Gender Studies

Acta Poloniae Historica
94, 2006
PL ISSN 0001 - 6829

Maria Bogucka

WOMEN AND THE ROOTS OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

European culture has two mighty roots: the Judeo–Christian tradition and Graeco–Roman antiquity. The *Bible* on the one hand and the intellectual achievements of ancient philosophers, scientists and writers on the other, have shaped the type of mentality characteristic of the inhabitants of Europe; Europe, of course, should not be treated here as a geographical area, as the Continent, but precisely as a unity of tradition and mentality. The European way of viewing the world, the European systems of values, combinations of convictions and prejudices, often in the form of stereotypes, spring from one common stem with two powerful roots. It is from them that over the ages grew the magnificent great tree producing many leaves and multi–coloured flowers. They did not, however, fall away from their common trunk that principally determined their shapes and colours.

The *Bible*, that is the so–called *Old* and *New Testaments*, is a bestseller of all times. This book, translated into all the languages of the world in an enormous number of copies, is to this day breaking all the records of popularity, inspiring the attitudes and convictions of endless generations. The origins of the *Old Testament* are lost in the darkness of mystery that envelops the core of its message: the extraordinary Covenant contracted by God with Man. Its individual books and fragments were created over many centuries, written down or transmitted orally by various authors for various purposes: historical (commemoration of the most important events in the history of Israel), prophetic (noting down of the voices of visionaries and their forecasts), religio–didactic (the *Psalms*, sapiential texts, e.g. Solomon's maxims). Their authors, even if we admit they were inspired by God,

were men — although some researchers support the thesis that women also participated in the creation of the *Bible*, e.g. the authorship of the *Song of Songs* is sometimes attributed to a woman. However, it was mainly men who wrote down the biblical texts, commented on them and transmitted them to their recipients, who were also principally of the male sex.

In biblical times the later Jews, called Hebrews or Israelites in that era, formed pastoral tribes that lived in the lands of the present state of Israel; these tribes were organized on a patriarchal principle, that is with the dominant position of males both in the family and society. Thus the *Old Testament* arose within the framework of patriarchal culture from which the elements of matriarchy were already disappearing. The supernatural inspiration of the authors was filtered through the minds shaped in the concrete conditions of their tribal–pastoral existence. In order to understand the great abstract Being — Jahve — the people of the *Old Testament* described Him according to their own abilities and ideas — hence sprang the unavoidale masculinization of God and His identification with the patriarchal figure of the Father. However, the Biblicists draw attention to the fact that the biblical images of the Divinity, apart from paternal traits show also some maternal features. This is the way they interpret Chapter XI of the *Book of Hosea*, speaking of God as the Mother of the chosen nation who fed it and carried it in Her arms. This is also clearly exemplified by the Icon of Divine Wisdom, which is clearly of feminine gender (both in the Hebrew original and in the Greek translation — Sophia). These accents were, however, effaced by time, among other things because of the successive translations of biblical texts from Hebrew into other languages, as well as the addition of commentaries; as a result people, being unable to break away from the forms of their own existence and ideas connected to it, endowed God with gender in an absurd way, making Him in the image of Man.

The socio–cultural context of the rise of the *Bible* was bound to bear upon the position of woman on the pages of its *Books*[1]. Biblical descriptions are focussed on men and their actions,

[1] More extensively on that subject, see: Josy Eisenberg, *La femme au temps de la Bible*, Paris 1993; Elżbieta Adamiak, *Milcząca obecność. O roli kobiety w Kościele (The Silent Presence. On the Role of the Woman in the Church)*, Warszawa 1999; *Kobieta w nowym wieku (Woman in the New Age)*, collective work ed. by Jacek Bolewski SJ, Kraków 2001.

women appear somewhere in the background, they are frequently nameless, as if they were not worth careful attention or mention. This corresponds with the situation of women in biblical times; subject to the rule of father and husband, limited in her options and rights, treated as an object, sometimes in a brutal way (in the conditions of polygamy, where women were ordered about by males in the family as if they were their personal property, and sometimes were practically raped), woman gained a better status only due to maternity. Hence the great tragedy of the infertile matriarchs of Israel: Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, is the main thread of the *Book of Genesis*, focussed on the problem of ensuring the continuity of Abraham's family. In those times the birth of a child, and the possession of numerous and healthy offspring was of paramount importance, and success in this respect could not be achieved without women.

The authors of the *Bible* do not confine themselves, however, to the depiction of the fate of the three matriarchs. The pages of the *Old Testament* show many figures of outstanding women — energetic, wise and heroic, who played a considerable role in the history of their people. Beautiful Esther risks her life to save her nation, bringing about the ruin of its foe, Haman; courageous Judith saves the town of Bethulia, inveigling Holofernes to her tent, and after making him drunk, cutting off his head; Jael also deceitfully kills the foe of Israelites, Sisera. The heroism of these women, the sacrifice they made for their people, was extolled not only in Israel; they went down in the European tradition as courageous heroines inspiring many works of artists, writers, painters, poets and dramatists. Later, in medieval and early modern times, they started to be perceived not so much as the personification of courage and patriotism but as the symbol of treacherous femininity, using their charm and beauty in order to ruin men. In some cases the biblical description itself suggests the condemnation of the excessive courage and adventurousness of women. In the *Book of the Judges* there is a story about a woman who saved the city of Thebez from the siege of Abimelech. A nameless woman was said to throw on the head of the enemy a big millstone. Abimelech, mortally wounded, was not so sorry because of losing his life as because of the shame of being killed by a woman, and asked his servant to finish him off, so that rumour would not have it that his death was caused by a female. The

author of the text seems to sympathise with Abimelech — at any rate, he certainly does not praise the woman who rendered such great services to her town and its inhabitants.

