

# Women and Work in the Middle Ages

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Modern historians are beginning to discover that medieval women made a significant contribution to the economy of the medieval world. In past histories, women were either ignored by men or taken for granted. Neither religious nor romantic literature gives us an accurate accounting of the activities of the real medieval woman. Today, letters, wills, business and legal documents, convent, manor and census records and manuscript illuminations are used to complete our concept of the world of medieval women. It is hoped that this study will assist the female members of the Society for Creative Anachronism, Inc. with their persona research and their attempts to become real medieval women. For women in the Middle Ages played an active role in medieval society, although their economic efforts were affected by their social class, marital status and by the place and time in which they lived.

Within the three estates are five groups of women which shall be examined:

First—Women from the class that was landed and free; the husband possessed some land and was relatively free of the control of the manorial lord. here we find the yeoman's wife, the knight's wife, the lady of the manor.

Second—Religious women. Women from the upper classes, and women of the noble and knightly families, as well as those from well-to-do merchant families, were the principal sources of vocations.

Third—Women whose families provided the free burgesses; the citizens of the towns. Chaucer's Wife of Bath was a free townswoman.

Fourth—Women of a lower estate who also lived in the towns.

Fifth—Women of the largest group in the society of the Middle Ages; those whose rights and duties were stated in manorial custom: peasants, cottagers, villains, serfs—Piers Ploughman's wife.

## **The Lady of the Manor**

The Lady of the Manor was a competent woman who often ran manors, farms and castles single-handedly. She was an influential person who had to deal with the management of acres of land, crops, animals and property; hundreds of employees and their homes; legal arguments, fights, riots and

even armed attacks. (Adams et al., p.5)

Christine de Pizan is an example of the strong and capable lady of the manor. She was widowed at age 25; with three young children; remained single and earned her living as a write. She instructs other women thusly:

"Because that knights, squires and gentlemen go upon journeys and follow the wars, it beseemeth wives to be wise in all they do, for that most often they dwell at home without their husbands who are at court or in divers lands." (Christine de Pizan, in Power, p.5)

We know a great deal about the life of the lady of the manor from the letters of Margaret Paston written between 1441 and 1447. Margaret was a rich heiress who was married to Sir John Paston, a lawyer, who spent several months away each year in London at the law courts. During his absence, Margaret was left in charge of the huge estates. There are 104 surviving letters which Margaret wrote to her husband that tell us about her busy life. Her activities included:

- 1 Keeping the tenants' houses in repair.  
"There be divers of your tenantries at Mautby that had great need to be repaired, and the tenants be so poor that they are not a power to repair them; wherefore I would that the marsh might be kept in your own hand this year that the tenants might have rushes to repair with their houses. And also there is windfall wood at the manor that is of no great value that might help them with toward the reparation."
- 2 Sorting out complaints and legal disagreements at the local law court.  
"I suppose there shall be great labour against you and your servants at the assizes and sessions here...it were well that ye should speak with the justices ere they come here; and if ye will that I complain to them I will do as you advise me to do."
- 3 Supervising the renting out of lands and property to tenants.
- 4 Solving problems with bad workers
- 5 Organizing the defense of the estates when they were attacked.
- 6 Supervising the repair of damages and buying new things.
- 7 Being responsible for running a household of hundreds of people.
- 8 Supervising the preparation of huge amounts of food and other household goods. (Much like managing a small hotel and

restaurant.)

- 9 Supervising workers.
- 10 Making medicines and watching over the sick. (a local nurse and social worker)
- 11 Monitoring the behavior of all the people living in her house and helping to arrange their marriages.

(*From the letters of Margaret Paston in Adams et al, pp. 6-11.*)

Diana Bornstein summarizes the advice given to upper class women by Christine de Pizan in *Livres des trios vertus*. In this book, Christine de Pizan fully recognizes women's contribution within the economic sphere and is really the only writer of her period to do so. She describes the extensive knowledge of law, accounting, warfare, agriculture, and textile production needed by the lady of the manor.

