just beyond the grasp of the historian. Nevertheless, we

periodically receive tantalizing glimpses of this informal influence's richness.

On January 11, 1465, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, the widow of an exiled Florentine, wrote her son Filippo, still exiled in Naples, a letter about business, family, and marriage. She also included information about her husband's second cousin Niccolò:

> Niccolò has gone out of office (*uscì*), and although he did some good things, they weren't the ones I would have wanted. Little honor has been paid to him or to the other outgoing magistrates, either when they were in office, or now that they have stepped down. Our scrutineer [someone who sat on a board that determined the eligibility of political candidates in Florence] was quite upset about it, as were we, but I feel that what was done will collapse, and it is thought they will start fresh. This Signoria [the Florentine executive body] has spent days in deliberation, and no one can find out anything about them. They have threatened to denounce whoever reveals anything as a rebel, so things are being done in total secrecy. I have heard that 58 [the Medici; Alessandra wrote using a rudimentary cipher system] is everything and 54 [the Pitti family] doesn't stand a chance. For the moment it looks to me as if they will get back to 56 [a Pucci family member] in the runoffs (*ne' primi termini*), if things continue to go as now. May God, who can do all, set this city right, for it is in a bad way. Niccolò went in proudly and then lost heart—as 14's [Tommaso Soderini] brother said, "He went in a lion and he will go out a lamb," and that's just what happened to him. When he saw the votes were going against him, he began to humble himself. Now since he left office he goes about accompanied by five or six armed men for fear of the counts of Maremma or others. It would have been better for him if [he had never been elected], for he would never have made so many enemies.[22]

Obviously, whatever else this letter says, it tells us that here is a woman who possesses a clear understanding of Florentine urban politics and their implications for her family and allies. Her other letters to her sons reflect this same political perspicacity. She was especially astute in analyzing the political implications and values of marriage alliances for either her own extended or other families. On April 20, 1464, she wrote Filippo concerning a potential bride for him and noted the possibility of marrying the daughter of Francesco Tanagli. She noted that "Francesco

Tanagli has a good reputation, and he has held office, not the highest, but still he has been in office. You may ask: Why should he give her to someone in exile?" She went on then to note that her dowry is small, an alliance with the Strozzi, even if they are exiled, is still extremely advantageous, and that Francesco had immediate need of political friends and help.

Here then is a fruitful area of investigation for historians interested in examining the scope of women's political influence in cities. Wherever the public and the private met, such as at the intersection of politics and marriage, perhaps here is where women were most active politically. Denied any formal public political role in the cities, did they act informally and privately to influence urban politics? Only a concerted effort to examine personal and private records, such as letters and diaries, will give us an answer to this question. But that is for the future.

NOTES

1. Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co., 1983), 175.

2. See David Herlihy, *Opera muliebra: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1975); Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City: Women, Children, and the Family in Fourteenth-Century Ghent* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985); Martha Howell, "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political Status in Northern Medieval Cities" in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988); and Judith Bennett, "Public Power and Suthority in the Medieval English Countryside" in same.

3. Quoted in Diane Owen Hughes, "Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy" in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance,* eds. Benjamin Kohl and Alison Smith (Lexington: D. C. Heath, 1995), 368.

4. Quoted in Shahar, 11.

5. See Ramsay Macmullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

6. Rodney Hilton, *English and French Towns in Feudal Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 66.

7. John Najemy, *Corporatism and Consensus in Florentine Electoral Politics, 1280-1400* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 9.

8. See Shahar, 113, 175; Dillard, 16-17; Howell, 39.

9. Nicholas, *Domestic Life*, 73 and *The Metamorphosis of a Medieval City: Ghent in the Age of the Arteveldes, 1302-1390* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 155-57.

10. See Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (NY: Academic Press, 1980).

11. Martha Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 181 and 183.

12. For an expanded view of this development, see the work of Martha Howell, especially *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*.

13. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy*, 181.

14. Nicholas, *Domestic Life*, 183.

15. See Steven Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

16. Theodore Evergates, ed. and trans., *Feudal Society in Medieval France: Documents from the County of Champagne* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 23.

17. Hilton, 67, 71.

18. Dillard, 148.

19. Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 56.

20. Nicholas, *Metamorphosis of a Medieval City*, 72.

21. Shahar, 176, 212-13.

22. Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirschner, eds., *The Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 116-17.

PART IV

Economics and Work in the Urban World

INTRODUCTION

Although demographically in the minority during the Middle Ages as compared to the rural peasantry, the urban population of the medieval period is one of the most important groups under study. Many of the values of the modern era—the so-called "Protestant" work ethic, the valuation of citizen action, the emphasis on economic rather than social status, even the sense of patriotism modern people experience—have their origins in the medieval urban world.

There were important cities all over Europe, especially after the millennium, when populations began to grow and trade began to expand. The main urban centers existed for specific reasons. Constantinople, Paris, and London were political as well as commercial centers. The cities of the Low Countries—Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp, and others—as well as the cities of Norwich in England and Calais in France were central to the thriving textile industry. The cities of central and northern Italy engaged in various commercial practices, among them merchant trading, banking, and manufacturing of luxury items such as brocaded and embroidered silk fabric and blown glass. Mediterranean cities such as Marseilles were essential trading outposts to the eastern trade routes. The cities dotting the shores of the Baltic Sea which formed the Hanseatic League engaged in trade in northern Europe, along the Baltic and into the North Sea. Rome was a world unto itself, with its main industry being tourism: it was the most popular pilgrimage site in western Europe. Thus, each medieval city

had a specific reason for existence, and its prosperity and the fortune of its citizens were dependent on that reason.

The cities of medieval Europe were the hardiest survivors of the transformation of the late Roman Empire into early medieval France, Spain, Italy, and Germany. Although the Romans consistently planted municipal centers throughout the empire, many of these fortified villages disappeared after the Romans abandoned them or the region was conquered by Germanic peoples. Those cities which did survive usually did so because they were Christian religious centers and housed a bishop or were connected to an important pilgrimage site. Bishops frequently took over the governing of these small urban areas as part of their diocesan responsibilities. Without these associations with the church, many Roman cities would simply have ceased to exist, especially in Europe north of the Alps, where there was no strong local urban tradition. Even in Italy, the cities of the Roman period declined significantly in the first 500 years of the Middle Ages.

Around the millennium, spurred by the greater stability following the end of the Viking, Muslim, and Magyar invasions and by the increase in commercial interaction between the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic Near East, and Western Europe, the cities of those regions all began to expand, and new urban areas sprang up in the wake of increased population, increased trade, and a fairly stable economy. Although dominated politically by the aristocracy, many of these cities eventually adopted citizenship rules which gave the merchant elite and the members of the skilled artisan class a political voice which they had not previously had. Moreover, a new protective economic system developed in these cities—the guild, which established rules for a particular trade, instructed apprentices, and was run by "masters" of the trade. Guilds became the most important social, economic, and political structure of the medieval city. They eventually, especially in Italy, overthrew much of the control of the rural nobility, and they were instrumental in gaining independence from local aristocratic authority. Although a closed system, in which only masters had a political voice, the guild system nonetheless provided the young cities of medieval Europe with an effective political and economic program that promoted the value of work and expanded the money economy of the time. While never replacing land as the most important element of the medieval economy, the medieval cities thus added another, and very important, dimension.

Women in the cities participated in the economic life of the city as members of families, as individual laborers, and as investors in commercial enterprises. Like women in the countryside, their status and economic position depended on family connections, on their marital status, and on their family's social position. Although, like peasant women, urban women were a significant part of the work force, they, again like peasant women, had little chance for mobility or authority in the work place, except through the informal networks of family ties. Widows of guild masters could assume control over the workshops of their late husbands, but women could rarely become masters in their own right, and the laws of the later Middle Ages restricted their access to such positions of power even further. The male head of the household was usually credited with the work of the family members, work which often was performed almost entirely by, or at least largely by, women. Single women made up the poorest populations of medieval towns and cities. Their work was often restricted to domestic service, prostitution, midwifery, or work in the textile industries. Although the tax rolls of cities such as Paris and Florence attest to the existence of women engaged in the more skilled and special fields, such as artist, bookbinder, or physician, by the later Middle Ages most of the skilled positions were closed to women, either because they were not permitted to acquire the necessary training and education or because new laws restricting their access to such jobs were created by the guild-controlled municipal governments.

Medieval urban women, nevertheless, did whatever they could to contribute to the economy of their families, to advance the wealth of their children, and to gain as much economic independence as possible. The two essays in this section focus specifically on ways in which medieval urban women functioned in the economy of the medieval city. First, Benjamin McRee and Trisha Dent discuss working women. Second, Mark Angelos discusses ways in which women invested their money and patronized certain kinds of businesses.

CHAPTER 14

Working Women in the Medieval City

Benjamin R. McRee and Trisha K. Dent

In the classic image of the medieval city, men dominate the world of work. They can be found at their looms weaving the cloth which helped to fill urban coffers, in their market stalls trading grain, fish, and other commodities, and in their shops supervising the work of journeymen and apprentices. Women appear only at the margins of this traditional picture, occupied with less visible domestic tasks—cooking, caring for children, or mending clothing. But the past is full of surprises, and the inaccuracy of this image, rooted as it is in common assumptions about the roles men and women played in pre-industrial societies, is one of them. Women were, in fact, active participants in the economic life of medieval cities. Although their level of participation varied with age and with the century and geographical region in which they lived, medieval women can be found in a wide variety of employments. Women held positions such as moneychangers and lenders, jewelers, and mint workers. They were blacksmiths and jailers. They engaged in the wine trade as grape purchasers, vineyard keepers, and wine retailers. Women ran small-scale marketing enterprises and shipping businesses. They were actively involved in book production as authors, scribes, illuminators, and booksellers. Widows participated in the real estate market, buying and selling land and houses. Women also worked in the metal trades and sometimes helped in building and construction. They even made tennis rackets! Few trades were actually closed to them. The pages that follow will focus on the principal kinds of work women did, looking specifically at their roles in five areas: domestic service, petty retailing, textile manufacturing, healing, and prostitution.

They will then consider regional and chronological variations in the work done by urban women, seeking to learn why women were more actively involved in the economy in some places and at some times rather than at others. Before turning to these topics, however, it will be useful at the start to describe three general factors that influenced the place of women in the urban work force.

First, an urban woman's role in the economy depended on the stage she had reached in her life cycle, that is on her age and marital status. The stages relevant to a woman's working life were adolescence, early adulthood, wifehood, and widowhood. Adolescents generally worked as domestic servants, either in their own homes or, more commonly, in the homes of others. Some spent this period as apprentices, learning the rudiments of a recognized trade. By the time they reached early adulthood at the age of twenty or so, women in northern Europe could live independently and work on their own if they chose. Social customs and a lack of capital usually restricted them to poorly paid work, however, often in the textile or food industries. In southern Europe women usually married (or chose a celibate religious life) before the age of twenty, so they did not have the same opportunities for independent work. After marriage, a new phase in a woman's work life began. Craftsmen's wives usually assisted their husbands in their trades. Since most businesses were run out of the home, this was not difficult to do. Married women might run the shop where goods were sold to customers, supervise the work of apprentices and servants, or assist in the manufacture of whatever products the house was making—shoes, cloth, gloves, bread, beer, and so on. A craftsman's wife was considered an essential part of the household labor force. Married women might also engage in independent enterprises. These were usually small scale endeavors, which women fit in amongst their responsibilities in the home and the workshop. Sometimes they were more ambitious, however. In London, married women who ran businesses separate from those of their husbands could declare themselves "*femes soles*." This special legal designation allowed them to make contracts (which married women were otherwise not permitted to do), take on female apprentices, and assume responsibility for their own debts. Finally, widows, who were always numerous, were generally permitted to continue running their deceased husbands' businesses. In this role they could purchase materials, supervise the work of journeymen and apprentices, make contracts, and

sell their wares. The only thing they could not do was hold office in the craft guild or participate in its decision-making process.

Second, the power of craft guilds influenced the opportunities available to all workers, both male and female. Craft guilds oversaw a substantial portion of urban economic activity. They had a range of powers and responsibilities, among them the establishment of standards for quality, the regulation of prices, and the oversight of apprenticeship. Their fundamental power, however, was that of determining who was allowed to practice the craft. In a city in which a guild of dyers operated, for example, only those who belonged to the guild were permitted to dye cloth destined for the market. Access to guild membership was thus crucial for women. The most well-known route to membership was apprenticeship. Most guilds accepted both boys and girls as apprentices, though boys predominated. Service as an apprentice began at a young age, usually thirteen or fourteen, and lasted five to ten years. During that time the apprentice lived in the master's house, did his or her bidding, and learned the trade. Once their terms of service ended, apprentices could expect to become full-fledged members of the guild, either immediately or after working independently as journeymen for several years. Occasionally women had their own guilds, as at Paris where the five guilds that specialized in silk production were composed entirely of women. They were the exceptions, of course. In most guilds, women comprised only a small minority of the members or were absent entirely. They were not barred from membership, however, at least until the end of the Middle Ages. Despite this openness, most women did not become guild members, contenting themselves instead with assisting in their fathers' or husbands' workshops or participating in trades not regulated by the guilds. There were, in fact, a large number of crafts in every city that were not organized into guilds and did not require an apprenticeship or other specialized training. These could include needlemaking, embroidering, retailing of food and drink, and production of small household items such as brooms and wooden utensils. None of these trades paid well, which helps to account for their unregulated status. Women as well as men had free access to such trades.

Finally, it is important to remember that urban women were always excluded from positions of public authority. In contrast to the feudal world, where women could wield power as queens and prominent members of the nobility, town councils were always made up exclusively of men. Guilds were also controlled by men, as were the

courts which handled business disputes of all sorts. And in the home, women lived under the authority of their fathers, masters, or husbands. Even the property of married women remained under their husbands' control. Only single women who lived on their own—an arrangement that was barely tolerated—and widows escaped male tutelage.

With these general influences in mind, it is now appropriate to look more closely at the different types of work urban women did. Domestic service is a fitting place to begin. A woman typically began her work life as a servant. She would take up her first position at the age of twelve or thirteen, remaining in this line of work until she reached her early twenties and went on to marry or work independently. During this period she would live under her master's roof, receiving bed and board and perhaps a small salary as well. Women from all but the highest ranks of medieval society spent at least part of their adolescence in this way. The prevalence of this experience ensured that domestic service was not considered degrading work. Urban women could expect to find positions in their own communities, perhaps in their own neighborhoods. Because the demand for servants regularly outstripped the local supply, many servants were immigrants who had left their native villages and sought a new life in the city. They rarely moved far, however, in most cases traveling no more than fifteen or twenty miles. To find suitable positions these women depended on networks of relatives, friends, and fellow villagers who were already working in the city. For a fee, employment agents could also help to bring masters and servants together in some cities. Agents and networks remained important for young women as most servants changed jobs frequently. It was not unusual to seek a new employer yearly, so that over the course of her career as a servant, a woman might work for half a dozen or more masters.

Servants performed a variety of tasks. Cleaning, marketing, and other household duties would have occupied the time of many servants, especially the younger ones. Servants' responsibilities were not limited to domestic chores, however. Because the house provided both living quarters and workspace, masters could easily involve servants in their trades. Servants in a baker's house might help with the task of preparing and kneading dough. At an inn, they could assist in the kitchen or serve customers. In the house of a glover, they might cut and stitch leather or help out in the shop. Such arrangements had advantages for both masters and servants. Masters gained a cheap source of labor and a means of increasing productivity and income without

violating rules restricting the number of apprentices a master could train. Servants, in turn, gained valuable skills and experience. As they moved from the house of one master to another, they could learn the rudiments of several trades.

Relations between masters and servants were not always harmonious. That is hardly surprising. Sparks were bound to fly from time to time when adolescents lived and worked with masters who enjoyed quasi-parental authority over them. Indeed, city courts regularly heard complaints involving masters and servants. The disputes usually involved money, with masters often accusing servants of theft and servants charging masters with withholding wages. On occasion conflicts turned violent, even resulting in homicide. Both masters and servants could end up as victims. Servants who slew their masters received harsh treatment. In Frankfurt two female servants who had killed their masters were executed by being buried in thorns and nettles while still alive, staked to the ground, and left to die miserable deaths.[1] Servants were, of course, also vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances, and complaints of rape were not unknown.

The records of the law courts paint an overly grim picture of master-servant relations, however. While living under the same roof could certainly provoke conflict, it might just as easily breed affection. Some employers remembered trusted servants in their wills, leaving them small grants of money or goods. There is also evidence that masters sought to secure good marriages for their servants, contributing to their dowries and seeing to the cultivation of proper manners. Although such actions were not entirely disinterested, as advantageous marriages reflected favorably on the household, they must have sprung at least partly from genuine fondness. Indeed, some servants ended up marrying their masters. Such was the case of one Thomasine Bonaventure, born to an impoverished family in the English county of Cornwall. As a young woman she went to work for Thomas Bumsby, a London merchant. When Bumsby's wife died, he married Thomasine. Bumbsby himself died two years later, leaving Thomasine a wealthy widow with no lack of suitors among London's prosperous merchant community.[2]

After domestic service, the most common occupations practiced by urban women were those associated with the sale of food and drink. Many of the women involved in these trades were petty retailers who took their products from door to door or sold them on the street. In England they were known as "hucksters" or "regrators," terms that

were not complimentary. In the fourteenth-century poem *Piers Plowman*, for example, William Langland introduces his readers to "Rose the Regrator" in a section of the poem dealing with the seven deadly sins. Rose was married to a man named "Covetousness," and she spent her time cheating customers who bought cloth or ale from her.[3] Real-life hucksters purchased small quantities of meat, eggs, fish, fruit, vegetables, cheese, or other goods at the city market or from rural producers and hawked them in the streets. Such women were often recent immigrants who were poor and lacked the capital and connections necessary to secure other kinds of work. Women who were a bit better off could rent a stall at the city market and sell their produce there. In most urban markets, in fact, women were the principal vendors of fruits and vegetables. In Nottingham the sale of food was so closely identified with women that the section of the city market devoted to this trade was known as "Womanmarket." In Norwich, England's second largest city, as many as a third of all the market stalls were rented by women. In addition to food, women also sold clothing and household items at market stalls. Women were also the principal brewers and sellers of ale during the Middle Ages in both urban and rural areas. Ale could easily be made in small batches—the only practical choice since it soured quickly—and sold from the home. Customers typically brought their own pitchers to be filled by the "alewife." Wine and other alcoholic beverages were sold in this way as well.

Women were also heavily involved in the largest and most complex industry of the Middle Ages—the production of textiles, especially woolens. Many steps were involved in the production of woolen cloth and clothing. Before it could be processed, raw wool had to be cleaned and carded; it could then be spun into thread. Thread was woven into cloth, which was then washed, dyed, fulled, and sheared to produce finished bolts of high-quality cloth. The cloth could then be cut, sewed, and embroidered to make articles of clothing. At the industry's height, each of these tasks gave its name to a separate profession, many with their own guilds. The names of some of these professions are preserved today in family surnames—Weaver, Dyer, Fuller, and Tailor, for example. During the early Middle Ages, production of cloth and clothing had been almost entirely in the hands of women. With the rise of towns in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the industry became urbanized, and men began to participate as well. Gradually they took over some stages of the process, notably

weaving. After the entry of men into the industry, women most often worked in the early stages of the process, washing, carding, and spinning the wool into thread, or in the final stages, sewing and embroidering garments. These tasks may not have paid as well as weaving, dying, or fulling, but they required less training and could easily be done in a woman's spare time. That made them appealing to many women.

Women did dominate two small but profitable corners of the textile industry. Both required considerable skill as well as capital sufficient to purchase the expensive materials involved. Both were also relatively small industries, found in only a few cities. The first was the production of gold thread, which was well established in cities such as Genoa and Nuremberg. Gold thread was used for embroidering ceremonial and luxury garments. The second was silk production, an industry that lay almost entirely in the hands of women. In Paris silkmakers had their own, all female, guilds and they supervised their own workshops and trained apprentices just as other master artisans did. Silkwomen in London did not have a guild, but they accepted apprentices and were sufficiently well organized to petition Parliament for protection from foreign competition.

The field of health care also attracted women. Female physicians were not unknown in the Middle Ages, despite the fact that university training—the recognized gateway to the profession—remained closed to them. They learned their art from other female practitioners and through practical experience. University-trained doctors often challenged the right of these women to practice medicine, however, claiming that they lacked the necessary grounding in standard medical texts. They forced some female physicians to abandon the profession or to limit their practices to women and children. A less controversial occupation was that of midwife. As men were generally banned from obstetrics in the Middle Ages, midwives performed a critical function. These women attended deliveries throughout the cities that employed them and were sometimes asked to provide expert testimony in cases where rape or abortion was suspected. They generally learned their craft through apprenticeship, mothers often training their own daughters to follow in their footsteps. In addition to a modest salary from the civic treasury, midwives often received payments or gifts from the families of women they had helped. Councils eager to increase the number of midwives practicing in their communities sometimes also offered bonuses to practitioners who took on apprentices.

In the field of health care, women also worked as barbers, nurses, apothecaries, and hospital managers. As the name suggests, barbers cut hair, but they also practiced medicine—applying plasters, using ointments, and performing minor surgical procedures such as letting blood. Women were well known as barbers until the fifteenth century when male barbers began to form guilds excluding them. Many more women became nurses or wet nurses. These women could decide whether they wanted to work full or part time and, as wet nurses, had the option of working in their own homes. Many nurses belonged to special organizations that fostered unity within the profession. Such organizations usually had a religious character and promoted nursing as a pious activity. Other organizations were formed by apothecaries and herbalists. Women in these occupations had their own shops where people could purchase herbs and medicines needed for cures. These women often concocted their own recipes for medications, which they then prescribed for their customers' ailments. Women also helped to manage hospitals and pesthouses. Medieval hospitals cared primarily for the elderly and for convalescents in need of extended care. Pesthouses, usually located outside city walls, treated victims of contagious diseases such as plague and operated only during epidemics. In both types of institutions it was not uncommon to find women handling admissions, supervising the kitchen, or purchasing food, equipment, and other necessities.

The final occupation to be examined here is that of the prostitute. Despite the pervasive influence of the church and frequent condemnations by preachers and moralists, prostitution flourished in medieval cities. Indeed, clergymen were often the chief customers of medieval prostitutes, and churchmen sometimes owned brothels. This profession clearly provoked contradictory behavior. It was widely tolerated, however, for two reasons. First, efforts to ban it generally proved to be futile. Brothels closed in one part of town simply reopened in another or in suburban districts beyond the reach of urban authorities. Second, it was thought that the presence of prostitutes helped to prevent fornication, rape, and sodomy. It was viewed, in other words, as the least dangerous of several possible sins.

Such considerations led civic authorities to regard prostitution as something to be accepted but heavily regulated. Prostitutes were thus assigned to special streets or houses, always some distance away from the city's busiest commercial districts. In London, prostitutes were banished to Southwark, on the far side of the Thames. The clothing

worn by prostitutes was also regulated. In Bristol, for example, they had to wear a distinctive striped hood that clearly announced their profession. Some German cities regulated the length of coats worn by these women. Many cities forbade them to wear fur-trimmed garments, which were considered marks of wealth and respectability. Brothels were also subject to close supervision. In Paris, women were not to remain overnight in the brothel. The governments of many German cities restricted the number of brothels permitted to operate and licensed their proprietors. No daughter of a citizen was permitted to work at such an establishment. Furthermore, prostitutes were to be guaranteed their room and board, whether they worked or not. Managers were reminded that the women should not be made to work when they did not wish to and should be permitted to refuse any customer they did not want. There is evidence that prostitutes did not regard their work as particularly shameful. In a survey of household occupations in fourteenth-century Bologna, for example, a substantial number of women identified themselves freely as prostitutes.[4] And on a visit to Nuremberg in 1471, Emperor Friedrich III gave money to six prostitutes who greeted him playfully during his tour of the city.[5]

The lives of most prostitutes cannot have been pleasant, however. In spite of hints that prostitutes in large cities such as Paris were prospering, most were poor. Prostitutes were generally immigrants who lacked the family ties or other connections that might have allowed them to find other work. Many must have been part-time workers who turned to prostitution when the meager returns from their efforts at spinning, embroidering, or washing clothes failed to meet their needs. Finally, the association between prostitution and the criminal world could place them in danger. In Castilian cities prostitutes were denied legal protection and could be beaten or robbed by other townsfolk without fear of punishment. Women accused of prostitution in some of these cities had to submit to the ordeal of the hot iron in order to clear their names.[6] More generally, prostitutes were vulnerable to abuse by customers and pimps or to punishment by the authorities if they themselves engaged in theft or other criminal activity.

The haphazard survival of medieval records makes it difficult to estimate the proportion of women who engaged in the various occupations described above. Some sense of the relative popularity of different lines of work can be gained, nonetheless, from the Paris *tailles* of 1292 and 1313. The *taille* was a tax levied on individuals and households that did not have a tax exemption (students, churchmen and

churchwomen, and members of the nobility were exempt) and were not too poor to pay. The *tailles* did not include all women who worked and did not list occupations consistently. As David Herlihy has shown, they can, nevertheless, provide a crude measure of the popularity of different occupations. The ten female occupations mentioned most frequently in 1292, in descending order of popularity, were household servant, peddler, dressmaker, laundress, Beguine (a religious designation), hairdresser, silk thread worker, silk worker, barber, and nurse. For the 1313 *taille*, which did not include servants (who could not pay much in any case), the top ten occupations were tavern keeper, peddler, hostel keeper, dressmaker, laundress, silk spinner, candlemaker, mercer, silk thread worker, and wool worker.[7] When the occupations of all the women listed in 1292 are grouped into similar categories, it appears that about a quarter of the women were servants, a quarter were involved in petty retailing and food provisioning, and a quarter were employed in textiles. Those in the remaining quarter practiced a wide range of other trades, including health care, woodwork, metalwork, construction, and candlemaking.

Women's involvement in the urban economy was not, of course, everywhere the same. Law, social customs, and economic conditions varied from one city and one region to another; it is only natural that women's roles should have varied as well. The contrast was sharpest between the Mediterranean south of Europe and the north. That contrast can be illustrated by comparing the Tuscan city of Florence, which has been studied by David Herlihy, with the Flemish city of Ghent, studied by David Nicholas.

Tuscan women maintained a very low economic profile. In the Florentine *catasto* of 1427-30, a detailed survey of the region's population and wealth, less than 1 percent of the women identified as heads of households reported an occupation.[8] Young girls did work as domestic servants for a short time, but since they usually married before they left their teens, they did not remain in these positions long. Even widows—frequent participants in the economic life of northern cities—did not have a strong presence in the work force. Although they sometimes lived independently, supported by rents from property they inherited, they seldom ran their deceased husbands' businesses. Herlihy has offered several explanations for the absence of women from the Florentine work force. First, Mediterranean culture emphasized female passivity; independent action of any sort on the part of women was discouraged. Second, craft guilds, organizations which often acted to

limit female participation, developed very early in Florence, perhaps preventing women from gaining a foothold in the economy. Third and perhaps most important, female virginity before marriage was highly valued in Tuscan society. As a result, parents of adolescent daughters sought to marry them off while they were still in their teens and, in the meantime, kept them under close supervision, often not allowing them out in public except for religious and ceremonial occasions. Needless to say, such restrictions limited their economic opportunities.[9]

Ghent, on the other end of the European continent, presents a different picture. According to Nicholas, single women were not only granted considerable independence in that Flemish city, they were expected to be able to support themselves. Married women, in turn, were expected to contribute to their families' economic well-being. Most married women were involved in trade or industry, often serving as partners in their husbands' businesses. Women were especially active in the provision of food and drink and in the manufacture and sale of textiles. Some craft guilds freely admitted women, notably the barbers and the blue dyers, and most permitted widows to operate the businesses of their deceased husbands. Women also worked frequently as moneylenders and innkeepers. Why was Ghent so different from Florence? Culture undoubtedly had much to do with the contrast, but so did marriage patterns. As one might guess, Flemish women married later than their Tuscan sisters, typically waiting until their early twenties to take husbands. This gave them an interval between adolescence and adulthood in which to develop the skills and confidence necessary for economic independence.[10]

While the examples of Ghent and Tuscany illustrate the importance of social customs in defining the roles women played in the urban economy, broad chronological changes affected their position as well. Indeed, historians have generally described the years between 1200 and 1450 as a period of considerable opportunity for urban women, especially in northern areas. After 1450, opportunities dwindled, and, in the sixteenth century, the place of women in the urban work force declined dramatically. The reasons for this shift are important and will be examined below.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—the heart of the High Middle Ages—European cities experienced dramatic growth. It was during this period of prosperity that customs governing the various occupations practiced in urban communities developed. Given the profits to be made in rapidly expanding trades and industries, urban

authorities had little reason to exclude women from the work force. After all, opportunities for work were plentiful, and the involvement of women in the economy only added to urban wealth. The fact that most businesses were based in the home made it practical, moreover, for women to balance domestic responsibilities, such as child care and household management, with economic enterprise.

The arrival of plague in the fourteenth century only increased economic opportunities for women. Between 1347 and 1350, plague took a horrible toll, killing approximately one third of the European population, men and women alike. The toll was usually greater in cities and heavily urbanized regions, often reaching 50 percent or more. Repeated visitations of plague and other diseases kept population levels low for at least a century after 1350, leading one historian to dub this period a "golden age of bacteria."[11] It was also a golden age for workers, however. Labor was in short supply after the plague, and survivors found their services in heavy demand. For women, the century-long shortage of workers meant increased opportunity for employment of all kinds. The help they provided in the shops of their fathers and husbands was more welcome than ever, and opportunities for independent endeavors grew. Indeed, economic conditions were so favorable that many more women than usual may have been able to live independently, delaying marriage or forgoing it altogether.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the situation began to change. Women everywhere saw their employment options narrow. Several examples can serve to illustrate this trend. In 1461, the government of the English city of Bristol passed an ordinance forbidding the wives, daughters, and maids of weavers to work at the loom.[12] This regulation prohibited what had, of course, been a traditional practice in medieval workshops; before this time the labor of every member of the household had been considered essential to its welfare. About this same time the governments of some German cities began to regulate the work of widows. Instead of continuing to run their deceased husbands' shops as long as they wished, a customary medieval practice, widows were increasingly permitted to keep them open for no more than a year or two after their husbands' death. Later, this time period was shortened to a few months.[13] In the sixteenth century, work by other German women came to be restricted as well. In the city of Nuremberg, for example, female servants in knifemakers' shops were forbidden to make or sharpen blades and independent practitioners of traditionally female trades, such as veil making, saw

new restrictions imposed on their enterprises. The number of apprentices they could train might be limited or the type and quantity of their output might be restricted. As these examples suggest, women were no longer wholly welcome in the urban work force.

What brought about the shift? There is no simple answer to this question. Historians believe that a combination of factors contributed to the change. The most important of these were population growth, new entry requirements in some trades, and changing attitudes towards women. Perhaps the most significant influence was population growth. Midway through the fifteenth century population levels in Europe began a slow recovery from their post-plague recession. One result of this expansion was increased competition for jobs, especially in areas where growth in population coincided with a slowdown in the economy. The narrowing of employment opportunity affected both men and women. For men it meant that the usual path to respectability and to at least modest prosperity—mastership in a recognized craft—was increasingly difficult to follow. Those who finished apprenticeships could no longer expect to be admitted readily to a guild and to be permitted to run their own businesses. Indeed, in some places the market became so tight that by the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century the only way for a journeyman to become a master was to marry a widow and inherit her former husband's place in the craft. For women, the impact was even more severe. They increasingly found themselves excluded from the most lucrative lines of work. In a rare but revealing display of candor, the government of Bristol justified the ordinance it passed in 1461 limiting women's work in weavers' shops (described above) by explaining that it was enacted so that the "king's people" would not lack employment. As their logic makes clear, guilds and city councils were not averse to restricting the work that women could do in order to preserve as many positions as possible for men.

Entry requirements in some trades also took their toll on female employment. Women had always had more difficulty than men raising the capital needed to buy equipment. For this reason they were found predominantly in trades that required minimal investment, such as petty retailing, brewing, and weaving. Changing technology could affect even these opportunities, however. When weavers moved to larger and more expensive looms or brewers began to produce beer in quantities that required larger vats, for example, those who could not afford the equipment were effectively excluded from the trade. Changes in training had a similar effect. Although some women had always

followed the traditional path of formal apprenticeship, most learned informally from their parents, their employers, and their husbands. This pattern suited their traditional role as helpers in family shops and their need for part-time, flexible work schedules. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, some guilds began to impose stricter training requirements on all workers, mandating a lengthy apprenticeship even for those who worked only as helpers in the shop. In some cases, this change was made to "professionalize" a craft and increase its status. In others, it was done to accommodate new, more complex methods of production or operation. Such requirements were not necessarily meant to exclude women, but it was women who had the most difficulty in meeting them.