In Israel, in contrast to other religions, women were not admitted to priesthood. This might have been caused precisely by the example of those religions, because the functioning of priestesses in the temples of Egypt, Babylon, etc, was combined with their sexual services. However, in Israel there were many prophetesses, leaders of the nation who showed their people the right way of action. When God through the mouth of prophet Micheas demanded Israel's gratitude for being led out of the land of bondage, He at the same time reminded this nation "I gave you Moses, Aaron and Miriam as leaders"[2]. Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, appears here as a person equal to Moses and Aaron who together with them leads her nation to the Promised Land. Miriam was a prophetess equal in status to the greatest prophets of Israel. Another famous prophetess was Deborah who foretold Israel's victory over its enemy — King Sisera. Deborah was at the same time a judge, a fact which confirms her unusually high status in society. The third famous woman–prophetess was Huldah, who competed with her contemporary prophet Jeremiah; it was her that the King of Judah Josiah asked for advice and instructions, which he greatly prized, although she was a woman. When during the reconstruction of the Temple of Jerusalem the *Book of the Law* was discovered, the King asked Huldah about the wrath of Jahve, foretold in that book, and it was she who explained how the Covenant with Jahve should be renewed. The group of prophetesses also includes Anne, a servant in the Temple of Jerusalem who recognized the Messiah in Christ.

But it was not only the prophetesses who enjoyed respect. There are scenes in the *Old Testament* that testify to the existence in Israel of wise women endowed with authority, whose advice was sought by men in crucial moments. Let us cite the story about the rebellious city of Abel–Beth–Maacah, besieged by the army of King David. A woman climbs on top the wall and asks to speak to the commander of the assailant army, Joab. When he comes to meet her, she rebukes him for his design to ruin a city which is part of the inheritance from Jahve. Joab demands the life of Sheba — the leader of the rebels and the woman promises to

[2] *Micah* 6, 3–4.

deliver him. Following her advice, the inhabitants of the city cut off Sheba's head and cast it in front of Joab. This way the city is saved. We should admire the way this woman was able to quench the conflict between the two parties. Joab negotiates with her as if she were his equal; the inhabitants of the town obey her instructions. A woman whose name is not known, who had no other power except for her personal authority, solves the conflict. Similar power and wisdom is represented in the *Bible* by the nameless woman of Endor who advised Saul and raised his spirits when the patriarch broke down because of Jahve's wrath. It appears that some women in biblical times were equal to, and sometimes even surpassed men in wisdom, and at least some of them were able to influence the course of important events.

And yet in this patriarchal society the status of woman was much lower than that of man. Let us cite another picture, perpetuated in the *Bible*. Jephthah, the leader of Israelites, before his encounter with the Ammonites, for his victory promises God to make to Him a burnt offering of the first creature who greets him at home. When he entered the door, his only daughter flew to meet him, enthusiastic about her father's success, dancing and beating the drums. Jephthah tears his clothes, and bemoans the fate of his daughter, but does not try to release himself from his vow by making a vicarious offering, as it was frequently done at that time. God does not intervene for the sake of the girl, as he did in the case of Isaac, son of Abraham. Jephthah's daughter, whose name was not even handed down in the *Bible*, does not defend herself, does not try to avoid her horrible fate, she even encourages her father to keep his vow. Symbolically, she opens the gigantic procession of thousands and millions of women, who with utmost humility and without protest succumbed to their difficult, sometimes tragic fate.

The *Bible* devotes a lot of attention to the wives of foreign extraction. The *Books of Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, describing the return of the Israelites from captivity, carry a warning that mixed marriages are a threat to the language and tradition and the "mixed seed" leads to the contamination of Israel's progeny. This dislike of the female strangers reveals the acknowledgement of the great role of women in the transmission of tradition, faith and language; without them Israel would not be able to preserve its identity. When Ezra is reading the *Book of Divine Law*, he

transmits it to the whole people of Israel, that is both men and women. This shows that the notion of "the people" in the *Bible* embraces both men and women and that the latter are also able to understand the Divine Law.

Nevertheless, the legislation of the *Pentateuch*, in a way characteristic of patriarchal culture, views the woman in the first place through the prism of her sexuality. The law contained in the *Bible* condemned sexual molestation and rape (frequently committed in reality), opposed marriage with women of other nations (with the exception of marriages with war–captives), forbade marriage with relatives, (with the exception of those arranged according to the law of the levirate). The gravest sin against marriage was adultery. The *Pentateuch* contains several passages devoted to that problem, but they analyse only the guilt of the wife. The unfaithful man, in the light of these texts, was not committing a sin against his wife, but against the husband of the wife with whom he had illicit intercourse. The law clearly defends the rights of the husband who, as a result, can control the sexuality of his wife, and it is never the other way round. A man who starts loathing his wife can accuse her of the lack of the "sign of virginity" at the beginning of their marriage and if her parents do not prove her chastity, she will be stoned. If the accusation was unjust, the man, on the other hand, was only threatened by flogging. A man could also obtain a divorce only because he discovered in his wife "something repulsive".

We have already come across a vow in the story of Jephthah's daughter. This was a frequent form of pious practices. The *Book of Leviticus* designates the size of payment offered in the Temple for the redemption of a vow. It was supposed to be "the equivalent of a person", and usually the value of a woman was half that of a man. A woman's vow was valid only if no opposition to it was raised by the man in whose charge she remained (that is father, brother or husband). So even in relation to God a woman was not considered to be an independent person, and represented little worth. Thus we need not wonder that in the *Prayer of 18 Blessings* a Jew thanks God that He did not make him a woman.

The fragment of the *Bible* that fuels our imagination most and has been cited most frequently over the centuries is the description of the creation of man. Actually, it consists of two texts, written at different times, included in the *Book of Genesis*, despite

the difference in their intellectual standard. The first, earlier, called "the Jehovist's text" (for the author uses the name Jahve for God) goes back to the 10th century B.C. This is a colourful story of folk character about the creation of Adam from the dust of the ground and Eve from his rib, and later about the temptation of Eve by the serpent, tasting of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which was punished by driving the first human couple out of Eden. Researchers find in this text elements of myths cultivated also by other peoples (Sumerians, Babylonians), such as a magic Garden of Eden, with gentle though wild animals, and an attempt to steal the Divine Secret. Actually, only the issue of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is original. The other text, which goes back to the 5th–6th centuries B.C. is called by researchers the *Story of the Elohist*. The author, called the Elohist, uses for God the name of *Elohim*. He is a theologian who does not present the details of the naive legend about the "technique" of creating human beings, but presents the essence of the matter in few but quite unequivocal words: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them". Thus both man and woman have been created in the image of God, the act of creation does not record the idea of the subjection of one gender to another, a human being is created, regardless of his/her sex, directly by God, created by Him and directly connected with Him[3].

