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## WOMAN IN THE WORLD OF KNIGHTS

The Middle Ages are often stereotypically regarded as a rough, primitive epoch in which brutal, physical force was the dominant factor, pushing the physically weaker women into the position of oppressed beings. Misogyny is believed to have been characteristic of relations between the sexes. However, opinions of this kind should be carefully vetted, especially as regards the late Middle Ages.

In the 12th–13th centuries the rigid early medieval customs began to give way to the more refined forms of life of the West European elites. Culture, which had been developing in the shadow of monasteries, began to flourish also round universities and courts. Women had no access to universities, but they took part in court life and their influence softened customs, leading to their sublimation in that milieu. Literature fostering chivalrous ideals had the same effect. The *chansons de geste* (e.g. *Chanson de Roland*)<sup>1</sup> which appeared at that time glorified knightly virtues, honour, loyalty and bravery, idealized the fair sex and raised feelings, free from brutal sensuality, to a pedestal. This led to the emergence of the phenomenon of courtly love, regarded as service to the woman who was mistress of a knight's heart<sup>2</sup>. The model of the feudal relationship between the vassal and his lord was applied to men's attitude to women. A knight had to serve his lady, be obedient and faithful to her, and worship her unboundedly. The role of an adored lady could not, of course, be played by an ordinary woman. The female adored by a knight had to be a ravishing great lady beyond the knight's reach, a woman who

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<sup>1</sup> P. Le Gentil, *La chanson de Roland*, Paris 1955; S. Kay, *The chansons de geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fiction*, Oxford 1995.

<sup>2</sup> H. Davenson, *Les troubadours*, Paris 1960; E. Kohler, *Troubadourlyrik und höfischer Dichtung*, Berlin 1962.

was socially, psychologically and sometimes also geographically far away, a queen or a princess from a distant country, usually also a married woman, which meant that she was unattainable. Courtly love was a platonic love devoid of the hope of physical fulfilment. The knight fought in the colours of the lady of his heart, but the only reward he could hope for was a handkerchief thrown by her, a smile, sometimes a flower. Feelings of this kind are an excellent subject for poetry and songs<sup>3</sup>.

It was France, especially Languedoc and Provence, that was the homeland of courtly love. Itinerant troubadours sang or recited poems about knights and their ladies at French, Italian and later also German courts. A new image of woman was born. She became an incarnation of beauty, perfection and charm, an elusive creature difficult to conquer. The story of Tristan and Iseult, based on Celtic tradition, a tragic story about a pair of lovers destined never to unite, was enormously popular. Tristan, a model of knightly virtues, did not budge from his oath of loyalty to his king, and the beautiful Iseult preserved her virtue despite her deep feelings for a man who was not her husband<sup>4</sup>. The troubadours who sang their life story gained great popularity. One of the most brilliant among them was William IX, duke of Aquitaine (d. 1137), who preferred the lute and song to politics. Eleanor (1133–1204), his daughter and successor (she was his only child), was an exceptional woman, the heroine of many legends<sup>5</sup>. When her first marriage to the rude and unattractive king of France was annulled under the pretext of close kinship, she married Henry II Plantagenet, duke of Normandy, who thanks to her vast possessions got the English crown. Eleanor became the mother of English kings. But her marriage with Henry was also unsuccessful (Henry kept her in prison for over a dozen years). It was only after his death that she could arrange a free wonderful life for herself. She gained great political power when she acted as regent for her underage son Richard. Her court at Poitiers became a famous centre of society life, with women taking part in it on equal terms with men. It was a place where discussions were held on poetry and courtly love (which was considered to be much superior to that experienced in married

<sup>3</sup> B. O'Donoghue, *The Courtly Love Tradition*, Manchester 1982.

<sup>4</sup> B. Panvini, *La legende de Tristram e Isotta*, Firenze 1952.

<sup>5</sup> A. Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings*, Cambridge, Mass. 1963.

life), a centre of music, songs and recitations. Eleanor was praised as the most beautiful queen in Europe; poets dedicated dozens of love poems to her, and knights considered it a great honour to fight in her colours in tournaments.

The adoration of woman sprang up suddenly and quite unexpectedly in the very heart of the misogynistic Middle Ages. This was however a very restricted phenomenon, both socially and as regards its duration. Courtly love developed only in court and elitist circles; it was completely unknown even to the middle nobility, and townspeople, to say nothing of the peasantry. On the lower levels of society men's relations with women followed the old patriarchal model, their principal aim being procreation. Courtly love was like an artificially grown flower; it was an evanescent phenomenon. Literary fashions and the mentality of the elites kept changing very quickly. The *Roman de la Rose*, outlined by Guillaume de Lorris in the first half of the 13th century as an allegorical poem in praise of sentimental courtly love, a poem permeated with an almost religious adoration of woman, was soon developed and adapted by Jean de Meung whose contribution mixed eulogy of brutal sex with a sharp satire on women<sup>6</sup>.

In Wolfram von Aschenbach's 13th century courtly poem *Percival*, the scene of which is set at the court of the legendary Celtic king Arthur, there appears an alarming figure of a learned, ugly witch-woman; her presence destroys noble friendships between men, disturbs the peace and is the reason for the disintegration of the knightly company. This heralds the birth, or perhaps rather the return, of the ominous stereotype (learnedness + ugliness = women's destructive force) which was soon to rekindle dislike and fear of women. But beautiful women, too, evoked fear. One of the most popular chivalrous romances in Europe was the story about Mélusine, put down for the first time by Jean d'Arras (1387) and later by Thüring von Ringoltingen (1456). A demonic woman-serpent, a double-natured being, a mother and at the same time a deceitful seductress, was presented as the founder of the famous Lusignan family. This is how woman was viewed in the Middle Ages. Courtly love did not make a significant breach in the misogynistic imagination of the epoch, though it was an important element in it.

<sup>6</sup> G. Paré, *Les idées et les lettres au XIIIe s.: Le Roman de la Rose*, Montreal 1947.

Courtly love and knights-errant in love were aptly parodied at the turn of the 16th century by the Spaniard Cervantes in his *Don Quixote*, a poem which still enjoys great popularity. Cervantes presents Don Quixote as a crazy man in love with a vulgar wench, Dulcinea. Service to a lady is a product of an insane mind in the poem. One could hardly think of a sharper criticism of courtly love which, as a matter of fact, had died a natural death more than two hundred centuries before Cervantes. Present-day researchers connect the fascinating phenomenon of courtly love with the frustrations of sons from aristocratic families who, having no resources, either took part in crusades or wandered all over Europe in search of an aim in life or means of survival. A certain role must have also been played by the frustrations of highborn women who, having married for political reasons, were bored to death by the meaninglessness of their luxurious but monotonous existence. But the stimuli were too weak and the circle of interested persons too narrow for the phenomenon of courtly love to be a durable and significant phenomenon. Nevertheless, its impact on mentality was strong enough for its elements to appear in later literary works and partly also in life. At the turn of the 13th century the issue was taken up by the greatest of Italian poets, the Florentine Dante Alighieri, author of love sonnets addressed to the beautiful Beatrice Portinari. This current was continued in the 14th century by Francesco Petrarch in his love sonnets written in honour of his beloved Laura de Noves. This poetry is filled not only with echoes of courtly love but also with older antique elements: the myth of the love of Orpheus, son of a Thracian king, for Euridice bitten by a serpent on the day of her wedding. Like a knight-errant Orpheus looks for his beloved in Hades but he loses her again, this time irretrievably, by violating the infernal deities' command. When he looks back on leaving Hades, he sees his beloved for the last time. Unfulfilled, unhappy, lifelong love which from an antique seed grew unexpectedly at medieval West European courts, lending an air of glamour to women for a while, kept reviving in poetry. After Dante and Petrarch it attracted poets of the Romantic period who once again created an idealized model of man-woman relations, a model which was far removed from real life. It had nothing to do with reality, though history does know pairs of great unhappy lovers, such as Héloïse and Abélard (or Sigismund Augustus and Barbara Radziwiłł in Poland).