The end of the Middle Ages also witnessed the emergence of more rigidly patriarchal attitudes towards women. The men who ran city governments had always regarded independent women with some suspicion. They had felt that the proper vocation for women was marriage and that unmarried lay women ought to live under the tutelage of a father or master. Such attitudes intensified in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Authorities became convinced that unmarried, independent women posed a threat to the moral order of their communities. Looking for ways to discourage a mode of life they regarded as socially dangerous, they began to restrict employment that facilitated female independence. As a consequence, women were increasingly limited to low-paying, low-status jobs. It should not be surprising that the emergence of this attitude coincided in many places with moves to close public brothels and bath houses, eliminating another sort of moral disorder and, of course, another avenue of female employment.

When thinking about the decline of women in the medieval work force, three points are worth remembering. First, circumstances were different in every city and the relative importance of the forces outlined above varied from place to place. In any particular city local factors could also be just as influential as the ones that were more generally applicable. Second, women did not disappear altogether from the work force. They retained a strong presence in domestic service, in petty retailing, and in some parts of the textile industry, such as carding and spinning. What these employments had in common was low pay and low status. They had also long been recognized as appropriate trades for women and had the advantage of requiring little training and capital investment. Third, by the end of the Middle Ages, the process of

decline had barely begun. The story of women's exclusion from the most desirable sorts of work is most properly an Early Modern, not a medieval, one.

Standing at the end of the medieval period, looking back over the three or four preceding centuries, it is hard not to be impressed by the involvement of women in the urban economy. Women had practiced a wide variety of occupations and had done so with few restrictions. They had been weavers, tanners, cutlers, brewers, candlemakers, servants, leather workers, prostitutes, goldsmiths, merchants, dyers, apothecaries, tailors, and more. In following these trades they had made important contributions to the welfare of their families and to the vitality of the cities in which they lived. Considering their achievements, it is hard not to be convinced that the late medieval and Early Modern decline in their involvement in the world of work must have left their society poorer. Think of Alice, Chaucer's ebullient Wife of Bath and *The Canterbury Tales*'s most memorable character. She is best known for her fiery disposition and her inexhaustible reserves of energy, energy that enabled her to marry and bury five husbands. But it is worth recalling as well that Chaucer described this strong, independent woman as an able weaver. As the poet wrote:

> In making cloth she showed so great a bent,
> She bettered those of Ypres and of Ghent.[14]

Chaucer composed these lines in the second half of the fourteenth century, when women's participation in the urban economy was near its peak. He knew well that the two Flemish cities he named—Ypres and Ghent—were renowned for the fine cloth they produced. Is it too great a leap to suppose that Alice's strength of character went hand in hand with her economic capacities, that the rip-roaring life she led was made possible, at least in part, by her ability to pay her own way?

There were few female weavers—in Flanders or elsewhere—after 1500. Had Alice lived then, she would probably have been limited to spinning wool or operating an urban market stall. Such a reduced role would hardly have suited her capabilities. One must imagine that it did not suit the needs and aspirations of many of the flesh-and-blood women who lived at the dawn of the new "modern" era, either.

NOTES

1. Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 90.

2. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 187.

3. William Langland, *Piers the Ploughman*, trans. J. F. Goodridge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 67.

4. David Herlihy, *Opera muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 157-58.

5. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 100.

6. Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 196-98.

7. Herlihy, *Opera muliebria*, 131-36, 142-48.

8. *Ibid.*, 159.

9. *Ibid.*, 167-68.

10. David Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City: Women, Children, and the Family in Fourteenth-Century Ghent* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 84-106.

11. Sylvia L. Thrupp, "The Problem of Replacement-Rates in Late Medieval English Population," *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 18 (1965), 101-18, at 118.

12. Herlihy, *Opera muliebria*, 178.

13. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany*, 157.

14. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 31.

CHAPTER 15

Urban Women, Investment, and the Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages

Mark Angelos

One of the most important developments denoting the transition from the "early" to the "High" Middle Ages was the advent of the Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages. Shut out for centuries from the well-developed network of Mediterranean commerce maintained by Muslim and Byzantine merchants from Morocco to Syria, the newly revived cities and towns of northern Italy and the western Riviera gained entry into this lucrative financial market during the twelfth century. By the thirteenth century, commercial developments in places like Genoa and Venice began the important transitional period between the agrarian-centered economy of early medieval society and the full-blown money economy of later periods. Mediterranean merchants and their northern counterparts in the Low Countries and the Rhine Valley established an increasingly sophisticated urban network of interregional trade throughout western and central Europe. Credit, banking, double-entry bookkeeping, public notaries, and partnership contracts all signaled the appearance of a nascent capitalism in the west. Increasing commerce brought increasing wealth and the merchant families who capitalized on the considerable profits gained through trade rose to prominence in the social order of the medieval city. In the independent communes of northern Italy and the Low Countries, merchant families came to dominate political and economic life. Opportunities existed for social advancement through wise investment. New attitudes toward property

began to affect the structure of the family economy in northern Italian cities.

While men tended to control the bulk of family wealth, especially real estate, female family members held claim to property that proved handier than real estate for investment purposes: movable property (cash or commodities) which they could invest more readily in profit-making ventures. This essay will explore some ways in which women made investments in the growing money economy of the High and late Middle Ages, concentrating on cities in northern Italy (especially the port city of Genoa) but also reviewing and comparing information available from research on cities in northern Europe.

URBAN WOMEN'S INVESTMENT CAPITAL

Before we can begin to discuss the various types and levels of female investment, we need to look at larger questions concerning urban women and the control and use of property itself. Where did urban women get the property that they would use for investments? How was this capital managed within the context of the family? What rights and restrictions shaped women's access to and control over property? Answers to these questions naturally vary depending upon time and place but, for the most part, will focus upon the two central elements of any discussion involving property and family, namely inheritance and marriage. Changes in how property passes from one generation to the next and how the social and economic connections between families in marriage influence that passage reflect larger changes in society as a whole.

We see such changes taking place in northern Italy during the twelfth century. As a reflection of the revival of a flourishing urban society in western Europe for the first time since the ancient Roman era, the Italian city-republics began reintroducing Roman customs concerning inheritance and property rights in marriage, gradually revising and replacing Germanic practices established during the early Middle Ages. The competitive and challenging nature of urban life inspired a new familial cohesiveness that emphasized group ownership of real estate, a strategy that helped prevent excessive partitioning of the family patrimony. A united clan, with consolidated wealth, could wield far more power and influence in city affairs than a single nuclear family.

Urban families in northern Italy began to emphasize patrilineal bonds at the expense of their female members. By the end of the twelfth century, we can find significant movement in the communes of northern Italy toward agnate (male-line) control over property distribution. Earlier Germanic practices allowing greater freedom for cognate (female-line) succession of wealth were outlawed or discouraged. In particular, the Germanic custom of the *quarta* or *tercia*, by which a woman received a substantial marital gift from her husband (akin to English dower), began to disappear. City councils across northern Italy (and other parts of the western Mediterranean) either restricted or banned the custom of the *quarta* or *tercia* as they developed laws and practices regulating family matters. Although a woman could claim the *quarta* or *tercia* only upon her husband's death, she may have enjoyed considerable control over it during the marriage, thus giving her substantial economic influence within the household. Without the *quarta* or *tercia*, this potential source of economic power for many urban women in northern Italy disappeared. As the leading families of cities such as Genoa and Milan maneuvered in these ways to keep urban property within the agnate line, they also discouraged the inclusion of real estate in their daughter's dowries.

Laws banning the *quarta* or *tercia* did not, however, forbid a man from leaving his wife any legacy at all, and many husbands provided for their wives in their wills, albeit to a much lesser extent than a guaranteed quarter or third of the estate. In contrast to southern Europe, wives experienced no such restrictions during the same period in Flanders, the most urbanized area of northern Europe. For example, a newly widowed woman living in fourteenth-century Ghent received roughly half the estate upon the death of her husband.

DOTAL AND NON-DOTAL ASSETS

By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the property a woman received upon marriage—the dowry provided by her natal family and, sometimes, a counter dower gift from her husband—was her main source of personal wealth. The dowry reemerged in medieval Italy in a form similar to its predecessor, the Roman *dos*, but with a new purpose. No longer simply a wedding gift, a woman's dowry was now considered her entire share of the patrimony (*exclusio propter dotem)*, ending her claims to any later division of her father's estate with her brothers. This attitude thus guaranteed every woman the right to a

dowry. Diane Owen Hughes points out two further consequences of this change in emphasis: a shift for the new bride from economic reliance on her husband to reliance upon her kin and a shift to dowries consisting of cash or other forms of movable property instead of land. She argues that cash dowries, the standard form of this gift by the thirteenth century, represented "the daughter's effective disinheritance" by her natal family. Rather than truly representing a daughter's share of the patrimony, a fixed cash dowry restricted her from claiming any part of the real property bequeathed to her brothers upon the death of their father.[1] Again, we can observe a major difference in inheritance practices between Italy and Flanders. Sisters and brothers in fourteenth-century Ghent enjoyed equal rights to inherit from their parents' estate. The drive in northern Italy to keep politically important urban property within the patrilineal family decreased the economic power of women within the family. Yet by substituting movable property (either cash or commodities) for real estate, women gained greater access to the sort of capital easiest to invest in maritime commerce.

Cash dowries prevailed in Italian cities such as Florence, Siena, Pisa, Bologna, and Genoa by the middle of the fourteenth century. Husbands preferred a cash dowry, since traditionally they had control over their wives' marital wealth throughout the marriage. Although a woman's dowry was inalienable, husbands may have favored the cash dowry because movable property (easily invested in a variety of enterprises) was easier to hide in the family accounts than real estate. A husband knew that his bride's family usually kept careful watch over her dotal fund and could demand reparations if their son-in-law mishandled the account. In fact, a woman held the legal right to reclaim either her dowry or an equivalent amount of her husband's capital if he was in danger of bankruptcy. Indeed, the dowry might be considered less a one-time gift from the family to the bride than a credit granted for the upkeep of her new family and a factor binding her offspring to her natal relatives. A woman's dowry, fully reclaimable upon the death of her husband, was a right protected by communal governments both in northern Italy and in Flanders. The importance to a woman of her dowry cannot be overemphasized. It provided her with a legacy to be passed on to her children (perhaps as a daughter's dowry) and the means to support herself in widowhood. Besides the dowry, the Germanic practice of a counter dower gift from

husband to bride did not entirely disappear, and this gift provided women in some parts of Italy with additional dotal capital.

Evidence indicates that women also possessed property apart from their marital wealth. Although the law of dowry formally cut off their access to a paternal inheritance, Italian women still received legacies from their mothers or from other members of their family. Of course, many families did not produce male heirs, thus nullifying the attempt to keep property within the male line and, by default, giving some women a patrimony. In fact, some daughters received legacies from their fathers along with their brothers. Julius Kirshner's study of late medieval Florence reveals that, although non-dotal assets did not figure as significantly as dowries in family economic strategies, they did form a substantial part of a woman's capital.[2] Besides a husband's legacy, a Florentine woman might receive non-dotal assets from members of her natal family, either as a bequest in a relative's will or as a gift. Some of her kin might provide gifts to supplement her dowry and increase her patrimony, while other funds might come from aging relatives with the understanding that she would care for them in old age. Although a woman's non-dotal assets technically belonged to her and were intended for her own use, by the fourteenth century her husband controlled all of her capital, dotal and non-dotal alike. She could retain exclusive use of non-dotal gifts and bequests, however, if the person providing these assets stipulated this in the deed. As with the dowry, the state protected a woman's non-dotal assets against loss or alienation by her husband, and his will restored them to her after his death.

WIVES, HUSBANDS, AND FAMILY BUSINESS

Discussion of female investment capital shows the close links between family and property. For a married woman, her relationship with her husband had a significant effect on her ability to participate as an active player in family business and investment strategies. One obvious link between spouses developed out of a standard requirement in medieval law: most women needed to name a male guardian to make legal contracts. This guardian, whether a male relative for an unmarried woman or a married woman's husband, assumed liability for her legal acts. Unlike inheritance regulations, we see here few differences between northern and southern Europe. The city of Ghent required all women to gain male consent in order to enter into legal contracts,

except unmarried women emancipated by their families and "free merchant women" (a status granted to certain married women which freed their husbands from liability for them). Obliged to use male guardians whether emancipated or not, Florentine women did have the right to choose their own guardian, and many married women chose their husbands for this duty. Differences between Flanders and northern Italy reemerge when considering property within marriage. Whereas Italian lawyers always considered the property of each partner to be distinct and separate, marital property was held in common in Ghent.

Recent scholarship provides us with a wide range of evidence suggesting that husbands and wives often worked together in business to increase wealth within the family. One study of fifteenth-century Bohemia shows married women in Pilzen managing the books for their family businesses. In fourteenth-century Bruges (another important Flemish business center), where "women as managers and owners of exchanges and other businesses were an almost common sight," one woman brought an exchange bank into her marriage as her dowry, formed a limited partnership with her husband, and managed the business herself. Most urban businesses operated in the family home, making wives natural potential business partners with their husbands through proximity. Business wives normally provided Ghent city officials with required probate information about marital property, assets, and liabilities upon the death of their husbands. In fourteenth-century Florence, the very legal protections put in place to guard a woman's dowry and patrimony from loss as a result of her husband's insolvency provided some enterprising married couples with a "golden opportunity" to defraud creditors by concealing a husband's assets through the transferring of capital to his wife before declaring bankruptcy.

URBAN WOMEN AND INVESTMENT

The preceding examples and many others amply show women actively participating in the economic life of a medieval city. Rather than discussing further the general topic of "women and work" in the Middle Ages (covered in detail elsewhere in this volume), we might concentrate here on the particular question of urban women and investment. Now that we know how urban women obtained investment capital, we need to discover how they used it.

William Chester Jordan gives us a useful overall summary of this topic, organizing female investment into two basic categories—productive lending and commercial investment.[3] He emphasizes the importance of women providing loans and credit to improve or expand rural real estate. Monastic institutions and municipalities also depended upon women's productive lending. By the late Middle Ages, several German nunneries had established corrodies, in which a benefactor would provide an endowment to the house in return for an annuity, a room, and the promise of burial and annual prayers for her soul after death. Municipal bonds proved to be a very popular form of investment, especially for older women and widows. In return for their capital, French and German cities and towns promised women annuities for a specific number of years or for life. Jordan comments that northern European women "do not seem to have been risk takers except under very extraordinary circumstances, preferring real estate and annuities to trade." In contrast, in northern Italy women engaged in economic behavior of a much riskier nature, namely investment in large-scale Mediterranean commerce. Jordan argues that, "a few Italian exceptions aside," women did not play a major role in urban investment, especially compared with their important involvement in rural investment. Recent scholarship allows us to take a more detailed look at an "Italian exception" that Jordan found most compelling and interesting: the substantial presence of women in Genoese commerce at the dawn of the Commercial Revolution.

URBAN WOMEN AND INVESTMENT IN MARITIME COMMERCE: EXAMPLE OF GENOA

We can measure Genoese women's participation in Mediterranean trade by reading the city's notarial records, the oldest surviving documents of this type in Europe. After a comprehensive study of all extant *commenda* (a certain kind of investment) contracts, starting with the earliest records from 1155 and covering sixty years to 1216, we find female investors in nearly one-quarter of the more than four thousand acts.[4] Nearly three-quarters of these women were investing their own property, and most of the remainder were "proctoring" investments (acting as brokers) for someone else, usually a close relative. Women's investments during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were much the same as the bulk of men's investments. The women named in these acts were from the same

spectrum of Genoese society, representing old established merchant families, newer clans, and members of various artisan groups. While no woman invested enough capital to place herself among the leading merchants of the period, few of the men involved reached that highest plateau, either. In fact, most of the Genoese using commenda contracts were not in the strictest sense "merchants" at all but moderately wealthy townspeople who saw overseas trade as an opportunity for profitable investment.

Women rarely appeared in contracts from the middle of the twelfth century, but by the end of the twelfth century changing conditions in Genoa opened maritime commerce to a wider range of the city's people, men and women alike. Two factors—the political overthrow of the city's merchant elite and the transition to a less restrictive form of the *commenda* contract—allowed women greater access to overseas markets. Study of family investment patterns reveals two especially important connections involving women. Women married to traveling merchants invested their husbands' property during their spouses' long periods of absence, and widows sought to increase both their own property and the patrimony left to their sons by putting capital from both sources into trading ventures. Women's individual investments were, on the average, less than half as large as men's, and women tended to concentrate their commercial involvement into long-distance trade rather than local or regional ventures. Not surprisingly, much of this activity took place within the context of the family.

Genoese women appeared in *commenda* contracts associated with a wide range of relatives of each gender and from both their natal and marital families, sometimes participating in acts that also included as many as three or four relatives. A woman was far more likely to join her husband in a *commenda* contract than any other relative, followed by participation with her sons. Women often proctored capital for their husbands and sons, and, conversely, men also proctored investments for their wives and mothers. After the male members of their nuclear families, women most often interacted in maritime commerce with their brothers and brothers-in-law. Connections with female relatives did not occur as frequently, but we find enough examples of associations between women and their mothers, daughters, and sisters to show that collaboration between female family members was not unusual.

When we focus upon commercial relations between wives and husbands, we discover that, although traveling merchants rarely carried

investments from their own wives, they regularly carried capital from the wives of other merchants who were investing their husband's funds in his absence. In fact, this network of women investing and reinvesting the profits from past voyages while their husbands were off on new ventures demonstrates one important way that women contributed to the commercial success of their families. Many women active in maritime commerce were married to men who were the traveling partners in *commenda* contracts. The traveling partner invested his time and labor (instead of money) and received one-quarter of the profit he earned. This contrasts with the "investing" partner, who did not travel, but whose capital investment guaranteed him three-quarters of the profits. Thus, the traveling partner, by having his wife invest the money earned from the previous trip in *commenda* contracts with other merchants while he was away from Genoa on his next venture, stood (as the investing partner) to receive three-quarters of the profit from these new contracts.

Many Genoese merchant wives regularly invested their husbands' capital as their proctors. When we review commercial records left by Aidela and Rubaldus Bosus, for example, we see an active partnership in maritime commerce. While Rubaldus made regular voyages to the eastern Mediterranean, Aidela remained in Genoa and invested her husband's capital in eleven *commenda* contracts to ports in north Africa, Corsica, Sardinia, and Tuscany. Rubaldus often carried capital provided by women proctoring investments for relatives, and Aidela was frequently associated with her husband's business partners. On May 16, 1213, Aidela invested her husband's money in three *commenda* contracts. Rubaldus was back in Genoa by September of that year, collecting investments for a voyage to Alexandria. Off to Egypt by the end of October, Aidela proctored an investment for him to Tuscany. Rubaldus did not appear in any notarial records from the next year, which might indicate that he did not return to Genoa at all in 1214. On the other hand, Aidela kept herself busy by sending her husband's capital throughout the western Mediterranean in June, September, and October.

Although we often operate under the assumption that husbands generally managed the property of their wives, we find hundreds of cases where a woman identified as someone's wife invested in a *commenda* contract with no apparent connection to her husband and no indication that the capital belonged to him. The question of whose capital a wife was using in these contracts is a difficult one. Can we

assume that the property belonged to her unless the notary explicitly stated that it did not? These civil servants seemed to take particular care to note every instance where the circumstances of a *commenda* contract varied in any detail from the standard form, and they were especially diligent about giving a clear picture of the origins of every bit of capital given over to the traveling partner. After all, when the traveling partner returned from his voyage, he faced perhaps dozens of investors from several different *commenda* contracts, all anxious to realize their fair share of the profits.

Another curious aspect of this question concerns the requirement that women name male legal counselors (discussed above). In 1147, Genoa's communal council issued a proclamation requiring women to name counselors in certain legal contracts. Notarial records regularly name women's counselors for most acts. Yet women did not name counselors in 99 percent of their *commenda* contracts: only eleven of the nearly eleven hundred *commenda* contracts involving women from this period included a clause in which a woman named counselors. For some reason, this regulation did not seem normally to apply to women participating as investors in a *commenda* contract. Perhaps the clearest indication that notaries recognized a separation of property between spouses occurred when wife and husband each put investments into the same *commenda* contract, showing clearly that Genoese men regularly acknowledged capital originating from their wives, separate from their own funds. Does this prove that a married woman was investing her own capital in every one of the nearly three-hundred cases where she put funds into a *commenda* contract not specifically labeled as her husband's property? Perhaps not. But it certainly suggests that she should get the benefit of the doubt in each case.

Although we might debate the relative amount of influence a wife may have had over her husband's administration of her marital wealth during their marriage, widowhood gave a woman her first unchallenged control over property. Upon the death of her husband, a Genoese woman gained formal access to the bulk of her estate: her dowry, counter dower, and any non-dotal assets, such as legacies from her husband or relatives. The economic plans of a widow's family often influenced and guided her activities. Many a widow carried on close business associations with her brothers and sons, much as she might have done during the life of her husband. With ready access to their own capital, many widows made regular investments in overseas trade.

If the death of her husband left a Genoese woman with sons under twenty-five years of age, chances were good that her spouse had stipulated in his will that she be named to the board of trustees *(collegio di tutela)* established to manage the boys' patrimony until they reached the legal age of majority. The high frequency of widows acting as legal guardians shows how many of Genoa's merchant traders trusted their wives' competency in business matters.This gave many widows a second avenue for participation in maritime commerce. Acting as guardian (*tutor*), many widows played a central role in managing the large estates left in trust by their late husbands. Therefore, widows interacted with their sons in *commenda* contracts far more often than with their daughters, but many women helped children of both sexes participate in maritime commerce. Of course, a widow's life changed as her children grew up and established their own families. Roles might shift so that a son now proctored his mother's investments instead of the other way around.

We can find ample illustration in the notarial records that widows utilized their power to broker the potentially huge patrimonies left to minor sons. For example, Altilia, widow of Berardus de Castello, recorded nineteen *commenda* contracts between June 1210 and March 1213. Ten of these acts involved her boys' inheritance alone. Another seven were a combination of capital where the contract named an initial investment amount and then specified how much of it (usually around one-tenth) came from Altilia's property, with the remainder coming from the estate. For the three trading seasons covered in these documents, she sent 1275 Genoese *lire* (GL) of the patrimony throughout the Mediterranean, including ports in Morocco, Corsica, Sardinia, Tuscany, Sicily, Egypt, and Syria, and at the same time also invested over 200 GL of her own property. Altilia's traveling partners included three different men identified as her sons-in-law, one of her nephews, and three other members of her late husband's family. By utilizing kinsmen and the husbands of her adult daughters, Altilia not only worked to increase the size of her minor sons' estate (along with her own) but kept the one-quarter share of the profit earned by the *tractator* within her extended family as well. But if women expanded their ability to direct capital into maritime commerce by becoming guardians over their children's estates, it came at a price. To insure the rights and property of their heirs, most of the men naming their wives as tutors stipulated that she remain unmarried and stay with the children in the family's home. Commonly, a husband would attempt to

strengthen this provision by also voiding any legacy left to his wife upon her remarriage. This was another consequence of the struggle to keep property within a particular agnate kin group. Many a man feared that his wealth might be lost to another clan or squandered unless the mother of his heirs kept her loyalties undivided, although some men did leave their spouses capital without restriction. At first glance, the loss of a woman's freedom over wedlock (at least until her youngest boy reached the age of twenty-five) seems harsh. Still, the large number of widows apparently following these provisions gives us the sense that the material benefits of the arrangement may have outweighed personal considerations. Indeed, the opportunity to act in the capacity of head of household must have attracted many women, especially those skilled in business through years of coordinating activities with their husbands. And, as Steven Epstein points out, "there may have been plenty of good reasons for a Genoese woman to reject a second marriage, but without the material incentive some women may not have been able to survive without one."[5]

Widows also frequently maintained close links with members of their natal families. Sibilia, widow of Rubaldus Artimonus, enjoyed an active commercial relationship with her brothers, Symon and Marinus de Bulgaro. Symon and Marinus each ranked among Genoa's merchant elite at the beginning of the thirteenth century, conducting numerous affairs both as investors and traveling merchants in Mediterranean commerce. Both brothers had wives who proctored their investments while they were away from Genoa. Their sister Sibilia made seven investments in maritime commerce between the years 1200 and 1206, using her own property as well as capital from her sons. She seemed to have been an especially close partner of her brother, Symon, during this period. Sibilia did all of her business at this brothers' home, and Symon participated often either as her traveling partner, as a joint investor, or simply as a witness.

What movable property did women actually invest in these commercial ventures? Unfortunately, this question is difficult to answer since most *commenda* contracts express amounts in Genoese *lire*. The Genoese *lira* was money of account; in fact, there was no such coin as a Genoese *lira* during the period of our study. Fortunately, some contracts stated specifically what sort of investment capital passed from a female investor to her traveling partner. These particular acts show women handling a variety of items, ranging from luxury goods such as saffron and silk cloth to bulk commodities such as flax

and millet. We can organize the movable property that women invested in *commenda* contracts into three general groups: products associated with the textile and clothing industries, gold, and foodstuffs. Goods associated with the textile or clothing industries were the most common and included raw materials like unspun cotton, flax, and hides, as well as finished cloth of linen, wool, and silk. Gold included Muslim and Greek coins, gold dust from Saharan Africa, and gold thread manufactured in Genoa. Some contracts show women investing *orales*, a fashionable silk headpiece for women, in maritime commerce. Few foodstuffs turned up in these records, although we do find examples of women trading saffron and wine.

Even within this limited sample of *commenda* contracts, we discover that Genoese women had access to a variety of movable property which they could readily invest in Mediterranean trade. Although women handling English woolens and packets of Saharan gold dust casts a rather exotic light on this property, we should give equal attention to their involvement with local handiwork, such as *auro filato* (gold thread) and *orales*. Some scholars argue that women not only traded these goods but had substantial interest and involvement in their production. Logically, these small but expensive items made ideal commodities for investment and trade, providing the Genoese with luxury exports for the sophisticated Sicilian and Syrian markets.

COMMERCIAL INVESTMENT IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

Unfortunately, we do not know at the present time whether or not the women of Genoa sustained their participation in commercial investment during the years following the period of this study. The late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were heady times of dramatic economic growth for the city. During such a boom, investment may well have been encouraged from as broad a pool of contributors as possible. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, commercial conditions for northern Italians were changing dramatically and opportunities for investment declined. We can find a few indications that the state of northern Italian women's involvement in commercial investment may have deteriorated as well in the later Middle Ages. One study of women's capital investment in Siena suggests that women in that city found their investment opportunities curtailed as early as the late thirteenth century because of new laws that tried to

limit a married woman's ability to use her dotal funds in the marketplace.[6] By the fifteenth century, even a woman from one of Florence's most powerful families could not make significant investments in maritime commerce. Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, although head of her household and one of the richest widows in the city, invested capital only as a passive partner along with her relatives since she could not join a merchant guild or be an active partner in a merchant company.

Comparing the roles of women in the economies of Italy and northern Europe during the late Middle Ages, David Herlihy comments on the low visibility of women in Italian economic life and argues that "[W]omen appear as entrepreneurs in northern Europe to an extent that they rarely do in the south—at least not in Italy."[7] We see some indication of this in Martha C. Howell's investigation of women's work in fifteenth-century Cologne. Her examination brings out some interesting similarities to the situation in Genoa three hundred years earlier. Cologne found itself with an expanding economy (especially in long-distance trade), a new set of merchant families largely displacing the old elite, and easy access for women to participation in maritime commerce. Most female merchants were married. Some worked as agents for their husbands, and some carried on their husband's business after his death. Howell gives us the example of Grietgen van der Burg, married to one of Cologne's most important merchants, a trader in her own right who carried on much of her husband's business after his death.[8]

CONCLUSIONS

As the effects of the Commercial Revolution and the expansion of urban society opened greater parts of western and central Europe to the new money-based economy, we should not be surprised to see urban women interested in participating in commercial investment and other forms of revenue production. Medieval women and men saw investment in commercial enterprises as attractive means of providing income in order to face the same economic concerns that people confront today. The opportunity to improve your family's economic standing, provide for your children, and gain security in old age furnishes a powerful incentive to seek out lucrative investments.

The patterns of female economic activity we have identified in our discussion of Genoa occurred regularly in the commercial life of the

Genoese merchant family. Although women's long-term economic power within the family may have diminished compared with earlier centuries, the substitution of cash dowries for real estate occurred at the very time when the importance of movable property was increasing dramatically. The potential profits available from investment in Mediterranean commerce encouraged merchant families to keep as much of the family's liquid wealth in this market as possible. Since women tended to hold investment capital we find broad participation by female family members in maritime trade. We can even note a few *commenda* contracts where a female servant or a wet-nurse added their savings to a family enterprise. Genoese women played a crucial role as home partners in their families' commercial operations, acting as trusted agents for their husbands, sons, and brothers as well as serving as guardians and managers of their children's estates. William Chester Jordan, surprised that women would put capital into enterprises as hazardous as Mediterranean commerce, remarked that "[T]he risk-taking that Genoese women were drawn into benefited Genoa as a whole by diversifying its economic interests."[9] During this period of intense expansion of their city's economy, the participation of Genoese women in maritime commerce appears as a regular, commonplace, and vital part of that expansion.

Finally, we might note that discussing and comparing changes in gender and family relationships between divergent cultures and bridging large spans of time invites difficulties. Sometimes, we might see long-term trends and important changes based on available evidence only to discover new evidence that forces us to modify or even abandon earlier ideas. This is a necessary and often exciting part of the process of studying history. Much of our investigation of how urban women participated in the medieval economy remains to be done, and plenty of useful and important information concerning urban women and investment waits to be uncovered. Yet in our quest to understand the development of gender relations during the Middle Ages, we should be careful not to grant the idea of an omnipotent patriarchy too much credit. For example, we must treat legal evidence quite carefully. While laws in some places restricted urban women's control over property and their ability to participate in the economy, others may have served to mitigate these effects, and some may have appeared on the books but were ignored in practice. Thus, although the legal position of women subordinated them to men, they could,

nevertheless, exercise considerable economic power, either behind the scenes, as partners of husbands or sons, or as independent actors.

NOTES

1. Diane Owen Hughes, "From Brideprice to Dowry in Mediterranean Europe," in *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History*, ed. Marion A. Kaplan (New York: Haworth Press, 1985), 45.

2. Julius Kirshner, "Materials for a Gilded Cage: Non-Dotal Assets in Florence, 1300-1500," in *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present*, eds. David I. Kertzer and Richard P. Saller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

3. William Chester Jordan, *Women and Credit in Pre-Industrial and Developing Societies*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993). See especially "Part Two: Investment and Capital Formation in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe," pp. 51-81.

4. The *commenda* contract had two basic forms. In the *accomendatio*, the *commendator* (or *socius stans*-"sitting partner") gave capital to the *tractator* ("traveling partner") for his use in a commercial venture. The *tractator* kept one quarter of any profit. The *societas* was an earlier form of the *commenda* where the *tractator* usually invested one third of the venture's capital and collected one half of any profit. Often, a *commenda* contract had multiple *commendatores*, and some also named more than one *tractator*. For more information, see John H. Pryor, "Mediterranean Commerce in the Middle Ages. A Voyage under the Contract of Commenda," *Viator* 14 (1983):132-94.

5. Steven Epstein, *Wills and Wealth in Medieval Genoa, 1150-1250* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 109.

6. Eleanor S. Riemer, "Women, Dowries, and Capital Investment in Thirteenth-Century Siena," in *The Marriage Bargain: Women and Dowries in European History*, 59-80.

7. David Herlihy, *Opera muliebria: Women and Work in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press), 167, 171.

8. Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 145-146, 154-157.

9. Jordan, 70.

PART V

Women and Medieval Christianity

INTRODUCTION

The medieval world was a Christian world. Although Jews and Muslims lived side by side with Christians, traded with them, even befriended them (but more typically were persecuted by them), Europe nonetheless remained foundationally and fundamentally defined and bounded by Christian religious experience.

Christianity originated in the first century of the Roman Empire but developed substantially during the empire's waning years. For the first three centuries, Christianity was an outlawed, periodically persecuted, religion. Its liturgy developed in a climate of secrecy; converts and parishioners literally worshipped underground: in the catacombs of Late Antique cities, surrounded by the moldering remains of their ancestors. Christians were brought up into the "light" in the year 313, when the emperor Constantine published the Edict of Milan, which granted full toleration to Christianity throughout the western Roman Empire and, by about 320, to the entire Roman Empire. Although Constantine was not baptized until he was on his deathbed, he was an enormously influential figure in the development and triumph of Christianity, even presiding over the famous ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 which established the Nicene "Creed": the definition of the Trinity which is the staple of all Christian sects to this day.

