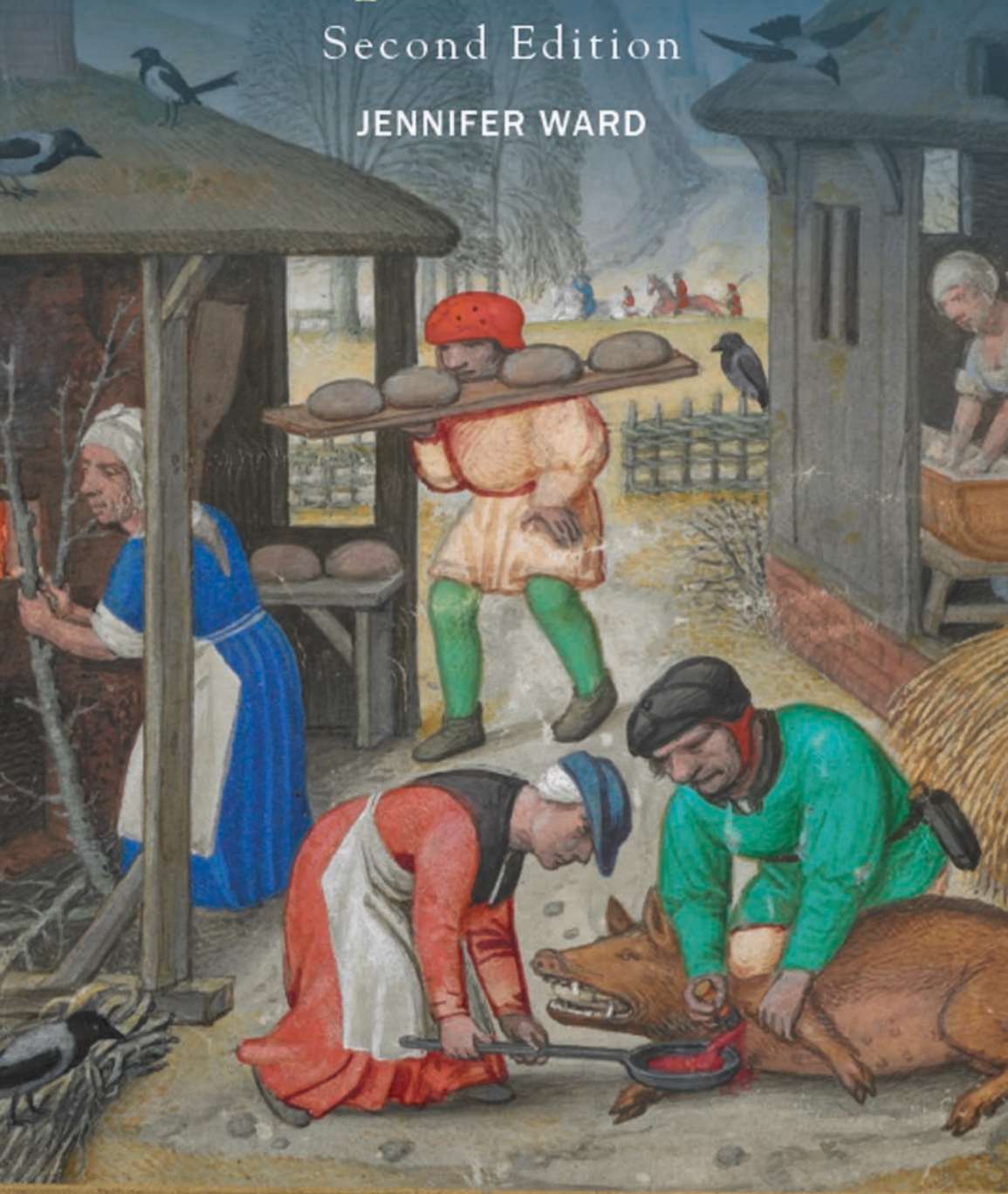


Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500

Second Edition

JENNIFER WARD



Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500

Second Edition

Women in Medieval Europe explores the key areas of female experience in the later medieval period, from peasant women to queens. It considers the women of the later Middle Ages in the context of their social relationships during a time of changing opportunities and activities, so that by 1500 women were becoming increasingly restricted from the world of work. The chapters are arranged thematically to show the varied roles and lives of women in and out of the home, covering topics such as marriage, religion, family and work.

For the second edition a new chapter draws together recent work on Jewish and Muslim women, as well as those from other ethnic groups, showing the wide-ranging experiences of women from different backgrounds. Particular attention is paid to women at work in the towns, and specifically urban topics such as trade, crafts, health care and prostitution. The latest research on women, gender and masculinity has also been incorporated, along with updated further reading recommendations.

