

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE

1. Name 8 famous historical figures who lived at any time between the year 1 C.E. and 1500 (approximately).
2. Name any famous women who lived in those times.
3. Why were the women famous?
4. Why were the men famous?
5. Whether you know a lot of history or a little, do you think women or men have contributed more to great events, changes, inventions etc. in history? You need *not* give any reasons – just say whether you think men or women have contributed more.
6. Comment on the following.

Even as a child I liked history. Even if it was boring – well – not too boring. Some old history books were ghastly, pages and pages of facts, written by stuffy pedants.

When I went to University I studied as much history as I could – mainly because I got good grades and the study was not a chore for me. When I graduated it was only natural that I should teach history.

I have been teaching history for fifteen years. In all that time it never occurred to me to question why there were so few outstanding women in history. Few that is, by comparison

to men. I just took it to be the way things were.

It was the women's movement of the 60s and 70s that started me asking questions about the role that women played in life.

I had always known that throughout history and in all cultures women as a group had been denied access to education and the agencies of power. Although I knew this was unjust and I knew the reasons for it, I really did not understand why – not really understand.

It was only when I married and started a family that I realised just how much time and how much emotional, physical and psychological energy is required to bear and raise a child.

Thinking about any time in history, except for the last several decades, and then only in modern industrialised countries, child-bearing was always dangerous for women. Parish records from the Middle Ages show that it was not unusual for a woman to have as many as fifteen children in her lifetime – often only four or five might survive to maturity. It meant that for most women all their energies were bound up in having and looking after children and managing a household.

Obviously this does not account for the insignificant place of women in history, but I believe it is the base-board on which all other reasons rest.

- (a) Do you think this passage was written by a man or a woman? Give your reasons.

- (b) The writer believes that one of the main reasons why there have not been many outstanding women in history is because they have had the main responsibility of looking after children. What do you think about this argument?
- (c) List any other reasons you can think of that might explain why women throughout history have not had an equal role in all aspects of life by comparison with men?

GENERAL BACKGROUND

The historian, M.I. Finley, in his book *Aspects of Antiquity*,⁹ describes women in the Roman Empire as always being in the power of and under the authority of a male – a father, brother or husband. Until late in Roman history, women were not even given their own individual name – they had names like Claudia, Julia and Livia, which were feminine forms of the family name. If there was more than one daughter, they were known as the Younger and the Elder etc.

In all cultures of the Ancient World, the fields of activity in which women could freely participate were severely restricted. Therefore, it is not surprising that in religion too, it was the same. In some Eastern cults, like the worship of the goddess Isis, women were in charge, but this was exceptional.

Scholars believe that in the earliest Christian communities, women had a comparable place alongside men, though what this equality meant in real terms seems uncertain as documentation and records from those early centuries are at best sketchy. However, scholars point out that within a short space of time, this changed and gradually the equality between men and women as Christian disciples was diminished, with men developing more dominant roles and women more inferior ones.

In these early centuries, there was a development within the Church that had an important effect on the place of women in society, and that was the option to become a nun. By the fourth century, a life of celibacy and virginity became a significant movement within Christianity. At the time, this was vigorously encouraged by Christian writers as a more noble choice of life than that of being married.

Some scholars believe the strong attacks on sexuality (proposed as one of the reasons for becoming nuns and monks) by early Christian writers were anti-feminist. Others have pointed out that for the women who chose this way of life, the option to be celibate was liberating, because it offered them an alternative to being married or single (which was not highly regarded).

For all classes of women who married, there was an inescapable cycle of child-bearing. For more than half the women, death before the age of forty was a common reality. In some classes, more than half were dead before they were thirty-five. Women were



An illustration of Medieval Nuns



A drawing of Medieval Nuns praying the Divine Office in their choir stalls in the convent chapel

worse off than men because of the dangers of childbirth. For lower class women, childbirth and hard work took an even greater toll.

In a family tomb of one noble family in Rome, which was used in the second and third century, 70 wives died before their husbands as opposed to 41 husbands who died before their wives.

By contrast, life in a convent had much to recommend it and many women saw it as a better option than domesticity. It became possible for women who chose this vocation to study, (which was beyond the means of most men and women) and to devote time to develop their spiritual life.

CONVENTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Communities of religious women became a common feature in the Christian West in the Middle Ages.

By the early Middle Ages there were significant numbers of women living in organised monastic

communities (later called convents). Some of these convents became important and influential centres of learning for both men and women. The abbess at the head of these convents controlled and administered the towns and lands surrounding the convent as well as being the leader of any religious order, male or female, which became established in the area. There are significant numbers of women scholars and religious leaders in this period.

By the late Middle Ages, however, a considerable number of convents had fallen into disarray. The control exerted by the abbesses of earlier centuries had been curtailed by the local bishops and other church authorities. Some convents housed women who had not chosen this vocation freely, but had been forced to become nuns because their families could not afford a sufficient dowry to ensure a worthwhile marriage. Others chose to become nuns

because it was an escape from a life of poverty which faced them in the outside world. A small number of nuns were discarded mistresses of influential men who thought it prudent to keep their former favourites shut away and therefore unable to create any trouble.

WITCHCRAFT TRIALS

The persecution of women for witchcraft gives another insight into the way women were perceived in the Middle Ages.