Missionary activity was an important component to early Christianity, first among the Jewish communities of the Near East and later among the gentile communities in the rest of the Roman Empire. When Germanic groups—the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Burgundians, Franks, Lombards, etc.—began to migrate into and

around the empire's borders, they became targets for missionary activity. Although intially somewhat hostile to the introduction of the new religion, a strategy devised by bishops and monk-missionaries "doomed" Germanic pagans and virtually guaranteed the adoption of Christianity: the missionaries worked hard to convert the *women* first—the wives of tribal chieftains and kings—assuming (quite rightly) that they would demand that, at the very least, their children be sympathetic to Christianity and would quite likely nag and badger their husbands into converting as well. Although the standard sources for this historical period, such as Bede and Gregory of Tours, do not exactly describe the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks (respectively) in these exact terms (in fact, they ascribe these conversions to miraculous and divine intervention), they admit that Clovis, king of the Franks, and Æthelbert, king of the Kent, both had Christian wives who not only corresponded with the pope but also made it a requirement of their marriages that their own religious practices should not be circumscribed. The history of Christian conversion could, in fact, be described as a history of "the thin edge of the wedge."

Once the Germanic kingdoms had converted to Christianity—of some form (in the early medieval period some groups converted to a form known as Arianism which was declared heretical)—the standardization of western Christendom was begun. The authority of the papacy in western Europe waxed and waned throughout the medieval centuries, but the unity of the Christian message came in large part from the Roman cultural traditions housed in the papal Curia. In contrast, the Byzantine Empire, which had "always" been Christian (since it developed after the reign of emperor Constantine), did not have a religious figure who could be seen as comparable to the pope. Although the patriarch of Constantinople was the most important religious personage in the Byzantine Empire, the actual head of the church was the emperor himself, who ruled church and state under a system commonly referred to as "caesaropapism."

From the very beginning of Christianity's history, women have been an essential and significant component in the development and transmission of the message. Female imagery abounds: the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, the church as Bride of Christ, and so on. Women held important positions in the early church, especially in the years before its legalization. Once the emperor had adopted the religion as his own, however, women's public roles in the church hierarchy

diminished substantially, especially after the diocesan model, which was based on the secular Roman imperial bureaucracy, became dominant. Indeed, positive images of women which are so much of the literature of the early church recede rapidly or are transformed into virulently anti-female polemic by the fourth century. As discussed in the essays which follow, the unattainable perfection of the virgin mother of Christ was the only positive female image in much of Christian literature, which abounded in images of female impurity, perversity, and temptation. How extraordinary that the same churchmen who inveigled against women in their writing targeted women as objects of conversion in early medieval Germanic Europe! Indeed, the tension between Christian male antipathy toward the female and their need of women as patrons and purveyors of the Christian message marks every interaction between the church and the women of medieval Europe.

The two essays following focus on specific ways in which women experienced Christianity and its conflicting messages. First, Janice Norris discusses the varieties of women's religious experience as "professionals": nuns, anchoresses, and beguines. Second, Elspeth Whitney explores the darker side of the Christian message: the influence of misogyny on the developing definitions of witches, heretics, and other outsiders.

CHAPTER 16

Nuns and Other Religious

Women and Christianity in the Middle Ages

Janice Racine Norris

CHRISTIANITY IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

Women have always been important to the development and expansion of Christianity. The New Testament gospels clearly show women active in the Jesus movement; Paul wrote about women who acted as deaconesses and companions to the apostles, and some extracanonical works, such as "The Acts of Paul and Thecla" or "The Gospel of Mary," describe dynamic women during the time when Christianity was extending around the Mediterranean. When separation emerged between the mass of believers and the developing professional clergy who were occupied full-time with service to the church, women were relegated to a subordinate role and an attempt was made to restrict them to only one vocation within the established church: asceticism.

For second-century Christians, asceticism often meant moving into the desert, living in caves or in isolated, makeshift shelters. Over time, this disorganized impulse grew into a formal and highly-organized Christian monastic life. Women, denied a place within the hierarchical church, made a place for themselves outside of it, first as Christian ascetics, then as monastics, and later, within new forms of Christian life created to meet their special needs.

When Antony (d. 356), "Father of Christian Monasticism," planned his retreat to the deserts of Egypt, he was left with a fair amount of property and a young sister for whom he was responsible. His decision to give away all his inheritance and to place his (unnamed) sister into the care of respected and trusted virgins was to prove a model for other male-headed Christian families. In her old age,

Antony's sister became abbess (mother) of a female religious house established near the groups of monks who recognized Antony as their spiritual leader. Antony had deposited his young sister in a convent, probably merely a Christian home run by women who had taken vows of chastity and poverty, before he left for the desert, indicating that, as early as the late third century, there were such places for women who wanted to live a religious, rather than a secular, life. The notion of male responsibility for females, both young and old, is an ancient one. Long before Christianity, a male head of household was accountable for everyone under his roof: family, servants, and slaves.

Both the life of Antony and those of other desert fathers show that females entered their spheres: wandering solitaries encountered other wanderers, some of whom happened to be female. There are stories of these desert fathers being tempted by the presence of women, but it is now impossible to determine whether these seductive females were in the desert or in the minds of male ascetics. Some women retreated to the desert for the same reasons men did. The thought of females tempting men vowed to celibacy, however, so frightened both ascetics and the men who recorded their lives that women and their experiences were systematically excluded from the lives of the desert fathers.

Pachomius (d. 346), "Father of Cenobitic Monasticism," also had a sister, known in some sources as Mary, whom he placed in a convent associated with his own houses at Tabennesi in Egypt. She later became the head of that house, which eventually housed the mothers and sisters of many of her brother's monks. When the mother of Pachomius's disciple, Theodore, came to visit her son at his desert home, she was lodged at the convent and perhaps remained there, in close proximity to her son. Pachomius provided this female religious house with a copy of the rules he had devised for monks in the many houses under his leadership, and he appointed a monk of his house as spiritual leader for the women.

From its inception, monasticism was a family movement, with women joining their brothers, fathers, and even husbands, in withdrawal from the world for religious reasons. Sometimes, it was a woman who desired to enter monastic life and encouraged her family to join her. Macrina the Younger (d. 380), desiring a life of virginity and contemplation, turned her home into a religious retreat and was joined by her mother Emmelia, and brothers Basil and Peter.

Often, women such as the Roman matron Paula (d. 404) who were thwarted in their own desires for a life of celibacy, seclusion, and

religious devotion by an early marriage, encouraged their daughters to vow themselves to religion very early in their womanhood, thus preserving their virginity and, perhaps more importantly, their independence. Virgin daughters entered houses of vowed women, and, in time, their widowed mothers often joined them. When widowed, Paula used her enormous wealth to found a convent for nuns, a house for monks, and a guest house in Bethlehem. When she died, her daughter, Eustochium (d. 418/19) succeeded her as leader of these houses and as confidant of Paula's mentor, the biblical scholar, Jerome (d. ca. 420).

Other Roman noblewomen learned ascetic life from the women of their own family. Melania the Elder (d. ca. 409), widowed at twenty-two, traveled the Mediterranean, founded a double monastery at Jerusalem, participated in public religious disputes, supervised the education of her granddaughter Melania the Younger (d. 439), and visited or corresponded with important Christian religious figures of her time, such as Augustine of Hippo (d. 430), Paulinus of Nola (d. 431), and the historian and translator Rufinius (d. 410).

In time, Melania the Younger and her husband, the wealthy patrician Valerius Pinian, followed in the elder Melania's footsteps. They vowed a celibate marriage, sold their vast properties and possessions and gave the proceeds to the church, founded convents for both women and men at Jerusalem. Melania's stature grew after she befriended the Empress Eudoxia Athenais during her tour of the Holy Land in 438.

The Spanish nun Egeria, traveling in Sinai and Palestine in the early fifth century, described monastic cells gathered around a shrine of St. Thecla in Isauria. These little dwellings housed either men or women within the vicinity of the church, and there were no boundaries separating the sexes. The women were governed by a senior woman, but Egeria did not mention whether any monk or priest had authority over them.

Women such as Melania the Elder, Paula, and Macrina placed themselves in women's religious houses. These were wealthy women and they lived in convents they themselves had founded, organized, and headed, although they were counselled by some paternal male cleric, like Jerome or Rufinius. As aristocrats, they moved within the Roman public world and did not resign that position once they had dedicated themselves and their property to a religious life.

Surely, life was different for women of the lower classes in the late Roman Empire, but we know nothing about these women. There were no ecclesiastical males to write their *vitae* or to collect their letters. Unfortunately, for the late Roman and early medieval periods, aristocratic males and their writings are the source for most of what is known about religious women, and so, these women can be seen only through male eyes. Even Egeria wrote little about herself; she recorded only what she saw on her pilgrimage.

EARLY MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

In Europe, as in the east, some Christian men and women chose an ascetic life for themselves. Sometimes they joined in groups, either in a single house or in a small community. However, like Christianity itself, Christian monasticism came into the West from the eastern Mediterranean. It was brought by men, often born in the east and schooled in eastern practices, who came to Europe and established monastic communities for themselves and their families.

John Cassian (d. ca. 435) travelled to monasteries in Palestine, Egypt, and Constantinople and finally settled in Marseilles, where in 415 he founded the monastery of St. Victor; he later founded the convent of St. Savior for women. Cassian can be credited with introducing the spirit of Egyptian asceticism into Europe and his *Institutes*, a work of instruction for monastic life, impressed Benedict of Nursia, whose own vision of monasticism later became the dominant model in Europe.

Earliest detailed knowledge of female monasticism in Europe comes from Arles in southern France. A noblewoman, Caesaria (d. after 524), became the first abbess of the convent of St. Jean, founded in 512 by her brother, Caesarius, Bishop of Arles (d. 542). Before taking her position as abbess, Caesaria had spent some time training for the religious life at Cassian's foundation of St. Savior. Caesarius, as founder and supervising bishop, wrote a Rule for the nuns under his sister's care which included strict enclosure, communal ownership of property, a life of prayer, the education of young girls, and the care of aged and poor women.

The second abbess at St. Jean, Caesaria the Younger (d. ca. 559), was a relative of the first abbess and her brother. Vigorous family involvement in most religious houses continued well into the Middle Ages. Often a fair amount of family wealth went into the foundation

and maintenance of a convent and families were loath to allow that property to move completely out of their hands. Assuring that female family members continued in leadership roles within a convent helped them maintain control over the property which was still viewed as a family resource. Caesarius even transferred some episcopal property to the convent before his death; he also obtained a guarantee of independence for the convent of St. Jean so that they were no longer under the control of the bishops of Arles. Later in the Middle Ages, the papacy and ecclesiastical hierarchy tried, not entirely successfully, to dissolve or interrupt family aspects of monasticism. Monasticism continued to be a family affair however, and ties between the nun and her family were not severed by her entrance into the religious life.

Caesarius's Rule for the convent of St. Jean was the first Rule for monastics written in the west, and it is symbolic that it was written for women. This Rule was adopted, perhaps with adaptations, by many of the new female religious houses rapidly rising in Christian Europe. As Jo Ann McNamara has pointed out, "women who might have been successful in organizing a consensual way of life without formal regulation were not left free to continue the experiment."[1] Male family members, bishops and priests, and secular leaders all demanded formal controls on the behavior of women. The ascetic life for both men and women was in the process of being institutionalized in the early Middle Ages and female religious houses came under particular scrutiny.

If female virginity was a powerful image in the medieval church, so was consecrated widowhood. Convents were places of refuge, not only for women wishing never to marry but for widows either needing physical protection from the world or hoping to prepare their own souls for eternity. When widowed in 511, the Frankish queen Clotild (d. 545) retreated to the Church of St. Martin at Tours where she lived as a religious. This did not keep her, however, from being intimately involved in the affairs of her family, travelling to Paris when necessary, and founding several convents at which she sometimes also resided.

In the early Middle Ages women were married when quite young, and many women were also widowed at a very young age, sometimes spending most of their adult lives in a religious house after a short married life. Clotild was thirty-six when she was widowed. Ethelburg (d. 647), wife of Edwin, king of Northumbria, may have been no more than twenty-three when Edwin died, and she returned to her native Kent to found the convent of Lyminge. The former slave Balthild (d. 680), wife of Clovis II (d. 657), had twenty-three years of widowhood,

most of which were in forced retirement at Clotild's convent of Chelles, a house Balthild had re-founded, perhaps hoping to accrue to herself some of the charisma of that matriarch.

Very quickly convents—like monasteries for men—became convenient prisons for noble or royal women who were either too important or too protected to be disposed of outright. Balthild was not the only woman sent to a convent to remove her from political life.

Theutberga, wife of Lothar II of Lotharingia (d. 869), was unable to produce a male child, so her husband attempted to divorce her. She was imprisoned in a convent so that he could marry his mistress, Waldrada, by whom he already had children. Lothar—and probably most of the bishops and secular lords involved in the dispute—wanted Theutberga to disappear quietly into religious life. She refused and withstood trial by ordeal to proclaim herself innocent of the adultery and incest charges by which her husband and his court hoped to remove her from her position of authority. The enclosed convent, a precinct supposedly sacred to women, could thus be used not only by the women themselves but also by both ecclesiastical and secular lords against women by forcing them against their wills into a religious life. Similarly, males could be forcibly tonsured and cloistered to remove them from public life.

Women forced into religion could prove disruptive to convent life. They often tried to escape; occasionally there was the scandal of pregnancy within convent walls. The revolt in 588 of the nuns against the abbess at the convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers was led by two Merovingian princesses, Basina and Clotild, who had not joined that convent voluntarily. The convent was invaded by armed thugs; the disruption caused many nuns to leave the house, and it required a council of bishops to settle the dispute between the princesses and their abbess.

Kings of Europe, only two or three generations from paganism, quickly adapted to the requirements of their Christian bishops. As at least one historian has observed, they treated the church as another kingdom with whom they had to negotiate. Powerful kings "married" their daughters into this kingdom by giving them to the church as "brides." As Christian bishops pressed monogamy upon medieval kings, these same kings used the church and its rapidly developing rules to help them control not only women but unwanted children, siblings, widowed mothers, and unruly vassals. Needing secular support in these early years, the church mostly allowed lords a

significant level of involvement in monastic life, however, a struggle was underway as to who would control the church and its property.

Queen Clotild, credited with aiding in the conversion of her husband Clovis, became a paradigm for Christian wives. Throughout the early Middle Ages, as pagan Europe was being converted to Roman Christianity, Clotild was held up as an example. Christian women were often deliberately married into pagan families with the explicit task of converting their husbands and subsequent sons. Popes and bishops wrote to queens and urged them to do their duty as married women by insuring the Christianity of their new husbands and their people.

Although the church supported Christian marriage and sometimes even secular customs, at times the convent became a refuge for runaway wives. Radegunda (d. 587), a Thuringian princess captured after the defeat of her father's kingdom by the Frankish king Chlothar I, was raised to become one of his wives. However after her husband ordered the murder of her brother, she sought to live a religious life and left Chlothar to found the convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers. She finally received Chlothar's agreement to her withdrawal from the marriage and his support of her convent. Caesarius's Rule for nuns was adopted as the Rule for the convent, and Radegunda corresponded with the abbess Caesaria the Younger about convent life. Like Clotild, she remained active in family enterprises, accepting daughters of the Frankish kings into her convent and using her royal position to obtain a piece of the true cross as a relic for her church.

Women's religious houses held noble and royal women only, along with their servants. This remained the case throughout most of the Middle Ages, for the social world was a very stratified one and the church did little to change this. Although there is mention of the occasional woman of less than noble status who was raised in a convent and later accepted into that house as a nun, most nuns were sisters and daughters of kings or local nobles, and their brothers were often local bishops. Christianity thus made formal places for elite women in all stages of life (as defined by the ritually acknowledged roles of a female): as virgin, married woman, or widow.

Until the late eleventh century, donating a young girl or boy to the Church was common practice. The oblate, or offering, was committed to the cloister for the remainder of her life. The Rule of St. Benedict was the basis for this practice in Europe, but it is clear that there were children in the early monastic centers of Egypt and Palestine. Caesarius of Arles, in his Rule for the nuns of St. Jean, set the age for accepting a

child at six or seven, but some children were donated at a much younger age.

Child oblation was practiced in the early Anglo-Saxon church. Oswy, king of Northumbria (d. 670), dedicated his daughter Aelffled to the church when she was less than two years old as a thank-offering for a Northumbrian victory in battle. Aelffled was placed in the care of the Abbess Hild (d. 680), a member of the Northumbrian royal family, and she eventually became abbess of Hild's foundation at Whitby. Many outstanding Anglo-Saxon churchmen and women were oblates. The missionary nun Leoba was donated by her parents; Boniface, Alcuin, Bede, and, perhaps, Ethelgifu (daughter of King Alfred of Wessex) were also oblates. Child oblation seems to have been particularly prevalent in areas on the continent christianized by Anglo-Saxons. In a recent study of child oblation in the early Middle Ages, Mayke De Jong noted, "Oblation was the mainstay of Carolingian monastic life along with other forms of child recruitment. This impression, gained from the few extant sources yielding numerical data, is confirmed by contemporary narratives."[2]

In the mid-eighth century, a small group of nuns left their native England for religious reasons. This band of about thirty women, possibly all from the convent of Wimbourne in Wessex, went to Germany to aid in the missionary efforts of Boniface and his fellow monks. Apparently, it was not altogether unusual for nuns to support some forms of missionary work. Bertila (d. c. 700), Abbess of Chelles, had dispatched both men and women to teach and establish monasteries in England.

We have the names of at least twelve of the women who worked in the missionary endeavor of Boniface, and all but one was related to Boniface or to monks already serving with him. Perhaps all thirty of these women were in some way related to the monks and were recruited for that reason; possibly those with a close relationship to the men were more easily remembered by the monks of Fulda who recorded their names. Several of the nuns—Leoba (d. 779), Walburga, and Thecla—were made abbesses of convents founded or re-founded for them by Boniface. They brought local girls into their convents and trained them to be nuns. They also cared for villagers, preaching Christianity by example. Leoba was a friend of Queen Hildegard (d. 783), Charlemagne's third wife, and seems to have been called to court frequently to be her spiritual companion. The nun also often travelled

to Boniface's monastery of Fulda and maintained a close relationship with the monks there after Boniface's death.

There was an element of danger to the vocation of these Anglo-Saxon missionary nuns. In 752 Saxons burned more than thirty churches in Thuringia. Wigbert, a priest who had gone to Germany to work with Boniface, wrote home, "the life here is in every respect, dangerous and hard, from hunger and thirst and cold, and the attacks of the heathen."[3] Boniface and some of his companions were killed by pagans in 754.

Nuns had to work hard to gain the confidence of villagers. When a dead infant was found in a pool close to Leoba's convent of Tauberbischofsheim, village women immediately charged the nuns with the double crime of lack of chastity and murder.

Double or mixed religious houses, such as Wimbourne, flourished in early medieval England and France, while isolated examples are found in other kingdoms. In almost all cases the monastery was headed by an abbess who supervised both monks and nuns. The Anglo-Saxon abbess, Hild (d. 680), ruled over the important double monastery of Whitby: it produced many bishops for the English church. Of the Frankish monasteries most closely associated with Anglo-Saxon women, those of Jouarre, Andelys, and Faremoutiers were double houses. Chelles may have been a double monastery at its inception or it may have become one at a later date. Conciliar decrees from Merovingian France generally present a negative picture of double communities and usually stress prohibition of, or further controls on, relations between the sexes within the monastery. The English historian Bede, on the other hand, related only one scandal regarding a double house. The double monastery of Coldingham burned down as divine punishment for the behavior of monks and nuns who were guilty of feasting, drinking and gossiping together; the nuns were also guilty of making friends with strange men.

One of the projects that occupied the work-time of nuns in the great convents was the copying of books. The *scriptorium* at Chelles was active as was that of its mother house, Jouarre. In 735, Boniface wrote from Germany to the English abbess, Eadburga, requesting that she make him a copy in her own hand of the letters of St. Peter. The early Middle Ages was a time when nuns were learned and their learning was valued as service to the Church.

Although the convent was a focus of religious life for women, not all female religious were enclosed in convents. Some lived in private

homes, sometimes alone, often with other women or even men. They were always vowed to a celibate life, but other ideals were decided individually. There were no universal rules other than that the occupants had to be celibate and had to avoid any implication of sexual offence.

HIGH AND LATE MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

By the year 1000, Europe, even at its farthest reaches, might be said to have been Christianized. Roman Christianity was the acknowledged religion of both the political leaders and the people, a Christian ecclesiastical structure had been established, and secular rulers had effected a series of accommodations with the church.

In France, from the early ninth century, there was a concerted effort on the part of church and secular leaders to reform or standardize monasticism. Louis the Pious (d. 840) and the abbot Benedict of Aniane (d. 821) worked together to regularize monastic life within the Carolingian Empire. One aim of this regularization was to bring all monastics, both nuns and monks, under the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia (d. after 546), whose Rule of moderation in asceticism, prayer, and work had come with many others into the Carolingian world. A round of liturgy with eight services in each twenty-four hours, known as the *Opus Dei*, characterized the center of the Benedictine life. It was the only liturgy open to women as celebrants.

The historian Penny Schine Gold has observed that, while women were active on both territorial and spiritual frontiers of monasticism, as monastic movements became more organized, women were quickly excluded from active, innovative participation.[4] Adoption of the Benedictine Rule meant that female founders and abbesses might no longer determine the character of a convent, while canon law placed an abbess more firmly under the control of her local bishop. The Benedictine Rule provided for the election of abbesses rather than their appointment and served to weaken ties between founding women and successive generations of their families, both within and outside monastic life. Family ties, an important source of influence for medieval women, were thus apparently mistrusted by the church hierarchy. Meanwhile, the development of a more unified canon law stressed the hierarchical nature of the institutional church and reinforced the male ecclesiastical structure.

A constant cycle in medieval monasticism was that of reform and renewal followed by periods of decay and weakening of the religious spirit of the early founders. Beginning in the tenth century, a reform movement spread from the Abbey of Cluny in the Rhone Valley of France. This Benedictine recovery strengthened the Rule and spread it throughout Europe via the Cluniac houses. In 1098, Robert of Molesme (d. 1111) founded the monastery of Cîteaux in the wilderness of Burgundy. Also under the guidance of the Benedictine Rule but with a stricter interpretation of the vows of poverty and solitude, this new order attracted many monks. As it grew, it began to attract female converts and the first Cistercian convent for nuns was founded in 1120 at Tart, near Cîteaux. Many Benedictine convents joined the Cistercian movement, among them that of Helfta in Saxony which housed the mystics Gertrude the Great (d. ca. 1302) and Mechtild of Magdeburg (d.1280). Cistercian monks, however, were always reluctant to supervise women's houses, and eventually the order refused to found new female houses. Because of these cycles of renewal in Benedictine monasticism, the ninth through the twelfth centuries in Europe can be called the Benedictine Age.

A second recurring theme of monastic history is that of exploration of varieties of religious life, for both women and men. For women, however, this exploration was more necessary to meet individual religious needs. Christianity offered women fewer options for formal religious participation than it did men, who had opportunities as deacons, priests, canons, or monks. After the ninth century, a female religious was restricted to her convent, cloistered, and enjoined to live according to the communal Benedictine Rule.

One of the most famous women of these Benedictine centuries was Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179). The youngest of ten children, in 1106 when she was eight years old, Hildegard was given to the church as a tithe and placed with the recluse Jutta of Sponheim. This oblation came near the very end of the long tradition of giving children to monastic foundations. Although we know little of Hildegard's family, we can assume that they were noble and had previous ties with Jutta. When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard took charge of the group of women that had gathered around Jutta's hermitage and, about fourteen years later, she moved this community to her own new foundation near Bingen on the Rhine. A great mystic, Hildegard had her visions recorded, and they were approved by local bishops as authentic, derived from God. She developed a large following, engaged in preaching tours, met

privately with the emperor, and wrote books on medicine and natural science as well as works of liturgical poetry and music for her convent. Although she had gained the support of emperors and popes, she spent the last year of her life with her community under interdict, caught in a conflict among competing ecclesiastical powers in her diocese of Mainz. The interdict, which prohibited performance of the divine liturgy in the convent, was lifted only six months before her death.

The High Middle Ages saw not only standardization and expansion of monastic orders but also a growth of differing opportunities for religious expression. The papacy's attempts to unify the church limited organizational opportunities, while a tremendous population explosion in Europe led more people to seek greater expression of personal religious convictions. The church was seriously concerned by these searchings for fear that they would lead into heretical or unorthodox religious beliefs and practices.

The growth of urban life accentuated and made more visible the vast wealth of some individuals and the abject poverty of others. People began to look to the cible, especially the New Testament and Jesus's life, for keys to living a more perfect Christianity. Following the guidance of the Apostles seemed to be the way. They had given away all that they had to follow Jesus, left their families and travelled through the land, preaching. In the twelfth century, the cities of Europe were filled with wandering preachers, and the countryside held many hermits, living lives of reclusive poverty. The vast majority of both wandering preachers and hermits were men, but other avenues were open to women, some of which they created for themselves.

The population explosion had, for a number of reasons, created a surplus of young unmarried—and unmarriageable—women. In the past, the church had been the only real alternative to marriage for women, but traditional religious orders of nuns could not absorb all the women who desired entrance, and not all of the women had the dowry which they were expected to offer upon admission.

Although some orders, such as the Cistercians, stopped founding female houses, several new orders were established with the needs of women in mind. In about the year 1100, Robert of Arbrissel (d. 1117), a wandering preacher with a huge following, convinced a council of bishops to allow him to found a convent at Fontevrault in France. In design it resembled the double monasteries of the early Middle Ages, with communities of both men and women living under the Benedictine Rule of an abbess. Robert's choice for first abbess was not a virgin

brought up in a convent but Petronilla of Chemillé, a widow who had experience of the world. During the following centuries, the Order of Fontevrault spread across France and into Spain and England.

Another experiment with double houses was made by Norbert of Xanten (d. 1132), who founded the Premonstratensians at Prémontré, France in 1120. He envisioned an active religious life for his followers, and the order can be seen as a link between the strictly contemplative orders and the mendicant (i.e., wandering) orders of the later Middle Ages. Premonstratensian nuns assisted the canons with work in the hospices attached to the abbeys, where they cared for the poor and sick who came to them. Eight years after Norbert's death, however, a general council forbade these double houses.

A third order was established that welcomed the female element when, in 1131, Gilbert of Sempringham founded the Gilbertine Order in England. Houses consisted of nuns, living under the Benedictine Rule, lay sisters and brothers to serve the nuns and do the work of the convent, and canons regular, living under the Rule of St. Augustine, to meet the sacramental needs of the community. The leader of the order, the Master General, was always a male, but each house was led by a prioress. This purely English order survived until the Protestant Reformation.

Inspired by the same apostolic spirit sweeping Europe, in 1207 Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) renounced his worldly possessions and began the movement known as the Order of Friars Minor. One of Francis's closest companions in those early years was the young noblewoman, Clare of Assisi (d. 1253). When she was around eighteen years old, moved by Francis' preaching, she literally escaped from her parents' home to join him. The movement Francis founded attempted to live in perfect apostolic spirituality: the friars begged for food and shelter and wandered from city to city, preaching. There is some indication that Clare expected to join him in this life. Nevertheless, it was apparently impossible for women to live the same life of wandering, begging, and preaching as did the Friars, and, when Francis tonsured Clare, thereby admitting her into the Second Order of Franciscans, she was sent directly to a Benedictine convent. There she remained until Francis had established a convent for her: San Damiano, near Assisi. Clare spent the rest of her life as abbess of that convent in a life of severe asceticism. She was soon joined by her mother, sisters, nieces, and other women seeking the contemplative life. Clare continued to pursue the goal of securing a Rule for her followers that

would incorporate the absolute poverty preached by Francis and dependence upon the Franciscan order with a life of strict claustration. Not being allowed to serve outside the convent walls, poverty and contemplation were Clare's final interpretation of apostolic life. Three days before her death, her request for a new Rule was granted by the Pope. The Poor Clares, as they were called, lived lives that combined the dependence of anchoresses, the severe asceticism of the early desert fathers, and the life of prayer. Because they lived in convents, governed by a Rule and under the direction of Franciscans, Clare's followers did not open themselves to condemnation as did the beguines, who lived and worked in informal communities and who refused to be cloistered. Convents of Poor Clares housed many mystics whose visions were recorded and transmitted throughout Europe.

At the same time Francis was creating a new form of Christian life, other groups of Friars were forming. The most important of these was the Order of Preachers, founded by Dominic de Guzman (d. 1221). In 1206, Dominic also founded a contemplative order for women and wrote their first constitution. There was no great female co-founder of the Dominican sisters, but the order grew rapidly and attracted a number of female mystics such as Margaret Ebner (d. 1351), who meditated and wrote on the sacred name of Jesus. Dominican nuns of the period, although a contemplative order, continued the Benedictine tradition of learning and scholarship. The first woman to be granted the title Doctor of the Church, Catherine of Siena (d. 1380), was greatly influenced by Dominican spirituality and joined the secular Third Order of Dominicans in the last years of her life.

Third orders allowed both women and men to participate in the apostolic spirituality of the Friars without giving up their responsibilities in the world. They formed communities, like that surrounding Catherine and were guided by Friars under a Rule. For women, who made up a large number of the "tertiaries," this third order provided a middle way between the convent and the world, a way sanctioned by the church.

There were however, those women who sought a life more severe than that offered by any cloistered, communal life. Memories of the harsh desert of the early ascetics survived in the saints' lives read daily as part of the liturgy. Some women chose lives of severe deprivation in order to pursue a greater spirituality.

Anchorites, like hermits, separated themselves from others, but hermits generally retired to the wilderness, whereas anchorites lived

enclosed in a cell adjacent to a church or convent, or built into a city wall. Most of these enclosed were women, known as anchoresses, and many were laywomen rather than nuns. Often, too, they were women of the middle class rather than the royal or noble women who tended to inhabit convents. Ritually cut off from community, these women were totally dependent on others for subsistence. They required someone to provide food and to help in removing waste from the cell and needed a priest to offer the sacraments of the church. This life of total dependence, without the guidance of a Rule, earned anchoresses the respect and awe of those who knew them. Some anchoresses wrote of their mystical experiences, and there was a fair amount of literature written for the guidance of the anchoress herself. Most of this literature was in the vernacular, not in Latin, the language of the church. One of the most famous anchoresses was the Englishwoman, Julian of Norwich (d. ca. 1423), whose name as we have it derives from her cell attached to the Church of St. Julian at Norwich. She wrote several accounts of her mystical experiences or "showings" in English, and apparently many sought her out for spiritual guidance.

Some women, especially in the towns of northern Europe, created spiritual communities for themselves. These women, later called beguines, were at times very numerous, overshadowing their male counterpart, the beghard. Beguines attempted to live the apostolic life of poverty, charity, and prayer. They even attempted to preach or teach in public, and several of these women wrote guidelines for living an apostolic life. They came from all social classes, lived in small groups, and supported themselves by working in the community at such tasks as spinning, weaving, and sewing. It was a spontaneous movement with no founder or central organization. Each small house, or beguinage, made its own rules; beguines did not make vows for life but for only as long as they chose, and many had no male spiritual advisor. As the movement was large and the women were enthusiastic, local bishops became concerned and this concern spread to the papacy. In 1216, Pope Honorius III, at the request of Jacques de Vitry, granted beguines the right to live as they chose, but in 1311, Pope Clement V declared that most of them were heretics. In 1310, the beguine Marguerite Porète was burned at the stake in Paris as a relapsed heretic. Other women suffered also. Kate Crawford Galea has concluded that the beguines had been vulnerable from the beginning of their movement. "To challenge a social order in which each person had a role put the beguines in a dangerous position for their chosen role was neither

religious nor lay... [they] had a vision of holy living which did not correspond with the categories available to them at the time."[5]

Perhaps, because their role within the church was so circumscribed, historians have theorized that women were more vulnerable than men to the lure of heterodox activities. The enthusiasm of inspired movements often allowed women the leadership roles so lacking for them in the church of the High and late Middle Ages. Due to the public nature of their activities in preaching, writing, teaching, and reading the bible, women were very visible in heretical groups such as the Waldensians, Cathars, Hussites, and Lollards.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some women found paths to an intense religious life outside of traditional religious institutions, but nonetheless, within the confines of orthodoxy. Many joined religious guilds or confraternities, hiring a priest to perform the sacraments but making their own guidelines. Often these men and women were married, raising children, and working at secular occupations. One of these new movements, called the *devotio moderna* (The Modern Devotion), was centered in the Netherlands at the end of the fourteenth century. Members were devoted to the Eucharist but stressed contemplation and pious reading rather than external acts of religion. In many houses, it was the daily practice to confess their sins to one another rather than to a priest. They took no vows, wore no special clothing, and could leave the association at any time. A founder of this movement, Gerard Groote (d. 1384), established the Sisters of the Common Life in 1379. A brotherhood was later founded. Unlike the beguines and beghards, Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life held all property jointly; like them, however, they were drawn from the middle classes. They had no interest in founding a new order, generally abhorring professionalized religious, but the *devotio moderna* sometimes served as a preparation for entrance to the cloister and may have led to reform of monastic life. The movement also has been seen as a precursor of Northern Humanism and the Protestant Reformation.