Certainly, the second, more intellectual and less fantastic description of the act of creation did not enjoy such popularity with the readers of the *Bible*, as the imaginative story of the Jehovist. One can even say that it was ousted by the colourful, naive and easily assimilated story, which from the very beginning was interpreted as proof of a woman's inferiority. Everything here testifies against Eve. She was created after Adam, from his rib, almost for his amusement. On top of that it was she who picked the fatal fruit and gave it to Adam to taste. It was because of her sin that they were driven out of Eden; it was her act that brought death to humankind, made man toil for his bread in the sweat of his face, made herself give birth to children in pain and subjected her to the rule of man. Many generations of women, weighed down by the legend of their worse creation out of the man's rib, were to atone for ages for the sin committed by their first Mother Eve.

[3] *Genesis*, ch. I, 1–2, 4.

It took many centuries before new interpretations of the Jehovist's story had arisen. One of them was recently presented in "Tygodnik Powszechny" by the renowned researcher of the *Bible*, Harold S. Kushner. He considers this fragment of the *Old Testament* as a literary description of the evolution of the human species consisting in the rise of human beings from the animal level, connected, among other things, with the birth of conscience and free choice. In this interpretation Eve is not a sinner but the one who leads Adam to humanity, teaching him to make his choice. The history of the Garden of Eden is not one of the fall, but of the emergence of humanity — we read in this beautiful and wise essay. If Adam and Eve had not eaten the fruit and God had not driven them out of Eden, they would have led an idle life in Paradise, without any effort, without striving for any aim. There would not have arisen any civilization and the grass around the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil would grow so high, it would cover it completely from view[4].

The *New Testament* brings a new view of the woman. The frequent careful analyses of the texts of the *Gospel* show — as many researchers say — that in Jesus' attitude to women we cannot discover any traces of discrimination against them. He liked to stay in their company, they were among his friends and disciples (Martha and Mary, Mary Magdalen). He had a long conversation with the Samaritan woman near a well, and, what is more, he conveyed to her the salutary message. Women were the first to learn of His Resurrection and were told to inform the Apostles of it. Many researchers say that apart from the group of Jesus' male disciples, there was also a group of female ones, headed by Mary Magdalen, called the Apostle of Apostles[5]. A woman's position in the rising Christianity was, however, called into question by St Paul. Brought up in the patriarchal culture of Judaism, the extreme circles of which believed that even the touch of a woman was impure, he transmitted some notions of that culture to early Christianity. The prohibition of talking, obliging the women in church to silence, the emphasis on a woman's subjection to the rule of her husband, the obligation to ask

[4] Harold S. Kushner, *Co się naprawdę zdarzyło w ogrodzie Edenu? (What did actually happen in the Garden of Eden?)*, "Tygodnik Powszechny", 13.04.1997.

[5] Rev. A. J. Skowronek, *Po stronie prawdy (On the Side of the Truth)*, "Tygodnik Powszechny", 16.04.2000; Carla Ricci, *Mary Magdalene and Many Others. Women who Followed Jesus*, Minneapolis 1994.

her husband at home, when she wanted to know something, comprised in Paul's epistles and teachings were due to the fact that he transmitted the old way of viewing the world and solving its problems to the new, and still unconsolidated community of the followers of Christ. In the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* we read that man is the image and reflection of God, and woman is the reflection of man. Man is not derived from a woman but she from him; man was not created for a woman, but she for him. This formulation follows precisely the old description of the Jehovist's, and completely ignores the exposition of the Elohist. On the other hand, the teachings of St Paul lack consistency. In his *Epistle to the Galatians* he says: "... there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus"[6]. And indeed, initially there was no discrimination against women in Christian communities, they even performed the function of deaconesses (St Paul mentions deaconess Phoebe in one of his *Epistles*, commending her to the care of his co–religionists). Nevertheless, as these communities developed, changes occurred in the position of women that were unfavourable to them and led to their marginalization.

This direction was followed not only by the Judaic tradition but was also the effect of the influence of the Graeco–Roman world that surrounded the first Christians. The culture of ancient Greece and Rome, the second "root" of European culture, was very patriarchal and unfavourable to women. Only in the earliest, archaic period, can we find in Greece the traces of matriarchy, and a high, dominating position of the woman in the family and society. These elements survived in some legends and myths (for example the myth of the Amazons). On the other hand, Olympus is in principle organized on the model of a patriarchal, hierarchical family, with paternal Zeus — the absolute ruler — although his relations with his wife Hera are complicated and they do not always testify to the unequivocal dominance of her husband. On Olympus there are also a lot of goddesses, with considerable power at their disposal, be it Venus — the goddess of love — who rules both over gods and people, or the powerful goddess of wisdom — Athena (who sprang out of the head of Zeus just as Eve was created of Adam's rib). Ancient Greece of Pericles' times

[6] *Epistle to the Galatians*, 3, 28.

was a country unfavourable to women. Especially in Athens they were enclosed in their homes, reduced to the role of a submissive wife and mother; their greatest virtues were obedience and child-bearing. Their participation in public life was confined to carrying flowers in religious processions. In Sparta their life was a bit brighter, the position of women in the family was stronger and they had their share in public life, for example by taking part in sports events. But here, too, there was a division into the public sphere, forbidden to women, and the private sphere in which they were enclosed.