"The lady who lives on her estates must be wise and must have the courage of a man. She should not oppress her tenants and workers but should be just and consistent. She should follow the advice of her husband and of wise counselors so that people will not think she is merely following her own will. She must know the laws of warfare so that she can command her men and defend her lands if they are attacked. She should know everything pertaining to her husband's business affairs so that she can act as his agent in his absence or for herself if she should become a widow. She must be a good manager of workers. To supervise her workers, she needs a good knowledge of farming. She will be sure to have adequate supplies for the spinning and weaving of cloth for the wise housekeeper can sometimes bring in more profit than the revenue from the land."

Christine de Pizan in Bornstein, pp. 105-7.)

The writing of Christine de Pizan and collections such as the Paston letters bear witness to the business ability of upper-class medieval women. Their men were thus freed to engage in wars, crusades, politics, and commerce, activities that led to the expansion of Europe. (Bornstein, p. 96)

### **Religious Women—the nun**

Not all upper class women married and became ladies of manors. Studies show that 7-10% of women in France and England never married. (Hanawalt, p. ix) For upper class women the convent was an alternative to married life and filled several basic needs. It received girls whose families were unable or unwilling to find them husbands. It provided an outlet for non-conformists as well as those who had genuine religious vocations. It was a refuge for female intellectuals. (Gies, p. 64) The convent provided

careers and a livelihood for wealthier ladies and was the only acceptable alternative to marriage for women who were restricted by birth from choices open to women of other classes. (Adams et al., p. 20)

Life in the convent was a balance between prayer, study and work. Convents were self-sufficient communities and all nuns were expected to work about 5 to 6 hours a day, according to the rule of St. Benedict who said that "Idleness was the enemy of the soul."

The abbess of such a community held one of the most important roles open to women during the Middle Ages. She was responsible for the direction of a major economic enterprise as well as for the spiritual care and discipline of her sisters. Under this superior, and in charge of the daily routine management of properties, household accounts and a staff of servants, were officials known as obedientiaris. These executives might include a prioress, a subprioress and a treasurer, as well as other officers who performed specialized functions. These might include a chantress who managed church services; a sacrist who cared for vestments and altar supplies; a fratress who oversaw the setting of tables and took care of linens and dishes; an almoness who took care of almsgiving; a chambress who arranged for the making of clothing and bedding; a cellarer who had charge of the food and often managed the farm; a kitcheness who superintended the cooking; an infirmarer who had charge of the sick and a novice mistress who supervised the novices. (Gies, p. 70)

All manner of general work was performed. There is a record of a Queen Radegund at Ste. Croix in Poitiers who took out garbage, carried water and firewood, stoked the fire, swept, cooked, cleaned, and washed dishes. (Gies, p. 72) In the later Middle Ages, however, convents employed people to perform many chores.

In addition to the administration and general work of these communities, convents provided services such as the making of vestments. Benedictine nuns were especially known for their embroidery on these. German convents were known for their scriptoriums. (Carr, p. 5) Many convents served as hotels for widows and other gentlewomen who did not take vows. Convents were frequently used as foundling homes and occasionally as schools. (Adams et al, p. 16)

### **The free townswoman**

"In making cloth she showed so great a bent  
She bettered those of Ypres and Ghent."  
(the Wyfe of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury*)

*Tales.)*

The Wife of Bath belongs to the third group of women workers, although she perhaps should not be viewed as a paradigm of the group. This group is the bourgeoisie and includes free townswomen from the merchant families down to those who practiced minor crafts.

Middle class women were expected not only to maintain their households, usually a townhouse within the city, but also to assist their husbands in business. A woman could be of assistance to her husband by helping him in his trade or by practicing one of her own (the "femme sole"). (Bornstein, p. 96) The period of 1300-1500 was a time of great expansion in industry and commerce and an increase in the number of workers was necessary. It seems to have been taken for granted that women would do their share. In London no trade was closed to women by law and evidence exists of women's employment in occupations of many kinds. (Abram, p. 276) In fact a married woman in business had two advantages over her husband. First, she had the choice of taking full responsibility for her actions and the debts incurred in her business (the "femme sole"), or of placing the responsibility on her husband. Additionally, in 1363 in London, a city ordinance declared that men had to keep to one trade while women were free to follow as many as they chose. (Bornstein, p. 96) Women sometimes pursued two or three occupations. However, rather than liberating, this ordinance might be construed to imply that women were less skilled or not "masters" of their trades.