Abélard, a French philosopher and theologian, lived from 1079 to 1142. He took part in disputes between nominalists and realists and expressed his opinions in discussions on the Holy Trinity, as a result of which his views were condemned by the Church in 1121 and 1141. He wrote many works but he is now famous mainly for his love for Héloïse. As a young cleric Abélard was engaged by a Parisian canon, Fulbert, to teach his young and beautiful niece, Héloïse. Abélard fell in love with the girl and seduced her. When Fulbert learned about this, he decided to take revenge for what he regarded as a stain on his honour. He engaged ruffians who fell upon Abélard in a Parisian back street and castrated him. Abélard became a monk at St. Denis monastery in Paris and Héloïse retired to the convent in Argenteuil and took the veil<sup>7</sup>. They never saw each other again but their feelings did not abate; they were in correspondence for many years<sup>8</sup>. These love letters still enchant experts in medieval literature, though a German researcher, B. S c h m e i d l e r, questioned their authenticity in 1913. In his view, Abélard faked Héloïse's letters, thinking that the history of his love would be more convincing if it was presented in the form of a confession of love between two lovers. Whatever the truth is, Abélard and Héloïse have become a model pair of tragic lovers extolled for centuries<sup>9</sup>. They lie together in the well known tomb in the Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris, which is still visited by sentimental tourists.

The story of Héloïse and Abélard leads us again to convents, a refuge for unhappy learned women. Héloïse was not only a tragic mistress but also a highly educated woman. She was taught by philosophers; we know that she knew foreign languages, Greek and Latin, read ancient writers and the writings of the Fathers of the Church. As a nun at Argenteuil, she enlarged the knowledge she had acquired from Abélard in her uncle's house. Her vast knowledge was nothing exceptional among nuns<sup>10</sup>. No less famous was

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<sup>7</sup> E. Gilson, *Héloïse et Abélard*, Paris 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *The Fifth and Sixth Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, ed. J. T. M u c k l e, "Medieval Studies" 17, 1955, pp. 240-281; *Letter Seven from Abelard to Heloise*, ed. T. P. M c L a u g h l i n, "Medieval Studies" 18, 1956, pp. 241-292.

<sup>9</sup> B. Wheeler, ed., *Listening to Heloise: The Voice of a Twelfth Century Woman*, New York 2000.

<sup>10</sup> For the intellectual interests and books read by nuns in English convents see D. N. B e l l, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries*, "Cistercian Studies", Series 158, Kalamazoo, Mich. 1995. The situation in French nunneries was similar.

St. Bridget (Birgitta) of Sweden (1302–1373), who after her husband's death became an inspired mystic and founded the order of Bridgittines. After a span of married life (she was married at the age of 14 and bore her husband eight children), she chose the path of asceticism and developed an activity untypical of women: she travelled across Europe and to the Holy Land, lectured on the visions she saw in ecstasy, and called on rulers, the Pope, the clergy and the nobility to initiate a moral rebirth and reform of the Church. Her great theological knowledge impressed her contemporaries and future generations, and so did her prophecies (she foretold an early fall of the Teutonic Knights).

Her contemporary, Catherine of Siena (1347–1380), also a mystic, was so highly esteemed that she was proclaimed doctor of the Church and patroness of Europe. She was the 24th child of a dyer in Siena. She had visions already as a child and then stigmata appeared on her body. As a young girl she joined the secular Dominican movement of the Mantellites (from *mantella*, a long coat) who preached the *Gospel* to the urban poor, and conducted charitable work. Many disciples, clergymen and lay persons, men and women, began to gather round her. Among them were also members of influential families of Siena, Florence and Pisa. Catherine gave them advice, wrote letters and soon started to conduct a large-scale public activity. She collaborated with Pope Gregory XI in organizing anti-Turkish crusades. In 1375 she was invited to Pisa to reconcile the Pope with the towns of Tuscany. When Florence revolted against the Apostolic See and Gregory XI placed the city under an interdict, the authorities of Florence sent Catherine to Avignon to conduct peace negotiations. Catherine persuaded the Pope to return to Rome. After Gregory XI's death (1378) and the rebellion of French cardinals against Urban VI, Catherine came out against the anti-Pope Clement VI. Summoned to Rome by Urban, she settled in the eternal city together with her disciples. She actively defended Urban, spoke on his behalf in the Consistory and called on Christian rulers in her letters to come out on the side of the legal Pope. When the Romans attacked the papal palace, Catherine undertook the difficult and dangerous work of mediation. She devoted her life to the cause of peace and reconciliation; she also fought to improve the clergy's habits. Her literary legacy consists of letters, a collection of prayers and the treatise *Il Dialogo (Dialogue)* which comprises Catherine's conver-

sations with God put down by her disciples. She created a coherent theological system, drawing on the writings of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux. By her whole life this great female thinker denied the assertion that women are intellectually inferior to men.

Less known but also worth mentioning is Juliana of Norwich, an English mystic born slightly later than Catherine of Siena (she lived from 1342 to 1420). From 1403 on she lived in seclusion at St. Julian's church in Norwich. Some researchers believe that she was a Benedictine. She had visions of Christ and the Holy Trinity which she described in a brief account and in later commentaries. She was popular among her contemporaries, who were attracted by her optimism and faith in God's love, but she never acquired the fame and influence enjoyed by St. Bridget of Sweden or by St. Catherine of Siena. Another medieval mystic was Dorothea from Montau (Małowy) in Pomerania. This daughter of Netherlandish immigrants, given away in marriage at an early age, bore children and was an ordinary housewife until the death of her husband in 1390. It was as a widow that she found her true vocation. She became a recluse and was immured in a small cell at the cathedral in Kwidzyn. Her visions were put down by her spiritual leader, an educated theologian, Father Joannes Marienwerder. They were published in the 19th century under the title *Confessiones and Apparitiones*. Dorota died in 1394 surrounded with a fame of saintliness. Father Joannes Marienwerder wrote a theoretical treatise *Septililium* about her life and revelations and an account of her visions entitled *Liber de Festis*. They show how fascinated he was with this unusual woman.

As we see, despite the unfavourable medieval conditions, some women managed to go beyond the roles assigned to them by tradition and custom. What was of help in this respect was high birth, membership of a royal, ducal or some other influential family. Only such women could become heroines of chivalrous romances and expect tributes from troubadours. But thanks to favourable circumstances or exceptional qualities of the mind and character, a middle-class or even a peasant woman could also rise in the world. Catherine of Siena was a simple townswoman and Dorothea of Montau, a peasant woman. Seclusion in a convent or a hermitage, severe asceticism, renunciation of personal life and its joys were the price they had to pay to rise to fame.

Asceticism, martyrdom and sainthood were a barrier which medieval misogyny did not dare to infringe. The cult of virgin martyrs and anchoresses flourished<sup>11</sup>. Sexual continence was recommended even in marriage<sup>12</sup>. The largest possibilities were open to the widows<sup>13</sup>. The same patterns of life could be seen in the lives of saintly women: a span of married life with the usual female occupations and the birth of children, followed by the husband's death, which opened a new chapter in the woman's life. This new chapter often began with a pilgrimage to Rome or the Holy Land and was followed by the choice of monastic or hermitic life<sup>14</sup>. Paradoxically, it was nuns and recluses who had the possibility of conducting large-scale activity in public life, influencing the development of events, advising rulers and politicians. It was not only famous female mystics and visionaries who became powerful. The career of a common abbess also gave women influence and power, not only over nuns<sup>15</sup>. In the Middle Ages convents, also female convents were powerful, rich institutions protected by rulers and lords, institutions which owned vast estates. The mother superior's rights were similar to those of a secular sovereign; in spite of being a woman, she had jurisdiction over her subjects and over the inhabitants of the lands belonging to the convent.

