Women in the Middle Ages

Medieval men embraced the Ancient Greek ‘one sex’ model. Accordingly, women and men were considered the same: what men had anatomically on the outside, women had within. Women were not regarded as a separate sex but measured against men; as they were generally weaker than men. Women were deemed ‘less capable’ rather than different.

A Woman’s Role

The woman’s main role was as a mother. Women were meant to produce male heirs and to raise them well. In epic poetry that recounts battle scenes, mothers are given credit for their sons’ bravery. They are also seen as the protectors of the nation’s men. Women were meant to support their husbands, and wives would often offer them advice or counsel. Peasant women worked alongside their husbands in the fields and as a consequence there was likely less of a gender divide in the country. Interestingly, the skeletons of women found in Wharram Percy, Yorkshire, revealed that they were more muscular than their urban counterparts presumably from the hard labour that they undertook.

Urban wives would learn the trade or business of their husband not only to assist him but to ensure they could earn a livelihood should they be widowed. Widows had greater autonomy than married women and were even allowed to manage and own property. Occasionally a woman was trained in her father’s trade. Whereas a surgeon could teach his daughter who could then treat patients a physician’s daughter might only practise on family and friends. (See Health, Hygiene, and Disease for more information).

Midwifery and obstetrics were undertaken by females. In addition to their domestic duties women might supplement the household income by taking on extra jobs such as laundry service, sewing and brewing ale.

Social Control

Women were subject to a strong element of social control. Gossip alone could ruin a reputation. Women sought to avoid any situation that might be construed as scandalous. Of course, enemies were prone to making up lies and name-calling could be very damaging to a young lady. Generally these rumours and insults questioned the sexual purity of a girl; such comments could stand in the way of a good marriage. Men were also subject to town gossip but it was generally less detrimental to the man’s reputation.
War

Women often played an integral role in wartime and when the men were away at war, the women would take over the household. They were expected to protect the children and manage their husband’s affairs. On occasion women would follow men into battle and serve as laundrywomen or undertake other domestic roles. They also provided company for the men. William Wallace’s wife, Marion Braidfute, followed him to battle and sadly died there. Some women even fought in battle. Whilst some writers referred to women as innocent casualties for propaganda purposes, women might be greatly involved in war efforts. A notable example is Agnes Randolph, known as Black Agnes, the countess of Dunbar. In 1338 Agnes held Dunbar Castle against the English in a siege that lasted five months while her husband was away. Embracing her domesticity, Agnes mocked the English troops by instructing her maids to dust the walls destroyed by the English. She and her companions would appear on the battlements when the castle was under fire.

Scottish women in the Middle Ages were by no means equal to men but they were able to take control in certain areas of their lives. As managers of the household, women made many important financial decisions. In times of trouble, they were able to take over their husband’s role. Most importantly, women raised the next generation of Scots. This period saw a great increase in power for women.

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Useful Reading


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