The Greeks did not make much of women, considering them to be naive and over-inquisitive, which led to various mishaps. Despite prohibition, Pandora opens the box, equally light-mindedly as Eve who picked the forbidden fruit. Psyche tresspasses against the order not to look at the face of Cupid. Such frivolous beings had to be subjected to the control of a man — father, husband or brother. The greatest philosophers: Plato, Aristotle, treated women as beings of an inferior category, as if they were formed of different matter from men. It is true that Plato admitted that a woman might have the same abilities as man, but nevertheless she was a "second hand" creature. Aristotle said with open contempt that a woman was an "abortive male", a mistake of Nature. The Greeks thought it impossible to have an intellectual contact with women, with the exception of educated and brilliant prostitutes — *hetaerae*, who deserved to be conversed with and to take part in social life. A married woman was supposed to give birth to children and run the house, she was not treated as a partner and companion in life. At any rate, there was preference in Greece for homosexual unions, (a man coupled with a woman solely for the sake of procreation). Such types of union also thrived among women — to mention the great Greek poetess Sapho, who lived with a group of female friends and pupils on the Isle of Lesbos, from which is derived the term of Lesbian love. Olympus itself also provided the models of homosexual behaviour (Zeus and Ganymede, Apollo and Hyacinthus). In Greek mythology we seldom come across love between man and woman, although we find there the beautiful issue of Orpheus and Eurydice.

In Greek literature the attitude to women evolved in an unfavourable direction, which was certainly the reflection of

changes in mentality and social life. In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, we still find many heroines with interesting, diversified characters, who played an important role in the events described in these two epics. In Homer's poems there is no misogynic atmosphere, although the Trojan war broke out because of a woman — beautiful Helena — and there are many treacherous women in the poem who bring about the ruin of men (Calypso, who detained Odysseus for 7 years, demonic Circe, who transformed his companions into swine). The poem presents the frequently tragic fate of women who are treated as objects, dependent on the changing fortunes of their husbands — wives, concubines and raped captives. Side by side with the unhappy, though courageous Andromacha and Hecuba, however, there also appear victorious women who are able to overcome the adversities of fate — beautiful Nausicaa saves Odysseus after a shipwreck, faithful and wise Penelope is able to outwit her suitors and wait to see her husband's return. A whole gallery of women has been presented in the poem with admiration and sympathy, never with malice.

As time elapsed, however, Greece was to bear a literature which chose women as the favourite target of attack. Though Sophocles and Aeschylus contemplate with sympathy the tragic fate of the bereft mother — Niobe — in the 7th century B.C., the satirist Semonides of Amorgus would derive women from impure animals: swine, asses and dogs, and the great historian Hesiodus would declare that a woman is the essence of evil, created by Zeus as a trap for mortals. No wonder that Euripides makes Iphigenia, who resolves to make a sacrifice, say characteristic words: "the death of a man is a loss to the home — a woman is a trifling thing"[7].

The Romans took over the myths, religion and philosophy of the Greeks. The Roman Olympus is even more patriarchal than the Greek, the goddesses clearly play here a secondary role in comparison to the male gods. An original contribution of Rome to the culture of Antiquity was the law — and this law clearly discriminates against women who were excluded from public life and subjected to the rule of their fathers, then husbands. *Ubi tu Gaius, ibi ego Gaia* — was the official text of the marriage vow in

[7] *Ifigenia w kraju Taurów (Iphigenia in Tauris)*, trans. J. Łanowski, in: Eurypides, *Tragedie*, ed. J. Łanowski, Warszawa 1980, p. 286; see also Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Die Töchter des Zeus. Frauen in alten Griechenland*, München 1992.

Rome. In Roman Law a woman is not treated as a subject but as an object, with limited possibilities of making decisions about her property, her own person, as well as her children, who belonged to their father. Of course, ancient Rome had much respect for matrons, the mothers of the family, considered to be the priestesses of the family hearth; it recognized their right of rule over the servants and slaves. But the field of a woman's existence was enclosed by the four walls of her home. Let us cite a Roman epitaph of the 2nd century B.C., devoted to certain Claudia: "She loved her husband with her whole heart, children she bore two... Graceful in her speech, she moved with dignity. Took care of her home and span the wool. That is all. Please, go now"[8].

Thus, it was only home, husband and children, nothing more. The exclusion from the public sphere is here even more categorical than in biblical times. The Roman literature, just as the Greek one, is full of strong misogynic accents. In Ovidius' popular work about the art of love we find contemptuous remarks about women pictured as objects for pleasure only as well as an apology of rape. It was in Antiquity that unfavourable stereotypes of women were born, (for example Xanthippe — a synonym of a stupid shrew), which survive to this day. Greek and Roman mythology gave birth to the associations of femininity with the notion of evil. The terrifying Erinyes who chase criminals and Medusa with serpents in her hair whose eyes kill her victims, were both of the female gender. There can be no doubt that the coupling of the *Old-* and *New Testament* tradition with the influence of Greek and Roman culture was at the root of the growing disfavour to women and discrimination against them in medieval and early-modern times.

The formation of New Europe after the downfall of Rome did not change the disadvantageous situation of women. The changes in social life and civilization that occurred in that period were linked to the rapid development and legalization of Christianity (the edict of toleration issued by Emperor Galerius, and the pro-Christian policy of Emperor Constantine, crowned in 313 by the Edict of Milan, declaring the freedom of worship). Christianity embraced all the basin of the Mediterranean Sea (Italy, Spain), it spread among the barbarian Germanic tribes, also in Egypt, Asia

[8] Cited after Z. Kubiak, *Kobiety antyku (Women in Antiquity)*, "Wysokie obcasy", 3.04.1999; see also Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women*, Cambridge 2006.

Minor, Syria, Greece, exerting great influence on their cultures, systems of values and social life. At the same time there arose the forms of organization of Christianity: dioceses, metropolises, patriarchates, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy was taking shape. It consisted of deacons, priests, bishops, recruited solely from the male members of Christian communities.