Women in the Middle Ages could gain more freedom and significance also if they broke loose from the structure of the official Church and took the path of heresy. This suited their

<sup>11</sup> C. W. Atkinson, *Precious Balsam in a Fragile Glass: The Ideology of Virginity in the Later Middle Ages*, "Journal of Family History" 8, 1983, pp. 131–143; S. Beckwith, *Passionate Regulation: Enclosure, Asceticism and the Feminist Imaginary*, "South Atlantic Quarterly" 3, 1993, pp. 803–824; C. Cubitt, *Virginity and Misogyny in Tenth and Eleventh Century England*, "Gender and History" 12, 2000, pp. 1–32; K. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*, Ithaca 1997.

<sup>12</sup> D. Elliot, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, Princeton 1993.

<sup>13</sup> C. R. Carlson, A. J. Weisl, eds., *Construction of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, New York 1999; P. S. Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin: Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth Century France*, Chicago 1985; A. Lucas, *Woman in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriage, Letters*, New York 1983.

<sup>14</sup> J. T. Schulten, *Forgetful of Their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society ca 500–1100*, Chicago 1998; B. L. Venarde, *Women's Monasticism and Medieval Society: Nunneries in France and England 890–1215*, Ithaca-London 1997; J. Wogan-Browne, *Saints' Lives and Women's Literary Culture, c. 1150–1300. Virginity and Its Authorisation*, Oxford 2001.

<sup>15</sup> L. Fradenburg, ed., *Woman and Sovereignty*, Edinburgh 1992; M. Eler, M. Kowaleski, eds. *Women and Power in Middle Ages*, Athens Ga 1988; J. Wogan-Browne, *op. cit.*, pp. 189 ff.



inclination for sacrifice and their readiness to yield to emotion; both attitudes were often stronger in women than in men. In the 12th century many women took part in the movements of the Cathars, Albigenses and Waldenses (mainly in southern France, Italy and Spain, partly also in Germany and England). These sects, popular especially among weavers (though they also had adherents among nobility), demanded a life of poverty, asceticism and chastity from their followers. The internal Catharist hierarchy divided the followers into two groups: the *perfecti* (perfect ones) and the *credentiores* (believers). Both men and women could become *perfecti* and consequently to preach<sup>16</sup>. The absence of sex discrimination attracted many women to heretic movements. Slightly later (in the 12th and 13th centuries), women were also attracted by the Beghards and the Beguines who set up ascetic communities living on the production of textiles in the Netherlands, Germany, Silesia and Pomerania. Though they were not persecuted to the same extent as the Cathars and the Waldensians, the official Church distrusted them.

Birth in a ruling family gave women the possibility of rising to a high position and acting more freely in the public sphere, which theoretically was closed to them. A certain model of behaviour was, of course, binding on a queen or a duchess: she was to be a good wife and mother, her most important task being to give birth to the heir to the throne. Charitable and cultural activities (care of the sick and the poor, foundation of churches and convents, promotion of artists and writers) were permissible and even laudable. To find an outlet for her energy a queen could engage in a handicraft that befitted women, e.g. embroidery or weaving. The medieval court was often organised as a kind of workshop in which the lady and her maids of honour spent entire days at hand-loom or plying the needle. Their fingers produced real works of art: table-cloths, chasubles and tapestries which are still admired in museums.

It was Elizabeth Habsburg, wife of the Polish king Casimir Jagellon, called "Mother of Kings", that was one of the truly model queens. She was the daughter of the king of Germany, Hungary

<sup>16</sup> Cf. U. Bejick, *Die Katharerinnen. Häresieverdächtige Frauen in Mittelalterlichen Süd-Frankreich*, Freiburg-Basel-Wien 1993; G. Koch, *Frauenfrage und Ketzertum im Mittelalter*, Berlin 1962; U. Weimann, *Mittelalterliche Frauenbewegungen*, Pfaffenweiler 1990.

and Bohemia, Albrecht II Habsburg. By marrying her, Casimir became related to one of the most powerful dynasties in Europe. Extensively educated and extremely ambitious, Elizabeth had a great influence on her husband, but it was only through him and her numerous children (she had 13) that she realized her ambitions. She mothered four kings: the Polish rulers John Albert, Alexander and Sigismund I, and the king of Bohemia and Hungary, Ladislaus. She supported Casimir's dynastic policy, kept watch over her hereditary rights to Bohemia and Hungary, but she did not set up her own party: she acted discreetly through her husband, never going beyond a woman's, a wife's role. She did not think about self-realization but was seeking realization through her family and her children, identifying her ambition with their career.

Of course not all medieval queens came up to this paragon of virtue. It was Byzantium, whose development was slightly different from that of Western Europe, that was a hatchery of energetic, educated women who were active in public life on their own account and made surprising political careers. In the first half of the 6th century a Theodora, a former circus actress, married the self-made emperor, Justinian, helped him to keep the throne and, ruling together with him, became a co-author of his great reforms (*Codex Justinianus*) and an associate in his conquests and the development of Byzantium's political power<sup>17</sup>. In the second half of the 8th century, Irene, a wise and energetic woman, ascended the throne and ruled at first as regent. After deposing her son, she became empress. She is said to have endeavoured to marry Charlemagne. In the first half of the 12th century, Anna Comnena, daughter of the emperor Alexius, an extremely well educated and shrewd woman, tried to remove her brother from power and wanted to put her husband on the throne so as to rule through him. The *coup d'état* organized by her failed however and Anna left Byzantium, devoting the rest of her life to writing. Her work *Alexias*, a history of Byzantium during the reign of her father, is still thought highly of by researchers.

There were fewer such careers in Western Europe but they happened there too. The most prominent female politician in the Middle Ages was undoubtedly Margaret, founder of the Kalmar Union, daughter of the king of Denmark Waldemar IV. She was

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<sup>17</sup>L. Garland, *Byzantine Empresses. Woman and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204*, London-New York 1999.

born in 1353 and was married to the king of Norway Haakon VI, in 1363 as a ten-year-old girl (Haakon was then 20 years old). Such political marriages were not exceptional in that epoch. After the death of her father in 1375, Margaret, then in her early twenties, procured the election of her infant son, Olaf, as king of Denmark, and began to rule the country in his name. After the death of Haakon in 1380 she was chosen regent of Norway. The death of yet another man, this time her son Olaf, in 1387 made it possible for Margaret to extend her rule. She was elected queen of Norway and retained the power of regent in Denmark. She then tried to bring Sweden under her influence. Her support of the Swedish opposition led to an armed conflict with King Albert, whom she defeated and took prisoner (1389). She conquered Sweden (seizure of Stockholm in 1398) and Finland (1399). She also succeeded in getting Gothland from the Teutonic Knights (1409). A great Scandinavian empire was thus created in the Baltic region. In order to make it durable, Margaret adopted the grandson of her sister, Eric of Pomerania, and had him elected king of Norway (1389), Denmark and Sweden (1396). Eric's coronation took place in Kalmar in 1397 and the councils of state of the three countries signed there the act of union which survived until 1523. The union created by Margaret was not only a dynastic one; it was based on similar cultures and languages as well as common economic and political interests. Margaret continued to be the real ruler of Scandinavia even after Eric had reached maturity. The creation of the union would have been enough to regard her as a prominent politician but she must also be given credit for introducing internal reforms and organizing the new state on solid foundations. She recovered for the Crown the landed property which had been taken over by powerful families, thus strengthening the central authority, and skilfully picked her way between the conflicting interests of great lords, Hanseatic towns and Teutonic Knights. She also promoted the arts. "She showed great wisdom in everything she did", wrote a chronicler about her. Her contemporaries called her "Semiramis of the North".