For women, even for those with no intense religious vocation, convent life offered a respectable and protected alternative to marriage. In many of the larger, more wealthy houses a woman could lead a full life of prayer and study with other women of her class. However, while Benedictine, Cistercian, Dominican, Gilbertine, and other convents continued to be an option for some women, through the end of the Middle Ages many diverse forms of religious life presented themselves

as women and men continued their search for a closer union with God and the salvation of their souls.

NOTES

1. Jo Ann McNamara, *The Ordeal of Community* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., n.d.), 7-8.

2. Mayke De Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 126.

3. Ephraim Emerton, editor. *The Letters of Saint Boniface* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 174.

4. Penny Schine Gold, *The Lady & the Virgin: Image, Attitude, and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 111.

5. Kate P. Crawford Galea, "Unhappy Choices—Factors that Contributed to the Decline and Condemnation of the Beguines," in *On Pilgrimage* (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1994), 516.

CHAPTER 17

Witches, Saints, and Other "Others"

Women and Deviance in Medieval Culture

Elspeth Whitney

In 1662, Margaret Lister of Fife was indicted for the crime of witchcraft, which at that time in Scotland was legally equivalent to treason. In her indictment she was described as "a witch, a charmer and a "libber." A "libber" is a female gelder, particularly, but not exclusively, of pigs. In seventeenth-century Scottish slang it also meant a caster of spells, a woman who forcibly exposes a boy's genitals, or a woman who cuts off someone's ears. Being a witch, in the seventeenth century as now, therefore, was a peculiarly female form of deviance, one which involved transgression not only against the state and against God but against the gender roles which governed daily life.

The European and colonial witch hunts which took place between 1500 and the beginning of the eighteenth century were perhaps the most spectacular expression of the notion of "woman as deviant" in western culture. Trial records reveal two distinct conceptions of what a witch was. European villagers and peasants, the class from which suspected witches were drawn, believed that certain "cunning" people possessed a special kind of access to the supernatural through knowledge of magic, herbs, and spells. Such people could either cause or heal diseases in humans and animals, both cause and cure infertility and impotence, make someone fall in or out of love, find lost objects, tell the future, read minds, control animals, and change the weather. The cunning man or woman was powerful but the powers he or she possessed were ambivalent. They could cure as well as injure, help as well as harm. Educated members of the ruling class, on the other hand,

believed that the witch was supremely and completely evil. In their view, enormous numbers of witches anointed themselves or their broom sticks with a salve made from the rendered fat of murdered unbaptised babies and flew through the air to nocturnal rituals called sabbats, where they danced naked until exhausted, indulged in cannibalism, incest, and sodomy, and finally worshipped the devil, sealing the pact with an act of sexual intercourse. Their powers derived not from their own knowledge but were completely dependent on their enslavement to the devil and hence could be used only to harm and to hurt. Unlike the ambivalent peasant notion of witchcraft, the educated man's witch was the embodiment of total evil.

Despite the differences in the notion of what witches did, however, there was agreement that almost all witches were female. Although not every suspected witch was a woman, men accused of witchcraft were almost always implicated through their association with previously accused female witches. Overall, except for a few exceptional areas of Europe, 80 percent to 90 percent of accused, tried, and convicted witches were female. Moreover,the official picture of the witch, expressed in witch hunting manuals and other treatises, was almost always that of a woman. If sex was not the only factor in determining who was targeted as a witch, it—along with poverty—was certainly one of the most important ones.

The first witch trials which focused on worship of the Devil, or diabolism, took place in the mid- and late fifteenth century. Contrary to many preconceptions, belief in a diabolical conspiracy of witches was a product of the Early Modern period—the time of the Scientific Revolution—and not of the Middle Ages. Throughout much of the medieval period, the official position of the church was that belief in night-flying supernatural witches was mere superstition. Yet in many ways, the foundation for the witch hunts was laid in the Middle Ages. Both medieval ideas about women and medieval practices in the persecution of perceived deviants or "outsiders" in European society were crucial elements in setting the stage for the later persecution of hundreds of thousands of poor and isolated women as slaves of the devil.

MEDIEVAL SOCIETY AND "DEVIANCE"

Historians of the Middle Ages have recently come to characterize medieval Europe after the year 1000 as a "persecuting society." From

about 950 to 1250, mounting popular and official campaigns of violence were directed against Jews, heretics, homosexuals, lepers, and other dissenting, nonconformist, and "outsider" groups. In the later Middle Ages, the intensity of waves of persecution tended to increase. During the Crusades, Jewish communities in the Rhineland, France, and the Holy Land experienced repeated attacks from crusaders. Beginning in the twelfth century, Jews were subjected to increasing legal disabilites, were forbidden to receive oaths of homage, began to be confined to ghettos, suffered confiscation of their wealth and expulsion from their homes, and were required to wear distinctive dress. Jewish women, seen as resolute defenders of their faith and as potential seductresses of men away from Christianity, in particular were made to wear humiliating clothing, often similar to that worn by prostitutes, even when Jewish men did not have to.

Comparable steps were taken against heretics. Whereas prior to the twelfth century, the usual penalties for heresy had been at most excommunication or banishment to a monastery, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries both secular and ecclesiastical laws began to provide the death penalty, especially for relapsed heretics. Like Jewish women, who were often symbolically identified with whores, female heretics were often assumed to be a particular source of moral contagion. Throughout the High and later Middle Ages the church, through its agents of the newly established Inquisition, increasingly brought pressure to bear on local communities to search out and punish heretics.

Similarly, homosexual behavior which, before 1200, was regarded as no more or less sinful than many other forms of sexual misbehavior became, at least for men, in the thirteenth century punishable by death. Lesbianism, on the other hand, while occasionally included in the standard list of "sins against Nature," was rarely mentioned in civil legislation, sermons, or confessional manuals. Lepers, regarded as "the living dead," were treated less harshly but by the thirteenth century were forbidden to walk the streets of many medieval cities, and in some places were forbidden to inherit, make wills, or plead in court.

Along with increasing legal disabilities, these same groups came to be associated with sinister threats to children, obscene rituals, and devil worship. From the mid-twelfth century, Jews were widely believed to call up demons, to murder Christian children, and to desecrate the host. Similar beliefs surfaced about heretics. By the thirteenth century, some people had begun to believe that heretics

gathered at night to perform obscene rituals, to murder and devour children, to worship the devil, and to engage in sodomy. In 1232 this belief was given official sanction in a papal bull *Vox in Rama*, issued by Pope Gregory IX, which recounts the initiation of novices into an heretical sect. After kissing the hindparts of the devil in the form of a toad or a large cat, the novices participate in a promiscuous orgy, culminating in the reappearance of the devil who, now in the form of a shining and furred man, presents the initiates with a desecrated host. At least occasionally, thirteenth-century accounts reported that heretics could fly to escape capture.

Lepers were less directly associated with the devil but, like both Jews and heretics, were thought to smell bad and be sexually excessive, perverted, and lascivious. Because of fear of "pollution," Jews, lepers, and sometimes prostitutes were not allowed to touch food in the marketplace. Heresy itself was frequently identified with leprosy: both were regarded as diseases of the soul. When a leper died, his or her hut and belongings were burned to rid the surroundings of pollution and contagion just as a convicted heretic's body was burned in the ritual of execution.

By 1300, the threats supposedly posed by one "outsider" group increasingly merged with the threats posed by the others. Jews, because they did not eat pork, were thought to be susceptible to leprosy. Both Jews and heretics were believed to use the blood of "innocent childen" for various magical and healing rituals; leprosy was thought to be cured by bathing in the blood of virgin (i.e., "innocent") children. Heretics were routinely accused of sodomy and associated with bestiality and demonic possession. Despite the obvious empirical differences distinguishing Jews, lepers, homosexuals, and heretics, a virtually interchangeable stereotype of the enemy as a person who killed children, had unnatural or excessive sex, and practiced cannibalism or other unnatural acts using human blood or other bodily fluids was applied to all of them. In the early fourteenth century, the assimilation of one group into another was complete when stories began to circulate linking various groups in a vast conspiracy to attack Christendom. In 1321, Jews and lepers, supposedly in league with the Muslims, were tried and convicted of a joint conspiracy to poison wells with a powder composed of human blood, urine, herbs, and a consecrated host. In 1348 during the spread of the Black Death, French and German Jews, along with paupers and beggars and an occasional "heretic," were accused of causing the plague through the use of mysterious

"powders"; trials of Jews under torture resulted in confessions, burnings of Jews at the stake, and massacres. During the same half-century, a number of trials took place in which highly-placed men and, much more rarely, women, were accused of heresy, sodomy, ritual magic, and the calling up of demons, or sorcery.

In order to understand the social dynamics which transformed minority or nonconformist groups from merely "different" to deviant and dangerous, historians have borrowed ideas from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Anthropologist Mary Douglas, for example, has aptly described the process by which a society or culture applies a universalizing stereotype of evil to "deviant" groups. According to Douglas, such stereotyping almost always includes an attribution of a hidden and insidious power to hurt, usually defined in vague and unspecific terms which are difficult to prove or disprove. In addition, outsider groups typically become associated in various ways with "filth": with disgusting food or with debased sexual and other habits. These attributions can then be used to define minority or outsider groups as embodying a sort of totalized evil, an "other" beyond redemption whose mere presence poses a threat.

This paradigm fits the medieval experience very closely. By the late Middle Ages, accusations of infanticide, sexual perversion, ritual cannibalism, and obscene and scatological practices had coalesced into a powerful image of evil applied to a variety of different groups. In looking for the underlying causes for a shift from relative tolerance to relative intolerance, scholars of the history of deviance have argued that societies undergoing fundamental social, political, and economic changes—such as Europe experienced during the later Middle Ages—often become vulnerable to what sociologists call "moral panics": occasions of intensified fear of perceived threats to the community, usually seen in moral and sexual terms. Such panics produce an atmosphere in which particular groups can plausibly be seen as both immoral and dangerous, which then encourages both official and unofficial violence against them. In other words, elements within a given society target as "deviant" those groups which seem to encapsulate that particular culture's nightmares. The choice of victims, whether Communists, illegal immigrants, or welfare mothers, tells us more about a society's cultural anxieties than about the actual dangers posed to social cohesion. In the Christian world of the Middle Ages, enormously concerned about religious conformity, Jews and heretics were literally demonized; that is, they were believed to be in league

with the devil, the arch-enemy of Christendom. Anxieties about sexuality and the ethical uses of money probably fueled persecution of homosexuals and Jews. At the very end of the Middle Ages, the emergence of the female witch as an object of fear and loathing almost certainly reflected increasing ambivalence about gender and gender roles.

Other elements in the genesis of increased attacks on outsider groups appear to be social stresses induced by rapid economic and social change and increased political centralization. In the case of the High Middle Ages, at around the millennium both a revitalized papacy and the newly powerful feudal kings and feudal lords pushed for an increasing systematization of authority, increasing centralization, and enforcement of law and order. These groups began the shift toward the impersonal, or "inquisitorial," system of justice characteristic of the modern nation-state. Whereas the earlier accusatory system depended on accusations made and pursued by individuals against other individuals in the context of community consensus, the inquisitorial system allowed for the independent prosecution of victim-less crimes by a central authority, including crimes against the state and crimes against public morality. This new form of judicial control provided the means by which amorphous fears could be transformed into crimes punishable by imprisonment, confiscation of property, and death. During the disruption of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, marked by economic decline, warfare, schism, and pestilence yet also by more thorough and efficient government, the trial and conviction of suspected traitors from within must have seemed both satisfying and necessary.

By the fifteenth century these same patterns began to be applied to witches. The witch hunts of the early modern period were fed by social and economic disruption, intensified anxieties about sexuality and gender roles, the identification of religious and political loyalties characteristic of the period of the Reformation, and the relentless drive of increasingly centralized national governments to control and discipline popular culture and the peasantry. The fourteenth and early fifteenth century had seen not only an increasing concern for and fear of heresy and heretics, but also, as we have seen, an increasing association of heresy with sodomy and magic. Groundwork for the emergence of a new stereotype of the witch was laid also by an intensified fear of the devil, an identification of magic with the invocation of demons, and an increasing awareness (and fear) of the

supernatural powers of certain women. The church had long disapproved of—and punished—the practice of witchcraft and evil magic, or *maleficium*, by individuals. In the late Middle Ages, however, attention was increasingly focused on the notion of the witch herself as an evil figure. By the 1450s officials of the church, who earlier had dismissed stories of night-flying witches as merely the fantasies of miserable and credulous old women, began to accept the reality of Diana and Herodias as demons upon which some women literally rode to nocturnal gatherings. Similarly, whereas church lawyers had formerly interpreted Exodus 22.18 ("Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live") to mean that individuals accused of practicing witchcraft should be excommunicated, they now argued that convicted witches deserved the death penalty. In the 1430s the first rumors of "sects" of witches began to circulate. By the late-fifteenth century, trials for the illicit practice of magic increasingly involved poor and powerless women accused of witchcraft and devil-worship rather than powerful men tried for sorcery. Unlike the respected, if often feared, powers of the male court sorcerer or magus who called up demons only in order to command them, the female witch was accused of being the pawn of the devil, herself controlled by the evil powers of Satan.

In 1486 with the publication of the *Malleus maleficarum*, one of the earliest and most often reprinted witch-hunting manuals, the stereotype of the witch emerged almost full-blown. That witches were chiefly female is a "fact that it were idle to contradict, since it is accredited by experience." Women are "beautiful to look upon, contaminating to the touch, and deadly to keep" and naturally more inclined to witchcraft not only because they are "feebler in mind and body," than men but because "woman is a wheedling and secret enemy"; moreover, "all witchcraft come from carnal lust, which is in woman insatiable." Once seduced by the devil, the witch inflicted every sort of infirmity, hardship, and illness on humankind, causing impotence, sterility, death, fatal storms, and sickness and injury to livestock. Witches stole, murdered and devoured children, and—of especial concern to the authors—they frequently caused men to lose their "virile members," so that the bewitched sufferer "can see and feel nothing but a smooth body with its surface interrupted by no genital organ."[1] Later images of the witch and her activities became increasingly sexualized, focusing on the salacious events of the Witches Sabbath and at times verging on the pornographic.

Not until the eighteenth century did the figure of the witch lose its power to invoke the powers of ecclesiastical and secular governments: the last legal execution of a witch occurred in Switzerland in 1782.

FEMALE AS DEVIANT IN CLASSICAL AND LATE-ANTIQUE INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Seen in its medieval context, the European witch-hunt hardly appears unique. Comparable persecutions and trials of similarly demonized "outsider" groups preceded the witch-hunts and seem to have provided the model for elements in the stereotype of the witch. Connections can be drawn, for example, between the late medieval image of the heretic as the worshipper of Satan and the witch, who by her apostasy to the devil could be considered as the type of the arch-heretic. Accusations of child murder, sexual perversion, and the malevolent use of magic were made against Jews, heretics, and lepers for centuries before they were made against witches. Moreover, some historians have suggested direct links between the trials of Jews, lepers, and, possibly, heretics, for the attempted poisoning of Christendom in the first half of the fourteenth century and the slightly later first trials of witches which took place in the same areas of Europe.

Yet the witch hunts were unique in one important respect: it was the first time in western history that systematic persecution had been focused specifically on women. Ancient and medieval conceptions of the deviant were not organized around gender but rather about issues of religious and political nonconformity. Moreover, classical-era and medieval governments did not take anxieties about the activities of purported witches seriously enough to launch full-scale investigations and trials against them. Nevertheless, the roots of the image of the female witch stretch back into antiquity, bolstered by more generalized ideas about the character, powers, and weaknesses of women as a group. If the category "witch" was not exactly congruent with that of "woman," the witch nevertheless represented for many the evil potential of every woman; in the words of Tertullian (c.160-c.225), one of many early Christian Fathers to express misogynist attitudes, "every woman is the devil's gateway." In order to understand the witch hunts of the Early Modern period, then, we must look at not only the specific factors which fed into the hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but at the history of ideas about women.

Medieval culture rested on the philosophy, science, and literature of the twin pillars of the pagan classical world and Christianity. Although the actual lives of women across the centuries between the ancient world and the Early Modern one varied enormously, the intellectual construction of women remained remarkably stable. Medieval writers endlessly quoted Greek, Roman, and patristic writers on the subject of women, and Christian attitudes in many ways paralleled classical ones.

In many ways, women as a group had been defined as "other" since the beginnings of European culture. Classical philosophy and science, which provided the basis for the Western intellectual tradition into the modern period, used the "male" as the standard by which humanity was measured. Ancient religions, including Judaism, forms of paganism, and Christianity itself also often privileged the male over the female. These systems of thought inculcated certain "norms" or standards of behavior which could be used to differentiate acceptable groups from the unacceptable; they were also strongly gendered. Although the classical world was in many ways more tolerant of diversity and of perceived "deviance" than was later European civilization, ancient thought provided the intellectual framework for the later demonization of women and outsider groups.

Greek ideas were passed on to the European tradition both directly, when in the eleventh century medieval scholars began to recover much of the classical corpus, and indirectly, through the intermediaries of Roman culture and Christianity. The classical Greeks, the most important originators of Western science and philosophy, developed brilliantly elaborate and subtle systems of thought which began to make sense of the apparent chaos of nature and human experience but which also explicitly and implicitly characterized the "female" as inferior and different from the "male." At the center of Greek thought was a radical distinction between mind (or soul) and body and a privileging of rationality and the abstract over the merely physical. The world of the divine was the changeless and eternal world of pure rationality; the world of material things was subject to decay, disorder, and destruction. Greek men, given the proper upbringing, training, and education, were presumed to possess the capacity for self-discipline and mastery of the self; fully in control of both their emotions and their body, they could therefore participate in a life of reason, including active civic participation in the community. Women, on the other hand, were thought to be both unable and unwilling to control fully their physical

impulses and, therefore, were considered to be less capable of rational thinking than men. According to Aristotle "It is clear that the rule of the soul over the body, and of the mind and the rational element is natural and expedient ... the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity, extends to all mankind."[2] While men were accorded the rights and duties of self-government in the public sphere, women's proper role in the community was confined to reproduction, household management, participation in some religious rituals, and, in the case of prostitutes, sexual services. Much of Greek literature reflects this identification of masculinity with the rule of reason, culture, and civilization, while femaleness was associated with the opposite and hostile world of instincts, passions, and uncontrolled nature.

Definitions of female inferiority were grounded in biological ideas. Aristotle and other founders of western medicine and biology argued that women were by nature colder, wetter, and softer than men and that this difference constituted an innate deficiency which rendered women more like children than like adult males: according to Aristotle, "a boy actually resembles a woman in physique, and a woman is as it were an infertile male; the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz. it lacks the power to concoct semen out of the final state of the nourishment because of the coldness of its nature."[3] Greek physiology therefore gave women a merely passive role in reproduction as the incubator of the developing fetus, while the male provided the active form, including the soul, for the child. "The female is as it were a deformed male; and the menstrual discharge is semen, though in an impure condition; i.e. it lacks one constituent, and one only, the principle of Soul."[4] Six hundred years later, Galen, the most famous of all ancient physicians, echoed Aristotle's judgment, referring to women as "half the whole race, imperfect, and as it were, mutilated."[5] Greek science and philosophy represented women as literally without boundaries—wet, soft, permeable, leaky, easily invaded from the outside by demonic forces and uncontrollable passions, and therefore both potentially polluted and polluting. Men, on the other hand, were protected by their natural dryness and heat, which was translated into an assumption of a natural capacity for self-control. In sum, Greek thought postulated a series of paired dichotomies organized around gender in which the female—and qualities associated with her—always appeared in the negative column.

Roman thought, based largely on Greek thought, similarly represented women as passively subject to the constant demands of their physicality and as incapable of reason. Although a few partial exceptions can be cited, for the Romans, as for the Greeks, the ideal woman was the submissive, obedient, silent, hard-working, chaste (but fertile) wife and mother. Women who transcended this limited role were usually depicted as sexually insatiable, deranged, and treacherous. Ancient pagan religions, both Greek and Roman, abounded with polarized images of women. On the one hand, women's spiritual powers, their fertility, and their connections with the creation of life were recognized in the numerous and powerful female deities of ancient paganism and the numerous cults celebrating the roles of women as wives, mothers and daughters. On the other hand, the "permeability" of women to outside supernatural forces was viewed with suspicion which gave rise to the numerous supernatural feminine creatures which inhabited ancient mythology and popular religion. Circe and Medea were archetypal figures of the sexually voracious female with magical powers who revenges herself on men. Other images were less individualized. The *lamia*, for example, was a woman, often a beautiful enchantress, sometimes an old hag, who first seduced and then devoured young men, collecting their blood for use in magic. The witches of Thessily were said to put their victims into trances, transform themselves into animals, and raid graveyards for the body parts of recently deceased people. Ovid and other authors describe night-flying *striges*, women who had transformed themselves into owl-like creatures and who attacked children, ate their entrails, and sucked their blood. Certain ancient goddesses, notably Diana and Hecate, were believed to go on nocturnal journeys through the air, accompanied by the souls of the dead or by demons (and, by the early Middle Ages, by ordinary women), sometimes in the shape of fantastic or grotesque animals. What is interesting about these beliefs is the contrast between the far more positive, if sometimes ambivalent, images of male sages, who drove out demons, healed, tamed beasts, and controlled the elements, and the unremittingly destructive figure of the female vampire-witch. This image, combined with folkloric elements and reinterpreted by male clerics, would later emerge as an aspect of the witch as the servant of Satan.

One crucial vehicle for transmission of classical constructions of women was Christianity. In its first centuries Christianity offered a potentially liberating stance which transcended gender. Christianity

was almost unique in the ancient world in that it offered the possibility of respectable lives for women outside the patriarchal family as virgins and widows living in religious communities. Its theology, moreover, insisted on the spiritual equality of all human souls. According to one letter by Paul, for example, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 3:28). At least some women seized the opportunity for independent action provided by Christianity's egalitarian ideals and became well-known and effective martyrs, prophetesses, and preachers. Especially among some of the splinter groups of early Christianity, such as the Montanists and Gnostic Christians, religious writings emphasized the feminine divine principle and women seem to have preached, prophesized, and possibly even acted as priests.

Yet as Christianity lost its original character as an outsider's religion favored largely by the poor, slaves, and women and increasingly sought to become the partner of the Roman state, it reverted to more traditional attitudes toward women. By the beginning of the third century women began to be excluded from even lesser positions of authority in the church hierarchy and were explicitly forbidden to baptize or preach. Christian groups which had become known for the prominence of women in their leadership increasingly turned out also to be those groups judged heretical. The leaders of the church now tended to be men well educated in Greco-Roman culture who sought to make Christianity more intellectually intelligible and respectable in the eyes of the Greco-Roman elite population by grounding Christian beliefs in classical philosophy. In the process they absorbed the system of ideas which constructed women as inferior and inherently different from men. Christian writers, for example, began to echo classical stereotypes about women's nature. Clement of Alexandria, for example, explicitly cites Greek notions of physiology in support of conventional gender roles: "His characteristic is action; hers, passivity. For what is hairy is by nature drier and warmer than what is bare; therefore, the male is hairier and more warm-blooded than the female; the uncastrated, than the castrated; the mature, than the immature."[6] Women were again expected to be silent, especially on spiritual matters and especially in church.

Two themes reappear constantly in the patristic and monastic literature of the late ancient world: women as the source of temptation to men and the necessity of virginity for religious women. Women were seen as the source of disorder in the world who could be regulated

only by divesting them of their sexual and female bodies and, in effect, by "becoming male." The most common term for an ascetic and virginal woman was *mulier virilis* or manly woman. Thus, maleness became the norm by which femaleness could only be seen as inferior, and ultimately, as deviant. Virtuous behavior in women, ranging from a simple dedication to the religious life to extraordinary courage in the face of martyrdom, was seen as contravening normal feminine behavior, comprehensible only if a woman could be called a man.

Comparable attitudes governed patristic interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve and the Fall. For many of the church Fathers, the biblical Eve came increasingly to symbolize the inherent physicality and sinfulness of women, Adam the innocent victim of a conspiracy between the devil and the first woman. Although most Christian authors appear to have felt a responsibility to recognize the theologically required notion of the spiritual equality of men and women, their writings nevertheless tended to identify the female with the body and carnality, and to exclude her from the male identification with reason, rationality, and the soul. Patristic writers sometimes considered the Fall the fault of both Adam and Eve, but more often their emphasis was on Eve's (and therefore all women's) inherent weakness, carnal nature, and lack of intelligence. In many women's ears the theological niceties must have been drowned out by the weight of condemnation, summed up in Tertullian's remarks:

> And do you not know that you are Eve? The judgement of God upon this sex lives on in this age; therefore, necessarily the guilt should live on also. You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back on the divine law: you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting. You easily destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die. [7]

WOMEN AND DEVIANCE IN MEDIEVAL INTELLECTUAL CULTURE

Patristic theology and classical philosophy fused during the early and High Middle Ages to form a unified representation of women. Medieval writers quoted Aristotle, Galen, the Church Fathers, and other writers from antiquity to bolster a polarized view of women which at

once emphasized women's failure to live up to the (male) ideal of rationality, self-control, and virtue and allowed for a female ideal of exceptional purity, chastity, and self-abnegation, exemplified by that most unlikely female the Virgin Mary. Although women's actual status and social and economic opportunities were considerably higher during the Middle Ages than during either antiquity or the Early Modern period, cultural representations of women followed a familiar pattern. Scientific, theological, and vernacular literature together proclaimed women to be inherently disorderly and irrational, sexually insatiable, and "loose," both literally and metaphorically, a disposition which could only be overcome by an extraordinary commitment to asceticism and virginity.

The High and later Middle Ages, moreover, saw the development of more particularized ideas about women as deviant which, combined with the patterns of persecution described above, contributed to the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As medieval society became more centralized and developed more sophisticated institutions, women, like other minority groups, began to lose status and autonomy and attitudes toward them hardened. The revival of Aristotelianism, especially, reinforced negative views of women. Thomas Aquinas, for example, who feels it necessary to ask whether woman should have been made at all in the original creation of things, responds first by quoting Aristotle that the female is a defective male and then concludes that women's creation was justified by man's need to have a helpmate in the work of procreation, adding that "where most work is concerned man can get help more conveniently from another man than from a woman."[8] Systems of physiology inherited from antiquity, moreover, combined with folklore to foster the development of beliefs about women which paralleled the attributions of a hidden power to harm and association with filth that we observed with respect to minority groups. By the end of the thirteenth century, for example, popular and medical beliefs had merged into a belief, originating in Aristotle, that a menstruating woman exuded poisons and had a gaze which dulled mirrors. Old women past menopause and poor women, because of their poor diet, were especially venomous and could poison and even kill children merely by looking at them. Hair taken from a menstruating woman and placed on a dung heap produced poisonous snakes; intercourse with one could induce leprosy or sterility, and a child conceived during the menstrual period would be born leprous, epileptic, or merely with red hair (associated both with lust and magical

powers). Thus, women, like Jews, were seen as "carriers" of disease to which they themselves were not susceptible. Menstrual blood alone was thought to prevent cereals from sprouting, to cause iron to rust, to kill herbs and fruits, and to make dogs rabid and spontaneously develop into monstrous creatures resembling toads.

Developments in late medieval spirituality may also have indirectly contributed to the hunts. The late Middle Ages was a period of a remarkable outpouring of female spirituality. Women seem to have been prominent in both many orthodox religious movements, such as the Beguines, and in heretical groups. Another index of active spirituality is the number and types of individuals popularly and officially regarded as saints. The late Middle Ages saw both a dramatic increase in the absolute number of female saints and an even more striking increase in the number of women saints relative to male saints. Studies of the sociology of sainthood have found, for example, that the proportion of female saints rose from less than 12 percent of the total prior to the thirteenth century to a high in the fifteenth century of almost 28 percent.[9] There were also unusual numbers of highly visible female mystics, some of whom, such as Catherine of Siena and Angela of Foligno, emerged as saintly figures, and others of whom, such as Marguerite Porète, were condemned as heretics. Female saints and mystics, moreover, developed distinctive ways of approaching the divine. According to historian Caroline Bynum, late medieval religious thought mixed, blended, and crossed gender lines in subtle and creative ways. Women religious especially seem to have rejected the binary oppositions of male and female, spiritual and physical, and instead, attempted to redeem the physical by emphasizing its intersection with the divine. This attempt took the form of a physical spirituality characterized by fleshly miracles rarely associated with men, such as miraculous lactation, stigmata, ecstatic nosebleeds, the miraculous exuding of oils, and miraculous cures through saliva. Women also were associated with miracles in which special sensations, especially sweet taste, accompanied the Eucharist, and miraculous fasting in which the saint was sustained only through the ingestion of the Eucharist. Late medieval female saints, in marked contrast to male saints, were also known for mystical, paranormal phenomena such as trances, levitation, and struggles with demons and visions, as well as for the patient suffering of debilitating illness.

These miracles, many of which involved bodily secretions, could be read as a re-writing of the negative view of women as "loose," fluid,

without boundaries, and hence as excessively permeable to the divine and supernatural. The preoccupation of women religious with internal states of being, such as visions or endurance of physical illness (in contrast to male preoccupation with temptation from outside) most probably also both reflects and attempts to subvert conventional notions of women's inherent instability. Yet while in some respects late medieval women may have been consciously or unconsciously attempting to counteract dualistic ideas which denigrated women, the later reinterpretation of late medieval women's spirituality by male clerics may have contributed to the witch hunts. It has often been noted that the activities of saints and witches, while not precisely symmetrical, exhibit some striking parallels. Both are known to fly or "levitate," to control natural forces, to find lost objects, to tell the future, to read minds, to affect others' physical well being, and, in some cases, to have special relationships with animals and/or food. If in some areas of Europe it was believed that witches could be identified by particular physical peculiarities, or the "witch's mark," one of the definitive characteristics of the late medieval female saint was the presence of divinely-inflicted wounds, or the stigmata. Both saint and witch, moreover, symbolically embodied supernatural forces, often manifested in the manipulation of bodily fluids, which were at once benevolent and dangerous. In medieval and Early Modern popular folklore, for example, witches were credited with helpful acts as well as harmful ones. Conversely, saints, in the interests of sanctity, hurt, as well as helped, people. Studies of popular religion increasingly reveal saints as ambivalent figures, capable of apparently cruel and malicious behavior towards those who did not revere them adequately. Moreover, the popular notion of sainthood, unlike the official image, tended to emphasize the belief that a saint, like a witch, exerts supernatural power in the present here and now on a regular basis. It is worth noting that in terms of gender there is an inverse relationship between sanctity and diabolism: whereas 80 percent of witches were female and 20 percent male, in the late Middle Ages roughly 80 percent of saints were male and 20 percent female.

Women's relationship to the male religious hierarchy, always ambiguous, therefore became in the late Middle Ages increasingly ambivalent. Women mystics were often highly visible and, far from remaining secluded, frequently became public figures, speaking publicly, and even, occasionally, as in the case of Catherine of Siena, influencing papal politics. The close and often intensely personal

connection with God marked the female mystic as divinely chosen but also carried the dangerous implication that her newly-empowered voice held an authority not directly controlled by the institutionalized church. Although men who spoke independently also drew fire from the church, clerical suspicion fell more easily and quickly on women. Female sanctity embodied, in male eyes, an inherent contradiction. By the early fourteenth century, male clerics had made association with religious women tantamount to association with heretics. Perhaps not surprisingly, from the fourteenth century on, women mystics were increasingly likely to be charged formally with heresy, sorcery, or the crime of being a "false saint." The increased distrust of women's religiosity is reflected in a remark made by a Franciscan friar in 1537: "with the fame of secret miracles secret sects are sown. Who knows how many deceptions have been sown with such fame. 'He's a saint, she's a saint who performs miracles'? In these times, the good Christian should make the sign of the cross upon seeing a miracle-working female reputed to be a saint."[10] In the minds of many, women's miracles could be more easily understood as stemming from the power of the devil than from God.