In the early 1300s, a disturbing trend began to emerge. It was the persecution and execution of women for witchcraft, which continued intermittently for about 500 years.

It is difficult to estimate just how many women lost their lives in this way, but it was likely to have been in the hundreds of thousands. (The ratio of women to men accused for witchcraft ranged from 20:1 to 100:1.)

Why were women the main targets of witch hunts?

There have been different theories put forward by historians, anthropologists and psychologists as to why women, almost exclusively, were accused of witchcraft.

Some believe that the witch hunts were a result of the 'general social upheaval of the time'. In other words, because people could not understand the problems and troubles in their society and because they were fearful of the changes and events that were occurring, they looked for causes or scapegoats to blame for their misfortunes; witches became a suitable target for blame.

It is not unusual for people to look for something or some group to blame when things go wrong. In the Middle Ages, events like the Black Death and the Hundred Years' War added to the confusion and distress. (As noted in the unit on the Black Death, Jews and heretical groups like the Albigensians were blamed for the spread of the Plague.)

However, this theory does not fully explain why it

was women in particular who were singled out for persecution.

For some historians, the witch hunts are not regarded as significant in the context of five hundred years of history. Others do not agree, suggesting that they shed considerable light on the place of women in society.

Writers Elizabeth Clark and Herbert Richardson claim that the persecution of women was, among other things, an expression of male anxiety about women's sexual powers and partly a fear of the new status of women as possible equals to men because of the emergence of a new commercial culture. (*Women and Religion*, Harper and Row, 1977). The idea that, even in a small way, women might have financial independence was an unacceptable possibility for most males. In reality, this was a very long way off, but even the hint of loss of power was profoundly disturbing.

Evidence to support the claim that male anxiety about women's sexual power is at the base of the witchcraft persecutions, is to be found in numerous chronicles about witches in the literature of the time.

The most well-known is a handbook written for Inquisitors, by two Dominicans, Henrick Kraemer and Jakob Sprenger, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, (the "Hammer Against Witches"). It was an encyclopedia on demonology which was to be used as a guide for the interrogation and torture of people accused of witchcraft.

The writers claimed that "women were more susceptible to witchcraft because they were light-minded, fickle, feeble in intelligence, quick to waver in faith and were cursed with an almost insatiable sexual desire so that they lusted for intercourse with the Devil. Men, for their part, were instructed to praise God for preserving them from this terrible curse, symbolised by the fact that God had come to earth as a man, this giving men a sort of immunity to such evil."¹⁰

The remainder of the *Malleus* is concerned with details of women's sexuality and, according to Clark and Richardson, is evidence to support their claim that men were fearful of and preoccupied with the sexual powers of women.

The accuracy of these various explanations of the witch hunts is difficult to assess and it is not possible to examine these at any length here; however, it is important to have some knowledge of a persecution of women that persisted for five hundred years.

By the eighteenth century, the witch hunts had almost ended, probably as a result of a combination of things such as:

- the banning of torture to extract confessions;
- a more scientific approach to analysing events and 'unnatural occurrences';
- and, as some scholars claim, a greater acceptance by men of the changing place of women in society.

WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL SOCIETY – OTHER ASPECTS

At the same time as some women were being hunted and persecuted as witches, others were respected and noted for their holiness, leadership and learning.

There were educated women, like Hildegard of Bingen (Germany) who was Abbess of a Benedictine congregation. She was a musician and artist; she wrote hymns, poems, and a morality play as well as writing about medicine, natural history and commentaries on the Gospels. She corresponded at length with four different popes, two emperors, and Henry II of England.

Queen Blanche of Castille was regent for her young son Louis IX of France and was a successful and astute politician. She instituted programs to help the poor and protected Jews from persecution.

Clare of Assisi founded a religious order based on extreme poverty and a strict regime of prayer. The order is still in existence today – the Poor Clares.

Dame Julian of Norwich was an anchoress (a hermit who confines him or herself to their living quarters). She is considered to be one of Christianity's greatest mystics and is studied by scholars, both Christian and non-Christian, to this



Joan is prepared for burning at the stake



A painting of Joan in battle dress at the head of the French troops

day. Some of her writings explored the idea of the 'motherhood of God'.

Catherine of Siena was also a mystic who devoted her life to charity and helping the poor. Although she had little formal education, she dictated an enormous volume of letters to a wide range of people on numerous topics. Like other women in the troubled times of the Middle Ages, she was considered something of a prophet and the conscience of those

in power. She constantly urged rulers and churchmen alike to reform their lives and to care for the people in their charge. Her stamina and energy were legend. It is believed that she played a vital role in convincing the pope to leave Avignon in France and return to the Vatican in Rome.

Joan of Arc was a peasant girl who helped inspire the French army to drive back the English during the Hundred Years' War. Believing she was guided by



A modern sculpture of St Catherine of Siena

heavenly voices, she led the French forces to free the city of Orleans from the English siege and to win other military victories. She was a mystic and spent much time in prayer. French opponents of the new king captured her and sold her to the English. She was tried for heresy and witchcraft and was burned at the stake in 1431. In 1456, a new trial reversed her condemnation and she was acclaimed as a saint.