Another great ruler was Elizabeth Łokietkówna, daughter of the Polish king Ladislaus the Elbow-High. In 1320 she married Charles Robert of Anjou, king of Hungary, and governed the country together with her husband. In 1370-1375 she ruled Poland as regent in the name of her son Louis, winning for him

the support of the lords of Little Poland and preparing the Polish throne for her granddaughter Hedwig.

Sometimes involvement in politics had a tragic end, as is illustrated by the history of Elizabeth of Bosnia, daughter of Bosnia's ruler, mother of the Polish queen Hedwig. She was brought up at the Hungarian court under the protection of Elizabeth Łokietkówna, who in 1353 married her to her son, Louis, hoping to secure the help of Elizabeth's father in the war which the Hungarians were then waging against Venice. Elizabeth had three daughters, Catherine, Mary and Hedwig, and after Louis's death ruled Hungary in their name. Being an ambitious person, she pursued her own, independent policy. Three parties (Neapolitan, French and Luxemburgian) competed for the Hungarian throne at that time. Elizabeth brought the Neapolitan pretender, Charles, to Hungary but after a quarrel with him had him murdered. This aroused the fury of Charles' Hungarian supporters, the powerful Horwath family, who ordered Elizabeth to be imprisoned and strangled (1387). Elizabeth also interfered in Polish affairs. At first she wanted to put her daughter Mary on the Polish throne; later in 1385 Ladislaus of Opole, acting on her orders, seized the Wawel castle in support of Wilhelm von Habsburg, who was engaged to her younger daughter Hedwig. Despite her great energy and ruthlessness, Elizabeth did not succeed in implementing her plans. Her tragic death in prison sealed the long series of her mistakes.

Italy was a country known for the political activity of many women. One of the best known among them was Bianca Maria, called *diva virago*, wife of Duke Francesco Sforza. She accompanied her husband in many military expeditions and sometimes even commanded the troops; for instance, she directed the defence of Cremona against the Venetians in 1447–1448. Another famous *virago*, Caterina Sforza, known as Madonna of Forli, taking advantage of the death of Pope Sixtus IV, occupied the castle of St. Angelo in 1484 and held it until the cardinals, surprised and furious, decided to pay a ransom to her husband Girolamo Riario. After her husband had been murdered by conspirators, she ruled Imola and Forli. When her children were taken prisoners by her enemies, she said she did not care what would happen to them, for the son she was carrying in her womb and the one who was in safety in Milan would be enough for her.

This callous mother ruled wisely and skilfully but everyone was afraid of her for she was generally regarded as a murderess. Besieged in Forli by the troops of Pope Alexander VI and the French king Charles VIII, she was wounded after unsuccessfully trying to blow herself and her lover up. Taken prisoner, she at once tried to escape and finally fled to Florence. This amazing woman left a collection of hand-written recipes for various cosmetics and ... poisons. The latter could kill in two weeks or after a month, depending on what was needed.

The women mentioned above were queens or princesses, that is, persons destined by their birth to play an important role in public life. The only exception was Theodora, a circus actress from Byzantium. In Western Europe only one woman of low birth played at that time an important role in politics: Joan of Arc, a peasant girl who in 1429-1431 commanded the French forces fighting for independence against the English. She managed to get access to the heir to the throne, took command of the troops which were to relieve the besieged Orleans, won a decisive victory, captured Reims and succeeded in having Charles VIII crowned. But the heavenly voices which had led her all along became suddenly silent. Deserted by everyone, she was caught by the English and after a short trial (main accusation was that she was wearing masculine dress) was burned at the stake at Rouen. She was rehabilitated relatively quickly (in 1456) but was not canonized until 1929. For many centuries Joan's career was fully accepted neither by the clergy nor by society, which was attached to the traditional stereotypes of sainthood.

Joan of Arc's story as well as the above-mentioned biographies of exceptional women show that a stereotypical conception of women's role lasted throughout the Middle Ages. Troubadours and literature idealizing women had but a narrow range of influence. There were women in the Middle Ages (quite a large number in fact) who by taking advantage of their high birth and great energy or by resorting to extreme forms of asceticism and renunciations gained a better position and acquired some power, thus exceeding the limits of behaviour admissible for females. But these were only exceptions. Work and family duties subordinated to patriarchal rules were in the centre of female world in the Middle Ages.

Hard physical work which could not be eased by the use of primitive instruments was a characteristic feature of the Middle

Ages. Since the level of technology was low, everything had to be done by hand. A large part of very hard work was done by women, especially females from the lowest social strata. Peasant women worked extremely hard from dawn to dusk. It was their duty to bring in water, grind grain and groat on heavy querns (wind- and water-powered mills began to be used rather late, in the 12th–13th centuries), cook meals, spin and weave linen and woolen cloth from which they made clothes for family members. In the early Middle Ages (10th–11th centuries) textile workshops operated in Merovingian villages under the serfdom system; peasant women wove cloth for the lord, receiving nothing more than food for their work<sup>18</sup>. It was only in the 12th century that the relaxation of the system of compulsory work and the development of the textile industry in towns led to the disappearance of workshops of this kind in Western Europe.

A village woman kept the garden, raised cattle and poultry, washed, stockpiled food for winter (preservation of fruits and vegetables, salting and smoking of meat), produced cheese and butter, picked mushrooms, berries and dry twigs in a neighbouring wood, brewed beer and made drinks from sap. Her work was not confined to the house and the farmyard. She also worked in the field. It was not always the husband who ploughed; if there were no beasts of draught, he would harness his wife. In winter when men rested and slept the clock round, women tirelessly fulfilled their daily duties and in the evening stripped feathers, sewed and embroidered. Helmbrecht, hero of a medieval story, advised his sister Gotelinda to leave the home of her father, a peasant, and marry a vagrant, for with a vagrant she would have a lady-like life but if she married a peasant, only toil and drudgery would be in store for her<sup>19</sup>.

A noble woman had, of course, an easier life for, having servants to do the hardest work, she only kept house and when her husband set out on a campaign, she ran the estate. But she did a lot of work herself; she spun, wove, sewed, embroidered, cooked or supervised the preparation of meals. She brought up the children and looked after the sick, an occupation which included the preparation of herbal brews and ointments, the dressing of wounds and ulcerations. Her occupations were many

<sup>18</sup> E. Ennen, *Frauen im Mittelalter*, München 1987, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> J. Le Goff, *La civilisation de l'Occident Médiéval*, Paris 1965, p. 295.

and varied and some of them demanded real skill and knowledge. Little girls were taught housework at an early age and they were not allowed to idle their time away.

Peasant women were in a rather strong position because of their work. A farm could not function properly without the wife; it was easier for a widow to manage by herself for she could employ a farm hand. A widower had to look for a new partner immediately after his wife's death, especially if he had small children. A village woman's work was held in high esteem; the division of labour in farms was functional rather than hierarchic.

The situation in towns was slightly different. In the countryside the whole work was concentrated in the household. The woman did her work without leaving home; she could therefore look after the children and breast-feed them when they were small. In medieval towns the household and the workshop or the merchant cantor were at first connected, which made it easier for women to take part in their husband's work. Wives helped their husbands and widows as a rule had the right to run the workshop for two or three years or till their next marriage. Women could even be members of some craft guilds (in Montpellier, Zurich, London, Leiden) and in some places they even set up their own female guilds, e.g. in Paris and Cologne<sup>20</sup>. There were many women in such crafts as the production of yarn, golden threads and silk, in wool combing and the production of linen fabrics; many women also worked in leather crafts (production of belts, handbags), in textile and even metal workshops. They often sold the goods made by their husbands and sons. They took part in the social and religious life of their craft, participating in feasts, recreations, religious services and the funerals of craft members.