The Early Modern period was preoccupied with order and the proper alignment of gender roles. In this environment, the construction of the nature of "woman" as inherently irrational and "out of control" going back to antiquity and continuing through the Middle Ages could only be construed as mandating the rigid enclosure of women by men and male institutions. Combined with an already established tradition of demonizing perceived deviance, women's independent access to the supernatural perhaps could only be seen in negative terms as possession not by God but by Satan. The relationship to the devil, moreover, could only be seen as one in which the witch herself remained enslaved and powerless, "enclosed" by the superior power of the male devil.

NOTES

1. *The Malleus maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*, tr. Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), Part I, Qu.6, 41-47, 59.

2. Aristotle, *Politics* I. 5, *Aristotle's Politics and Poetics*, trs. Benjamin Jowett and Thomas Twining, with an introduction by Lincoln Diamant (NY: Viking Press, 1963), 9.

3. Aristotle *On the Generation of Animals* I.20, 728a, tr. A. L.Peck, *Aristotle: Generation of Animals* (London: Heinemann; and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 103.

4. Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* II.3, 737a, tr. Peck, 175.

5. Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* II.299, tr. Margaret Tallmadge May, *Galen: On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 630.

6. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*. 3,3 quoted in Bernard P. Prusak, "Women: Seductive Siren and Source of Sin? Pseudepigraphal Myth and Christian Origins," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 103.

7. Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum* 1.1-2 quoted in *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texs*, ed. Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 51.

8. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Part 1, Qu..92, article 1,*St. Thomas Aquinas: Summa Theologica, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc.), 466.

9. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 220-21.

10. Alison Weber,"Saint Teresa, Demonologist" in *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain*, eds. Anne J. Cruz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 172-173. See Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 22-23 for suspicion of women religious in general.

PART VI

Women and Medieval Culture

Literature and Art

INTRODUCTION

The cultural aspects of the medieval world present an incredibly rich and diverse series of images. There are the magnificent early medieval borrowings from late Roman artistic and literary styles, seen in everything from the Carolingian "revival" (essentially early Romanesque) to the religious dramas of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, based on models of late Roman comedy. There are the histories of Bede and Gregory of Tours, written in Latin and based on early Christian/late Roman models but with Germanic kings and kingdoms as their subjects, and there are the translations of the bible, of Boethius, and of St. Augustine of Hippo into Old English that King Alfred of Wessex commanded be done—and learned Latin so as to contribute to the project himself. In the central centuries of the Middle Ages, a number of highly original styles came into their own: Romanesque and Byzantine in the visual arts and in architecture; the oral poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and the early *chansons de geste* of the continent. The High Middle Ages can easily be called the Gothic age or the age of the romance and the troubador, depending on the view. These purely medieval stylistic inventions, in many ways derived (perhaps ironically) from Islamic Spanish and Near Eastern models rather than from Roman antecedents, are what we usually think of when we think of things "medieval": the great gothic cathedrals of Europe; the Arthurian romance cycles composed in France and England; Dante and the early humanists such as Petrarch and Boccaccio.

Women figure prominently in all of these forms of medieval culture, as purveyors and facilitators, as patrons, as consumers, and as artists and creators. The richness of female contributions is demonstrated wonderfully in the essays below. What is also revealed is the fundamental ambivalence toward women that lies at the heart of the medieval age: the tension between the Virgin Mary and Eve; the depiction of powerful women as dangerous (a world turned upside-down is a world in which women rule); the frustration felt by women authors such as Christine de Pizan in finding nothing but negative imagery in the literature of their day and their determination to provide another perspective. All of these images and more reveal themselves in what follows. Louise Mirrer discusses the depiction of women in male-authored texts, especially with respect to male attitudes toward female bodies. Katharina Wilson and Glenda McLeod focus on the wonderful diversity of the works by medieval women writers. Finally, Christine Havice elucidates the centrality of women in the production, transmission, and consumption of medieval art.

CHAPTER 18

Women's Representation in Male-Authored Works of the Middle Ages

Louise Mirrer

Christine de Pizan (b. 1365), the first Frenchwoman to choose writing as a profession, begins her *Book of the City of Ladies* with a potent description of female representation in male-authored works. Reflecting on a book she has by chance picked up to read, she writes:

> . . .just the sight of this book. . . made me wonder how it happened that so many men—and learned men among them—have been and are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many wicked insults about women and their behavior . . . judging from the treatises of all philosophers and poets and from all the orators—it would take too long to mention their names—it seems that they all speak from one and the same mouth. They all concur in one conclusion: that the behavior of women is inclined to and full of every vice.[1]

Mathéolus, the particular author whose work prompted Christine's reaction, is, as she notes, by no means unique in his misogynist depictions. Indeed, highly negative representations of women in medieval works written by men are common and pervasive. Describing women at every stage of the life cycle—that is, as virgin, wife, and widow—and exploiting every type of discourse—proverb, law, literature, and doctrine—they disclose a powerful misogynist literary tradition along with a broad array of antifeminist cultural practices.

Thus, in popular proverbs, married women are frequently seen as untrustworthy, as in, for example, the medieval Spanish proverbs, "A married woman is never a safe bet" and "Every married woman has her overcoat and her lover." In literature and in law, widows are often pictured enjoying liberation from male control to a frightening excess, squandering their husbands' fortunes and their sons' inheritances. To satisfy their uncontrollable lust, they even resort to assault on their dead husbands' bodies—cutting the head, breaking the teeth, severing the penis, and so on. In doctrine, women are frequently represented as a single generalized class with wholly evil characteristics. St. John Chrysostom (c. 345-407), for example, writes to a young man about to trade his monastic vows for marriage:

> . . . if you consider what is stored up inside those beautiful eyes, and that straight nose, and the mouth and the cheeks, you will affirm the well-shaped body to be nothing else than a whited sepulchre; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness. Moreover when you see a rag with any of these things on it, such as phlegm, or spittle you cannot bear to touch it with even the tips of your fingers, nay you cannot even endure looking at it; and yet are you in a flutter of excitement about the storehouses and depositories of these things.[2]

Women's images in medieval male-authored texts are, of course, not exclusively negative. The Virgin Mary and other female saints provided writers with important models of feminine virtue and purity, and a number of them used these highly positive images interchangeably with those of more worldly women. The fifteenth-century life of Saint Margaret by Osbern Bokenham is a case in point. This work offers a catalogue of features conventionally used in the description of feminine physical beauty (lily-white forehead, arched black eyebrows, gray eyes, cheerful cheeks, straight and even nose, red lips, clefted chin glowing as brightly as polished marble, etc.) as a metaphor for saintly virtue.

Often, female depictions are presented by their male authors as being faithful to real women. But literary images can only indirectly reflect reality, and the female representations found in the works do not always tell us much about real women or their actual participation in medieval society. As in all representation, these portrayals may be as much about the male author who created them as they are about the woman or women he portrays. The product of men's imagination,

depictions of females frequently embody men's attitudes, beliefs, and fears. Aelred of Rievaulx's twelfth-century Latin *De institutione inclusarum* (Concerning the Practice of Claustration), for example, uses a discourse which reflects the author's own struggles against sexual desire even as it purports to speak of anchoresses' need to overcome lust. Aelred even attributes masculine physical symptoms to the anchoress, warning her, among other things, against noctural emissions "that [take] the members by surprise."[3] As will be seen below, this is not at all an unusual strategy in medieval male representations of women.

Real women are not, however, entirely absent from the male-authored texts that portray them. As readers of these texts, they interacted with the images presented. Christine de Pizan, for example, shows how women might identify with even the most violently misogynist representations:

> I was so transfixed by this line of reasoning for such a long time that it seemed as if I were in a stupor. Like a gushing fountain, a series of authorities, whom I recalled one after another, came to mind, along with their opinions on this topic. And I finally decided that God formed a vile creature when He made woman, and I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the refuse and abode of every evil and vice. As I was thinking this, a great unhappiness and sadness welled up in my heart, for I detested myself and the entire feminine sex, as though we were monstrosities in nature.[4]

Christine also shows how women might resist the images supplied them. She invents in her Book three allegorical female figures (Reason, Rectitude, and Justice), the first of whom tells her

> One can interpret these [male writers] according to the grammatical figure of *antiphrasis*, which means, as you know, that if you call something bad, in fact, it is good, and also vice versa. Thus I advise you to profit from [these men's] works and to interpret them in the manner in which they are intended in those messages where they attack women.[5]

Even though the images Christine speaks of derive from written texts, illiterate women also were able to interact with them. Margery Kempe (b. 1373), an Englishwoman who dictated to a scribe an account of her unusual life as a pilgrim in England, Europe, and the Holy Land, discovered multiple roles for herself by listening to sermons, conversations, and texts read aloud. Imagining herself to be handmaid to the Virgin Mary, she invented a conversation as part of her own, personalized recreation of the Passion. For example, she tells the Virgin, "I beseech you, lady, cease your sorrowing, for your son is dead and out of his pain, and I think you have sorrowed enough. And Lady, I will sorrow for you, for your sorrow is my sorrow."[6]

Julian of Norwich (b. 1342), an English Benedictine nun and anchoress, was, like Christine de Pizan, a literate women. However, her remarks show that women's identities could be shaped by visual as well as written female representations. She describes real women's implication in both types of representation in the context of her desire to be—or at least to be with—the various female images attaching to Christ's Passion:

> I longed to be present that time with Mary Magdalene and with the others who were Christ's lovers, so that I could have seen physically the Passion of our lord, which he suffered for me. I longed also to suffer with him as others who loved him did. I desired these things even though I believed soberly in all the sufferings of Christ as the holy church depicts and explains them. I also believed the paintings of crucifixes to be made by the grace of God after the teaching of the holy church according to the likeness of Christ's Passion, as far as the mind of a person may reach. Notwithstanding all this true belief, I desired a bodily sight, through which I might have more knowledge of the physical pains of our lord and our savior, and also of the compassion of our lady and of his true lovers, who believed in his pains then and who still believe, for I would have been one of them and suffered with them.[7]

Even as they played out male fantasy, female images found in medieval male-authored texts sometimes spoke to the experiences of real women. The lovely, virginal Philomena depicted in the Old French version of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* is raped and mutilated (her tongue is ripped out) by her lecherous brother-in-law. Yet she is able to "write" her story into a beautiful tapestry. Her artful weaving metaphorically

offers a challenge to those who might think women effectively silenced by medieval men's real and symbolic antifeminist behaviors.

The portrayal of the Virgin Mary in Gonzalo de Berceo's thirteenth-century *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora* also implicates real women in its imagery. The Virgin, depicted as an aggressive and authoritative queen in this text, commands men and legislates their behavior while God, almost as an afterthought and apparently without much will of his own, approves her decrees:

. . . I command this	and give it as a judgment
that the soul over which	you had a dispute
should return to its body,	(and) should repent.
. . . .	
This judgment prevailed;	it was authorized by God.[8]

Although Berceo's *Milagros* imagines a degree of female power well beyond that experienced by real medieval women, it was not necessarily entirely different from that exercised by queens and noblewomen in medieval society.

There are three main domains within which representations of women in medieval male-authored texts can be most fruitfully understood and analyzed. The first—and most inclusive—has to do with the body. Women's bodies occupy a central position in medieval men's texts. Bound up in medical, legal, literary, and spiritual discourse, their representation often obscures the female subject. The images, however, are key to understanding not only how men viewed women but also—albeit somewhat more abstractly—what alternate possibilities women may have had in medieval society.

The second domain has to do with religion. This domain is not entirely separable from the body because of the Christian focus on virginity and also because so much of Christian ritual appears against the backdrop of corporeal imagery (such as Christ's posture on the cross, his wounds, his blood). Religious literature provided an opportunity for women readers both to participate in religion and to transcend actual restrictions on their participation. Representations of the Virgin Mary kissing the blood of her wounded son, and thereby physically internalizing his bodily fluids, project women into the discourse on religion, modeling appropriate female spiritual behavior and, at the same time, inviting a specifically female experience of Christ.

The third domain pertains to the social and economic spheres of race and class. Representations of "other" women, in particular, female Muslims and Jews, are sometimes quite distinctive and may play a somewhat different role in medieval visual and textual production and consumption. Social class is another crucial factor in medieval images of women, inextricably linked to the complex features that determine meaning and the limits of interpretation.

The following three sections are designed to offer some interesting and provocative examples of female representation in medieval male-authored texts. The accompanying brief critical analyses may help to account for the appearance of these representations in some of the best known works of the period.

ANATOMY LESSONS

The *fabliau* (short humorous tale) has the distinction among the various genres of Old French literature of focusing obsessively on the body. Descriptions of human genitalia and their various functions during sexual intercourse occur repeatedly as do bawdy accounts of corporeal interactions. Although the texts do not always center on women, it is often their body parts that are featured. The *Farce moralisée a quatre personnaiges* is one striking example. This text depicts the marital dilemmas of two husbands through a detailed description of their wives' *teste* (head) and *cul* (ass). The first husband described in the text complains of his wife's incessant speech (i.e., her *teste*) along with her refusal to sleep with him. The second husband notes that his wife speaks sweetly, but that she spreads her "ass" (*cul*) too widely—meaning that she grants sexual favors to too many men. Ultimately concluding that "there is not a woman who doesn't have either a bad ass or a bad head," the text provides an unusual anatomy lesson: women's bodies, like men's, have only one upper and one lower opening. It is clear that in this text the ass stands in for the vagina (*con*) as the main locus of female sexual activity.

This curious anatomical view can only suggest men's failure to understand fully the details of female anatomy. It also underscores men's view of female sexuality as obscure and mysterious. But the absence of a vagina in the text's female representation further indicates men's wish to take control of women and their bodies. With two openings rather than three, the *Farce moralisée* remakes woman in man's image. Symbolically denying her (female) sexual difference, the

text also deprives her of subjectivity, or agency. She can experience and act on her desire only through an orifice held in common with men.

The *Farce moralisée* performs a related operation on the female *teste*, which is identified in the work as the locus of irrational female speech. The text, for example, denies the first wife access to reasoned talk and the second wife access to meaningful words (her words fail utterly to correspond to her actions). Thus presented as incapable of making sense, the female head appears in desperate need of control by a rational—that is, a male—head. In this way, the text disqualifies women for independent action, ensuring male dominance.

The female head and ass end up symbolically conjoined in the *Farce moralisée* (one of the husbands even remarks, "The skull and head of mine resemble the ass of yours!"). Thus women's irrational speech, linked in the image of the female body to women's outrageous sexuality, appears to legitimate the exclusion of females from the discourses of power and control. Yet this rather typical misogynist representation also suggests—albeit indirectly—women's capacity to subvert male domination. Neither of the husbands described is actually capable of controlling his wife's behavior. The first wife rejects her husband's ideal of female speech (that is, silence). The second wife similarly resists a male ideal of feminine behavior, refusing to remain faithful to her husband. Thus women's representation in even so misogynist a text as the *Farce moralisée* may be seen as capable of contesting the doctrine of female powerlessness.

Textual representations of women's bodies did sometimes live up to men's ideals for feminine behavior. Interestingly, however, these idealized representations frequently reversed traditional gender hierarchies, elevating beautiful, virtuous, and chaste women to a position of dominance with respect to men. The following medieval lyric is typical:

> Oh excellent sovereign, most attractive to see,
> Both prudent and pure, like a valuable pearl,
> Also fair of figure and glowing with beauty,
> Both comely and gentle, and inviting to praise,
> Your breath is sweeter than balm, sugar, or licorice.
> I am bold to speak of you, though I am unable
> To write adequately of your worthiness, which is so lovable.
> Because you are both beautiful and generous,
> Wise and womanly,

Faithful as a turtledove on a tree
Without any treason.[9]

In the text cited above, woman is idealized—placed on a pedestal and revered by a man who adores and respects her. This literary attitude has led some critics to argue that the position of women improved during the Middle Ages and that they enjoyed a greater range of options than during other periods—for example, the Renaissance. It is, however, unclear as to what extent the literature actually reflected real medieval women's experience, or even more generally, the societies they lived in. Georges Duby, for example, argues that the tradition commonly known as "courtly love" (a highly conventionalized code of behavior between lords and ladies which involved the adoration and respect of a knight for a beautiful, intelligent, and lofty-minded woman) was no more than a game played by men. Although the game may have improved women's condition, it did not perceptibly alter their lowly status in the male-female hierarchy. Howard Bloch sees courtly representation as tied to women's material condition, the lovely female bodies described in the texts bound up in the dynamics of an evolving medieval society. When women's status changed from that of "property to be disposed of" to beings "capable of disposing . . . of property," the image of the noblewoman became "idealized in the terms of courtly love."[10]

While the courtly tradition may have placed women on a pedestal, praising their physical beauty and crediting them with ennobling the knights who suffered for their love and inspiring them to great deeds, it also often incorporated some less liberating ideals for women. The whiteness of a woman's skin, elaborated on in, for example, the Middle English romance *Emaré*, chiefly promotes female humility, chastity, patience, meekness, and domesticity:

She was courteous in all things,
Both to the old and to the young,
And as white as the lily flower.
Of her hands she was skilled,
She loved all whom she saw,
With impeccable honor.[11]

Thus the female bodies presented in the courtly texts may, as in the *fabliau*, reveal a quite complex and highly-nuanced message.

"A YOUNG MAN WAS TEMPTED BY MY BEAUTY"

One of the most important aspects of female representation in the courtly tradition is the unavailability of the woman whose virtues are extolled. She may be, for example, a married woman whose favors can never be obtained by the man who praises her, or she may simply be indifferent to her suitor's adoration and suffering. This courtly state has been likened to the Christian ideal of virginity, which similarly insisted that women be unattainable. But, while the courtly tradition praised women's physical attributes (so long as their bodies remained out of reach), the Christian ideal called for the body's negation. Indeed, virginity, according to Christian doctrine, entailed a physical condition for woman so pure that even a man's glance could destroy that purity—and put him in spiritual danger. A text attributed to the English hermit and mystic Richard Rolle (c. 1290-1349) demonstrates this attitude:

> . . . Heraclites the clerk tells that a maiden forsook her city and sat in a sepulcher, and took her sustenance at a little hole. For ten years she never saw a man nor a woman, nor did anyone see her face. Instead, she stood at the hole and explained why she was enclosed. She said, "A young man was tempted by my beauty. And therefore, I would rather be enclosed as long as I live in this sepulcher, than to cause any soul, which is made in the likeness of God, to perish."[12]

The Christian ideal of virginity was, as the above text suggests, in reality nearly impossible for women to achieve. Many medieval doctrinal and devotional works took account of this, condemning even the reclusive anchoress on the grounds that she was susceptible of reclaiming her female sexuality and hence might fail to measure up to Christian ideals. Aelred's *Rule* graphically imagines such a scenario:

> At her [the recluse's] window will be seated some garrulous old gossip pouring idle tales into her ears, feeding her with scandal and gossip, describing in detail the face, appearance, and mannerisms of now this priest, now that monk or clerk, describing too the frivolous behavior of a young girl; the free and easy way of a widow who thinks what she likes is right; the cunning ways of a wife who cuckholds her husband while she gratifies her passions. The recluse all the while is dissolved in laughter, and the poison she drinks with such delight spreads throughout her body. When the hour grows late

> and they must part both are heavily burdened, the old woman with provisions, the recluse with sensual pleasures. Quiet returns, but the poor wretch turns over and over in her heart the fantasies born of her idle listening; her reflections only fan more fiercely the flame enkindled by her chatter. Like a drunkard, she staggers through the psalms, gropes through her reading, wavers while at prayer. When darkness falls, she welcomes women of even less repute; they add fresh fuel to the flames and only desist when they have exposed her, now wholly ensnared by her own sensuality, to the mockery of the demons. Now they speak without reserve, their purpose no longer being to arouse desire but to gratify it, they discuss place and time, and the man who will acquiesce in her designs. The opening of the cell must somehow be enlarged to allow her to pass through or her paramours to enter; what was once a cell has now become a brothel.[13]

Secular works recognized the problems inherent in the Christian ideal of virginity and apparent in both the text attributed to Rolle and Aelred's *Rule*. These works offered a perspective which admitted—sometimes with comic detail—the reality that virginity was not for all women. The prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" (c. 1387-1400), for example, argues:

> Had God commanded maidenhood to all
> Marriage would be condemned beyond recall,
> And certainly if seed were never sown,
> How ever could virginity be grown?
> Paul did not dare pronounce, let matters rest,
> His Master having given him no behest.
> There's a prize offered for virginity;
> Catch as catch can! Who's in for it? Let's see![14]

Although doctrinal and devotional literature frequently perpetuated misogynist stereotypes of woman as evil, it could also more favorably model female behavior. In this regard it provided women with an opportunity to see themselves as fully enfranchised within the theological context. The Virgin Mary, depicted as coredemptrice in, for example, Berceo's *Milagros*, appears as Christ's partner as well as his mother:

The ways of the Mother she gave birth
surely conform to each other, well;
He, for both good and evil ones, them;
She, if they prayed to her,
Along with those of Him to whom
like natures that know each other
descended on behalf of all of
Succored everyone.[15]

Works such as the *Milagros* suggested that women had an important role to play in Christianity; should they aspire to the virtues spelled out for them in devotional texts, their participation might achieve them recognition and respect similar, if not equal to, that accorded the Virgin Mary and other female saints.

Many devotional texts were indeed aimed specifically at a female audience and as such had important social effects for women. They sometimes allowed even ordinary females to identify with the mother of God and to envisage a role for themselves in Christian history and ritual. That Mary, Christ's mother, was often the centerpiece of such texts reinforced the sigiificance of the female maternal role, exalting the humane mothering aspects of the feminine. Moreover, devotional texts that allowed or encouraged women to imagine themselves centrally involved in Christ's Passion sometimes provided them with a sexual outlet otherwise prohibited by Christian doctrine, particularly outside of marriage. *A Talking of the Love of God* provides one such example:

> For when in my soul with a perfect intention I see You so piteously hanging on the cross, Your body all covered with blood, Your limbs wrenched asunder, Your joints twisted, Your wounds and Your sweet face, which was so bright and fair, now made so horrible, and that You Lord, so meekly took it all, with so much love for me, who was Your enemy, then I readily feel a taste of Your precious love, of that precious treasure which so fills my heart that it makes me think all worldly woe sweet like honey, wheresoever I go. Sweet Lord, of Your mercy! Where is there any bliss, compared with the taste of Your love at Your own coming, when Your own mother, so fair of face, offers me Your own body on the cross, dear love, exactly like You were, to embrace it as my own companion. The love begins to well up in my heart and glow very hotly in my breast. . . . I leap at Him swiftly as a greyhound at a hart, quite beside myself, in loving

> manner, and fold in my arms the cross at the lower end. I suck the blood from His feet; that sucking is extremely sweet. I kiss and embrace, and occasionally stop, as one who is love-mad and sick with love-pain. I look at her, who brings Him, and she begins to smile, as if it pleased her and she wanted me to go on. I leap back to where I was and venture myself there; I embrace and I kiss, as if I was mad. I roll and I suck I do not know how long. And when I am sated, I want yet more.[16]

"OTHER" WOMEN

Images of "other" women are among the most striking female representations in the male-authored texts of the Middle Ages. Young female Muslims, referred to in Spanish literature as *moricas* or *morillas* and in French works as *jeunes sarrasines* as well as beautiful Jewish women (in Spanish, *lindas judias*) appear across a broad spectrum of texts dealing with topics as diverse as the death of Christ and the reconquest of Muslim Spain. Pictured as young and virginal but also fertile, these images offered up "other" women to Christian men as consolation in times of need, as fulfillment of sexual desire, and as a metaphor for the triumph of Christianity over Islam and Judaism.

The *morica* described in the medieval Spanish ballad *Pártese el moro Alicante* (The Muslim Is Leaving Alicante) is one salient example of the type. A gift given by a Muslim king to his Christian captive as consolation for the deaths of the Christian's seven sons, the *morica*—said to be the king's own sister—is pictured as "hungrily" curing the captive's anger. Proving her fertility, she bears him a new son who will perpetuate his nearly-extinct Christian family.

In *Pártese el moro Alicante*, the *morica* is nameless, a feature that reflects her lack of power. She is also speechless, a counterpoint to both the Muslim king and the Christian captive, whose discourses are lengthy. Yet the *morica*'s eroticized portrayal shows that she is not entirely passive; her silent but forceful show of passion invites and satisfies Christian sexual appetite.

As an actively desiring woman, the *morica*'s image contrasts sharply with the reality of her culture, in which upper-class women were covered from head to toe and kept guarded from men's view. Such a contrast suggests resistance to male Muslim control and the weakening of their dominion. Indeed, the *morica*'s willingness to sleep with the Christian and her very depiction as a gift handed over to the

enemy by a Muslim king qualify her as a metaphor for Christian triumph. Effectively liberated from the strict guardianship of male Muslims, the *morica* is a trophy of war, part of an imaginary strategy for Christian victory.

In the male-authored texts of medieval Iberia, Jewish women are depicted in a somewhat similar fashion. Beautiful and oftentimes involved in sexual relationships with Christian men, they are saved from being punished by their male coreligionists when they cry out for help to the Virgin Mary. Happily converted to Christianity, they reject Jewish men's control.

The thirteenth-century Galician-Portuguese *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, a collection of hymns and miracles dedicated to the Virgin Mary, offers one important example of the type. Marisaltos, a beautiful Jewish woman "found in error and caught," is sentenced to laceration by her male Jewish community. Hurled by Jewish men from a cliff, she appeals to the Virgin Mary for help. Landing safely on the ground, she rushes to a nearby church and has herself baptized in the Christian faith.

The *Cantigas* does not describe the precise nature of Marisaltos's crime—although it identifies her as guilty—but other versions of the story report that she had been accused of extramarital sexual relations with a Christian man. Six miniature panels with prose captions that accompany the story appear to confirm at least the sexual nature of her crime. For example, the first two panels show her being led to the edge of the cliff wearing only a transparent chemise. In the panel that depicts her fall to the ground, her voluptuous nude body is clearly visible. That Marisaltos is shown immodestly displayed—indeed, publicly paraded—by Jewish men suggests, as in the case of the *morica*, the sexual availability of "other" women. Since Jewish, like Muslim, women would never have been undressed by their men in public, the eroticized image contrasts sharply with actual medieval reality. In the context of the antisemitism of late medieval Spain—as well as the eventual conversion or expulsion of Spanish Jews at the close of the Middle Ages—this type of representation emphasizes the weakness of the male Jewish community. This point is, of course, also made in the fact that Marisaltos, as a Jew, is sexually wayward but as a Christian is chaste. The beautiful Jewish woman who converts to Christianity is thus, like the young Muslim woman who bears a Christian a son, a metaphor for the triumph of Christianity.

In the medieval Iberian texts discussed above, power is expressed in terms of men's efforts to control the sexuality of the female members of their community. This concept of power is at work also in literary representations of upper-class women. These women, who were in fact medieval society's more powerful females, are in similar fashion depicted as imaginarily liberated from men's control. There is nothing, however, of Christian triumph in this type of representation since the women and men involved are all Christian. Instead, these texts serve as a warning to men, appealing, as in the *fabliau*, for women's exclusion from access to the discourses of power, often by showing the ruinous consequences for men when women "wear the pants." But this time the imagined effects of female authority are no joke: upper-class women did in fact wield some degree of power in the medieval world.

Pártese el moro Alicante, the Spanish ballad discussed above, is part of the longer legend of the *Siete Infantes de Lara* (Seven Royal Princes of Lara). This legend describes a sexually attractive, upper-class Christian woman who appears imaginarily liberated from the authority of her male kin. Perceiving herself insulted, she demands vengeance. As a result, an entire noble family is all but extinguished, and the woman's own husband is eventually killed. Among other things, the legend makes clear the ways in which upper-class women's access to the discourses of power can lead to tragedy and ruin for the men who fail to silence them.

Das Frauenturnier (The Ladies' Toumament), a medieval German tale composed by an anonymous author before 1300, explores upper-class women's behavior in men's absence. The women described in the tale have been left behind by their menfolk, who go off to negotiate a peace settlement. Since the men take with them their swords but no armor or horses, the women are able to participate in one of the most sacred of male domains—the tournament, in which they dress and joust as men do. The tournament's victor is a woman who has never married because of her lack of a proper dowry. Although *Das Frauenturnier* does not entirely suggest, as the legend of the *Siete Infantes de Lara* does, that women behave irresponsibly when allowed to act "as men," it does show men's discomfort with women's independence and their need to assert their authority when women demonstrate the capacity to manage on their own. The menfolk return home, hear of the tournament, and, after some discussion of its implications for them (such as that they might be expected to carry out domestic duties), forbid the women ever to joust again. The tale ends with the female victor being

given a dowry and married off. Her future jousting will take place only within the marriage bed, where her performance will be safely controlled by her husband.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the misogyny of many female representations, women were fundamental to all of the works discussed in this essay. Their bodies, viewed on the one hand as the devil's temptation and on the other as nurturing and succoring, and their personae fascinated and in turn inspired the men who wrote about them. While these texts often obscured the complex and multidimensional female character, the representations of women contained in them still often managed to resist men's attempts to undercut female autonomy. In the monastic context, women's spiritual dedication gained them men's respect and honor and could even precipitate a discourse of equality and friendship among male and female religious. In the secular world, women's submissive role was nuanced by courtly representations that placed women on a pedestal: by humorous tales that portrayed men as incapable of controlling their wives and by texts that revealed women's ability to act independently in men's absence.

Many of the works discussed in this essay circulated widely among women, offering them multiple identities as literary subject, as object, as reader, and as patron. Thus, under a variety of scenarios, representations of women in male-authored texts of the Middle Ages highlight the importance of women in medieval culture.

NOTES

1. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, tr. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 4-5.

2. Cited in Katherine M. Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 14-22.

3. Aelred, *A Rule of Life for a Recluse*, tr. Mary Paul Macpherson, in *Treatises and the Pastoral Prayer*, ed. M. Pasil Penington (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 64, cited in Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 48.

4. Pizan, 5.

5. *Ibid.*, 7.

6. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. S. B. Meech and Hope Emily Allen, EETS, o.s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 193.

7. *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, 2 vols. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), 2:201-2.

8. Gonzalo de Berceo, *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, Vol. 2 of *Obras completas*, ed. Brian Dutton (London: Tamesis, 1967), stanzas 208, 209. Translation is mine.

9. Lyric 43 in *Middle English Lyrics*, eds. Maxwell Luria and Richard Hoffman (New York: Norton, 1974), 42, cited in Bartlett 1995: 68.

10. Georges Duby, "The Courtly Love Model," in Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *The Middle Ages*, Vol. 2 of *A History of Women in the West*, eds. Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 261-76; and R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 196.

11. Cited in Bartlett, 62.

12. *De vita cuiusdam puellae inclusae propter amorem Christi*, in *The Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole, an English Father of the Church, and His Followers*, ed. Carl Horstmann, 2 vols. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895-96), 1:194; cited in Bartlett, 142.

13. Aelred, 46-47, cited in Bartlett, 45.

14. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, tr. Nevill Coghill (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1952).

15. Berceo, stanza 159; translation mine.

16. *A Talking of the Love of God*, edited from MS Vernon (Bodleian 3938) and Collated with MS Simeon (Brit. Mus. Add. 22283), ed. and trans. Sister Dr. M Salvina Westra (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 60-61, cited in Bartlett, 126-27.