This fully revised new edition is a comprehensive yet accessible introduction to the topic, perfect for all those studying women in Europe in the later Middle Ages.

Jennifer Ward spent much of her career at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where she taught medieval and regional history. Her previous publications include: *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (1992), *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066–1500* (1995) and *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (2006).

This page intentionally left blank

Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500

Second Edition

Jennifer Ward

Second edition published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2016 Jennifer Ward

The right of Jennifer Ward to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

First edition published 2002 by Pearson Education Limited

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ward, Jennifer C.

Title: Women in medieval Europe, 1200-1500 / Jennifer Ward.

Description: Second edition. | London : Routledge, 2016. | "First edition published 2002 by Pearson Education Limited"—Title page verso. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015037828 | ISBN 9781138855670

(hardback : alkaline paper) | ISBN 9781138855687

(paperback : alkaline paper) | ISBN 9781315629803 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women—Europe—History—Middle Ages, 500-1500. |

Women—Europe—Social conditions. | Women and religion—Europe—

History—To 1500. | Women—Political activity—Europe—History—

To 1500. | Europe—Social conditions—T0 1492.

Classification: LCC HQ1147.E85 W37 2016 | DDC 305.4209409/02—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015037828>

ISBN: 978-1-138-85567-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-85568-7 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-62980-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon

by Keystroke, Station Road, Codsall, Wolverhampton

In memory of John

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Preface to the second edition</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1 Upbringing	15
2 Marriage	29
3 Women and family	50
4 The house and household	70
5 Women and work in rural areas	81
6 Townswomen and work	88
7 Ethnic minorities: Jews, Muslims and slaves	121
8 Women and power: Noblewomen and queens	129
9 Laywomen and the arts	154
10 Religious life: Nuns and nunneries	175
11 Religious life: Beguines, penitents and recluses	199
12 Mystics and saints	215

viii *Contents*

13 Laywomen and charity	234
14 Lay beliefs and religious practice	246
15 Women, heresy and witchcraft	265
Conclusion	278
<i>Further reading</i>	282
<i>Index</i>	293

Preface

Over the past twenty years, interest in women's history has continued unabated, and research is throwing new light on women's activities, interests and beliefs. History is not the only discipline contributing to this upsurge. Literary, social, cultural and religious studies have all made great contributions to the story of women in the past. Archaeological excavations and work on architecture and art history enable us to reconstruct women's houses, daily lives and relationships to family and children. Women in Europe had and have a common inheritance, and in many ways in the Middle Ages their lives were similar wherever they lived. Yet recent work is also pointing to strong regional differences, some of which can still be traced in the modern world. Aspects of the Middle Ages are still alive in the Europe of today.

In writing this book, I have incurred a number of debts. I would like to thank Patricia Skinner, one of the editors of the series, and Heather McCallum and her colleagues at Pearson Education for their help, and Philip Broadhead, Paul Fouracre, Kay Lacey and Kate Lowe for their advice on particular parts of the book. Any remaining mistakes are mine. I would also like to thank family and friends for visiting with me numerous sites associated with medieval women and discussing their implications.

Jennifer Ward
March 2002

This page intentionally left blank

Preface to the second edition

For the second edition a new chapter, 'Ethnic minorities: Jews, Muslims and slaves', has been included. 'Women and the work they do' has now been divided between a rural and an urban chapter. I would like to thank Laura Pilsworth and Catherine Aitken for their help with the revisions.

Jennifer Ward, September 2015

This page intentionally left blank

Abbreviations

<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>BIHR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
<i>EETS</i>	Early English Text Society
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>JFH</i>	<i>Journal of Family History</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
<i>PandP</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Women, the Church and the law

Few women of the later Middle Ages, apart possibly from Joan of Arc, are known by name to people in the twenty-first century. Joan of Arc was herself exceptional in taking on the male role of a soldier and raising the siege of Orleans in 1429. More is heard of kings, popes, philosophers and scholars than of queens and women mystics and writers. Partly this is due to the subordination of medieval women and the way in which they were viewed by the Church and the law, partly it is due to traditions in historical writing until recent times. However, the continuing interest in social history and gender from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day has resulted in women becoming more noticed.