At the turn of the 3rd century A.D. there appeared a very strong movement towards eremitic and ascetic life. Anchorites settled in secluded places, eating plant roots and insects, renouncing any contact with women, regarding any kind of sex as a sin. The repugnance to sex, at any rate, appeared also in some circles in Antiquity; for example the stoics preferred abstinence and celibacy to marriage, and Sophranus, the physician of Emperor Hadrian, allowed physical love only for the sake of procreation. Christianity took up this repugnance to sex and started to propagate the cult of virginity. St Paul put it openly "He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord". St Augustine (the turn of the 4th century) warned that nothing degrades the spirit of man more than a woman's caresses and sexual contact. The condemnation of physical love led to a growing detestation of woman seen as a temptress and offender of pious feelings. The hermits, exhausted by ascetic life, were tormented by visions of seductive females who persuaded them to commit a sin (the famous temptation of St Jerome at the turn of the 4th century). Although St Clement of Alexandria (the beginning of the 3rd century) regarded conjugal life as chaste and possible to reconcile with the principles of Christian existence, there was a growing general feeling that celibacy is a higher, better form of life. Hence a demand was being gradually put forward for the celibacy of the clergy. The successive synods accepted resolutions in this matter, which were, however, difficult to put into practice. Finally, a reform of the Church in this respect was taken up by Pope Leo IX in the 11th century, and later by Gregory VII. The Second Lateran Council (1139) acknowledged the higher orders (that is the orders of the priests) as an obstacle to marriage, the clergy was called upon to send away their wives, the believers were forbidden to take part in the services celebrated by married priests. The principle of celibacy was adopted in the Western Church also because of the fear of the depletion of ecclesiastical property by

being inherited by the children of the priests. The Eastern (Orthodox) Church retained the marriages of the clergy. At any rate, in the Western Church the introduction of celibacy met with much resistance, and it was not put into general practice until the 15th–16th century.

The depreciation of sexual life and marriage had a very bad effect on the attitude to women. The first mother Eve was more and more strongly condemned as the one who had led to the fall of man. She was becoming ever more unilaterally the symbol of sin. Every woman was her inheritor, a living impersonation of evil, also that associated with the sphere of condemned sexuality.

The early–Christian philosophers who gained the title of the Fathers of the Church disliked and distrusted women just as the philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome had done. Clement of Alexandria, mentioned above, (the beginning of the 3rd century), although he did not condemn marriage, thought that every woman should detest the fact that she is a female. At the turn of the 2nd century Tertullian wrote: "You (the woman — MB) have so easily brought about the ruin of man who was made in the image of God. Even the Son of God had to die for your sins. You are the chamber of the Devil"[9]. Origen (about 185–about 254) had himself castrated so as not to yield to temptation. Negative opinions about women were also developed by St Augustine (354–450), the great authority who bore upon the whole ages of Christian philosophical thought. As a neo–Platonist he was convinced that the main role in the transmission of life is played not by a woman but by man; she is merely a vessel serving to cultivate the male seed. According to Augustine man and woman are equal at the level of soul, but not of the body. He also declared for the division of roles, with the active one reserved for man, born to be a ruler; a woman's role was to be passive and subordinate. In St Augustine's life a great role was played by his mother, St Monica. Curiously, she combined the tendency to dominate her son with submissiveness towards her husband, whose brutality she had to suffer. It was under her influence that St Augustine, after a dozen–odd years of common life with his concubine, sent her away and deprived her of her child.

[9] Cited after E. Adamiak, *Milcząca obecność*, p. 47.

Augustine's views were later developed (in the 13th century) by St Thomas Aquinas who thought that the image of God was only impersonated in man. God is the beginning and the aim of man, while the beginning and the aim of a woman is man — he said.

Thus Christianity at the early stage of its existence began to develop a rather negative opinion of women and started to treat them with contempt. This prepared the ground for the establishment of their low social and political position in the new states arising on the ruins of the ancient Roman Empire. An important role in the shaping of relations prevailing in those states was also played by the pagan religions and systems of values professed by the Germanic tribes whose invasions had led to the downfall of Rome (finally in 455 A.D.). Among the Germans the main social roles were played by male warriors; women took care of their households and worked in the fields together with slaves. The Germans worshipped the forces of Nature, sacrifices were usually made by the fathers of the families, and the tribal elders. Only here and there did appear priests and even priestesses. In the mythology of Germanic tribes, however, both southern and northern — Scandinavian, supernatural female beings (demons) played a significant role. Among them were the so–called Valkyries, who served the principal deity, Odin (who appeared among southern Germans under the name of Woden), and escorted the killed warriors to Valhalla — the dwelling place of the dead. One of the Valkyries was Brynhild, famous for her conflict with Odin. Thus here also, just as in the Greek mythology, we may find the distant repercussions of matriarchy. Even more distinct are they among the Basques, a strange people who have preserved their separate character in the Pyrenean Peninsula to this day. The main figure in the mythology of the Basques was the demon Mara, who appeared in the form of a beautiful young woman (in the Middle Ages sometimes identified with the Virgin Mary)[10].

In general the position of women among the Germanic tribes was not high. The common, traditional law, additionally influenced by Roman Law, restrained their freedom of action. A woman, for example, could not stand as guarantee, a fact that

[10] Rafał Maciszewski, *Mity skandynawskie (Scandinavian Myths)*, Warszawa 1998; Jorge Ruiz Lardizabel, *Mity, wierzenia i obyczaje Basków (The Myths, Beliefs and Customs of the Basques)*, Pruszków 2002.

weakened her economic position. In the case of marriage the husband received her dowry, which he reciprocated by a grant (Germ. *Mitgift*, Lat. *dos, dotalicium*) in the form of land or money. Despite appearances, this was not, however, a purchase of the wife, but the ensurance of the upkeep to a woman[11]. The Germanic family was organized on a patriarchal basis. A woman could not appear independently before the court of justice, could not administer her property, she was also discriminated against by the law of succession — she usually received 1/4 or 1/3 only of her patrimony plus the so–called maternal part. In individual tribes these matters were, at any rate, settled in various ways. Accordingly, the Frankish law said that patrimony should go to the sons, while the daughters inherited the property of their mother. Later *lex salica* excluded women altogether from the inheritance of land (which later resulted in France in the exclusion of women from the succession to the throne, a principle adopted also by other countries, e.g. Poland). In the 6th century the Franks confirmed again the principle that the *dotalicium* was to serve as the ensurance of the upkeep to a widow. A woman could not administer it (this was the role of her guardian), but she was certainly its owner. On the other hand, she had a right to dispose freely of her clothes and jewelry (the so–called *gerada*).