The participation of women in trade depended on its scale. Not many women were engaged in large-scale foreign trade for this demanded many skills (knowledge of foreign languages, of

<sup>20</sup> B. A. Hanawalt, ed., *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe*. Bloomington 1986; I. Titz-Matuszak, "Starcke Weibes-Personen". *Geschichte der Goslauer Frauen vom Mittelalter bis 1800*, vol. 1, *Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen*, Hildesheim 1994; M. Wensky, *Die Frau im Handel und Gewerbe vom Mittelalter bis zur Frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Die Frau in der deutschen Wirtschaft*, "Zeitschrift für Unternehmensgeschichte", fasc. 35, 1985, pp. 30-44; eadem, *Die Stellung der Frau in der stadtkölnischen Wirtschaft im Spätmittelalter*, Köln 1980; K. Wesoly, *Die weibliche Bevölkerungsanteil in den spätmittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Städten und die Betätigung von Frauen im zünftigen Handwerk*, "Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins" 128, 1980, pp. 60-117.

distant markets, of various monetary systems and the use of the bills of exchange) as well as departures from home for a long time, but there were some exceptions. In Cologne, for instance, some women took part in large-scale speculative trade in spices, cloth, wine, metals and metal goods. In the Netherlands women not only took part in overseas trade but also owned ships, participated in financing the construction and equipping of vessels, which means that they must have had a large capital at their disposal. But the main field of women's activity was retail trade which was quite feminized in many towns and regions. Food trade was often monopolised by women for as housewives they were natural experts in this field. The production and sale of beer, and later of vodka, was also often in women's hands, and so was the running of many taverns and taprooms. Only men were great bankers but small-scale usury and pawnshops were the domain of women in all European towns, Jewish women excelling in this field<sup>21</sup>. This was a very convenient way of earning money, for without leaving home and with the help of but a small capital, women could lend small sums to their neighbours on the security of objects of everyday use and thus supplement their own modest home budget.

Some women, e.g. midwives and wet-nurses (both in great demand and consequently well paid) worked outside home. Women teachers and women doctors also earned well but there were few of them. Some rich families, wishing to save themselves the trouble of looking after an infant, put it out to a nurse, taking it back when the child passed through the first most dangerous period of life. This was a popular custom in England and France. The women who looked after other people's children, adding them to their own issue, relieved municipal orphanages and homes for foundlings and this was of great importance for these institutions were too small to meet the demand (there are many examples e.g. from Italy, France, Germany).

With but a few exceptions, women earned significantly less than men. They usually received a half or even a third of a man's

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<sup>21</sup> W. Ch. Jordan, *Woman and Credit in the Middle Ages. Problems and Directions*, "Journal of European Economic History" 17, 1988, pp. 33-62; *idem*, *Jews on Top. Woman and the Availability of Consumption Loans in Northern France in the Mid-Thirteenth Century*, "Journal of Jewish Studies" 29, 1978, pp. 39-56; M. Toch, *Der jüdische Geldhandel in der Wirtschaft des deutschen Spätmittelalters: Nürnberg 1350-1499*, "Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte" 117, 1984, pp. 283-310.



wage in the same trade. It was generally believed that a woman would spend her earnings on her own needs while a man had to maintain a family. But very often women were the only breadwinners in the family. On the other hand, the fact that they were paid less than men made them more competitive on the labour market and made it easier for them to get a job.

What made life especially difficult for women was legal discrimination. Not in all towns could females have municipal rights, that is, be citizens with equal rights. They held no posts, nor could they become members of municipal authorities. Lucrative leases of municipal posts were men's monopoly and exceptions were rare; in 1453 the municipal weighing scales in Lübeck were leased to a woman. In some towns women were allowed to be corn and hop measurers. Midwives were sworn in by municipal authorities as official controllers who were expected to discover births of illegitimate children, abortions and infanticides<sup>22</sup>.

Women appeared in court less frequently than men and it was usually required that they should be accompanied by a male protector, their representative. They were also less frequently called as witnesses (unless it was a case concerning marriage, infanticide or abortion) and their statements had less value than the statements made by men. Women were a minority in the criminal world but some offences were feminized (petty theft, infanticide, cases of bawling out, the casting of spells)<sup>23</sup>.

Two female professions were practised mainly by unmarried women: prostitution and domestic service. In the Middle Ages women rarely remained in an unmarried state, and if they did, they were treated with animosity and suspicion by society and the authorities. Prostitutes were the main target of social odium even though paid love was in most regions legal and was resorted to by young men before marriage as well as by married men (during journeys or when they were bored by sexual intercourse with their wives) and even though it yielded handsome profits to pimps, owners of brothels and inns. The prostitutes were socially censured and were forced to manifest their shameful trade

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<sup>22</sup> S. Laurent, *Naitre au Moyen Age. De la conception à la naissance: la grossesse et l'accouchement (XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> s.)*, Paris 1989.

<sup>23</sup> R. van Dülmen, *Frauen vor Gericht*, Frankfurt/M 1990; *idem*, ed., *Verbrechen, Strafen und Soziale Kontrolle*, Frankfurt/M 1990.

publicly. They had to wear yellow dresses or red headscarves. In many towns it was their duty to help extinguish fire<sup>24</sup>.

Many girls worked as servants in towns and countryside. Some went into service to gather a dowry which would enable them to get married; others lived single until the end of their lives. Their pay varied; in addition to having a roof over their head and food, they received clothes and a certain sum of money. Their pay was always much lower than that of a male servant, but male servants were employed only by rich people. This is why domestic service was greatly feminized. The lives of servants differed. Beating, mistreatment, sexual abuse, birth of illegitimate children were not exceptional. But some girls were lucky — they spent many years in the same house and even put by a fair amount of money for their old age; the last few years of their lives they usually spent in a “hospital”, a charitable institution in which a person who brought in an amount of money could count on some additional advantages (better food, bed in a separate cubicle, like those that have survived in a hospital in Lübeck)<sup>25</sup>.

To sum up it can be said that women played an important economic role in the Middle Ages. Without the work they did at home (a typical situation) or outside it (less frequent but also quite frequently met) the medieval economy could not have functioned.

The opportunities open to women depended to a great extent on their place in the family. Today a family usually consists of parents and their children; it is a small two-generation unit (the so-called nuclear family) which only sometimes includes grandparents, becoming a three-generation unit (the so-called stem family). Its members share a dwelling place and run the household jointly. Nuclear and stem families also existed in the old days but a greater role was played by the extended family consisting of relatives of father and mother and their spouses (relatives of kin). There also existed an even wider structure, a group of many families belonging to a clan believed to have one common ancestor and therefore the same coat of arms<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. E. Ennen, *Frauen im Mittelalter*, p. 173; F. Irsgler, Bettler, Dirnen und Henker im spätmittelalterlichen und frühneuzeitlichen Köln. Zur Analyse sozialer Randgruppen, “Geschichte in Köln. Studentliche Zeitschrift am. hist. Seminar” 7, 1980.

<sup>25</sup> E. Ennen, *Frauen im Mittelalter*, pp. 181 ff.; E. Maschke, *Die Unterschichten der mittelalterlichen Städte Deutschlands*, in: *Gesellschaftliche Unterschichten in den südwestdeutschen Städten*, Stuttgart 1967, pp. 1-74.

The family was the basic unit of social life in town and country. It organized the lives of individuals from birth to death, made it possible for them to survive (the lives of single persons were shorter; nobody looked after them when they were ill or disabled). The family was irreplaceable in production, both in town and country. A farm could exist thanks to the joint work of all members of the family; in towns the family provided the natural foundation for craftsmen's workshops and merchant firms. Big trade in particular was organized on a family basis; sons were sent to the towns in which the family's trading partners lived, daughters were married to merchants with whom the father's firm was in trade contacts. In the Middle Ages a merchant company was usually a family company; relationship increased confidence, a necessary element in trade transactions. Each family not only took part in the production of goods, it not only produced but also consumed; it was within the family that the produced goods were divided.