CHAPTER 19

Sounding Trumpets, Chords of Light, and Little Knives

Medieval Women Writers

Katharina M. Wilson and Glenda McLeod

Medieval women writers often characterized their writings and themselves through lovely and intricate metaphors: Hrotsvit von Gandersheim was a small trumpet, Hildegard von Bingen tinkling chords of light, and Christine de Pizan a little knife. Although women authors in the Middle Ages may have been less numerous than men, they nevertheless played a significant role, contributing important colors, textures, and patterns to the age's literary feast. Like all legacies, theirs resists easy classification. Women writers often differed from their male counterparts, but their work does not simply reflect or invert patterns found in those counterparts's texts, nor are texts by women monolithic in their approaches, styles, or themes as the various metaphoric self-identifications suggest. As with literature written by men, historical and cultural forces, the author's and audience's social milieus, and yes, individual talent imparted diverse characteristics to women's writing. They did not differ from men in the requirements for and circumstances of their creative endeavors, nor did they necessarily speak with one voice when they disputed (or concurred with) the largely male paradigms that shaped medieval life. When women writers of the Middle Ages sought to subvert the dominant (male) paradigm, they did so like other marginalized groups—either by appropriating or occasionally by replacing the paradigm with non-hierarchical, egalitarian, holistic models.[1]

Scanning women's writing by what one might think the simplest principle possible—the languages used—unveils the level of

complexity facing any surveyor of medieval literature. Like men, women wrote in a wide assortment of languages; to understand the importance of this variety, however, one must recognize that linguistic choice for medieval writers, as for some modern writers in multilingual areas, carried philosophical and political implications. Initially, those in the western half of the former Roman Empire used Latin, while as those in the Byzantine East continued to write in both Latin and Greek. Later western European authors increasingly turned to the vernaculars—we have texts by women in English, French, Occitan, German, Spanish, and Dutch—but, unlike men, women as a group were often particularly associated with the vernacular tongues. As the official language of the church, government, universities, and law courts, Latin was associated with men and with the dominant literary paradigm. The vernaculars, on the other hand, carried connotations of laity and orality. Secular writers writing in the vernaculars, such as Marie de France, tend to make much of this distribution in their works; however, during the same period monastic women such as Hildegard von Bingen and Heloise continued to write in Latin. These larger cultural associations affected both texts and the development of literary languages themselves. During the late Middle Ages/early Renaissance, women played a significant role in forging the literary vernaculars simply because they were encouraged to translate rather than to compose, to reproduce rather than to produce works. As late as the 1500s in England, Mary Sydney, who was the sister of the famous poet Philip and, like her brother, quite talented, did not write original verse; instead, she translated a prodigious number of texts, completing, among other projects, Philip's own unfinished translations of the Psalms.

Despite these limitations, evidence of women's interest in (as both readers and writers/copiers) and patronage of literary activities is very strong. In female scriptoria such as at Chelles, staffs composed exclusively of women labored in manuscript production. In the east, literate, sophisticated, and urbane women, such as Eudokia and Anna Komnene, graced the upper reaches of the imperial court. Eudokia was educated by her father, a professional rhetorician; Anna Komnene's knowledge of classical literature and learning was so great that it attracted, even during her exile, a coterie of savants and philosophers. In the west, educated women during the early Middle Ages thrived mostly in monastic settings, such as the Abbey of Gandersheim which boasted among its members the early playwright Hrotsvit. Although some rare secular women also wrote in these early years (perhaps the

most prominent being Dhuoda in Merovingian France), they lived primarily in the aristocratic centers of ninth-century Carolingian and the tenth-century Ottonian renaissances. An exception is the sixth-century queen Amalsuintha, tutored by Cassiodorus, whose compilations formed an important part of the bridge of books responsible for transmitting vital elements of classical culture across the gulf of the early Middle Ages; indeed it is through Cassiodorus that we know something of Amalsuintha's style, for he preserved four of her letters in his *Variae.* Less typical was the sixth-century Queen Radegund, whose fiancè, Clothar (who had murdered her brother in one of the political feuds of early France), ordered her education. Radegund later fled her husband by retreating to a convent in the south of France. During the High and late Middle Ages, as monasteries lost their supremacy in education and cultural transmission, women—like men—were educated both in monasteries and convents and in schools and homes, although they rarely attended classes at the new universities. Education was sometimes acquired through a family member (as with Christine de Pizan), a tutor (as with Heloise), or (rarely) at a school (as with Beatrijs of Nazareth). Throughout the Middle Ages and especially among the mystics, women consulted other women or were encouraged in their studies by women friends or acquaintances; Caesaria of Arles, in her letter to Radegund, used military imagery to describe their interaction and the lives they lived behind convent walls, thus appropriating the dominant male paradigm to a monastic setting and using it as a valorization of female excellence. Hrotsvit composed some of her works at the behest of her abbess; Julian of Norwich counseled Margery Kempe; Hildegard von Bingen wrote and encouraged her fellow German mystic Elisabeth of Schönau; and Hildegard's own teacher was her abbess Jutta von Spanheim.

As both the distributors and the benefactors of literary patronage, women helped to shape medieval letters. Eudokia organized the academy at Constantinople and nurtured the growth of literary studies; the writer of the Heloise letters asked for advice on constructing a rule for women from Abelard.[2] Hrosvit wrote her epic (Gesta Ottonis) and her history of Gandersheim for and to glorify the Ottonian royal family; Marie de France dedicated both her lais and her fables to royal patrons, the first probably to Henry II of England, the second to an unidentified Count William. Queen Maud of England, wife of Henry I, commissioned works in French and Latin, including the Voyage of St. Brendan, one of the first vernacular works written in England after the

Norman Conquest. Her commissioned biography of her mother, St. Margaret, features several scenes designed to emphasize the saint's love of books. In the fourteenth century, Christine de Pizan made her living as a professional writer, composing under the commission of the powerful Duke of Burgundy as well as such foreign nobles as the English Earl of Salisbury and the Italian Duke of Milan. Nor were patrons limited to the secular sphere. The church promoted the work of St. Brigid of Sweden, endorsed the mystical visions of Hildegard von Bingen, and encouraged the reading and, indeed, the veneration of the letters of St. Catherine of Siena. Texts by women were read not only by those who knew them but also beyond their lifetimes and by those in other lands. At the Anglo-Norman court, Denis Piramus testified to the popularity of the lais of Marie de France, whose works were later translated into Old Norse, Middle English, Middle High German, Italian, and Latin, in his *La vie Seint Edmund le Rei*, written c. 1170. One of the first books William Caxton printed on his new press was an English translation of Christine de Pizan's manual on warfare. St. Catherine of Siena's letters were extolled as models of vernacular prose by the Italian humanists, and the German humanists praised Hrotsvit's works with equal intensity.

Clearly, women in circles likely to be literate were as apt to read and write as were men; in the early Middle Ages they were perhaps even more apt to do so since men generally learned to fight rather than to read: Charlemagne could read but never got the knack of writing despite keeping wax tablets by his bedside to practice upon; his sisters, however, were fully literate from an early age. Letters existing among five women (Leoba, Aelffled, Eadburga, Eangyth, Bugga) and the martyred missionary St. Boniface touch again and again upon the correspondents' love of books. Dhuoda tirelessly and imperiously advises her son William "*Lege*!" ("Read!"). When Ceasaria consults with Radegund on the way of life for a woman religious, reading plays a large part in recommended daily activity; indeed, Radegund's monastery was a renowned center of learning in its day. Women also used libraries when available to them as documents show: Christine visited the royal library at the Louvre, Hrotsvit the well-stocked shelves of Gandersheim, and Eudokia and Anna Komnene the even more impressive imperial collections in Constantinople.

Granted, then, that women were educated, literate, and involved in the writing, reading, and transmission of texts, what can we say about the specific texts that they wrote? Among those penned by women,

genre distribution is very wide indeed: one finds medieval women writing *epistulae*, *centos*, hagiography, drama, fables, historiography, manuals of instruction in the *speculum* tradition, travelogues, lyric poems, epics, allegories, *lais*, *summae*, visionary literature, autobiographies, and treatises on a wide variety of subjects. Most of the cultural, religious, and literary movements of the Middle Ages produced at least one literary representative among women writers. They were especially strong in the religious, didactic, visionary, and epistolary genres, the latter being very plastic and easily adaptable to a number of needs. Women were not as well represented in satire, although one finds some—although rarely in the invective vein—in the writings of Christine de Pizan, Hrotsvit von Gandersheim, and Eucharia of Marseilles. Neither did women participate profusely in genres such as the *chanson de geste* that celebrate warfare. Some did write epics or works that borrowed from the epic traditions—notably Anna Komnene (in imperial Byzantium), Hrotsvit (in Ottonian Germany), and Radegund (in Merovingian France)—but again these rarely exalted deeds of war in the way a *chanson de geste* might. Eudokia, the fifth-century Empress of Byzantium, composed Homeric hexameters in celebration of her husband's military victories, but she is an exception and the work is largely intended to praise her husband. Both men and women generally wrote from their respective but collective experiences: men tended to deal with the physically heroic pursuits of war, women with the spiritually heroic exploits of love and devotion.

In general, the choice of genre often depended upon aspects other than or in addition to gender: the writer's audience, milieu, and purposes are equally important. Even more fundamental and often proscriptive of such factors is the question of who had the leisure time to write. Medieval women writers were under either institutional (that is, monastic) or familial (that is, paternal or spousal) tutelage. Thus, monastic women such as Hrotsvit, Hildegard, St. Catherine of Siena, or Julian of Norwich wrote hagiography; visionary literature, or letters to ecclesiastical officials on church matters. Courtly women, such as Marie de France and the *troubairitz*, wrote of knights and ladies, and of love. Queens or women of high rank at court, such as Amalsuintha or Queen Maud of England, wrote letters dealing with politics and diplomacy or, when dealing with family matters—as was the case with Anna Komnene and Radegund—epics on family history.

Like men, women wrote because they were answering a calling or fulfilling a religious or secular need; at times these needs are intensely

personal. They addressed the secular hierarchy and, at times, the papal Curia for political reasons, as St. Catherine of Siena did in her letters seeking to further church reforms and to promote the return of the papacy to Rome. They also wrote for religious and didactic reasons for those in and out of orders, as Egeria did in her fourth-century description of her trip to the Holy Land or as mystics such as Elisabeth of Schönau did in their visionary literature. When Marie wrote her *lais* and the *troubairitz* their verse, they sought at least partly to entertain. Often mothers wrote to instruct their children, as is the case with Dhuoda's manual for her sons. In the seventh century, Caesaria of Arles wrote to instruct Radegund in the rule to be followed by women religious; and in the fifteenth century, Christine wrote to instruct the dauphin, the Duke of Guienne, with her *Livre du corps de policie*.

Some gender-specific differences do emerge, however, in the themes and presentations of medieval texts written by men and women. Women tend to feature heroines more frequently and to characterize them as more admirable than do men, as one sees in Radegund's depiction of the fall of her native Thuringia, Hrotsvit's dramas and legends, Anna Komnene's family epic the *Alexiad*, Marie de France's *lais*, and Christine de Pizan's allegorical works and courtly poems. Christine, among others, also questions conventional views denigrating women, most famously in her *Epistre au dieu d'amours* and *Livre de la citè des dames*. Likewise, Hildegard von Bingen, although she presents conventional and negative views of women's biology, also proposes alternative views on their vulnerability to the sin of lust. In writing about love women are more apt to insist upon the physicality of the act, as one sees in the works of Marie de France, Heloise, the *troubairitz*, and (negatively) Hrotsvit von Gandersheim and Christine de Pizan. When such differences occur, of course, the most fascinating question to emerge concerns if and/or how women writers subvert the patriarchal paradigm in their texts. Again, the answer is not a simple one. Many monastic women (and at times secular ones as well) simply appropriate the hierarchy and subvert it by inverting the values and/or roles assigned to either gender. Many of Hrotsvit's dramas are in this vein. In the works of the Roman playwright Terence which served as Hrotsvit's models, good men are pursued, seduced, and ruined by lascivious women; Hrotsvit reverses the pattern and presents pure Christian women (unsuccessfully) attacked and (sometimes) martyred by evil, powerful men seeking to destroy their physical purity and faith. Some rare women question the paradigm itself and, in place of

hierarchy and rigid structure, advocate a non-hierarchial, egalitarian, holistic, pre-patriarchal model. The author who most fully realizes this alternative is Marie de France whose *lais* maintain no gender quotas in respect to virtue; she also insists upon the equal importance of any number of items traditionally ranked into superior and inferior categories: author and reader, clerical and lay traditions, oral and written literature, and (in the love relationship) male and female participant.

Like men's voices, however, women's voices were not defined simply by gender concerns; women, too, were responding to cultural and historical forces identifiable across the divisions of the early, High, and late Middle Ages. For both sexes, literature in the early Middle Ages was dominated by the cloister and the palace; its major cultural influence was Christianity, which introduced a new ideal of chastity that allowed women an opportunity for virginal consecration and a life devoted to piety and study, thus ensuring them at least a modicum of the leisure essential for the creative pursuits. This chaste ideal, along with a strong emphasis on martyrdom and asceticism, defined the pinnacle of heroism in early medieval literature, whose heroines often die defending their chastity and faith. In this respect the church was a liberating influence, even though there are also scriptural injunctions concerning female subservience (I Tim.2) and the exclusion of women from the church hierarchy (I Cor. 14:34-35; I Tim. 2:12-15).

Since women in the early medieval centuries often played important roles as agents of conversion or as leaders of such centers of learning as then existed—convents, abbeys and (sometimes) double monasteries—it is no surprise that early women writers often held positions of considerable power and influence. In the secular sphere, Eudokia was, for a time, empress of Byzantium; in the west, Dhuoda, like numerous aristocratic ladies, was in charge of her husband's territories in southern France during his many absences in battle. The fact that Eudokia was later exiled to the Holy Land, and that Dhuoda's sons were taken from her to serve as hostages at the court of Charles the Bald illustrates how uncertain life could be in these dangerous times, especially for people of position and influence. Sometimes women who held secular power retreated for safety to monastic convents as Radegund, Queen of Neustria, did.

In the East, much of the sophistication of the later Roman Empire was preserved, thus making authors such as Eudokia possible. Splendidly educated in the classics by her father, a professional

rhetorician, she had the training and ability necessary to compose in a number of genres, one of the most intriguing being the Homeric *centos* in which, by snipping and rearranging excerpts from Homer's epics, she told the story of Christ's life. She also wrote verse paraphrases of biblical passages, a Homeric address to the people of Antioch, a life of St. Cyprian of Antioch, and Homeric hexameters celebrating her husband Theodosius's triumph over the Persians.

In the early medieval West, however, education was rarer and less well developed. It is easy to overestimate the cultural veneer of the Ottonian and Carolingian renaissances: learning was more widely cultivated in both but was also regarded as a plaything, a means of acquiring status. The French historian Jacques Le Goff aptly describes the value and dissemination of Carolingian culture when he compares it to spices, another rare luxury item of the period, and notes that the manuscripts owned by the noble families were often looked at rather than read.[3] Nevertheless, some impressive achievements adorn this period and, in the writings of several women, values from classical culture and the barbaric tribes begin to fuse into a new cultural harmony. Dhuoda's manual for her son exemplifies Carolingian learning in its use of far-fetched etymologies, mnemonic verses, and semi-magical numerology. Dhuoda combines this learning from late antiquity with a view of society that is clearly Germanic: all social relations are evoked as familial and personal. The text is unique in many ways, not least of which is the rare view it gives of a woman's conception of her own authority within the nexus of familial ties.

Earlier, Radegund of Poitiers (520-587) likewise united a diversity of traditions in her epistolary epic, *De excidio Thuringiae* (The Fall of Thuringia). The epic draws on the classical *planctus* tradition; its speaker is shaped partly by the persona of Ovid's heroines in the *Heroides*. From Germanic sources come the elegiac tone and the themes of the lament—the wintery sea, the mead hall, the lost comrades. In addition, the tale is autobiographical: a story of Radegund's family, her murdered brother, and her cousin Hamalafred who was exiled to Constantinople. In this rich mixture of genres, influences, and traditions, Radegund, like many monastic women, appropriates the male paradigm. Unlike most monastic writers, however, her subject is secular rather than sacred: to her plight and family tragedy she applies conventions often used in Germanic poetry to describe men in relationships with their warlords. A similar multi-level appropriation takes place in Hrotsvit von Gandersheim's dramas.

Taking the form of Terentian comedy, Hrotsvit supplies a Christian content that not only changes the pagan context of the plays but, as we have noted, also inverts Terence's depiction of lascivious women pursuing and ruining harried men. In the process, Hrotsvit also appropriates and inverts the Christian paradigm of sexual temptation which depicts all women (aside from the Virgin Mary) as the daughters of Eve: the malicious personifications of lust who pose a constant threat to man's salvation. She subverts the paradigm by presenting almost ludicrously exaggerated instances of female resilience to male power by showing the frail, the disadvantaged, female taunting and thwarting the strong, the powerful, the privileged, male. This transformation, of course, establishes Hrotsvit not only as the "censor" of pagan tradition but also as a more sophisticated reader of an author studied, read, and praised by many of the Church Fathers, including St. Jerome himself.

Literature during the High Middle Ages was still dominated by the cloister and palace, but major, diverse, and sweeping changes also modified significantly how, why, and for whom the literature in those two centers of culture was produced. There was new wealth and new sophistication; moreover, the growth of towns and their merchant class, a series of important colonization movements, and the appearance of new intellectual and artistic milieus in the universities and courts changed the societal influences on literary production profoundly. These influences are reflected as well in changes in the content of high medieval literature which reflect the rise of courtly love, the bloom of the vernaculars, and the new influences of Greek and Arabic philosophy and science. While these important changes in secular life went on, the church underwent a period of strife in the High Middle Ages as new ascetic and reforming impulses took hold. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the church enjoyed one of its golden ages of mysticism, a boon that not only empowered Christianity but also challenged and at times confused the church hierarchy. Women are represented profusely among the mystics and have provided "some of the highest flights of mystical poetry in the Middle Ages."[4]

As in the early Middle Ages, the most conspicuous source of power for women writers in the High Middle Ages was religious. Heretical movements—especially the Waldenses, the Cathars, the adherents of the Free Spirit, and later the Lollards and Hussites—attracted many women and granted them important positions. The visionary literature written by women mystics was sometimes (but not always) associated with heresies, rightly or wrongly. Hildegard von

Bingen was unflinching in her defense of orthodoxy, but the beguine Marguerite Porète was burned at the stake for heresy in 1306. This period's greatest monument of visionary literature is undoubtedly Hildegard's *Scivias*, which influenced the visionary works of Elisabeth of Schönau. In addition to the *Scivias*, however, Hildegard also wrote two other visionary treatises—*Liber vitae meritorum* and *Liber divinorum operum*—numerous songs, a play, and two treatises on the natural sciences and medicine. These works embody the wealth and variety of literary production in the twelfth century, not only recording visions rich in geometric shapes, dazzling lights, and powerful smells but also exploiting and cataloging Hildegard's considerable learning in medicine and natural philosophy. Hers was a rare combination of religious, poetic, and scientific acumen; if one considers that she also served as abbess of her convent, one should add administrative gifts to that list.

Notwithstanding this brilliant display, her texts do not fully represent their age in one important respect: although Hildegard occasionally uses the image of mystical love from the Song of Songs, her works do not mirror the great interest in the theme of love that marks other texts of this period. It has sometimes been suggested that the Middle Ages invented romance; love as a theme certainly suffuses the texts of the Gothic period. Many women mystics were drawn to emphasize the experience of love, and perhaps it is unsurprising that in this, the great age of Virgin worship, they often appropriated the vocabulary and conventions of the newly emergent courtly love tradition to describe their relationships with God, Christ, and the Virgin. Such an appropriation certainly characterizes the *minnemystik* of northern Europe, as represented in the works of Beatrijs of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Hadewijch. Heloise's letters also emphasize the theme and experience of love, reflecting both spiritual and secular manifestations in her debate with her former husband and teacher Abelard, while the *lais* of Marie de France and the poems of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *troubairitz* in Occitania provide interesting feminine takes on the themes and conventions of courtly love and the courtly triangle, often without slighting the physical act as did many male-authored courtly texts. As with the mystics, other women writers of the High Middle Ages weave additional themes into their love stories: Heloise's epistles also address the application of the Benedictine Rule, written for men, to cloistered women, and Marie de France's *lais* interlink love with social critique by advocating a model

of reciprocity and egalitarianism in human interactions, thus challenging the patriarchy's hierarchial paradigm. The model itself, however, goes virtually unchallenged in the works of other women. The influence of the new scholarship rising in the male-controlled universities clearly marks not only Heloise's letters but also Hildegard's treatises; neither questions the model of hierarchy, although Heloise may well invert it by sparing herself nothing in her confession of sin to Abelard and thus implicitly besting his confession in his autobiography, the *Historia calamitatum*.

In the High Middle Ages women began increasingly to write in the vernaculars: Hildegard's and Heloise's texts are in Latin, but Marie's *lais*, the *troubairitz*'s poems, and Beatrijs's, Mechthild's, and Hadewijch's visions are not. Elisabeth of Schönau's visions were dictated in part to her brother, who notes that, although he records them in Latin, they were given in a mixture of Latin and German. In Marie's case, this linguistic choice has thematic overtones: she writes in the vernacular and tells stories from the oral tradition, but to this tradition she also fuses elements of the Latin, written, clerical tradition: another instance of her tendency to discard hierarchy and traditional models.

In medieval Europe, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were centuries of climax and decline. At this time, the social caste of literacy and literary production began to change fundamentally. More writers, male and female, came from the middle class than in earlier centuries. Often religious authors were not associated with typical monastic communities: in the case of women writers, many were beguines, a lay religious movement whose members did not profess a common rule or make formal, monastic vows. Others were wandering lay women, such as Margery Kempe, who left a fascinating account of her life in *The Booke of Margery Kempe*; or women in orders isolated from their communities, such as Julian of Norwich, who lived the life of an anchorite, sealed alone in her cell. A similar ascendency of the middle class occurs among secular writers: Christine de Pizan was not a noble but the daughter and wife of bureaucrats.

While the late medieval centuries saw the devastations of the Black Death and its subsequent social upheaval, a new world also began to take shape in the waning centuries of the Middle Ages. In western Europe, many developments moved some of the kingdoms in the direction of a more modern, centralized state; with the destruction of the old order came a new willingness to question authorities, both religious and secular. Late medieval writers, male and female, were

more apt to challenge the authority of the clerical, ecclesiastical, and even political elite openly and/or to write, and read, in isolation, that is, outside a recognized community and sometimes outside a recognized tradition.

In ecclesiastical circles, one finds several examples of these trends. Julian of Norwich interpreted her visions and, through them, Holy Scripture alone in her cell: a striking contrast to Hildegard, who not only directed but also lived and wrote in the midst of a bustling community. The works of Marguerite Porète, the beguine executed for heresy, exemplify not only the continuing power of the *minnemystike* but also the later impulse toward individual and personal imitation of the *via apostolica.* In England, the lay wife Margery Kempe, whose dictated autobiography records her intense religious experiences, insisted on the personal nature of her interactions with Christ and was suspected of being a Lollard. Even women who spoke under the church's authority—most famously St. Bridget and St. Catherine of Siena—wrote in order to reform the moral decay of Rome and the secular world. Christine de Pizan, one of the most accomplished women writers of the later Middle Ages, also had a reforming, even an iconoclastic, agenda. In her vast and varied body of work written during a period of war and social upheaval in France, social degeneration and a call for the restoration of virtue and probity form constant and interlinked themes. Christine took to task not only the clerical establishment (as in her literary debate *Epistres sur le Roman de la Rose*) but also the monarchy, its administrative bureaucracy, and the legal profession (as in the *Epistre a la reine*, *Lamentacion sur les maux de la France*, and *Avision-Christine*). In her book-long defense of women, *Le Livre de la citè des dames*, Christine attacks traditional depictions of women in literature and constructs her own depiction and self-image instead, figured in the allegory of a city. In general, however, Christine, unlike Marie, did not provide a new model for action; rather, she called upon her audience to uphold the old standards they had deserted. She even presented the notion that the denigration of women in print —a denigration with a long and venerable tradition in both ecclesiastical and philosophical texts—was a betrayal of true, apostolic Christianity and of valid scholarship, defending her ideas by recourse to traditional home truths.

Clearly, medieval women not only wrote but, like medieval men, also wrote in many genres and languages, presented many different kinds of characters, dramatized and commented on most of the

important themes of the period, and partook stylistically of every literary and cultural movement of the age. They differed profoundly among themselves and across the centuries not only in terms of what they produced but also in terms of how they viewed and interlaced the dual requirements of their vocation: writing and reading. Some women were more radical than others. Often religious writers used mechanical metaphors when speaking of the act of composition: they are merely instruments or transmitters through which the divine voice speaks. Thus, as mere transmitters, they see themselves as writing objectively. Both Hildegard and Hrotsvit insist that they are "trumpets" or "tinkling chords" of God's light; Julian proclaims that it is not she but God who speaks through her lines. Secular writers, on the other hand, often employ organic or psychological metaphors for their acts of creation; they speak in their own voice and thus are (self-confessedly) subjective. Marie de France, speaking of both writing and reading (or more precisely hearing), compares her poetic creation to a plant that can bloom only when it is watered by kind consideration and nurtured by thoughtful reading and a good reception. The reciprocity this image evokes—literature as a venture shaped by both audience and author—implicitly questions the value of hierarchy. Similarly, when Christine's narrator, assisted by Dame Reason, clears the field of rubble to prepare for her city of ladies, she also speaks of both reading and writing: she must clear the physical debris (representing the authoritative misreadings of woman's image) in order to reconstruct the physical edifice that represents her new and admittedly subjective interpretation. Her presentation illustrates a view of reading that in some ways combines those of Marie with those of many monastic writers. Like the latter, she appropriates images and ideas used by the hierarchy (here featured as blocks of stone) and then reconfigures them into different patterns (here featured as a physical city). But like Marie—laboring at night to integrate elements from clerical and lay, literate and oral traditions—Christine shapes the reading herself: it is subjective interpretation admitted to honestly.

After many such sleepless nights laboring at the page, women writers left posterity a rich legacy that was all too often neglected after the seventeenth century. Its reemergence in this century, not as the isolated text of this or that writer but as a united body of work, complements, completes, and illuminates the legacy of the male authors who are more widely studied. Medieval women writers sometimes echo their male counterparts: they faced many of the same challenges and

lived under many of the same conditions. As writers, they shared a need for education, for leisure time to read and write, and for sympathetic audiences. But women writers also differed, not only from men but also among themselves, most interestingly when they confronted paradigms and traditions that devalued their gender. This variety constitutes one of the strengths of their legacy and one of its sources of fascination for readers today.

NOTES

1. Two anthologies of women's writing, in which the reader can find the authors referred to in this essay, are *Medieval Women Writers*, ed. Katharina Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984) and *The Writings of Medieval Women: An Anthology*, ed. Marcelle Thiébaux (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).

2. The authenticity of Heloise's letters, while agreed upon far from unanimously, has been pleaded persuasively by interpreters throughout the ages. See, for example, Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: From Perpetua to Marguerite de Porete* (Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer, 1992).

3. See Le Goff, *Medieval Civilization*, tr. Julia Barrow (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 130.

4. Dronke, *Medieval Women Writers*, 15.

CHAPTER 20

Approaching Medieval Women Through Medieval Art

Christine Havice

The image of the Abbess Adelheid I (fig.1) is preserved for us in a life-sized tomb marker in the imperial convent in Quedlinburg; it can represent the range of issues we must consider when we try to understand medieval women by studying medieval art. The image itself is conventional: monastic habit and Gospel book mark her as a holy woman. Adelheid (977-1043) is individuated only by the inscription in the lower border, which provides her name and title, "Athelh(eid) Abb(a)t(issa)" and the day of her death. Adelheid's is, in fact, one of three retrospective tombstones of abbesses sculpted for the convent church of St. Servatius during its rebuilding following a fire in 1070. The three are nearly identical, following the medieval preference for the idealized and the typical, upon which only small distinctions—in this case, the gestures of each figure and the accompanying inscriptions—were inscribed. Thus this image depicts not Adelheid herself but what she represented according to contemporary ideals.

Yet this conventionality masks Adelheid's importance for our inquiry; we must cast our conceptual nets more broadly in order to use this image to understand the historical woman within the context of tenth- and eleventh-century culture and society. From sources of that time, we learn that Adelheid succeeded her aunt Mathilda as abbess of the convent of St. Maria and as supervisor for the project of enlarging St. Servatius. Under Adelheid's stewardship, the convent preserved inherited relics closely associated with the imperial family while continuing actively to search for others, for which additional precious containers were then fabricated. Adelheid, following in the footsteps of

preceding abbesses, also provided the impulse and support for the creation of new works of art: one was a Gospel manuscript copied at Quedlinburg right around the year 1000 and provided with decorated initials as well as an elaborately jewelled cover containing a Byzantine ivory relief that must have come into the family's possession when Emperor Otto II married the Byzantine princess Theophano in 972. The children of that marriage, Adelheid herself and her younger brother, the future emperor Otto III, are invoked in the closing prayer of the Gospel manuscript, which remains in the church treasury to this very day. So to the idealized image of the abbess from her tomb marker we can add details, provided by a variety of both visual and documentary sources, that demonstrate her continuing involvement in art making, as a kind of overseer as well as sponsor rather than as artist herself, by which she certainly shaped objects of medieval visual art in media as varied as sculpture, architecture, and painting in books.

Any consideration of women's roles in the visual arts during the Middle Ages must reflect such a complexity of approach. We encounter images of women which were shaped by conventions and ideals that changed with time and from place to place and with the social status of the individual woman or the class to which she belonged. We encounter some women who were involved in the production of art objects, a few as artists who shaped the material but more frequently as sponsors who requested and paid for the fabrication of works or as overseers or as intended recipients of the work whose ideas were to varying degree incorporated into the object. In the following essay, these categories are considered one by one, but, as in the case of Adelheid, in fact they frequently intersect: a sponsor has her own image inserted into a manuscript, or a series of images of women is included in a work of embroidery created by women and presented to a queen. In these cases, we must "read" the resulting work of art with sensitivity to the significance of each of these interventions; only then can we reach a full understanding of both women and the art of the Middle Ages. This understanding complements conceptions derived from literary and historical sources; the visual arts, in an age where literacy was limited and oral and visual communication conveyed society's most important messages, are too frequently ignored, skimmed over, or interpreted in a non-critical, illustrative manner. The following survey is not exhaustive; rather, a few typical cases will demonstrate the complexities of the issues and richness of the insights to be gained.

A final note before turning to the art. The physical objects which we call medieval art may be found in museums, but more often they remain *in situ* as part of larger architectural, sculptural, or textual contexts, or in church treasuries or libraries. Medieval art objects were almost always functional; they might have been church furnishings, books, or small-scale pieces executed in precious or perishable materials that modern art historians have lumped together as "craft," reflecting our own values rather than medieval practice. These objects have suffered damage or have migrated from the original context in which they had meaning, and so they are sometimes fragmentary and difficult to get to know. Yet they are invaluable documents and well worth the effort. In the appendix that follows, the reader can find a glossary of terms. Sources for images other than those reproduced here can be found in the bibliographic section at the end of the volume.

IMAGES OF MEDIEVAL WOMEN: LEGENDARY AND HISTORICAL FIGURES

We begin our examination of images of medieval women by distinguishing between those of legendary and those of historical figures (this is not necessarily a medieval distinction). Numerically, the former predominate, which should not surprise, given the central role that art played in expressing and communicating medieval ideals. All images, whether of legendary or historical women, tend to be highly conventionalized, following venerable patterns rather than recording nature as observed or life as lived. Nonetheless, they can be useful to the historian in revealing medieval values and attitudes toward women, among other things.

Legendary Women

In sheer number, representations of the Virgin Mary and the Christian saints constitute the largest body of images of women from the Middle Ages. The earliest of these originated in the late Roman Empire, in catacombs and sculpture of the third and fourth centuries, where they are depicted as simple figures whom we cannot always securely identify. Then in 431, the Church Council of Ephesus declared Mary to be the Mother of God or *Theotokos*, justifying her cult based upon her role in the incarnation; this is why she is almost invariably shown with the Christ Child. Her status was expressed in recognizable visual terms. Artists represented her in the regalia of a Byzantine Empress, usually

enthroned and often accompanied by saints and/or angels as courtiers as she appears in the palimpsest fresco of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome and in church apses, particularly in Italy and Byzantium, for the next millennium. While the Virgin also appears as an actor in single scenes based on the Gospel accounts, such as the Annunciation and the Nativity, by far the most common early images are the frontal iconic representations associated with devotion, particularly in the Byzantine East. There, a series of variations in the iconography of the Virgin over the centuries emphasize the multiple qualities and roles people ascribed to her. For example, the Virgin Hodegetria—"Indicator of the Way" (fig. 2)—points with her right hand to the Christ Child—"the Way and the Light"—who is borne on her left arm while he in turn blesses the beholder. The details of this image derive from an icon once kept in Constantinople's Hodegon monastery, where a miraculous well was reputed to bring sight to the blind and thus "show the way." With time people conflated the Hodegetria icon with one painted miraculously by St. Luke, augmenting its significance. Like this late version from Rhodes, most panels of the Virgin represent her half-length to create a feeling of proximity to the worshipper who turns to her as intermediary. Other "types" of Virgin imagery stress her role as protectress, as nurturer, or as bringer of victory by altering gesture, attributes, and inscription. In Byzantium she was celebrated as the vehicle of orthodoxy at the end of the long controversy over religious images known as Iconoclasm (726-843). This victory was marked with a grand mosaic in the apse of the world's largest church, Hagia Sophia, and a special Easter sermon at its unveiling. The Mother of God was believed to affect people's lives and the very fortunes of an empire directly as well as in spiritual and material ways.