According to the law which functioned among the Saxons, daughters could only inherit if there were no sons. The guardianship of the daughters was exercised not by their mother but by the man who was the next of kin of their deceased father. Regulations were so constructed that a female was throughout her life dependent on a man — her father, husband, brother, in the case of a lack of them — a male guardian. The law of the Lombards forbade a woman to live alone and to lead an independent existence. It was not only because under the conditions of that time she could easily become an object of attack, which she not always could resist. The guardianship imposed on her was sometimes worse than an attack. Only the situation of widows was a bit better; they had more freedom. They usually received a part of their husband's property as a life annuity to provide for their upkeep, which they however lost if they remarried. The Saxon law emphasized that every widow should have

[11] Extensively on that subject see: Edith E n n e n, *Frauen in Mittelalter*, München 1984.

a legal male guardian and this was usually a relative of her deceased husband. The relationships between the guardian and his charge were not always good. Some legal regulations that protected women testify to the conflicts that arose. The Lombard King Rothar's edict (7th century) ensured the freedom of the choice of a new husband to widows. It also said that a girl forced to marriage against her will could question the right of custody of her guardian and go to live with other relatives or seek protection at the royal court. The legislator also forbade the guardian forcing the girl to take the veil (which was frequently done in order to seize her property). King Rothar announced he ensured his protection to women, who could lodge their complaints at his court. The royal protection was very important, especially in view of the frequent forced marriages, (they were sometimes contracted at a very young age of the bride — 12 years) and the resultant possibility of manipulation.

Also in marriage, according to the early–medieval law of the Germans, the situation of women was very difficult. The very fact of leaving one's own family and joining a strange one was connected with frustration and a necessity to assert one's position in a new environment, where a young woman met with disregard, or even ill–feelings, also, and sometimes even especially on the part of women (the husband's mother and sisters who were afraid of losing their influence). A girl who got married was obliged to retain her chastity until wedlock, and a wife to remain unquestionably faithful. Adultery was punished by death. A wife who left her husband was threatened by drowning. On the other hand a husband who left his wife without sufficient reason was only obliged to return to her her *dotalicium* and to pay a moderate fine (12 shillings). Proven unfaithfulness or performance of witchcraft authorized a husband to send his wife away. Only in the case where he left home without any reason, his property would go to his wife and children. If a husband made his wife have intercourse with another man, and she agreed to it — she was threatened by death, but the husband only by a fine paid in money to her relatives, the same as if he murdered his wife.

In a primitive society, with its strict customs, and frequent war turmoil, there was certainly a need for the legal protection of physically weaker persons, such as women. Thus the law pro-

vided some regulations that guarded their interests, for example a punishment for rape. What was at stake here, was, however, rather the defence of the honour of the man (husband, father, brother) than of the woman, personally. The regulations that controlled behaviour in such cases contain a characteristic combination of two categories important to the people of that era — those of gender and social position. Thus for raping a female slave a freeman was to pay twelve shillings to her owner. If the violator was a slave he received 150 blows of a stick. Tearing the kerchief off a free woman's head and pulling her by the hair was subject to a fine of 12 shillings for the offended woman and 12 shillings for the court of justice. The same kind of act done to a female slave was punished only by three shillings for the victim plus three shillings of a court fine. A male slave who attacked a free woman was to get 200 blows of a stick, if he attacked a female slave — only 75 blows.

Treated generally with suspicion and contempt, especially when she was a slave, or even a free person of low social rank, a woman represented one, generally acknowledged value — she was a child-bearer, without whom there was no progeny. Hence the law accorded a high value to a young woman who was at a child-producing age. For killing a woman who was able to give birth to a child *lex salica* charged 600 shillings. *Lex Ripuaria*, for killing a pregnant woman charged 700 shillings. These were enormous sums and very high estimates, especially if we take into consideration that killing a dignitary — a bishop — was punished with 900 shillings and a murder of a common freeman — with 200 shillings. The high price of a woman-mother was actually not the estimate of her person, but of her offspring.

This was also the reason for the severe punishment for abortion. Abortion was treated as homicide. Contraception was an equally serious offence, although it was from ancient times very widespread (various potions, ointments, condoms made of cattle guts, interrupted, oral or anal intercourse).

Valued as a child-bearer, a woman was also appreciated as a worker, as a skilful and indefatigable producer of various goods, without which society would not be able to survive. Women's work was irreplaceable in the household and in the field, in the production of food and clothes. The awareness of the value of a woman's hands finds its reflection in the Frisian Law, which

established an especially severe punishment for hitting the hand of a woman who was weaving cloth. In medieval times Frisia was famous for its excellent textiles which were in great demand on the markets of the whole of Europe of that era.

However, it would be wrong to see the women of early medieval times only as submissive victims, unable to put up resistance, and defend their own interests, or the interests of their families. The middle of the 8th century saw very interesting events in the country of the Lombards: women played an important role in one of the upheavals in the countryside, frequent in those times. The peasants, afraid to act personally, sent their wives and slaves to stand for them in the fight. The women attacked the hostile village, looted it and cruelly disposed of their enemies. The victims made their complaint to King Liutprand, who included his verdict in the *Book of Laws*, so that it would serve in the future as a precedent. The aggressive women were punished by having their heads shaven and being flogged, regardless of their social position. The King announced that no such upheavals organized by females would be tolerated, and their husbands would be charged with fines, since armed uprisings do not become women, but only men[12]. We know, however, that Liutprand's warning was ineffective, since women took part in many upheavals and riots throughout the Middle Ages; especially numerous was their participation in hunger protests, connected with the dearth and shortage of food, to which they were especially sensitive as the providers of their families.

In sum, one must conclude that both the situation of women and their reactions were changing, and depended on many circumstances, on the moment of history and the general situation of various social groups to which they belonged. Especially the combination of gender and social status as well as the position in family structures (unmarried girl, married woman, widow) determined the woman's position and her possibilities in life. The situation of a widow of high social rank was the best; she frequently could demonstrate considerable independence, which, as source records show, was often shocking for her contemporaries. The Duke of Benevento, Aregis (the end of the 8th century) accused widows of licentiousness, using lipstick, taking too much

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 42.

advantage of their freedom, coquetry, and called for shutting them in nunneries.

