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*Defying Historical Stereotypes: Women Claiming Power in the Medieval Period*

Of all the stereotypes that obscure the truth of the Middle Ages, one primary example is the extent of the power women held in society. While being a woman in the Middle Ages was no doubt a struggle through misogyny and a lack of options within one's assigned gender role, there were still loopholes to be found within societal and cultural constraints. Women in medieval times were not the waifs subjected entirely to rape and loss that we often imagine - they often found ways to navigate and negotiate power within the trappings of the Catholic church, to fight back against their would-be tormentors, and to use the trends of the time to establish their own agency.

Despite the somewhat misogynist confines of Catholicism, many free European women found power within dominant cultural and religious beliefs. Holy women and female mystics were unofficial spiritual leaders within their communities, acting with extreme piety and receiving what they believed to be visions from God. These visions, particularly, often held sway over male religious officials of even the highest status, "the authority to dictate to popes and kings."<sup>1</sup> The mystic and later saint Catherine of Siena exchanged much correspondence with Pope Urban VI - in her view the true pope of the Great Western Schism - about the direction of the church and the behaviors of its men, advice which sometimes was even taken into consideration.<sup>2</sup> Countess Delphine de Puimichel, the focal point of the book *Souls Under Siege*,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernstein, Hilary. *Lecture 8, Part 2: War, Schism, and Spirituality*. 38:00 - 38:11.

<sup>2</sup> Bernstein, Hilary. *Lecture 8, Part 2*. 42:11 - 42:22.

was a holy woman in Provence during the time of the Black Death and flood of mercenary invasions in the late 14th century. She performed miracles within her communities and the towns she visited, both during her adult life and posthumously,<sup>3</sup> and as a result was a well-respected pillar for all around her, intervening in political and spiritual dilemmas alike. Though these women were not able to be priests, to give sermons, or to attain official status within the Catholic church, they found ways to ground and prove their spiritual power regardless.

Another somewhat obvious example of women seeking power within existing structures are nuns. Nuns were a female counterpart to monks, particularly popular as a calling in the Early to the High Middle Ages. With their vow of chastity, nuns in monasteries could protect themselves from the gamble of childbirth and, potentially, relationships with men at all, securing a rare independence.<sup>4</sup> Monasteries were also centers of economic and political power, often funded spectacularly by local lords and bishops and placed on or near vital trade routes.<sup>5</sup> This means that the nuns that lived in them or ran them often found themselves with a not-insignificant amount of secular power in addition to the spiritual, though, on the other hand, could also become places of demotion for royal or noble ladies that kings and the like wanted out of the way, or settled in a “dignified place of retirement.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, monasterial nuns could also be seen as an equalizing position, as women from nearly any background could find their way there and become devout. Nuns can be ranked among holy women and mystics as deceptively powerful roles women could fill within Catholicism.

Yet whether medieval women were able to eke out these positions of spiritual or secular power or not, there were other ways for them to claim agency in their lives. Particularly during

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<sup>3</sup> Archambeau, Nicole. *Souls Under Siege: Stories of War, Plague, and Confession in Fourteenth-Century Provence*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2021. pp. 1-7.

<sup>4</sup> Cole, Joshua and Symes, Carol. *Western Civilizations: their history and their culture*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2020. p. 241.

<sup>5</sup> Cole, Joshua and Symes, Carol. *Western Civilizations*. p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> Cole, Joshua and Symes, Carol. *Western Civilizations*, p. 241.

the time of the plague, women were the ones who healed their families and communities by turning to prayer and religious devotion - considered one of the most powerful things one could do, at the time - when what we would term the “medical science” of the period did not work.<sup>7</sup> One such example is from a woman named Alazays Mesellano in Provence, who first sought out a doctor for the deathly illness of her baby granddaughter (a common first step at the time, contrary to popular belief) and when that fell through, trusted in her daughter and the power of one of Delphine’s relics to cure the child, which it did.<sup>8</sup> By this we can see how ‘healthcare’ operated during this time, and the role women played in it by placing their unshakeable faith in each other and in their religious beliefs to work miracles. It was a holy woman that these mothers relied on for succor, and the strength of their own feminine devotion that cured the baby.