The members of each family were conscious of the ties linking them. Family solidarity is testified to by many chronicles written by noblemen and townsmen. Concern for the honour of the family was the duty of all its members. Family honour could be tarnished by cowardice of a family's male member but first and foremost by an improper behaviour of a woman; hence the control exercised by each family over its women.

The family played an important role in social life and politics. Sons ensured the durability and continuity of their family, daughters were ambassadors of their family's interests in the new milieu which they entered through marriage. International policy was determined by rulers' dynastic, that is family, interests. Magnates supported their sons and relatives in appointments to high positions, bishops and senior clergymen promoted their offspring, and when celibate was firmly established they backed their nephews. Nepotism was widespread in the Middle Ages. In towns the families forming the élite, the so-called patricians, monopolized important ruling positions for their members; family interests determined the policy pursued by towns. Families stood at the cradle of the political parties which began to appear in the Middle Ages. Rivalry between families and family alliances deter-

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<sup>26</sup>J. Heers, *Le clan familial au Moyen Age*, Paris 1974; I. Weber-Kellerman, *Die Familie. Geschichte, Geschichten und Bilder*, Frankfurt/M 1976.

mined the course of political events. Many suggestive examples have been supplied by Italian towns. In Rome power was in the hands of the mighty Colonnas and Orsinis. In Milan the Viscontis and the della Tores fought for power, later the Medicis gained superiority. The d'Este family was in power in Ferrara, in Florence the most influential were the Buondelmontis, Amideis, Donatis and Cerchis, later the Albizzis and Strozzi. Shakespeare's well known drama *Romeo and Juliet* is based on an historical quarrel between the Capulets and the Montagues. In Italy and Germany the Welfs (or Guelfs), descendants of the Bavarian duke Welf, and the Ghibellines connected to the Hohenstaufen family fought for decades for or against the German Emperor.

Family rivalry also developed in Baltic cities, e.g. in Gdańsk (Danzig) which at the turn of the 15th century was the scene of a violent struggle for power between several patrician families; on one side was the camp of the Angermünds, Feldstetes and von Suchtens, on the other — the new arrivals, the Ferbers<sup>27</sup>. A conflict erupted when young Maurycy Ferber wanted to marry Anna Pileman, a girl from the opposite party. The separation of the lovers is reminiscent of the tragic history of Romeo and Juliet, although the Gdańsk lovers did not die. Anna was forced to marry to a young man of the von Suchten family, and Maurycy Ferber took holy orders and made a career as bishop of Warmia (Ermeland). But the dispute had a deep impact on the internal situation in Gdańsk and determined the structure of power in the city for many years.

In a way, the history of the Middle Ages can be viewed as a history of families, their rivalry or collaboration<sup>28</sup>. In many cases family history explains the meanders of the lives of its members.

Within a family the position of each member depended on gender and age. Men were more important and had more rights than women, old people had a greater influence and significance than youngsters or children. The medieval family was a hierarchic and patriarchal family in all social groups. But its internal

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<sup>27</sup> M. Bogućka, *Życie w dawnym Gdańsku (Life in Old Gdańsk)*, Warszawa 1997, p. 16 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. especially D. Herlihy, *Family Solidarity in Medieval Italian History*, in: *Economy, Society and Government in Medieval Italy. Essays in Memory of Robert L. Reynolds*, The Kent State U.P. 1969, pp. 173–182; E. Maschke, *Die Familie in der deutschen Stadt des späten Mittelalters*, Heidelberg 1980, pp. 9 ff.; H. Rütting, *Die Familie in der deutschen Kleinstadt am Übergang vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit*, in: *Familie zwischen Tradition und Moderne*, ed. W. Bulst, J. Goy, J. Hoock, Göttingen 1981, pp. 19–35.

structure also depended on certain external circumstances, on its social position and material situation, on whether it was a noble, an urban or a peasant family, whether it was rich or poor, whether it belonged to the group of old residents of a region or town or to the group of migrants who could not claim to have a local tradition of long standing.

In all families women were subordinated first to their fathers and then to their husbands or brothers. The fact that through marriage a woman left her own family and joined the family of her husband usually worsened her situation. She was a stranger in the new family, its internal relations were unknown to her, she had to establish her position in a new, frequently unfriendly environment (exacting mothers-in-law, jealous sisters-in-law). On the whole, sources do not provide much evidence of women's solidarity; there is more evidence of their rivalry. Much depended on the woman's origin (on whether she came from a rich, influential family, whether she could count on the support of her father and brothers) and on the dowry she brought in. Her property was of course managed by her husband, she could dispose only of her personal belongings (clothes, jewellery). Only widows were more independent financially. In some countries or towns women recognized legally as single were allowed to run a commercial firm, lend money, conclude contracts, in other words participate in economic life. If a husband turned out to be a drunkard or a spendthrift, his wife could ask the court to bar him from managing her property, so that it should not be squandered. A male protector appointed by the court looked then after it.

Marriage was an important event in a woman's life for it raised her social status. For a man, too, marriage was an important event for it testified to his adulthood and in many cases offered him greater financial possibilities thanks to his wife's dowry. It has already been mentioned that by marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine Henry Plantagenet acquired large territories in France, which enabled him to establish the Plantagenets' rule in England. William, Earl of Pembroke, being a younger son, led a modest life but at the age of 45 he married Isabel de Clare and thanks to this marriage became one of the richest men in England. In 1216–1219 he ruled as regent in England. As early as the middle of the 14th century Charles IV pursued a skilful policy of profitable marriages. He was the son of the Bohemian king John of Luxem-

burg who married him to the sister of the French king, Philip VI. Thanks to this marriage Charles entered the arena of international politics. His second marriage to the daughter of the palatine of the Rhine gave him the Palatinate, and the third marriage to the duchess of Świdnica brought him the Duchy of Świdnica and Lower Silesia. Charles's fourth wife was the duchess of West Pomerania, Elizabeth. Wives' dowries also lay at the root of the Habsburgs' empire. *Alii bella gerant, tu felix Austria nube*, this was what the Europeans thought about the Habsburgs. In 1477 Maximilian I Habsburg married Mary, heiress to Burgundy; thanks to this marriage the Habsburgs extended their rule to the rich Netherlands, soon creating an empire which had no equal in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages.

The fortunes and influence of many ruling houses, of mag-nates' and patricians' families also grew thanks to marriages. It is not surprising therefore that marriages were decided not by the young people but by their parents, after careful consultations with relatives and friends. Powerful lords asked the advice of their vassals; on the other hand under feudal law a vassal had to obtain the consent of his suzerain to get married. When a vassal died, it was the suzerain's duty to arrange a good marriage of his vassal's daughter as quickly as possible.

Marriage was a contract between spouses (or rather between their families), but it was also a sacrament. It was more and more often concluded in the presence of a priest. The canon law in force in the whole of Europe required the consent of the bride and bridegroom but in practice the young people were seldom asked and their will, especially the will of women, was often broken, as is testified to in sources from the epoch. Let us quote a meaningful example. The heroine of the *Chanson d'Elie de Saint-Gilles* complains: "I don't want an old man with wrinkled skin ... His skin is only seemingly healthy. It is eaten by vermin inside and I shall not be able to stand his flaccid flesh. It would be much better to run away from such captivity"<sup>29</sup>.