In the Latin West, a number of freestanding, wooden sculptures of the Virgin Mother and Child on the throne identified as the *Sedes sapientiae* or Solomon's "Throne of Wisdom" appear from the eleventh century onward. Expressing both maternal immanence and virginal transcendance, these "Majesty" statues were placed on altars as the focus of prayer. Some, such as the Essen Madonna, contained precious relics associated with the Virgin, hidden in tiny compartments within the statue. Many acquired revetements of precious metal and encrustations of gems and precious stones, while others were clothed in elaborate textile garments as expressions of the devotion of worshippers. It was deemed an honor to carry the Majesty in religious processions on feast days, and accounts reveal that some statues were

the focus of religious drama when the priests, costumed as the Three Kings, re-enacted their journey on the Feast of Epiphany. The Majesty statue offered a vicarious authenticity by which it became a stand-in for Mary herself, assuring worshippers that their prayers were heard. This is best expressed in a late medieval tale about a lowly tumbler who despaired because the only gift he could offer the Virgin was a tumbling performance, which he gave before a statue that was evidently of the Majesty type. Miraculously the statue came to life to affirm the Virgin's gracious acceptance of the humble offering.

Devotion to Mary increased from the twelfth century onward, when most of the great Gothic cathedrals came to be dedicated to "Notre Dame." At Chartres, the right doorway of the Royal Portals is organized around the theme of the Incarnation and, in its tympanum, probably reproduces an ancient Majesty statue that had been the focus of the Marian cult there (fig.3). The timeless, unchanging qualities of dignity and wisdom are emphasized by the figure's motionless, symmetrical, and remote appearance as well as by its centrality in the entire composition. Modern scholars have attempted to understand how medieval women might have responded to as ambivalent a message as the one Mary represented, a virginal maternity unattainable by mortals; such scholars have distinguished a likely women's "reading" of such images from that of men who probably found the mutually exclusive terms of her sanctity less personally relevant and thus less distracting.

Certainly people of the High and later Middle Ages looked for connections between their lives and that of Christ's human parent. While officials of the church increasingly made use of royal associations to explain Mary's qualities—at many cathedrals, she is shown being crowned Queen of Heaven by her son, becoming simultaneously the Bride of Christ and the embodiment of the church itself—other images stressed her humanity. In eleventh-century Byzantium worshippers sought images for both manuscripts and monumental art that depicted Mary's infancy and childhood, events described not in the Bible but in sermons and legend. Events such as the Annunciation to St. Anne, the Virgin's mother, and the Nativity of the Virgin were modelled to a large extent on analogous events from Christ's infancy, but the Virgin's story also acquired distinctive moments, such as her First Seven Steps and her Miraculous Feeding in the Temple. In the twelfth-century West, theologians elaborated the significance of the Tree of Jesse, which depicted Christ's family tree with the Virgin and Child at its apex. These familial images

proliferated, often taking the form of small-scale sculptures for chapels where they were the focus of personal devotion: the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child); the Holy Kinship (Mary's maternal relatives); and the *Anna Selbdritt* (Christ enthroned on Mary's lap, while she in turn sits on the lap of her mother, St. Anne). Late medieval artists began to represent Mary in familiar domestic situations, particularly in miniatures illustrating Books of Hours; we find Mary, Joseph and the Child "at home" in a very comfortable interior in several illuminations in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves. At the same time the ancient image of the Virgin *lactans*, nursing the Child, reappears in order to underscore her maternal humility and thus the humanity of her Son, and statues of the Virgin cradling the dead Christ descended from the cross express an earthly mother's grief, as in the Roettgen *Pietá*.

In ways that may be hard for us to appreciate today, people of the later Middle Ages felt a special closeness to Mary that works of art reveal in various ways. Images decorating cathedral doorways, such as the south transept portal at Chartres, represent the Virgin interceding on behalf of humankind with her Son, the resurrected Christ, at the moment of Last Judgement. She occupies this place because she was the vehicle by which Christ became human and because of the familiarity of the maternal role as advocate. Mary's intercessory role is emphasized in the emergence, in the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, of the Book of Hours, a service book which had at its core a series of devotions in praise of Mary and which was used by individuals for private worship. When decorated, the Book of Hours featured scenes from Mary's life and Christ's infancy, culminating in her Coronation in Heaven; it might also incorporate images of the manuscript's owner (fig.4) praying or being presented to Mary and associating themselves with her virtue. Also in Books of Hours and related works of art depicting the Virgin, we frequently encounter images of her in the act of reading or being taught to read by her mother, St. Anne; contemporary scholars have shown that these reflect increasing levels of literacy among women of the middle and upper classes who were the consumers and often the commissioners, of these special objects.

Saints comprise the largest other group of legendary female images. In the early Middle Ages, artists followed the pattern established by the imperial Virgin to represent most female saints. In the apses of Italian churches, saints such as Agnes or Praxede and

Pudentiana stand to greet us in the ceremonial costume of an *augusta*, while the procession of virgin martyrs attending the enthroned Virgin at Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna are dressed as nimbed courtiers. With time, the legends of these many saints become individuated to some extent as deeds, miracles, and then martyrdom—usually drawn out and replete with gory details to emphasize the saint's almost athletic spiritual endurance—find visualization in architectural sculpture and frescoes at sites of burial or relics, where the images function to mark and repeat the stories for worshippers, most of whom did not read. In the Byzantine East, the process of recording and thus standardizing saints' *vitae* began in the tenth century, from which time we also encounter images to illustrate these narratives in manuscripts and other portable objects. In the West, *vitae* of saints were recorded individually over the centuries, but the great collections of stories, including the *Golden Legend*, date only from the thirteenth century. Nonetheless, standing, half-length, or bust depictions of women saints, usually identifiable via attributes and inscriptions, can be found in surviving church decoration from the ninth century onward, particularly in places where their relics were revered. To the virgin martyrs of the early years of Christianity were gradually added other saints, such as Walpurga and Brigid, whose cults were adapted by the church from those of the pre-Christian, agrarian goddesses throughout northwestern Europe. Their appearance, with attributive objects for identification, seems to have been dictated in part by local traditions and socio-economic factors, so historians today can use the images of these saints as indicators of the concerns of medieval worshippers at a particular time and place.

By the later Middle Ages, the symbolism and significance of saints grew more complex, and their images appeared everywhere. St. Catherine of Alexandria, a learned princess whose rejection of the Emperor Maxentius led to her torture on the wheel and then to her decapitation, appears in art elaborately costumed to indicate her rank, with book, broken wheel, and sword as her identifying attributes; correspondingly, she had special meaning for maidens, students and scholars, and wheelwrights and millers as well as for the beguines of Liège. In single scenes, St. Margaret is regularly depicted emerging from the dragon's belly, whence her significance for women in childbirth, but the full cycle representing her passion includes scenes of torment at the hands of her jailors and her ultimate decapitation (fig.5). In Books of Hours, Catherine and Margaret, the most popular female

saints of the Middle Ages, appear among other saints as illustration to the suffrages; their intercessory function, like that of the Virgin herself, brought them directly into people's lives, as we are reminded in Margery Kempe's *Book*, where she regularly invokes Catherine and Margaret to witness her travails. Their images served as reminders of their perpetual vigilance. Elsewhere in Books of Hours and other contexts, we encounter female saints in dedicatory miniatures, where they accompany or introduce a patron who is their namesake.

Along with these Christian witnesses, legendary women from both Old and New Testaments provided medieval people with examples of particular qualities or parallels to contemporary situations. Eve becomes the occasion of lessons on disobedience and curiosity, overshadowing her partner-in-crime as the preferred emblem of Original Sin in the Middle Ages, even though theologians could not decide whether her fault lay in deliberately defying Adam and the Lord or in being so dim that the serpent found her an easy mark. In a sculpted capital of the 1120s, from the monastery church at Vézelay (fig.6), Eve instigates the fall with a provocative pose in which the artist also aligns the spherical forms of apples and breasts to underscore the admonition, repeated regularly in this church and in others during this period of clerical reform, against women as bearers of both sex and death. In other contexts, Eve becomes the explicit opposite of the Virgin: the bad first woman whose redemption is promised through the good, last woman as we find them paired on the great bronze doors commissioned by Bishop Bernward for the Cathedral at Hildesheim in the first third of the eleventh century. In Byzantium, theologians stressed Eve's role as the mother of all humans. *Anastasis* iconography after the twelfth century shows Christ resurrecting both Eve and Adam from Hades in their capacity as parents of us all as we see in the fresco of the *parekklesion* in the Kariye Djami in Constantinople. In the Latin West, Eve's New Testament counterpart was Mary Magdalene, whose presence in Crucifixion imagery may be intended to evoke this connection and completion, as does Adam's skull beneath Golgotha. Other powerful female figures from the Old Testament—Judith, Suzanna, Queen Esther, Bathesheba—appear as figures in manuscript illumination, reliefs, or frescoes where their particular virtues are associated with historical individuals or are invoked to support a cause. Yet, medieval ambivalence about women sometimes motivates shifts in the meaning of even these biblical figures. King David's infatuation with Bathsheba led him to commit adultery and murder; in the fifteenth

century, this story becomes a favorite illustration to the Penitential Psalms in Books of Hours. The bathing Bathsheba offered late medieval artists a rare justification for representing the female nude, which bears so heavy a charge of sin in the Christian tradition. However, these images increasingly relegate David to the background and focus attention instead on Bathsheba, who becomes, through pose and attributes such as fruit, a coy seductress, the biblical account notwithstanding. Through the study of iconology, art thus permits us to track important shifts in attitudes that other sources record less clearly.

In addition to these legendary women drawn from within the system of Christian faith, medieval images of women include many which survive from Roman and Greek antiquity. These were incorporated into medieval thought, partly out of deference to classical antiquity, partly because they were effective in representing complex abstractions, and partly because they were already available to express ideas that remained relevant. The Greeks and the Romans used the female form to symbolize places, things, and ideas, often in complex allegories. Their medieval descendants may be found in such figures as the Muse, now Holy Wisdom, who inspires the Evangelist Mark in the sixth-century Rossano Gospels; the subject provinces paying homage to Emperor Otto III in his Gospel book of ca.1000; and the Liberal Arts who surround the Throne of Wisdom in the archivolts of the Incarnation portal at Chartres (fig.3), amplifying the meaning of wisdom to include the curriculum of study of the twelfth-century cathedral school there. Some concepts expressed by personifications are medieval in origin: the early church chose to represent itself visually as the allegorial figure of *Ecclesia*, a woman bearing cross and chalice, paired and contrasted with the blindfolded woman holding a broken spear, *Synagoge*, the superseded faith of the Jews.

Following the general pattern of medieval learning, artists even continued to use goddesses of antiquity where appropriate: Venus/ Aphrodite for occasions where beauty demanded embodiment, for example, or Juno as a model of the powerful consort. Out of deference to the classical past, the church permitted such images, if presented with the proper moral spin. From the twelfth century onward, partly due to the impact of the secular values of courtly love, such images proliferate, usually with a decidedly medieval flavor. An historical anecdote involving the philosopher Aristotle abjectly submitting to the whim of the prostitute Phyllis (also called Campaspe) in order to win her favors appears in art at about the same time as Aristotle's writings

were recovered via Arab translation from Spain for use in the emerging schools and universities. It is not hard to see the object lesson here, nor could medieval women miss the message that learning and sexuality are constructed as mutually exclusive terms.

Courtly love itself provides a language to express the tensions in the relations between the sexes. By the fourteenth century, particularly on objects serving private purposes such as caskets (containers), mirror-backs, or combs, and on objects for personal adornment or the embellishment of private spaces such as buckles, brooches, garments, tapestries and embroidered hangings, images of women and men playing chess or backgammon, doing battle or jousting in tournaments, hawking, or dallying in pleasure gardens enter into the vocabulary of western art. They offer glimpses of privileged people at play, yet none are quite what they appear to be on the surface. Sharp weapons and castle gates in images of siege, lovers with lances playing chess with ladies holding rings emerge as artful references to genitalia and sexual negotiation when viewed in the light of late medieval romances such as the *Roman de la Rose*. Art historians have learned that the most powerful images communicate directly and are, at the same time, many-layered in reference: the tensions between male and female in these images of courtship rehearse the roles of pursuer and quarry, the imperatives of consummation and resistance; their vigor comes in large measure from the critique of and simultaneous affirmation of the status quo that these ironical images of "beloved" women represent.

Images of women of the peasantry and the emerging middle class rarely occur. Most of what does come down to us is legendary insofar as the images were inherited from classical antiquity's "works and days" tradition. The iconography of the Labors of the Months, referring to the cycle of time through images of agricultural activities appropriate to each season, turns up in programmes of church sculpture and in manuscripts, often in conjunction with the zodiacal signs. The activities represented are typical—sowing, harvesting, winnowing—so we cannot hope to find particular women, but here we are likely to find generic peasants, or, later, bourgeois women performing agrarian, craft, or domestic activities that the artist occasionally depicts in updated, realistic detail. The best-known images from Jean de Berry's *Très riches heures* come from its calendar, where the Limbourg brothers depict peasants at work in the fields for the month of June, and warming themselves by the fire for February. Similarly direct and humble, we encounter images of women who act out proverbs, fables,

or popular sayings in the margins of manuscripts from the thirteenth century onward and in the relief carvings of misericords in late Gothic choir stalls. These often appear as vignettes "from life," or what later come to be known as genre scenes; they frequently exhibit an earthy humor and disregard, if not disrespect, for high culture familiar to anyone who has read *The Canterbury Tales*. The humor often derives from gender role reversals, such as a woman fighting with her husband over who gets to wear the pants, or other situations intended to represent the comic improbability of a world turned upside down, such as sharing domestic chores (fig.7). It seems that the laboring classes were so taken for granted in the Middle Ages that only in such turnabouts did those who shaped the content of images see fit to take notice.

Historical Women

The example of the tombstone of the Abbess Adelheid has already alerted us to the limitations we face in studying images of historical—as opposed to legendary—women from the Middle Ages. We find the consorts of powerful men, a few wealthy heiresses, queens ruling in the absence of a husband or as regent for minor sons, abbesses who came from royal or aristocratic families, and, later on, members of the minor nobility and of the growing middle class as these gain economic clout. Such representations were created in lesser numbers than were images of historical men, and virtually all are limited by both convention and context to the expression of ideals. Images of women who exceeded those limits seldom find a place in the visual arts in the Middle Ages.

In the company of other family members, or less frequently on their own, historical women of the Middle Ages are represented as donors and sponsors. From Imperial Germany we find dozens of images of queens and kings or emperors in the dedicatory pages of manuscripts, in ivories, and on reliqueries of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The *Pericopes* of Henry II opens with an image of Henry and his queen, Kunigunde, escorted by saints Peter and Paul to the centrally enthroned Christ, who bestows upon them the crowns of their authority. This image mirrors the couple's appearance in a later relief on a portal of Bamberg Cathedral, which they founded in 1007; here it is Kunigunde who carries the model of the cathedral in token of their sponsorship. In the frontispiece to another manuscript, the Empress Gisela kneels before an oversize Christ in Majesty; opposite, her

husband the Emperor Conrad II occupies the privileged position to Christ's right in an arrangement typical for paired donors. These conventions of presentation are medieval commonplaces, found in countless churches both West and East. In Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, multiple images of empresses with their consorts record successive donations to the great church. When the Empress Zoe remarried, the head of her consort, as well as the inscription identifying him, was updated, keeping the mosaic in the south gallery essentially intact.

We also find images of historical women acting alone as donors; these, too, follow the dictates of convention, with only rare departures. As one example, the dedicatory miniature in the Gospel book of the Abbess Hitda of Meschede (978-1042) depicts her offering the book to the convent's "patron," St. Walpurga: the veil identifies her as a nun, while her position, off center and at a level lower than the saint, indicates her subordinate status, although on the privileged right. This image tells us more about an ideal relationship and status than about Hitda herself, as we saw with the Abbess Adelheid. Several centuries later, however, dedicatory images were handled with greater freedom, often conveying limited amounts of specific information "from life," as we see in the presentation miniature in a Book of Hours in the Walters Art Gallery (fig.4). Although accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel and part of an Annunciation, the anonymous patron affords us a glimpse of some details of mid-fifteenth-century fashion, such as the fur-trimmed robe, tall hennin, and necklace. Heightened realism (relatively speaking) is just one feature of late medieval art which improves its documentary value. At the same time, art production, particularly of small-scale, portable objects intended for use in personal devotion, increases to meet the higher demand of an expanding middle class. These are precisely the objects which women of means commissioned or bought, and Books of Hours are especially valuable to the historian in this regard.

Commemorative and funerary monuments supply many images of historical women, in which the socio-political impact of alliances established through marriage and women's biological role in producing heirs shape the iconography. In Byzantium, an emperor's consort was crowned *basilissa* as part of the marriage ceremony; a famous ivory relief in Paris records one such tenth-century coronation, most likely between the Emperor Romanos II and Eudoxia. The composition again follows convention in representing status and hierarchical relationships.

After 972, when the Byzantine princess Theophano married the German Otto II, a sculptor working for their court—perhaps himself a Greek artist who had earlier accompanied Theophano on her westward journey or perhaps a German copying a work she had brought with her from Constantinople—created an Ottonian version, complete with telltale errors, of the same iconography as on the Romanos-Eudoxia ivory. Theophano's is only the best-documented case of many whereby the marital translocation of women was responsible for the movement of art, artists, and artistic ideas across cultural and political boundaries.

Tombs begin to represent an image of the deceased in the twelfth century. A relatively high proportion of these depict women, however, although tombs might seem to require highly individualized effigies, these in fact function not as portraits but as statements of ideals as we find in the tomb of Anne of Burgundy from the 1430s. The effigies emphasize generalized physical beauty and virtue, balanced by assertions of familial and dynastic claims. Tombs such as those of Mary of Burgundy and Marie de Bourbon make retrospective reference to ancestry or to illustrious individual predecessors by means of such devices as family trees, heraldry, and figural representation. These features become attributes of the effigy, revealing how profoundly the maternity or childlessness, primogeniture, and kinship shaped the individual lives of aristocratic medieval women and reminding us of their roles in enacting political alliances through marriage, all of which affected the wider polity and culture of the Middle Ages.

Other funerary contexts offer images of women family members of the deceased, such as the tomb of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (d. 1439). His effigy is surrounded by figures of the children of two marriages, mostly his daughters (with their husbands), who fulfill customary filial obligations in eternity by attending their father in death. Commemorative monuments often include women in the ranks of illustrious ancestors. Among the twelve life-sized sculptures of the Billung and Wettin family forebears in the choir of Naumberg Cathedral from the mid-thirteenth century, Uta of Meissen and Regelindis are represented with their consorts and offer striking if, again, idealized images of aristocratic women within the network of kinship that afforded them some space for agency as well as for recognition by their descendants.

Familial considerations also seem to have affected the few corporate images of women religious that we have from the Middle Ages. In a unique series of images prefacing a *typikon* or foundation

document for the Convent of the Virgin of Good Hope in Constantinople, the founder and first abbess Theodora Synadene has represented her parents, husband, daughter, sons and their wives, and granddaughters and their consorts in the circle of those whom this charitable act should benefit. Scholars have shown that this extended family portrait records with great accuracy details of the elaborate silk ceremonial costumes of the women, which can be read as Theodora's assertion of familial success in the world as she retires from it. Following Byzantine practice, she provided that the convent should devolve upon her daughter, the nun Euphrosyne, upon her death. At that time, the latter added three more miniatures to the series in the *typikon*, including the members of **her** spiritual family, the sisters of the convent (fig.9), represented in their various grades and ages. Similar collective images may be found in works of art produced for nuns in western convents. Both Hildegard von Bingen and Herrad of Hohenburg (of whom we will have more to say shortly) included images of their religious sisters in works they wrote for their guidance.

From the eleventh and twelfth centuries onward, aristocratic women could own and use seals to identify themselves and to authorize their juridical and executive decisions on documents. Seals are very small, so designs must be highly abbreviated, and they are also strongly conventional in following centuries of (male) tradition. Yet women's seals do again reveal ideals. We find royal and aristocratic women in costume, pose, and activity that refer to their status and relation to power, to their physical beauty and grace, and to ancestry and procreation. We have already encountered these themes in images of historical women. The intimate connection between seal and owner, who exercised choice of design and for whom a particular design became a kind of signature, emphasizes the power of these themes, however limited, to express women's experience.

A final source of images is the illustrated chronicle, of which a few survive. These tend to depend upon conventional images for such recurring events as battles and sieges, councils and coronations; in scenes of marriages and deaths, where we encounter women, stereotypes prevail as well. However, even within these limitations, we can frequently learn from these images things that written texts may not spell out: These may be personal—Queen Jeanne d'Evreux of France walked in procession carrying her godson, the future Charles VI, to his baptism in 1368—or social-official—the ranks and precedence of those composing the funeral procession for Jeanne de Bourbon in 1378.

While images in chronicles again depict women acting in family and dynastic roles, on occasion these are monumentally important. In an illumination in the Chronicle of Matthew of Paris for 1248, Blanche of Castile is central in the composition, returning the emblem of Crusade to her son Louis IX on his sickbed as he renews his vow to take up the cross and make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. A few images of contemporary events may also turn up in contexts other than chronicle manuscripts. For example, a liturgical book from the famous scriptorium at Reichenau records a visit in 1039 by the widowed Empress Gisela, who is depicted walking among the monks and clerics in a rare "from life" miniature, alluding not only to her sponsorship of the manuscript but also to its occasion. Even as the image itself follows convention, contextual evidence makes it more eloquent.

WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE PRODUCTION OF MEDIEVAL ART

In surveying images of medieval women, we have occasionally caught sight of actual women who participated in the creation and reception of those images, although none were identified as artists. Were we to concentrate our efforts exclusively on seeking women artists—that is, the fabricators of the physical objects—we would learn only part of the story of women's participation in shaping medieval art. In addition, we must consider the contributions of those women who commissioned or paid for works, those to whom works were given as gifts or who were otherwise expected to use them, and those who generated an idea that artists then executed. Each of these interventions could have an impact on the way a work of art was shaped and the way in which it was used and understood. We gain some sense of these interventions from the works of art themselves and also from surviving external evidence, such as contracts, inscriptions, wills, and inventories which list and sometimes describe objects and collections as well as other kinds of literary documents such as chronicles, saints' *vitae*, and fiction. When we examine art objects with an awareness of the multiple possible interventions by women, we can deepen our appreciation of the process by which art came into being in the Middle Ages and can begin to delineate the kinds of contributions women made to that process.

Recipients and Consumers

Many objects exist which have been associated with the names of historical women of the Middle Ages although the nature of that association may be unclear. Frequently, such objects must have been received as gifts or inheritances. A wooden lectern worked in relief known as Queen Radegund's reading desk seems to have been a gift brought back from the East by agents she had sent to search for relics. A Book of Hours, probably given by Yolanda Queen of Sicily to her daughter Yolande of Anjou when she married Francis I of Brittany in 1431, subsequently came into the possession of Isabella Stuart, Francis' second wife; evidently Isabella had the Book updated, as it now bears her image and coats of arms and is known to us by her name.

In other cases, works destined for a female recipient were shaped by the intentions of others but also, indirectly, by the recipient's circumstances and values. The early fourteenth-century Queen Mary Psalter, for example, seems to have been commissioned originally by Edward II for Isabella of France and the related Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, queen of France from 1324-1328, was a marriage gift from her husband, Charles IV le Bel. In both cases, modern scholars have argued that the images illuminating these pages were selected to admonish and warn these royal wives against the sexual excess that had disrupted relationships among family members and created widespread dynastic and political upheaval. Similarly, one of the earliest dedication miniatures to survive from the Middle Ages prefaces the early sixth-century copy of Dioscorides's *De materia medica* now in Vienna. The manuscript was given to the wealthy Constantinopolitan patron Juliana Anicia to celebrate her role with a series of visual references to her virtues, Prudence and Generosity, and to the arts which she supported, so it is clear that, indirectly at least, she shaped the unusual and particular iconography of this image.

This process of tailoring a gift to the recipient has a long history in the Middle Ages; it is not always clear where the impulse for that tailoring originates. In the second quarter of the twelfth century, the illuminators at St. Alban's monastery in England departed so regularly from the program typical for psalters by including images which refer to the life and goals of Christina, Prioress of Markyate, that we conclude that the St. Alban's Psalter was made for her; it is not clear, however, that Christina herself was directly involved while the psalter was produced. In the later thirteenth century, a Psalter-Hours from the

diocese of Liège contains images of and prayers to an unusual selection of "desert mothers," saints of the early Middle Ages, which suggests that the book was destined for a group of beguines; and an extensively illustrated devotional book of c.1300 has recently been proposed as a work by and for a group of nuns or canonesses of the same area. As a final example, in a celebrated miniature from early fifteenth-century Paris, Queen Isabeau de Bavière is presented a book by the "first professional writer," Christine de Pizan (1365-ca.1430). Christine dedicated several of her books to Isabeau in hopes of both recognition and material compensation. Around 1410, it appears that Isabeau requested that Christine both supervise the compilation of some of these and add other, specially commissioned texts, to create a grand volume, completion of which seems to have provided the occasion for this carefully detailed miniature. We may assume that it represents Isabeau, the recipient, in a manner destined to please Isabeau, the instigator of the compilation.

Sponsors

Most of the images of historical women we have already encountered turn out to be women whom we can show to have been responsible for ordering and funding the art work containing their image. Today we would label them "patrons," but this term obscures the precise nature of the intervention in the process of creation. It blurs the distinction between recipient, such as Juliana Anicia, and sponsor, such as Theodora Synadene, who commissioned the illustration of her *typikon* to express a personal and familial message. And "patron" does not adequately differentiate between a noblewoman who initiated or continued projects but whose participation was largely indirect, and the small group of women authors who seem to have "leaned over the shoulders" of those illustrating their books to control their visual contents. Both generated ideas, but the extent of their involvement in the process of fabricating the work of art varied considerably; unfortunately, documentation does not always permit us to be as precise on these matters as we might wish.

From written sources as early as the fifth through eighth centuries, we encounter scattered references to women who supplied the initial motivation for making art as well as the means in the form of payment and/or material. Gregory of Tours, writing towards the end of the sixth century, tells us that Queen Radegund, in her capacity as abbess of the

convent of the Holy Cross at Poitiers, sent out agents to collect relics of the True Cross and of the apostles and then had reliqueries created to contain them. Gregory also tells us that Radegund was buried in the convent church which she had begun, from which we infer that she sponsored at least this one work of architecture; several other surviving sculpted objects are associated with her name as we have seen. Art patronage must have been part of the job description for medieval noblewomen, whether in the world or cloistered.

Five centuries later, Queen Sancha of Spain persuaded her husband, Ferdinand, to construct the church of San Isidoro in León. Ferdinand is often named alone as its patron, but the chronicle explicitly credits Sancha with the idea for the project and the persistence in getting Ferdinand to undertake (and pay for) it. The couple is represented together at the foot of the somewhat later Crucifixion fresco in the narthex and they are jointly credited with the foundation of the church in an inscription over the portal. Together they are named, and sometimes depicted, as donors of many smaller devotional objects: a large ivory crucifix, reliqueries for the remains of St. Isidore and St. Pelagius, an ivory casket, and several brilliantly illuminated manuscripts. These they gave in 1063 to San Isidoro on the occasion of the translation of Isidore's relics to the church, which served as the palace chapel, thus associating the revered saint with their rule. It does not make sense, even if it were possible, to distinguish Sancha's contributions from those of Ferdinand, but the example of the royal pantheon is suggestive of her instrumentality. Subsequently, their daughter Urraca (c.1033-1101) continued this tradition of patronage, rebuilding San Isidoro in its present form and overseeing the construction of its narthex, the "Pantheon of the Kings," which served as mausoleum for the kings and queens of León and Castile for two centuries. Urraca also commissioned an elaborate sardonyx chalice and a seven-foot crucifix which has been lost as well as restoring churches and altars and sponsoring the adornment of ecclesiastical vestments throughout the kingdom. Her sister Elvira also, if more modestly, was a sponsor of ecclesiastical gifts to monasteries and churches.

In Sancha, Ferdinand, and Urraca we discern a pattern familiar in other parts of western Europe in the tenth through twelfth centuries. Members of ruling families sponsor—instigate, pay for, and sometimes can be shown to dictate features of—works which express, among other things, their dynastic ambitions and the authority by which they rule. It is worth asking, even if we have insufficient evidence at this point to

answer, to what degree was such patronage divided along gender lines? Sponsorship often extends across several generations and into both secular and ecclesiastic, including monastic, contexts. The works that result from it range from portable furnishings and illuminated manuscripts to larger-scale sculpture and architectural complexes, to which documents—such as the image from 1353 of Abbess Hedwig of Trebnitz supervising construction of the convent church—attest. The abbess Adelheid conforms to this pattern. Daughter of one emperor and sister to another, she continued patronage activities in the same spirit as her aunt Mathilda, who had begun the building campaign, replacing the original convent church built by her ancestor, Queen Mathilda, in the tenth century. After Adelheid, the series of imperial daughters and sisters continued, each ruling as abbesses and adding to the collection of precious objects now in the Quedlinburg treasury or recorded in its medieval inventories. In addition to commissioning new works, frequently they remodelled or embellished older works such as the reliquery of St. Servatius, which was cobbled together with Carolingian ivories in an early thirteenth-century gilded frame by the later Abbess Agnes, who had herself represented with her Prioress Oderad kneeling at the foot of the enthroned Christ on the reliquery face. Only in the past twenty-five years have scholars begun to investigate systematically these networks of familial and conventual interventions in medieval art production.

In the High Middle Ages, evidence of women's sponsorship of artworks increases along with the number and variety of surviving objects and documents. As we noted in women's images, convention almost invariably dictated the broad outlines, but on some occasions we detect the sponsor intervening in the design or meaning to give it a particular inflection. For example, Eleanor of Aquitaine sponsored a range of works given as marriage gifts or ecclesiastical donations, and at Fontevrault, where she spent some years in retirement but without taking vows, she funded works such as the nuns' kitchen and commissioned the tombs of her second husband, King Henry II Plantagenet, and her son, Richard, in the church choir. Her own tomb, now located between those of Richard and Henry, bears an effigy of Eleanor recumbent but reading from an open book, thus still alive and active, an iconographic innovation of great impact (fig.8); hers is the only figure so depicted in this group. If the book is intended for a prayerbook or psalter, it becomes an attribute of the traditional female virtue of piety. However, regardless of its identity, it also clearly

proclaims Eleanor's literacy, a skill relatively rare among women of her time. It is likely that such bold and unusual iconography was dictated by Eleanor herself in the last years before her death in 1204.

Abbesses and nuns from royal families and noblewomen in secular society or in conventual retirement had a long tradition of sponsoring the copying and decorating of manuscripts. In the earlier Middle Ages, such patronage took place in the context of the monastic scriptorium, where works such as the presentation image of the Abbess Hitda and St. Walpurga were produced. With the growth of towns and then universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, book production gradually shifted to lay workers in urban centers. This coincided with an increase in the numbers and economic influence of the emerging middle class, which introduced images of its craftsmen and merchants into spaces (such as the stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals) previously occupied only by Christ, the saints, and the celebrants of the Mass. At about the same time, the popularity of the Psalter and, eventually, of the Book of Hours as tools of personal devotion coincided with the desire of other members of the privileged classes, including the emergent bourgeoisie, to emulate the royals in displaying their piety through the ownership of works of art. Many of the richly illuminated books from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that are known to us today are due to the sponsorship of queens such as Queens Melisende of Jerusalem, Ingeborg, and Blanche of Castile. Over time, these royals were joined by others, including some women from the middle class, who wished to own the personal devotional books, including Yolande de Soissons, wife of the sire de Moreuil, who commissioned a Psalter-Hours now in the Morgan Library. Because they could be read privately and tailored to the needs and wishes of individuals, Books of Hours were purchased widely and become for the historian a valuable index of later medieval devotional practice and values; inventories and wills stipulating the legatees of these books reveal that women commissioned and used Books of Hours and then willed them to their female heirs in far greater numbers than any other type of book. Names of sponsors may appear in prayers, on flyleaves, and in colophons in the books and, as we have seen, often sponsors' images, inscribed or anonymous, become part of the decoration and reassertion of their participation and ownership. A cursory reading of contemporary catalogues of Books of Hours reveals how often such images occur, which we can attribute directly to the sponsor's command. We have already met the kneeling, unnamed woman

presented by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Annunciate on the folio facing the opening to the Little Office of the Virgin in a Baltimore Hours (fig.4). This juxtaposition associates the sponsor with the Virgin at the moment of conception and appears to express not only generic devotion to Mary but a specific wish for children, a reading confirmed by the full text of Gabriel's greeting to the Virgin, written out below. This appropriation of Annunciation iconography to express particular fertility wishes occurs in other Books of Hours, such as the Hours of Mary of Guelders, as well as in other monuments sponsored by women of the later Middle Ages.