During this time, the historian's tools for analysis have become more refined. Women's history became more prominent as a result of the feminist movement. About forty years ago, historians wanted to open up knowledge of medieval women by using new methodologies of analysing sources, and this concern is ongoing. Sources which had previously been used were re-examined from fresh viewpoints. More recently, work on gender studies as an effective tool of analysis has opened up new understandings of medieval society. Gender is essentially a social and cultural construction of human relationships, whether in the home, workplace or community.¹ The present study of masculinity is an essential part of this, and, as a result, the picture of human relations has become more complex and nuanced, as rigid, polarised identities of men and women have been undermined by deeper analysis.

This approach to gender gives rise to studies in difference set in the contexts of place and time, since people differ in numerous ways – in sexuality, ethnicity, religion, status, age, occupations, authority and power. Understanding of the complexity of sexualities has grown, and this has a bearing on relationships and needs to be set against the rigid definitions of sexuality in the medieval world and the emphasis on male authority and control.² Gender entails an understanding of place since men's and women's relationships varied considerably from region to region in medieval Europe, and changes took place in societies and culture during the later Middle Ages. Gender has to be looked at from more than the biological point of view. Although most women had common experience as mothers,

2 *Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500*

the social construction of status highlights their different experiences over place and time.

It is a truism that women were regarded as inferior and subordinate in the later Middle Ages, and to understand this it is essential to go back to the classical past. The Greeks believed that all matter in the universe, including mankind, was made up of four elements – earth, air, fire and water – in varying combinations. These elements corresponded in the human body to the four humours: choler or yellow bile was associated with fire; phlegm with water; black bile with earth; and blood with air. Each element had its own characteristics: fire was hot and dry; air hot and wet; water cold and wet; and earth cold and dry. Good health was ensured by keeping a balance between the humours, but one or two were usually predominant, giving the personality and appearance their main traits – an individual might be choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic (through an excess of black bile) or sanguine, if blood was the dominant humour.

More significant from the point of view of women was the opinion that in them the cold and moist elements were uppermost. This idea was emphasised by Aristotle, as when he claimed that women matured and aged earlier than men because they were weaker and colder by nature; they were inferior to men who had the heat to grow more slowly. For Aristotle, a woman was an imperfect man. The same point was made in the second century A.D. by the physician Galen who asserted that man was more perfect than woman because of the element of heat.³

The imperfect nature of women was apparent in their sexual organs. Both Aristotle and Galen believed that men's and women's sexual organs were mirror images of each other. As Galen put it, the organs were formed inside the woman when she was a foetus in the womb and because of her lack of heat could not emerge on the outside of the body; however, he considered this an advantage for humanity, since women were essential for procreation, and the Creator would not have made women imperfect unless there had been good reason for this. Aristotle distinguished between the man as active and the woman as passive partner, the man providing the form and the woman matter, as befitted the weaker creature. The woman produced menstrual fluid, not semen. The male semen implanted itself in the womb and developed into a foetus, the woman simply providing the site for this development to take place. Galen, however, was aware of the presence of the ovaries, which he regarded as small testes, and saw women's semen as having a role in procreation; at the same time he pointed out that the semen of the male had a more important part to play. Both theories are found during the Middle Ages. The recovery of Aristotle's works in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries led to his having great influence on medical science as on other forms of learning. St Thomas Aquinas subscribed to his belief in matter and form, arguing that the foetus received its form from the power of the father's semen.⁴

Menstruation was a further sign of women's imperfection, and for Aristotle this explained why women did not produce semen. Menstrual blood was regarded as unclean and polluting in classical and medieval times. Yet it was believed that menstrual blood nourished the foetus in the womb and that the breast-milk which fed the baby after birth was a form of menstrual blood. The girl-baby was disadvantaged even in the womb; boys, it was believed, developed on the right side of the womb, while girls on the left suffered from a colder environment from the time of conception.⁵

These scientific views have to be set against the religious ideas of the Middle Ages. According to the Church, mankind fell from the state of grace through the action of Eve who, according to the story in the Bible in the Book of Genesis, was tempted by the devil to pick the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil growing in the middle of the Garden of Eden. God had forbidden Adam and Eve to touch this fruit, but Eve ate it and gave it to her husband. As a result, God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden and condemned them to a life of toil and suffering.⁶ Eve's weakness in succumbing to temptation underlay much of the misogynistic writing of the Middle Ages. Although St Paul stressed the obligations of marital partners towards each other, he saw the wife as a person lacking in authority and subject to her husband.⁷ The Fall, taken together with the influence of classical writings and the long tradition of women's subordination, largely explains the Church's deep distrust of women. The idealising of virginity by the Church led to the opinion that marriage was second best. Yet gender analysis shows some variety among churchmen's views, as is apparent in the pastoral manuals of practical advice to parish priests, written from *c.* 1200 onwards. Although Thomas of Chobham saw husband and wife as having a good influence on each other, the wife was certainly subordinate to her husband, whereas Robert Grosseteste saw the marital relationship on a more equal footing of reciprocal support and partnership.⁸