During times of invasion and warfare also were women who fought back against both tormentors and stereotype. In another example from Archambeau’s book, when one Lady Andrea Raymon and a group of her loved ones were pursued on horseback by armed mercenaries on their way to their home, Andrea steeled herself and sought courage from the saintly example of the holy woman Delphine. Her “heart changed,”<sup>9</sup> and Lady Andrea and her group were able to find their way home through sheer confidence and bravery despite the danger of both the mercenaries and her horse’s broken saddle, trading barbs with the attackers along the way. Even without the spiritual component - the lingering example of Delphine and her godliness - Lady Andrea guided her group to safety even under the threat of rape or death. This cannot be overstated. While it may be common sense on paper that certain medieval women could hold their own in conflicts or protect their loved ones from armed strife, the story of Lady Andrea

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<sup>7</sup> Archambeau, Nicole. *Souls Under Siege*. p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Archambeau, Nicole. *Souls Under Siege*. pp 118-119.

<sup>9</sup> Archambeau, Nicole. *Souls Under Siege*. p. 105.

proves that these women truly existed and possessed their own agency, fighting in a metaphorical sense for what they believed and cared about.

Women in the Middle Ages could also use the interests, preoccupations, and crises of the times in their favor to become something more than they were told they could be - though this could be a limitation just as much as a freedom. Joan of Arc, the well-known figure who was told by angels and God to approach the King of France and lead his army into battle against the English crown during the Hundred Years' War, exemplifies both.<sup>10</sup> Even as a teenage girl - a cross-section of gender and age still oft-reviled in the present - she used the tensions and interests of the time, the acceptance of female mysticism, the political dysfunction and potential need for a religious savior in this war, to go and do what many young women could never dream of. Yet, after granting the French the upper hand they so sorely needed, she was betrayed by her own people and tried for both witchcraft and heresy. The main point against her in the 1431 Condemnation by the University of Paris was that "you have continually worn men's clothes . . . and that you have had short hair, cut around above the ears, without retaining anything on your person which shows that you are a woman."<sup>11</sup> In the end, the culture of her time that dictated the role of women - even holy women - so strongly that it caused her martyrdom.

A more light-hearted example of women using the interests of the time to their advantage comes with the example of Christine de Pizan. Christine was "the first lay woman to earn her living by writing," becoming a powerhouse of the written word in the early 15th century and even turning out books about decidedly 'un-ladylike' topics such as warfare.<sup>12</sup> However, the exact timing of Christine's career is crucial to understanding why she was not fated to obscurity,

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<sup>10</sup> Cole, Joshua and Symes, Carol. *Western Civilizations*. p. 386.

<sup>11</sup> Larrington, Carolyne, ed. and trans., "The Condemnation of Joan of Arc by the University of Paris, 1431," in *Women and Writing in Medieval Europe* (New York: 1995), pp.183-184

<sup>12</sup> Cole, Joshua and Symes, Carol. *Western Civilizations*. pp. 372-373.

or worse, treated as a heretic much like Joan herself - the time of her writings falls during the birth of the Italian Renaissance, when, in the intellectual sphere, appeals to the classical past were celebrated and taken seriously. Christine was able to use this to her advantage, particularly when talking about warfare in books such as *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, where she calls upon not only her nationality as an Italian woman, but upon the Roman goddess Minerva to guide her understanding of the matters she wrote about.<sup>13</sup> By metaphorically appealing to not only this higher power, but this *classical* higher power, Christine coyly harnessed the preoccupations of male intellectuals of the time to create the life that she wanted for herself, that of a writer, to support and protect her family, as well as inspire and advocate for women for generations to come.

In spite of economic instability, plague, war, and the limitations imposed by both religious and secular leaders alike on the role of women in society and culture, women in the Middle Ages, even those born in lower classes, developed ways to claim power and agency. Whether this power was religious, academic, or even just personal for one's self and loved ones in the midst of myriad crises, medieval women consistently found loopholes in the societal and cultural constraints placed on them to stand tall and resist gender-based limitations. It's prudent to remember these examples of day-to-day resistance and strength against marginalization while studying a field such as history, lest we fall into the trap of letting our own misconceptions and stereotypes cloud our view of humanity as a whole.

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<sup>13</sup> de Pizan, Christine. *The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and trans. Sumner Willard (University Park, PA: 1999). pp. 11-13.

Note: Minerva is the Roman pantheon equivalent of the Greek goddess Athena.

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