The turbulent history of the Merovingian dynasty testifies to the fact that women from the upper social strata and especially the courtly circles enjoyed considerable liberties and possibilities. Although the succession to the throne was open only to males, and polygamy and murder of troublesome wives was not an exception, the more energetic wives of Merovingian rulers acquired large influence as a result of their intrigues and scheming. This is exemplified by the forty year civil war due to the conflict between Brunhilda, the Visigoth princess, wife of Sigebert I, King of Austrasia, and Fredegunde, wife of Chilperic I, the ruler of Neustria. Sigebert was murdered in 575 as a result of a plot organized by Fredegunde, but Chilperic did not enjoy his power for long, in 584 he was also murdered. Fredegunde then became a regent for her juvenile son Clotaire II. The feud between the two female rulers competing for the leadership among the Franks lasted till 597 when Fredegunde died. The chronicler of those years, Gregory of Tours, cites numerous crimes committed by Fredegunde and depicts her as an extremely ambitious, ruthless woman in her effort to gain and retain the power. Brunhilda, equally energetic and greedy for fame, survived her rival and died only in 613 at a very advanced (by the standards of her times), age of 78. Her story became the groundwork for the Germanic heroic epic whose final version was written in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century — *The Nibelungenlied*. The epic reconstructs the turmoil of the times of the migration of nations and the conquest of Burgundy. The women extolled in it are greedy for power, formidable warriors who manipulate men; their prototypes were certainly the ancient Merovingian queens preserved in collective memory.

A relatively high position was held by Scandinavian women, among the Vikings. Harold Fairhair who in the 11th century united the Viking tribes in a state that gave rise to Norway had a very energetic grandmother, Queen Aasa, the heroine of many legends and sagas. She was said to have taken part in the murder of her own husband in order to secure the power for her son and later grandson.

In the 10th–11th centuries the importance of women was considerably growing in many courts and centres of power,

especially in the imperial Ottonian circles. The first in the group of magnificent empresses is Adelaide, the daughter of the King of Burgundy, Rudolf II, wife of Lothair II who died in 950. In accordance with the Lombard tradition she had a right to appoint her successor and chose marquis Berengar of Ivrea. However, they soon fell out with each other, and when Berengar tried to force Adelaide to marry him, she escaped from prison and married Otto I, with whom in 962 she was crowned in Rome as Empress. She brought to Otto Italy as dowry. She had great influence on the government, and was called *consors regis, particeps imperii.* Similar influence in the court was exerted by her successor, Empress Theophano, a Byzantine princess married to Emperor Otto II; she was also called *coimperatrix augusta nec non imperii regnorumque consors* — thus a co–ruler and participant in government. When in 996 Otto III set out for Italy, he entrusted regency in Germany to a woman — his aunt Mathilda, a wise abbess of Quedlinburg who had taken an active part in international politics for years. Not only in Germany did the female rulers enjoy great authority and develop large activity. In the 11th century in England a great political role was played by two queens: the daughter of Richard I, Duke of Normandy, Emma, who married King Aethelred II and later Canute the Great and was the mother of Harthacanute and Edward the Confessor, and her daughter–in–law, Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor. It is worth remembering that Emma was for a certain time the regent of Norway on behalf of Canute, thus she was an independent ruler also outside England[13].

We should remember, of course, that these female rulers owed their great power only to the fact that they were wives, widows, or mothers of kings and princes. Their power stemmed from the status they owed to their relations with men, and was not connected to their own persons. Thus we should not treat them as "female kings" but only as ambitious, energetic women who knew how to take advantage of their situation for gaining larger power and respect than that allowed by the general social position of the women of that era.

While analysing the political role of medieval female rulers we should emphasize not only their frequently very high diplo-

[13] Pauline Stafford, *Queen Emma and Queen Edith. Woman Power in XIth C. England*, Oxford 1997.

matic skills and talents for making international deals, but also their great role in the sphere of culture. The future wives of rulers who came to a foreign country to marry the king or prince brought to his court the elements of a different culture, their settlement in a new country favoured the exchange of information and stimulated the formation of different customs. A good example here may be the Bohemian Dobrava and her role in the Christianization of Poland, her great influence on the life and behaviour of Mieszko the First and his court, which is corroborated by chroniclers. The sister of Boleslaus the Brave, Sigrid Storrada, who about 988 married Eric of Sweden, brought about the Christianization of that country; she had also the main formative influence on the young successor to the throne — Olaf. There are more such examples, there were plenty of such persons and events in the Middle Ages. It was the women from the ruling circles who, leaving their family homes and settling in the courts of their husbands, overcame the cultural isolation of individual countries, helped to conclude and consolidate alliances (armed conflicts were frequently quenched by marriage contracts), initiated the processes of mutual understanding, and helped to create the sense of European community. The far-reaching European ideas of the Ottonians developed in the environment of the imperial court where women played a special role; their influence on these ideas must have been considerable.

Apart from the courts, convents were the centres where women in medieval times could find self-fulfilment and an opportunity to develop multifarious activities. The first nunneries arose as early as the second half of the 4th century (the first rule was created by St Benedict's sister Scholastica), and their numbers grew rapidly. They were frequently joined by women from higher social circles who wanted to serve God and also to avoid marriage. Life in a convent offered opportunities for self-fulfilment and both female nunneries and male monasteries were from the very beginning important centres of culture. Ireland, where Christianity developed on the basis of flourishing monasticism, had a special position in the development of religious life. Irish monks carefully saved from oblivion the heritage of ancient culture, e.g. by copying classical ancient authors. In the Irish Church, which rather stood aside from the Roman mainstream, women had a very strong position, much stronger than on the Continent. St

Bridget (452–524), the founder of the convent in Kildare, performed functions close to those of a bishop[14]. Also in neighbouring England there developed powerful female convents at Whitby and Ely. Their founders — St Hilda and St Aethelroda came from royal families, hence their convents were endowed with great landed estates and developed into important centres of culture and science; their abbesses had a large influence on the ecclesiastical and secular policy all over the country.