This prospective wish, looking toward the future, balances against another theme we encounter frequently in works of this later period: pride in family and ancestry. Privately sponsored tombs, sculpture, and painted forms of decoration, sometimes associated with private chapels and at other times incorporated into larger, more public, ecclesiastical spaces, become more and more common from the fourteenth century onward; such contributions correspond to changes in social and economic relationships in later medieval society by which prominent families were expected to give public evidence of piety, status, and wealth. We detect the role of women sponsors in many of these works. For example, in the first half of the fourteenth century, Eleanor de Clare commissioned two large windows for the monks' choir at Tewkesbury Abbey made up of a series of eight images representing her two husbands and illustrious ancestors of the de Clare family going back to the foundation of the abbey. From surviving documents, we discover that women also provided for and oversaw the design of tombs of family members: Mary of Burgundy was directly involved in the construction of funerary monuments for her mother, Isabelle de Bourbon, and her uncle, Jacques de Bourbon. For her own tomb, however, she specified only that it be located in the cathedral of her "patron" saint in Bruges; this is the same Mary who had herself depicted reading at a window opening onto a chapel with the Virgin enthroned, the dedication image in her splendid Book of Hours. In another will, Isabel Despenser dictated that her tomb effigy (evidently never executed) show her "all naked with her hair cast backward," to be surrounded by the poor expressing their grief. The context of other tombs of medieval women needs to be investigated to ascertain the degree to which these reflect directions of the deceased.

Authors

We have already met Christine de Pizan, whose experience as a writer and copyist gained her access to the book publishing circles of early fifteenth-century Paris. Among the numerous copies of her texts made during her lifetime, many were also illumined, and we can infer that the author herself had a direct role in shaping that decoration. Christine's writing regularly attests to her awareness of issues facing contemporary artisans and some of her manuscripts contain marginal notes—apparently in her own hand—instructing the illuminators what to paint.

In this respect, Christine inherited an authorial tradition from the Germanic abbesses Hildegard von Bingen and Herrad of Hohenbourg, who wrote (or dictated) texts recording their visions and theology and who presumably supervised their decoration in monastic scriptoria. Hildegard (1098-1179) has recently achieved her fifteen minutes of twentieth-century fame for her musical compositions, but in her lifetime she was celebrated for her books, several of which recorded her personal visions and her interpretations of their meanings. The *Scivias* ("Know the Ways") and the *De operatione dei* ("Concerning God's Workings") document, explain, and share Hildegard's idiosyncratic and highly personal visionary experiences. Since her command of written Latin was imperfect, she dictated to a series of scribes; one of these tells us that he witnessed Hildegard's inspiration, a moment captured in a famous miniature from the *Scivias*, in which the abbess's head is touched by divinity. In an early thirteenth-century (thus posthumous) copy of Hildegard's *De operatione Dei*, the illuminator provides the opening vision with an image of *Caritas* (divine love) personified, within a large frame (fig.10). Below, in a smaller frame appended exactly like a footnote, the seated Hildegard is depicted with stylus and writing tablet, receiving the vision in the form of rays which stream through the window piercing the frame of the larger image and directly enter her eyes, thereby certifying that the content of the miniature is exactly what Hildegard saw. The illuminator inserts these footnote-like images of Hildegard at work in her study for each vision in this text in order to authenticate the visions/miniatures above; the original illustrations must have been created under Hildegard's watchful eye. In this case and in the cases of Christine de Pizan and Herrad of Hohenbourg, the author works as designer, specifying details as well as overall conception while leaving the

execution to trained painters; in this they anticipate certain practices in the art workshops of Renaissance Italian artists.

Artists

While the Abbess Adelheid was not herself an artist, the convent in which she lived and worked is a typical location for the activity of women artists of the Middle Ages. A search for these artists through the centuries leads as often to monastic houses as to secular workshops. For example, the nun Ende, working in the double monastery of San Salvador in Tábara (Spain), signs herself as *depintrix* (female painter) in the colophon of the celebrated Gerona Apocalypse of c.975. Not only does her name precede that of her collaborator Emeterius, but it is provided with an enlarged initial "E" to emphasize her priority. Evidence of women active as scribes and sometimes also as illuminators in monastic scriptoria appears throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. As early as the sixth century, St. Caesarius's sister responded to his appeal for nuns to engage in copying texts, and subsequently we have lists of books—some provided only with modestly highlighted initials, others more sumptuously decorated—from convents of the Carolingian period onward, most famously from the double monastery at Chelles. In the thirteenth century, Johanna, a needleworker and nun in the English convent at Beverly, stitched her name into a piece of embroidery of the type known as *opus anglicanum*, the only surviving signed work of this sort. And at the end of the Middle Ages, German convents such as those dedicated to St. Catherine and St. Clare in Nurnberg continued to produce textile works for both church and secular use as well as to copy and illumine manuscripts for the convent's daily cycle of devotions.

Between these temporal extremes, we rely on a range of sources: colophons and deeds, tax rolls and signatures, literature, images, and legend. Because the data from Byzantium reveal rather little about artists, we will focus here on the Latin West, where we encounter the names of female artists in saints' *vitae*, such as the Flemish nuns Harlinde and Renilde who were recorded in the ninth century as illuminators and embroiderers and with whom a fragmentary chasuble now in Maesyck is traditionally associated. Occasionally, a signature in the feminine, such as "Madalberta" in an eighth-century manuscript, appears without any biographical details to flesh it out; the nuns in medieval convents are less well known to us than the sponsors and

authors for whom they worked as scribes and illuminators and as weavers and embroiderers. In the twelfth century, the nun Guda leaves us an inscribed self-portrait in an initial; an embroidered antependium of c.1200 from Hildegard's convent at Rupertsburg includes a row of kneeling nuns along the lower border, each identified by inscription, similar to the nuns in Herrad of Hohenbourg's congregational portrait in the *Hortus deliciarum* of a generation earlier. We also know of a series of nuns named *Diemud* (Humility)—one of whom provides her self-portrait in an initial—who worked as the scribes and/or illuminators of a group of twelfth- and thirteenth-century German manuscripts.

For the most part, however, we identify women artists through context. The white-on-white linen embroidery known as *opus teutonicum* was widely practiced in German convents and was generally reserved for items to be used during Lent, such as the altar-cloth from Altenburg-an-der-Lahn (fig. 11). The materials used—linen and wool, with perhaps some silk thread—were comparatively cheap, which some scholars have linked to the straitened economic circumstances of thirteenth- and fourteenth- century nunneries, and the whitework design is austere in conformity to the occasion. But hung as a curtain to screen the altar during Lent, against the light from eastern windows, the embroidery functions in silhouette, depending upon the density of stitches to create opaque form and spelling out its stories backlit, like shadow puppetry. To the Crucifixion and Resurrection iconography in this piece is added the image of St. Elisabeth of Hungary feeding the sick (left of center); Elisabeth, beatified in 1235, had placed her daughter Gertrude in the convent at Altenburg-an-der-Lahn, where she later became abbess. This particular detail, in view of the technique and the fact that the altar curtain remained in the convent until relatively recently, assure us, even in the absence of signatures, that it was embroidered by the nuns who practiced their art there. Collateral information from archaeological and anthropological studies provides us with greater insight into the lives of these artist-nuns even as individuals do not always come into sharp focus.

In England, a long tradition of Anglo-Saxon noble, lay, and conventual needleworkers permits us to examine several issues. Textiles created by nuns and given to churchmen are recorded as early as the seventh century and thereafter, while in the early eleventh century, chronicles tell us that royal consorts were the creators of specific embroidered objects: King Cnut's first wife, Aelgifu,

embroidered altar cloths of great splendor which the King presented to two of his abbeys; Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, embroidered his ceremonial vestments. As testimony to the high regard for English needlework, after the Norman conquest, William's queen, Mathilda, commissioned a chasuble from an Englishwoman in Winchester, which she then gave to the church she had founded in Caen (France). This is but the first of many records of laywomen—thus, early professional artists—who fulfilled both royal and church commissions alongside aristocratic amateurs and sisters within convent walls.

This tradition provides an important context for considering the Bayeux Tapestry, that singular and monumental piece of embroidered political narrative, for which we still debate the details of creation. Leaving aside the much-later legends attributing it to Queen Mathilda, the embroidery has been shown to draw upon manuscripts in the monastic library at Canterbury for many of its motifs, leading to the proposal that the design came from a monastic source and was given to professional needleworkers, presumably female, to execute. We have documentation of just such work relationships in near-contemporary England—the tenth-century polymath St. Dunstan was asked for embroidery designs by a noblewoman—but we also know of women who worked to their own designs, again both amateur and professional. In the Bayeux Tapestry itself, a scholar has recently pointed out that the needleworkers seem to have exercised some liberty in details which, on occasion, suggest an alternative reading of the heroics of the main story, reinforcing the hypothesis that the executants were English rather than Norman.

We encounter other women embroiderers in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England, including Mabel of Bury St. Edmonds, who is recorded for at least seventeen years' service to King Henry III. Henry even submitted one of Mabel's chasubles for appraisal by a group of both women and men professional embroiderers so that he could compensate her fairly for both materials and labor. Other women embroiderers are also named in the royal household accounts, but neither they nor Mabel, unfortunately, can be associated with any surviving work. With the increasing demand for English embroidery, particularly the luxury *opus anglicanum*, needleworkers were collected into workshops in order to pool labor, skills, and capital for larger commissions, organized themselves into guilds, and relied more regularly on contractors to negotiate terms. From the thirteenth century

onward, contractors' names eclipse those of needleworkers, revealing changes in the social estimation of the art.

Opus anglicanum embroidery of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries survives in relatively large quantities because it was treasured for its craft and value. We cannot always assume that all practitioners were women, for although some pieces originated in convents, others were secular productions from workshops with workers of both sexes in which sometimes whole families were engaged, passing their skills on through several generations. Nonetheless, certain works, such as the Syon Cope, can be assigned to women needleworkers, for it belonged for centuries to the convent of Syon in Middlesex; others, such as the Pienza Cope, feature prominent passion cycles of female saints such as Catherine and Margaret as well as the standard images of the Coronation of the Virgin and Nativity, strongly suggesting that women had a hand in determining the iconographic program. These luxury products were ordered kings, emperors, popes, and church prelates in quantity from convents and secular workshops to give as gifts; inventories identify the pieces by their elaborate materials, while contracts provide some idea of their costs and the quantity of labor required for their completion.

In the cities, we have some documentation that permits us to glimpse not just isolated practitioners of an art or craft but whole groups of them. Tax rolls and census documents identify townspeople by trade, permitting us to make comparisons among various groups. The multiple tasks of textile and manuscript production are listed right along with occupations such as brewing and tanning, and scholars have observed that the names of women appear, although in lesser numbers than those of men, in virtually every category, including the art trades. Guild documents also record participation by women, although many are described as the wives, widows, or daughters of craftsmen, emphasizing the cottage-industrial nature of medieval artistic production. This model also goes a long way toward explaining why we find almost no women as architects, monumental painters or sculptors: these crafts required itinerancy and thus distance from the household/workshop. Similarly, practitioners of very expensive forms of art, such as goldsmithing, include few women, as the limited demand for their products would again require itinerancy. In addition, guilds limited women's rights to take on apprentices and to pass on the family trade by inheritance, which necessarily kept them out of the more high-profile guilds.

Through guild records such as these and through tax and census rolls, we discern the participation of laywomen in the book and textile professions of later medieval urban economy. One Thomasse is recorded in 1292 as both illuminator and tavern keeper in Paris, and Christine de Pizan singles out for praise her contemporary, the painter Anastaise, who seems to have specialized in the decoration of borders of illuminated pages. Husband-and-wife illuminators are recorded in Bologna in the thirteenth century and in Cologne in the early fourteenth, while in Paris, Jeanne de Montbaston and her husband Richard worked as a team to copy and illuminate manuscripts with the authorization of the University; a number of these now can be identified. In one, a copy of the *Roman de la Rose*, we see Jeanne and Richard at work in the lower margin, he writing out the text and she painting the miniatures. Upon Richard's death in 1353, Jeanne took the oath of *libraire* or supplier of books to the University's students as an independent producer. In a somewhat later Book of Hours perhaps from Besanson, the scribe Alan includes in the colophon the information that his wife provided the illuminations. Again, the familial nature of women's participation is striking in these cases. A talented daughter—such as Bourgot LeNoir, mentioned in a contract with her father Jehan in 1353—or wife might emerge as a valued contributor and a professional in her own right, but there is little evidence to suggest that women set out to become artists beyond the boundaries of family. This pattern persists, of course, well into modern times.

Otherwise, the later Middle Ages is remarkably poor in surviving works to which we can associate women. We have a legend that the nuns at Wienhausen provided the frescoes for their convent church, while the nuns at Lothen worked a monumental tapestry setting forth the history of the convent. Women are recorded as sculptors and as practitioners of the several textile trades, and in the lists of painters in Bruges of 1480, one in four names is a woman's. Yet in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, we see a decline in visible female participation. Whereas production increased with emerging capitalism of the bourgeoisie, and artists more and more frequently signed their works in manuscripts as well as in other media; virtually none of these signatures indicates a female creator. We also know that many successful book artists of the fourteenth and especially fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were in such demand that they moved from one location to another to fulfill commissions among competing patrons. This new kind of itinerancy, along with the emergence of distinct artistic

identities, suggests that as artists gained renown, a form of "star system" emerged in contrast to which the domestically or conventually anchored medieval system of production left women at a disadvantage, a version of the pattern already observed in other aspects of fifteenth-century economy.

In fact, the most famous women artists of the later Middle Ages, ironically, are legendary: three visual artists, Thamar, Irene, and Marcia, are held up among many examples in Giovanni Boccaccio's reworking of antique sources for his *De claris mulieribus* (Concerning Famous Women). Translated into French in the first years of the fifteenth century, this very popular text was frequently copied and illumined north of the Alps, providing us with several dozen versions of these three women artists at work. In an image from one such manuscript in the Spencer Collection in New York, Marcia is painting, alone in her stately workshop (fig. 12). Described by Boccaccio as a chaste single woman who made only images of females in order to avoid dealing with the customary antique subject of the nude male, Marcia is well dressed and surrounded by paintings and sculptures of clothed and modestly posed women. She appears to be the feminine equivalent of an ideal that emerges in early Renaissance Italy during the fifteenth century: the talented visual artist, independent, heroic in inspiration, yet sufficiently polished to be acceptable in court circles. Marcia's multiple attestations of modesty further conform her to contemporary ideals of the feminine.

But in fact, the ideal of the hero-artist, even in its feminine, Marcian form, was as ill fitted to women's experience as the ideal of Mary's virginal maternity. Our sources have repeatedly suggested that women artists worked in contexts where they simultaneously fulfilled familial or conventual as well as artistic obligations. If Marcia is an early and feminine image of a Renaissance ideal, she must take her place along with the legendary Sabina von Steinbach, who never sculpted at Strassbourg Cathedral and Queen Mathilda embroidering the Bayeux Tapestry only in myth. While these legendary women captured the imagination, their conventionality, regardless of when constructed, obscures the real women artists at work in the Middle Ages. And, as we have seen, this fact reveals much about medieval attitudes toward women and art, but much less about women's actual interventions in art, which took such a variety of forms for over a thousand years.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Tombstone of Abbess Adelheid I, early XIIth century; Quedlinburg (Germany), Convent Church.

2. Virgin Hodegetria icon, second quarter XIVth century; Rhodes, Castello.

3. Enthroned Virgin and Child, with Liberal Arts and Philosophers in archivolts, Portal of the Incarnation, c.1155 (detail of Royal Portals), Notre Dame de Chartres.

4. Sponsor presented by Gabriel to Virgin Annunciate, fols. 13v-14r Book of Hours, 1450s; Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, Ms.W267.

5. The Martyrdom of St. Margaret, fol. 180r (suffrages), Book of Hours by Coëtivy Master, 1460s; Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, Ms.W274.

6. Temptation of Adam and Eve, clerestory capital, c.1120: La Madeleine, Vézalay.

7. The Shared Task, misericord, XVth century; Rouen, Notre-Dame Cathedral.

8. Eleanor of Aquitaine, tomb effigy, XIIIth century; Fontevrault, Abbey Church.

9. Nuns of the Convent of the Virgin of Good Hope (Constantinople), fol. 12, 1340s; Oxford, Lincoln College, Ms.gr.35, Typikon.

10. Hildegard's Vision, *Caritas*, fol.1v, *De operatione Dei*, XIIIth century; Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, Ms.1942.

11. Lenten cloth with Crucifixion and St. Elisabeth of Hungary, from the Convent of Altenburg-an-der-Lahn, ca.1330-1350; Cleveland Museum of Art, J.H. Wade Fund Purchase, 1948.352.

12. Marcia, fol.37v, from Boccaccio, *Des clères et nobles femmes*, c.1470; New York Public Library, Spencer Collection, Ms.33.

Figure 1: Tombstone of Abbess Adelheid I, early XIIth century; Quedlinburg (Germany), Convent Church. Photo: Foto-Kittel, Quedlinburg, published with kind permission of the Pastor, Evangelische S. Servatii Domgemeinde.

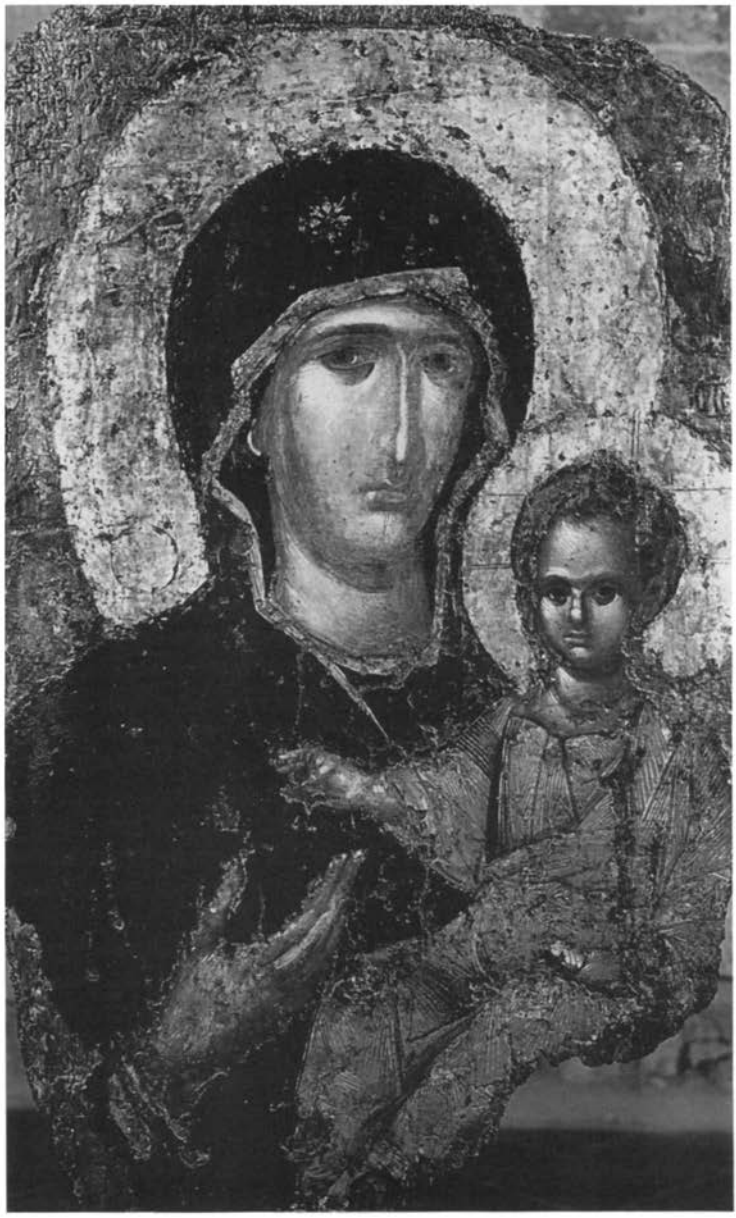

Figure 2: Virgin Hodegetria (face of double-sided icon), second quarter XIVth century. Photo: Rhodes, Archaeological Institute of the Dodecanese, published with permission of the Ministry of Culture, Greece.

Figure 3: Enthroned Virgin and Child with Liberal Arts and Philosophers, Portal of the Incarnation, West façade, Notre-Dame, Chartres Cathedral. Photo: Christine Havice.

Figure 4: Sponsor presented by Gabriel to Virgin Annunciate, fols. 13v-14r, Walters Art Gallery, W267 (Book of Hours), 1450s. Photo: The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

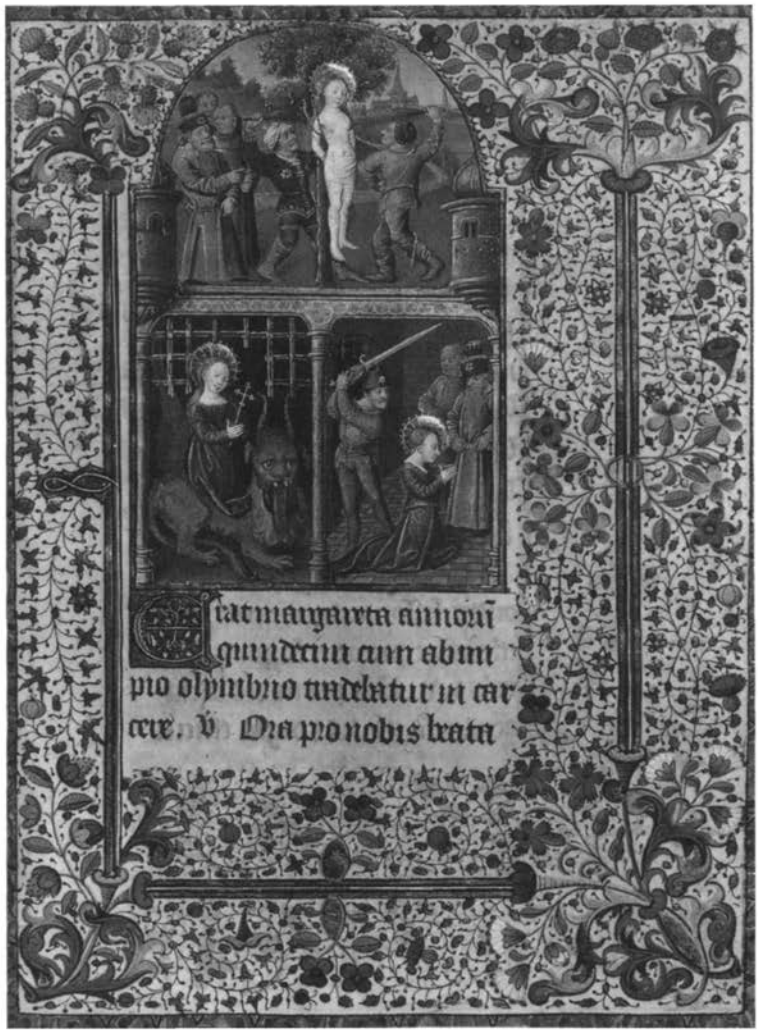

Figure 5: The Martyrdom of St. Margaret, Fol. 180r, Walters Art Gallery W274 (Book of Hours), by Coëtivy Master, 1460s. Photo: The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

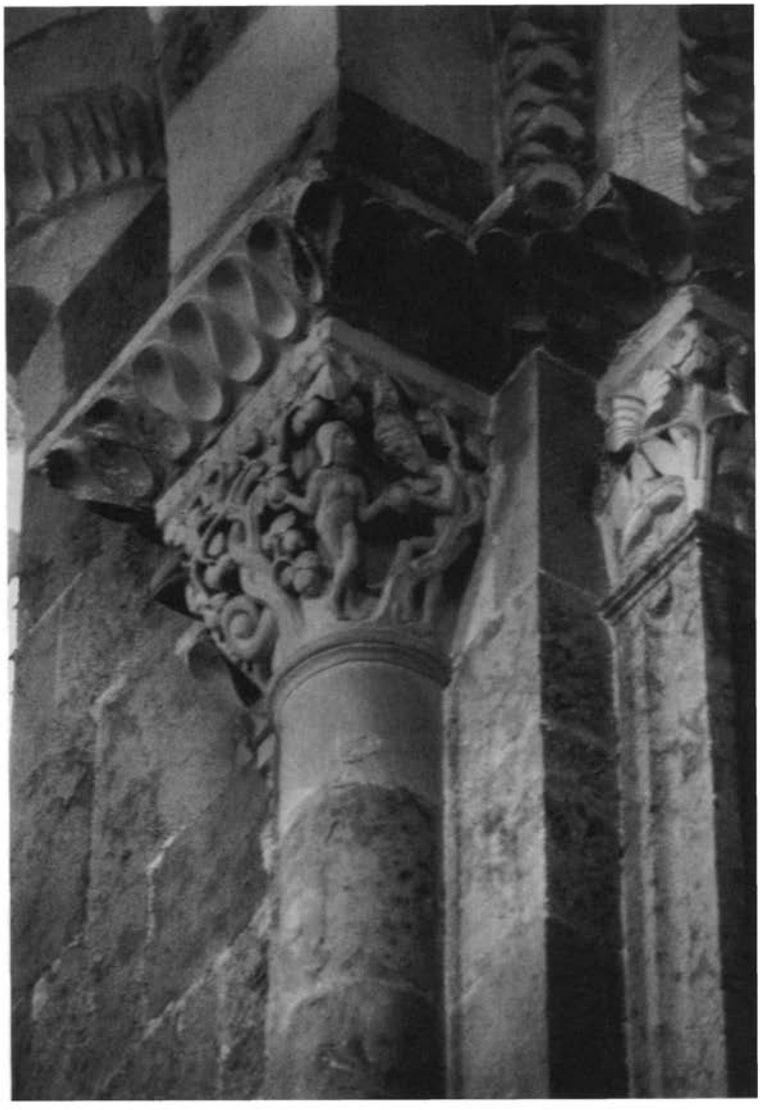

Figure 6: Temptation of Adam and Eve, clerestory capital, La Madeleine, Vézalay, c. 1120. Photo: Christine Havice.

Figure 7: The Shared Task, misericord, Notre-Dame, Rouen Cathedral. Photo: After H. Kraus, *The Hidden World of Misericords* (NY: Braziller, 1975).

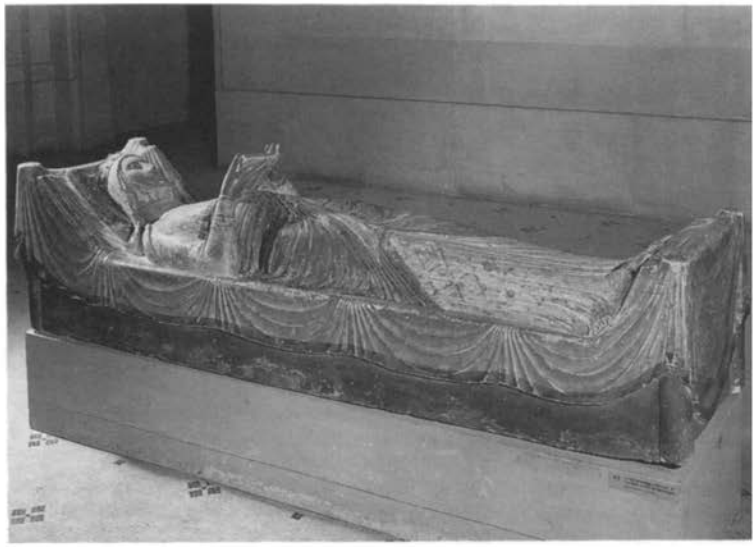

Figure 8: Eleanor of Aquitaine, tomb effigy, Abbey Church of Fontevrault, XIIIth century. Photo: Art Resource.

Figure 9: Nuns of the Convent of the Virgin of Good Hope (Constantinople/ Istanbul), fol. 12r, Lincoln College ms. gr. 35 (Typikon), 1340s. Photo: Oxford, Lincoln College.

Figure 10: Hildegard's Vision of *Caritas*, fol. 1v, *De operatione Dei*, Lucca, Biblioteca Statale ms. 1942, XIIIth century. Photo: Lucca, Biblioteca Statale, with permission of the Ministry for Cultural and Environmental Heritage (all rights reserved).

Figure 11: Lenten cloth with Crucifixion and St. Elisabeth of Hungary, from the Convent of Altenburg-an-der-Lahn, second quarter of the XIVth century. Embroidery, linen on linen, 393.7 x 149.9 cm. Copyright The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund, 1948.352.

Figure 12: Marcia paints a self-portrait, fol. 37v, New York Public Library, Spencer Ms. 33 (Giovanni Boccaccio, *Des clères et nobles femmes*), c. 1470. Photo: Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lennox, and Tilden Foundations.

APPENDIX

Glossary of Terms

antependium: Latin "hanging before," so a textile or work in metal which hangs or is placed in front of an altar.

attribute: An object or animal held by or accompanying the image of a particular figure, such as a saint, which refers to some quality of that figure or to an event from her/his history.

Book of Hours: A private devotional book of the later Middle Ages, built around the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin and usually including a calendar, the seven penitential psalms, the litany, and suffrages (prayers to saints) as well as other optional texts.

chasuble: a conical or bell-shaped cloak, partially sewn up the front, leaving an opening for the head, worn as the outermost garment by the priest in celebrating the Eucharist.

colophon: An entry at the end of a manuscript which provides information on its fabrication. A colophon may include name and information on the copyist(s), commissioner or organizer of the scriptorium, and others involved in its production such as miniaturists, and the date and location, among other useful data.

convention, conventionality: A socially-constructed shorthand representation of or stereotype for a more complex visual form or message. Regularly medieval artists use conventions to represent abstract concepts; one example might be hierarchical size, where a more important figure is represented as larger than less important ones.

A nimbus or halo is another example of conventionality, representing sanctity or divinity.

genre: From the Latin "type" or "kind," a word used in art discourse after the sixteenth century to refer to types of subject matter, such as still life, landscape, or portraiture. Subsequently, a more restricted refrence to humble, homey, and quotidian subjects such as found among Dutch painters of the seventeenth century.

icon: Greek "image," so originally any type of visual representation; post-medieval usage designates an icon as a panel painting of devotional content.

iconography: The meaning of visual form, historically and socially constructed and usually operating on several levels simultaneously.

iconology: The longitudinal study of iconography, its changes and adaptations through time and the relationship of those to external events and ideas.

mariolatry: Greek "devotion to Maria," thus any aspect of Christian Marian devotion or the cults which develop from it.

misericord: Latin "mercy," a wooden half-seat in later medieval church choirs against which canons and monks could lean during long services and which grew to be elaborately carved on the underside so that, when folded up and not in use, a wealth of sculpture would be visible in the choir. The subject matter ranged widely and could include secular as well as religious iconography.

opus anglicanum: "English work," referring to the embroidery tradition of stitching in silk and gold thread on linen, incorporating pearls and precious stones, worked in the underside couching technique. It generally indicates fine ecclesiastical needlework and reached its apex in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Passion: From the Latin, "to endure, suffer," to describe the final events in the life of Christ, from the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday through his death on the cross; by extension, the heroic sufferings prior to death of Christian martyrs.

pericopes: A liturgical book which re-arranges the Gospel texts in the sequence used as readings or lections for the Mass and services.

reliquery: A container, usually elaborate, for relics, which can be the physical remains of a saints or deities or a personal item once belonging to them such as the Tunic of the Virgin at Chartres, or an object sanctified by their proximity such as the True Cross. Reliqueries served both to protect fragile relics and to demonstrate devotion of the faithful through the expense and quantity of decoration.

scriptorium: A copying school, at first in monasteries, later also independent in urban settings, for duplicating extant and making new manuscripts. These might also be illuminated or decorated, depending on type of manuscript, destination, and resources of the commissioner.

tympanum: The semi-circular or lunette-shaped space remaining between the top of a church door and the arch above it; from the Romanesque period onward, filled with relief sculpture of iconographic significance, particularly over principal portals.

typikon: In Byzantium, the foundational cartulary for a monastery or convent, containing regulations for its operation and other terms stipulated by the donor.

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