To learn a skill or trade, middle class women, especially those of the town would have to serve an apprenticeship. Both men and women could take apprentices, although women usually did so in conjunction with their husbands. The apprenticeship agreement, made between two families, was a legal document called an indenture. The following is an extract of an indenture in which John Nogle of London apprentices his sister, Katherine, in 1392.

"This indenture witnesses that John Nogle of London, haberdasher, has put Katherine Nogle, his sister, apprentice to Avice Wodeford, silkthrower, of London to learn her rat and to serve her after the manner of an apprentice from Pentecost in the 15th year of the reign of King Richard II until the end of the next seven years..." (Adams et al, p. 27)

Men could also make their wives and daughters apprentices which accounted for women entering trades that would not be expected. Husbands and wives frequently worked together, the wife helping her husband when he was at home, and acting for him in his absence. When a man died, his wife was often capable of continuing the business and the ordinances of the

guilds allowed her to do so. (Bornstein, p. 1010) Widows who had completed an apprenticeship and inherited their husband's shop could, in theory, end up with a large and profitable business of their own.

Although these widows and other "femme soles" were frequently allowed to enter the guilds, they seldom were allowed to control the guilds or become jurees, supervisors of other workers. As the economy flourished, men, who were in control of the guilds, found other ways to restrict the activity of women to the home and shop. Although a woman might be active in the manufacture of a product, she was seldom allowed to market it. Eventually she was also restricted to the lower level of production. A woman could not become a master dyer, for example, because she was not permitted to lift the cloth from the vats. In another guild ordinance, a woman pastry-maker (pistrix) was not permitted to carry more than one box of biscuits across the town. (Gies, p. 165)

Guild records show us that women were active in many trades. In Paris, women participated in over 100 trades, some of which were practiced only by women and some by men and women. IN the 1300's women were practicing some trades that were later restricted to men. There were women barbers, apothecaries, armorers, shipwrights, tailors and spurriers. In Paris we find records of women in building trades, such as masons, carpenters, makers of doors and diggers of gravel. However nearly all trades had fewer women than men and in many trades the number declined as time went on. In 1420 in London, only 20 out of 300 brewers were female. This was a trade which many women had practiced in the early Middle Ages. (Adams, p. 28)

The silk industry was an aspect of the textile industry in which women were especially prominent. Many of the trades in the industry were practiced only by women. The women were not only spinners and weavers; they made ribbons, kerchiefs, fringes, tassels, laces, caps, purses and other small articles of silk. They were also able to serve as jurees, who supervised workers and served as elected officers sworn to uphold the regulations and standards of their craft. (Bornstein, p. 100) The silkworkers were a powerful group. In 1468 in England, they banded together to complain to the King about Nicholas Sardouche who was monopolizing the supply of crude silk and selling it to them at higher prices. An inquiry was made and Sardouche was found guilty. (Abram, p. 278)

An occupation of importance for medieval women was that of the midwife. These women had a strong sense of identity and always mentioned their occupation when acting in any legal or public capacity. (Wiesner, p. 8) The importance given to this position can be seen in the records of Nuremberg in 1430. Nuremberg was an important urban center and was also an example for other cities in that it assumed control of the public welfare and hygiene

from an early date (Hanawalt, p. 95)