In the territory of later France, Radegonde, the daughter of the King of Thuringia and wife of the King of Franks Clotaire, at odds with her husband (he killed her brothers), having left the royal court took shelter at Poitiers where she established a convent (soon numbering 200 sisters) and raised The Holy Virgin's Church (today St Radegonde's Church, with her sepulchre). Radegonde was an imperious woman, she did not recognize the sovereignty of the bishop and subjected her convent directly to the sovereignty of the king. She turned Poitiers into a centre of poetry and literature; here, in the shadow of her convent a renowned poet Venetianus Fortunatus wrote, among other things, her biography, in which he extolled this unusual woman. When she died in 587, chronicler and bishop Gregory of Tours recorded numerous miracles which took place during her funeral; directly afterwards, the cult of this new female Saint started to develop.

In early medieval times probably the richest and most powerful female congregation was the Canonesses' Convent in Gandersheim in Germany (near Hildesheim). It was founded by the Bohemian Duke Liudolf, and its Mother Superiors were in succession his three daughters, who gained considerable privileges for this congregation: immunity and a right to the direct protection by the king as well as rich endowments. Throughout a decade the independence of this foundation was a thorn in the side of the bishops and local authorities, disputes were conducted over the jurisdiction concerning the canonesses. In 1028 the verdict turned out to be advantageous to the bishops of Hildesheim. But soon after, in the 12th century, the abbess received the title of the Prince of the Reich and in 1208 the abbey was finally exempted from episcopal rule; the convent was supported by the

[14] Benedykt Zientara, *Historia powszechna średniowiecza (General History of the Middle Ages)*, Warszawa 1968, p. 79.

wealthy families of the whole of Saxony, who placed their daughters there. The canonesses had a number of special privileges: they had a right to dispose of their personal property, were not obliged to permanent residence in the convent, and could easily obtain release from vows if they wanted to get married. In Gandersheim, side by side with the nunnery, there was a male monastery, but composed of monks derived from the burgher estate, which resulted in their dependence on the canonesses. This was a situation which was contrary to the general rule of the domination of monasteries over nunneries. Only in the 15th century did the monks of Gandersheim acquire the right to participate in the election of the abbess. In 1589, as a result of the victory of the Reformation in these areas, the abbey was transformed into an imperial secular foundation, with its own representation in the Parliaments of the Reich. Throughout its history the convent in Gandersheim had its own armed forces and its own court of justice, exercising jurisdiction over a vast area. This was, in fact, a strong though small state, governed by women.

For the Middle Ages nunneries and monasteries were extremely important institutions — they formed a network of cultural centres: they collected and copied books, developed literary and scientific activity, and organized schools. For women they were of double importance, since it was only here they had access to knowledge and could devote themselves to occupations other than those of the household. Schools at that time were open only to the boys, hence the convents were the only places where girls could acquire education. The daughters of noble families were often sent here to take lessons from the nuns. Hand in hand with singing and playing instruments, artistic embroidery, tapestry weaving and painting, they sometimes could learn Greek and Latin, read S e n e c a, P l a t o and the Fathers of the Church, as well as learn the beginnings of history and geography.

The convents were the formative places of the great personalities of woman–thinkers and writers whose intellectual achievements were not second to men. And there were quite a few such cases. In the 7th century in England St Hilda, granddaughter of Edwin, King of Northumbria, and Mother Superior of the convent in Whitby, gained fame as the educator and teacher of bishops (five graduates of her school became bishops, four of whom were canonized), adviser of politicians, sponsor and patroness of

Caedmon, poet of Celtic descent (also canonized). In the 10th century, in Gandersheim, an unusual poetic talent was shown by Hroswitha, the author of subtle poems and dramas, an expert on the classics and the heritage of Antiquity. In the second half of the 12th century the prioress of the convent in Hohenburg in Alsace, Herrada of Landsperg, compiled the first ever encyclopedia entitled *Hortus deliciarum (The Garden of Delight)*; richly illustrated by the author herself, it is a valuable source of our knowledge of medieval life and customs. The earliest poetess writing in German was the recluse Ava, who in the years 1120–1125 created a poem about the life of Christ, based on the *Gospel*, the Apocrypha and folk legends. In the 12th century admiration was gained all over Germany by the renowned Benedictine Hildegard of Bingen, a visionary, mystic, writer and physician[15]. "She surpassed in perspicacity not only philosophers and dialecticians, but even the ancient prophets" — wrote one of her friends, Ludwig of St Eucharius, about her[16]. Hildegard developed an extensive activity, going beyond the traditional roles attributed in her times to women. In the years 1160–1167 she made three long journeys through Germany, appearing in public, speaking to clergymen, monks and laymen, and engaging in the moral reform of the Church. She conducted a lively correspondence — about three hundred of her letters to the Pope, the emperor, bishops and theologians have been preserved. She wrote numerous works in the fields of theology, cosmology, studies of Nature, medicine, and extremely beautiful and spiritually profound poems as well as musical compositions. She was one of the most creative and productive medieval personalities.

The convent was for the women of medieval times the only path leading to intellectual activity. The renunciation of family life and maternity was the price they paid for gaining a possibility of intellectual development, the cultivation of their talents and creative self-fulfilment[17]. There were very few secular authoresses. One was Gertrude, daughter of the Polish King Miesz-

[15] Sabina Flanagan, *Hildegarda z Bingen. Żywot wizjonerki (Hildegard of Bingen. Life of a Visionary)*, Warszawa 2002.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[17] J. Wogan-Browns, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture*, c. 1150–1500, Oxford 2001.

ko II and the German princess Rycheza, educated in a Benedictine convent in Rhineland, and married to the Ruthenian Prince Isaslav of Kiev. In the years 1075–1086 she had written a Prayer Book, the only of its kind, enriched by autobiographical elements[18]. Other female rulers found self-fulfilment rather in political games and the struggle for power. The life of an ordinary woman, of lower social rank, dominated by her male partners in a patriarchal family, was filled by bearing children and hard work in the household.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

[18] Teresa Michałowska, *Ego Gertruda*, Warszawa 2001; Brygida Kürbis, *Modlitwy księżnej Gertrudy z Psałterza Egberta z kalendarzem (The Prayers of Princess Gertrude from Egbert's Psalter with a Calendar)*, Kraków 2002.