According to canon law, girls could get married at the age of 12 and boys at the age of 14. Close relationship and holy orders were an obstacle to marriage. In practice, child marriages were concluded only in royal or very rich families; poor people had to

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<sup>29</sup>M. Pastoureaux, *La vie quotidienne en France en Angleterre au temps des chevaliers de la Table Ronde, XII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siecle*, Paris 1976, p. 9.

wait a long time to be economically capable to set up a family. On the average, common young people were over 20, sometimes even over 30, when they married. Journeymen, sailors and soldiers, whose service was often life-long, remained frequently single until death. As a rule, men contracted marriage later than women. Marriage was thought to be unbreakable, though it could be annulled under some circumstances (e.g. if it was unconsummated). Annulments were quite common among rulers and rich people who could afford to employ skilful lawyers and bear considerable costs. They were motivated not only by personal reasons but also by political considerations (like the contraction of marriage). Eleanor of Aquitaine succeeded in having her marriage to the French king, Louis VII, annulled, but it was usually men who were the active side in divorce proceedings. Let us mention a typical example. In 1193 the French king, Philip Augustus, married Ingeborg, sister of the Danish king. He soon began to feel revulsion against his wife and tried to get rid of her, using close relationship as a pretext (she was a cousin of his first wife, Isabella of Hainaut who died in 1192). An assembly of prelates and barons annulled the marriage and Ingeborg was locked in a convent from which she managed to send a complaint to the Pope. The case gained publicity and all rulers rejected Philip Augustus' marriage proposals. It was only the duke of Bavaria who allowed his daughter Agnes of Meran to marry him. The wedding took place in 1196 but then the Pope placed France under an interdict. Philip Augustus had to give in. He sent Agnes away and took Ingeborg back, but she was not granted full rights as queen until 1212. The French king's matrimonial troubles illustrate the low position and small possibilities of women, even in ruling families. Females could be transferred from one man to another; they were treated like objects, locked in convents and taken out when this was required by political circumstances (Ingeborg); they were given away in marriage to divorcees of dubious reputation (Agnes), they had practically no influence on their fate (though by writing to the Pope brave Ingeborg caused a lot of trouble to the French king).

Marriages were sealed by solemn ceremonies. There were periods when no weddings took place because of the ban on pomp and circumstance (from the first Sunday in Advent to the eighth day after Epiphany, from the second Sunday before Lent to the

Low Sunday, from the Monday before Assumption to eight days before Whitsun). Marriages were negotiated by intermediaries. In many towns there were professional matchmakers who knew the regional matrimonial market. The role of intermediaries was often played by relatives and friends. The use of intermediaries facilitated negotiations and eased the stress of a possible setback. More and more weddings took place in church, though this was not yet a widespread custom in the Middle Ages and many weddings were organized in private houses. Rich gifts, a ceremonial performance of the sexual act and a several-day-long wedding were indispensable elements of the ritual. They were to fix the event in people's memory and to testify to the wealth and high social position of the families concerned. Various legal regulations, however, were issued, especially by municipal authorities, to set a limit on the value of gifts, the number of invited guests and the pomp of the feasts. In 15th century Florence, for instance, no more than 25 women (the females of the house were not in this number) could sit down to dinner, and no more than 10 men (the disproportion reflects the sex structure in families; women outnumbered men for females lived longer and were not allowed to dwell apart). Eight servants could wait at table. Three courses could be served at noon, each of no more than 25 dishes. If veal was served, no other meat was allowed to appear on the table. In the evening two courses could be served: minced meat, jellied meat or meat pie. The regulations and restrictions were frequently breached. Wedding ceremonies cost thousands of ducats; people taking part in a wedding party could easily consume 200 calves, dozens of goatlings, hares, capons, geese, pheasants, peacocks, enormous quantities of sweets and huge amounts of wine<sup>30</sup>.

A splendid feast remained for long in the memory of many guests and this was very important should it be necessary to testify that the offspring generated by a given couple was born in wedlock. There were many illegitimate children (bastards) in the Middle Ages (in Latin *bastardus* means imperfect, half-breed, even degenerate). Children born out of wedlock were in theory deprived of all rights, but much depended on the social position of their parents, especially their father. The illegitimate children of rulers, powerful lords and high-ranking clergymen could attain

<sup>30</sup> For more examples cf. M. Pastoureau, *op. cit.*, p. 11; M. L. Dubreton, *La vie quotidienne en Florence au temps de Medicis*, Paris 1958, p. 67 ff.



the highest dignities and lucrative positions. Pope Clement VII (end of the 15th century) was a bastard; his father was Giuliano Medici and his mother a common girl called Gorini. Bastards frequently held high military posts. One of the most famous bastards was Count Jean de Dunois, called the bastard of Orleans, son of Prince Louis of Orleans and his mistress Marietta d'Enghien. Count de Dunois was hero of the war against the English; in 1429 he defended Orleans, hence his sobriquet.

The bastards born to the lower classes fared much worse. They had little chance of making a career. The guilds required "certificates of legitimate birth" and such certificates were also indispensable to obtain urban rights. What was open to them was the career of a soldier or a sailor, that is low-paid occupations which involved risk. The illegitimate children of poor people frequently became beggars or criminals (thieves, bandits). Jean le Brun, leader of a gang of bandits active in Paris at the end of the 14th century, was the son of a soldier from the king of Navarre's forces and a Norman peasant girl seduced by him<sup>31</sup>.

What was a wife's position in a medieval family? We have only touched upon this question when speaking about the annulment of marriages, that is divorce. The medieval family was a patriarchal family but this patriarchalism depended on many factors, including social class. In rich families the wife had servants and slaves to wait on her (in the Middle Ages slavery was widespread in some countries, e.g. in Italy which brought female slaves from the Balkans; white-slave traffic thrived in Dubrovnik — Ragusa). Well-situated women did not have to do hard work at home, they only supervised it. The wife of a rich peasant also had great authority and a strong position (in Western Europe the peasants were granted personal freedom as early as the 12th century; the rent previously paid in kind was replaced by a rent in cash). Her work in the household was indispensable and often brought a considerable income. The position of the wife of a prosperous townsman, who often worked together with her husband in his craft or trade, was not bad either.

Much depended also on relations between the spouses, the size of the woman's dowry, the position of the family from which she descended and, perhaps mainly, on her fertility. The birth of

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<sup>31</sup> B. Geremek, *Życie codzienne w Paryżu Franciszka Villona (Everyday Life in François Villon's Paris)*, Warszawa 1972, pp. 88 ff.

a child strengthened the woman's position in the family while infertility disqualified her, even if she had many other virtues. This is testified to by many sources, e.g. the correspondence of the Datini couple. The Datinis were a rich merchant family in Florence and Prato engaged in the production and sale of textiles. Its most prominent representative was Francesco Datini (1335–1410) who was married to Margarita, 25 years his junior. But as Margarita bore her husband no child, Francesco ill-treated her and they seldom dwelled together. Mrs. Datini came from a good, noble family, she was a hard working and intelligent woman, she ran the house, landed estates and the family's firm in town, multiplying the Datinis' wealth. Despite her virtues, the husband harassed her and threatened that he would leave her.

People in the Middle Ages observed the Biblical commandment to proliferate. Some researchers assert that the birth rate in Western Europe amounted to 35 per cent in the 12th century, an extremely high figure. One of the reasons why medieval people wanted to have so many children may have been the high death rate; very few infants reached adult age. One had to have many children to be sure one would have an heir. Contrary to the present-day situation, it was the richest families that were the most fertile, poor people had the smallest number of children, which was undoubtedly due to undernourishment and hard physical work. Moreover, the fertility of the aristocracy seemed to keep growing. Among the rich families in Picardy, large families with 8–15 children accounted for 12 per cent of all families in 1150, 33 per cent in 1180 and for as much as 42 per cent in 1210<sup>32</sup>. Rulers were also interested in having many children. Eleanor of Aquitaine had 10 children by her two husbands, Isabel de Clare, wife of the Earl of Pembroke, regent of England at the beginning of the 13th century, bore him nine children, Elizabeth Habsburg, wife of Casimir Jagiellon, was the mother of 13 children.