The Nuremberg city council was very concerned about the availability of the trained midwives for its growing population. There was also a concern that more women could be trained. Regulations were made and careful records were kept. Payments made to midwives compare well with salaries of craftsmen at the journeyman level depending on how many births a midwife attended. The average was 3-5 per week. (Hanawalt, p. 97) Midwives participated with other craftsmen and guild members at an annual oath-swearing parade. From the ordinances sworn to and from legal cases we can get an idea of the variety of activities in which midwives were involved. The city council provided and paid for the services of a midwife for every indigent mother. Midwives were not allowed to dispense strong drugs although they could arrange for the apothecary to do so. Bonuses were offered to encourage the acceptance of an apprentice who would train for a period of four years. (Hanawalt, p. 99) Midwives also gave postnatal care and often served as backup medical assistants during outbreaks of plague and other epidemics. Midwives were used by physicians in all female physical examinations and they also did cesarean sections on dead or dying mothers. They probably also did other minor surgery, especially for women. They distributed public welfare such as alms to indigent mothers, served various religious functions such as participating in the baptismal ceremonies and gave legal testimony. (Hanawalt, p. 105)

Although the occupation of midwife was necessary and its practice and training was regulated by city ordinance, there is some evidence that her social status was not as high as that of the merchant or master craftsman. A midwife was frequently referred to by her first name in city records and she did not have her own household/shop. Her station, as well as her pay, was probably equal to that of a journeyman. (Hanawalt, p. 99) Women served in the medical field as barbers and apothecaries, but mostly as assistants to their husbands. There is occasional mention of women doctors. Women were studying medicine in Salerno as early as the 11th century. However, they were restricted in London and forbidden to study medicine in Paris.

Another field in which we find women craftworkers is in book production and decorations. There were women scribes, illuminators, binders and one mention of a book publisher. As book production became more secular, women found employment, again usually in the shops of their husbands, fathers or brothers. In *The City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan praises the work of a Parisian illuminator named Anastasia and in the accounts of King John of France for January, 1358, we find the name of Marguerite the binder, who was paid for rebinding a copy of the Bible. (Bornstein, p. 100)

Another trade in which women were employed in large numbers was the

manufacture and sale of food and beverages. (Gies, p. 175) This is not surprising since brewing and baking were originally home industries. (Bornstein, p. 101)

Beer and ale were favorite beverages of the Middle Ages and from very early times women brewed and sold them. The vocabulary (brewster, ale-wife) indicates that women played a prominent part in this profession. However the brewers outnumbered the brewsters and gradually tried to exclude the women from brewing. Baxters also were numerous. Some had bake-houses or carts of their own, but many were merely regratresses who carried the bread around and sold it door-to-door. (Abram, p. 279)

### **Townswomen who had little or no training or skill**

The fourth group of women might be described as the townswomen whose occupations required little or no training or skill. This medieval working woman was a member of the urban lower middle class or perhaps of the urban poor. These women were not considered to be citizens of the city in which they lived although they may have been born there. Many were immigrants from the countryside. We know the least about this group. What we know comes from public records. They are the working women of the lesser crafts, street-vendors and servants. (Sheehan, p. 25)

Many of these women worked as hucksters or "regratresses." They were street vendors who retailed products that had been purchased wholesale. Among things sold in this fashion were fish (fish-mongering was considered to be a good business with the many fast days), poultry, dairy products, charcoal and staples such as oats, salt and flour. (Hanawalt, p. 148)

Court records show that this group also included receivers of stolen goods, petty criminals and brothel proprietors. Hanawalt claims that 32% of brothel-keepers were women and that many women fell into this occupation due to limits put on other commercial activities for women. (Hanawalt, p. 154)

Also included in this group would be wet-nurses and healers (nurses), candle-makers and leather-finishers. Domestic servants, mostly single women, were the worst-paid women workers. They frequently worked mainly or entirely for their keep. Women in this group were often forced to expand their income by prostitution or thievery. (Gies, p. 181)

What distinguishes female employment in this fourth group is that the women rarely had formal training in a workplace. Domestic servants, prostitutes, retailers, brewsters and food-preparers required little in the way of longterm detailed instructions. These women worked in occupations that

used skills learned informally within the family context. Their typical "female" skills were marketable only in occupations like domestic service, food retailing, cloth manufacture, the nursing and nurturing of children and even prostitution. (Hanawalt, p. 155)

### **The peasant woman—Piers Ploughman's Wife**

We return to the countryside to study the last and largest group of working women in the Middle Ages.

"Villein or free, rich or poor, the peasant's wife was a partner to her husband in a way that the lady of the castle, whatever her responsibilities, was not."

(Gies, p. 147)

The lower we go down the social scale, the more equality is found in the work that was done by men and women. Peasant women were expected to share in all their husbands' labor on the farm. In addition to agricultural labors they had all the traditional household chores. (Bornstein, p. 102)

William Langford's narrative poem "Piers Ploughman," written between 1362 and 1399, shows us the harsh life of women living in the country.

Charged with children and overcharged by landlords

What they may spare in spinning, they spend on rental

On milk or on meal to make porridge

To still the sobbing of the children at meal times.

Also themselves suffer much hunger

And woe in wintertime, with waking at night

To rise to the (bedside) to rock the cradle...

Both to card, and to comb, to clout

And to wash, to rub and to reel

And rushes to peel.

The woe of these women who dwell in hovels

Is too sad to speak of or to say in rhyme.

("Piers Ploughman" in Adams et al, p. 22)

The spinning described in "Piers Ploughman" was such a common activity that it was hardly recognized as a skill or craft. The main feudal obligation of the female serf was to spin and weave a fixed quantity of material every year for the lord of the manor. A woman could free herself from this obligation by paying a fixed sum or by donating a certain amount of wine or poultry. The tenant farmer's wife would use money earned by spinning to pay the rent. This was frequently the only cash generated. (Bornstein, p. 102)

Other duties of Piers Plowman's wife included: making all the family's food and clothes from raw materials; milking cows and feeding the chickens, ducks and geese; pounding and combing out flax; shearing sheep and washing, carding, spinning and weaving the wool; making cheese; looking after the family's vegetable patch. She also worked with her husband in the field, sowing, reaping, gleaning, binding, threshing, and winnowing and sometimes even ploughing. She took her spinning to the field with her to occupy her spare time! (Adams et al, p. 3)

Many peasant women did not marry because of a shortage of eligible landholding partners. There were several options for unmarried country girls. They could remain on their father's land and work for him or their brothers in return for food and lodging. They could become servants in another peasant's home where they received food and clothes in return for their labor. They could become one of the famuli (Gies, p. 154), the permanent staff of workers on a manor. Here they could become a dairy maid or even a shepherdess. They could hire themselves out as field workers where they did the same basic work as men. Or they might travel to the towns in search of work. If they managed to escape and stay free for a year and a day, they were free from serfdom. (Adams et al, p. 23) The widowed peasant woman could pass the land to her sons or to her daughters' husbands. The children were required to provide for their mother if she did so. Evidence of fines and lost lands tell us that some women decided to work the land themselves. They were still required to fulfill all their feudal obligations to their lord. (Adams et al, p. 24)

The lives of peasant women were hard and they worked as a means of survival. However, Christine de Pizan felt that the lives of peasant women were more stable and secure than those of the upper classes and that peasant women enjoyed greater equality.

"Albeit they be fed with coarse bread, milk, lard, and pottage and drink water, and albeit they have care and labour enow, yet is their life surer year they have greater sufficiency then some that be of higher estate."

Christine Pizan quoted in Adams et al, p. 26)

## **Conclusions and Observations**

1. The work of medieval women was centered around the home. When industry began to develop outside the house

and the home workshop, women's domestic duties frequently prevented them from taking a leading part in the industrial development.

2. The work patterns of medieval women changed with their marital status. Apprenticeships were frequently terminated by marriage. Widows were frequently able to practice their husbands' trades.
3. Women were allowed only a limited role in crafts and guild participation. There were restrictions on their employment, and their status and pay was generally lower than that of men.
4. Equality of women in work was in inverse proportion to their social status. This means that peasant men and women worked "equally" hard and were "equally" poor. It was only within the peasant and artisan class that women shared work and responsibility with men on a nearly equal basis.
5. Medieval women contributed to all aspects of their economy, perhaps dominating the domestic side of what was still basically an agricultural economy.

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More on a public talk Monika gave on this in [May 2007](#), with photos and more information, and here is more on [the author](#)