Did love exist in marriages which were arranged by parents for dynastic or family reasons? Courtly love, lauded by troubadours, existed outside the family; it was a platonic love, a subject for literature rather than a real phenomenon. But flesh and blood love, sexual love, also existed in the Middle Ages, As an example

<sup>32</sup> R. Fossier, *La terre et les hommes en Picardie*, Paris 1968, vol. I, pp. 284–286.

we can refer to the liaison between Héloïse and Abélard, which is no less famous than the legendary love of Tristan and Iseult. But in both cases this was an affection outside marriage. Some information about the emotional ties in marriages can be gathered from correspondence, last wills and sometimes from chronicles, but these sources are not very abundant. The love between spouses which they present is less turbulent than the literary descriptions, it is melted in everyday troubles. It undoubtedly existed in some marriages, having arisen through joint efforts to increase the couple's wealth and bring up their children, through mutual care for each other's health. After all, some marriages were love matches concluded secretly, without the knowledge and consent of the parents, relatives or the suzerain. In order to prevent secret unions the Fourth Lateran Council announced in 1215 that banns should be read before each wedding. An interesting example of a secret love match was recorded in Gdańsk. Krzysztof Beyer chronicled a scandal which broke out in the city over a marriage concluded by a rich widow, Anna Mandt, and a merchant from Berlin, Jan Ricke. "This happened in January (1516 — M. B.), a week before the day of St. Paul's conversion. Mrs. Anka Mandt, daughter of Mr. Jurgen Mandt, widow of the burgomaster Jan Schefke who died in 1512, got engaged to a townsman, Jan Rike, without the knowledge and consent of her family and friends. They exchanged rings, gold chains and gifts"<sup>33</sup>. The banns were read in church, arousing the surprise and anger of the family and friends whose consent had not been sought and who took a negative attitude to Anna's marriage. "But Mrs. Anka refused to give in and insisted on having Jan Rike". The energetic woman, fearing that force may be used against her or that she might even be arrested, left her home, leaving her belongings, dresses and jewels behind, and asked the townsmen Karsten Strobandt and Benedykt Burger, friends of Rike, to give her refuge. Rike himself, bearing arms, arrived soon to relieve her, accompanied by four armed men. He brought a closed carriage and Mrs. Anka, accompanied by two female friends and a servant, got in and left Gdańsk for Berlin, writes the chronicler. Rumours about the exciting event circu-

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Scriptores Rerum Prussicarum*, vol. IV, pp. 273 ff. The other quotations concerning this question also come from this work. Cf. also M. B o g u c k a, *op. cit.*, pp. 134 ff.

lated in society. Anna and Jan got married in Berlin. A long-drawn trial began, for according to the law, a woman who married without the consent of her family lost her property. The legal proceedings against Mrs. Anka's brothers who were keeping her possession lasted until 1529. Jan Rike died in the meantime. The stubborn woman became widow for the second time and got married again in Berlin. The dispute ended many years later with an agreement by virtue of which Mrs. Anka finally obtained the part of her mother's property to which she was entitled.

A willful marriage could be costly to a woman and not many of them had the courage to defy their family, law and custom. An even worse fate awaited women who chose an extramarital union but none the less quite a large number of such women could be found in all social groups. Especially frequent were clergymen's illegal unions. Despite the Gregorian reform introduced in the 11th century, celibate was not observed and the Church authorities tolerated this situation. It was only at the turn of the 15th century that celibate began to be more strictly exacted. In his old age Nicolaus Copernicus fell victim to the new rigorous attitude when the bishop ordered him to send away Anna Schilling, his companion for many years.

There is not a shadow of a doubt that emotional ties did exist between men and women in the Middle Ages, both in legal and illegal unions. Their existence acted in favour of women, like the birth of a child, strengthening the woman's position in the family.

In some medieval couples the wife's religious ardour, her inclination for asceticism, hampered the establishment of closer ties between spouses and hindered their normal sexual life. After twenty years of marriage Hedwig of Silesia, wife of Duke Henry the Bearded, gained his consent to separation and went to live in a Cistercian convent at Trzebnica where her daughter, Gertruda, was prioress. Hedwig practised strict asceticism in the convent and finally died of exhaustion (1243). Kinga, daughter of the Hungarian king Bela IV, married to the Polish Duke Ladislaus the Chaste (1239), persuaded her husband to take the oath of chastity. There were more such "white" marriages in the Middle Ages. They could, of course, be undertaken only by strong domineering women (St. Hedwig was a well known despot, St. Kinga was also prone to domination) who by denying their husbands their marital rights, created a special status for them-

selves, a status which was unattainable for an ordinary subservient wife.

The bringing up of many children, like asceticism, gave a woman the possibility of extending her influence and increasing her significance in the family. As far as this question is concerned, very interesting information can be found in the letters of Alexandra Strozzi to her sons. They belonged to the family of important Florentine merchants in the 15th century. After her husband's death, Alexandra became head of the family, took over book-keeping and the running of the firm, decided the fate of her children and ran the family's estates<sup>34</sup> When her sons grew up, they continued to be in close contact with their mother; she chose their careers, advised them, was their confidant and guide until the end of her life.

To sum up, it can be said that women in the Middle Ages were generally ill treated because of their gender. The feudal system, based on the suzerain-vassal relationship which involved military service and other war contributions for the suzerain, excluded women as physically weaker beings. This led to many restrictions, e.g. the introduction of Salic law which made it difficult for women to own land and inherit the throne. Of course the rules were sometime mitigated; in the Netherlands, for instance, women could have fiefs and hold some posts, but these were exceptions. Throughout the Middle Ages women's hereditary rights were restricted, the main reason being objection to the partition of estates. Woman was regarded as not only physically but also morally weaker than man, for she was blamed for the sin committed by Eve.

Of course all these restrictions depended on the region, country and also the time. Some researchers hold the view that the situation of women improved under the Carolingians (a period of intellectual and moral rebirth), during the crusades (the lack of men caused by the crusades made it necessary to replace them in various fields of life, a phenomenon similar to the results of World War I and World War II) and during the development of courtly love. Nevertheless, throughout the Middle Ages women

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<sup>34</sup>E. Uitz, *Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi, eine Frau aus der Geschäftswelt des spätmittelalterlichen Florenz*, in: *Fürstinnen und Städterinnen. Frauen im Mittelalter*, ed. G. Bayreuther, B. Pätzold, E. Uitz, Freiburg, Basel, Wien 1993, pp. 322 ff.

had practically no access to education (apart from courts and rich households, it was only convents that were the main educational centres). In spite of this there were some learned and surprisingly intelligent women (e.g. Héloïse, Margareta Datini, Alexandra Strozzi, Catherine of Siena). Women had no access to universities, but in some houses of noblemen and townsmen teachers were employed to instruct the girls. Relations within families varied, though their structure was always patriarchal and patrilineal (the child was included in the father's family). The work done by women was of enormous importance; without them the medieval society, constantly threatened by hunger, war and pestilence would not have survived.

Medieval women were on the fringe of society, even in religious life, although through asceticism, monastic life and participation in heretic movements some of them gained greater possibilities for public activity. In political life they were also on the margin. A queen or princess was expected to produce heirs to the throne and be engaged only in charitable work and art patronage. But some women managed to go beyond these limits. There was no lack of strong, ambitious women who wanted to rule and knew how to dominate, women who were successful in their competition with men.

The Middle Ages were without doubt an era of misogyny and of the marginalization of women. But it was the following epoch, the early modern times, that brought a real wave of large-scale persecution and feverish hatred in many European countries.

*(Translated by Janina Dorosz)*