Women's vices were a popular subject for preachers, writers and poets in the later Middle Ages. Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) was a prominent churchman and crusader, well known for his support of the beguines, the religious women of the Low Countries, and in particular of Mary of Oignies whom he regarded as his inspiration. He was also a prolific preacher and fully aware of women's shortcomings. He expected wives to obey their husbands; Eve was created from Adam's rib, not from his head, in order to reduce women's arrogance. Women were self-willed, quarrelsome, disobedient, weak, deceitful and untrustworthy.⁹ Two traits were particularly emphasised by churchmen: women were lustful and had an insatiable sexual appetite, and they lacked reason and therefore needed to be subject to a man's guidance.

The antithesis of Eve was the Virgin Mary, the woman who obeyed God's call to become the mother of his Son, Jesus Christ, who redeemed the world through his death on the cross and his resurrection. She epitomised obedience

to God's will, whereas Eve stood for disobedience. The cult of the Virgin became more prominent from the later eleventh century, and carvings and paintings of her increased as the Gothic style took hold in Europe. Depictions of the Coronation of the Virgin of the late twelfth century put her on the same level as Christ, but subsequent images show her in an attitude of submission to her Son. Later medieval depictions of the Virgin and Child emphasised her human qualities as a mother, and these human qualities come out in the visions of women mystics. However, this concern with the Virgin's humanity did not give rise to a more positive view of women, because Mary was the outstanding exception to women's general nature – she was not only mother but virgin, a status impossible for any other woman to achieve.¹⁰ Mary inspired deep devotion, was regarded as a model of the Christian life, was called upon as intercessor, and adopted as patron by cities and churches, but she did not alter the way in which women were viewed by the Church in the later Middle Ages.

Preachers and writers were bound to speak in general terms in order to make their point. The reverence for authorities, whether classical philosophers or Church Fathers, meant that it was highly unlikely that views on women's status and imperfections would be overturned. These views permeated social attitudes, but do not give the whole story as to how women were regarded. One thirteenth-century woman disagreed with the traditional interpretation of the Fall. She argued that Adam disliked the original Eve whom God had created and killed her, whereupon God created a second Eve out of Adam's rib. She was loved excessively by her husband and this passion became more important to him than God's commands. This writer saw Adam as responsible for the Fall.¹¹ Christine de Pizan argued vigorously in the early fifteenth century that women possessed both intelligence and strength of character. She based her views on her own experience and on classical myths and the lives of the saints. She accepted the concept of obedience to one's husband, but regarded women as rational beings and expected them to act independently if the need arose.¹²

As with Church writings, the law emphasised women's subordination. The laws in later medieval Europe varied widely, with customary law usual in the North and Roman law increasingly adopted in the South, and with state law, promulgated in both city-state and kingdom, coming to play a more significant role between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet despite the differences, all types of law regarded women as inferior to men and treated them as daughters, wives and widows rather than as individuals in their own right. They were widely regarded as irrational and incapable, and in the interests of social order needed to be kept under male control. These ideas underlay and supported patriarchal society.

Many women lacked legal identity. It was usual all over Europe for minors to be represented by father or guardian and for the wife to be represented by her husband. In areas of customary law, however, women who were described as *femmes soles* had the right to their own legal identity and

might conduct business on their own and bring cases in the courts, although gender prejudice against women was often apparent. These women might be the wives of townsmen who were working independently of their husbands, or sometimes the wives of nobles. Most *femmes soles* were widows and were frequently to be found in northern France, the Low Countries and England. In parts of Italy, however, no woman enjoyed independent legal status during her father's lifetime, unless she had been emancipated from his control, and even the widow needed a *mundualdus*, or male legal guardian, to conclude deeds and contracts. This applied in Florence and a number of other cities, and although the *mundualdus* appears on occasion to have been bypassed, the underlying assumption remained that women were incapable of acting independently in law.¹³

Women's inferior status was particularly marked in relation to property. The growing emphasis on primogeniture and agnatic lineage (or patrilineage) restricted women's rights of inheritance and, in certain parts of Europe, of dower. From the eleventh or twelfth centuries, descent in the male line became increasingly the norm, with the largest share of the inheritance passing to the eldest son. It was accepted that daughters had a right to a share in the family property, and in many areas the dowry came to be regarded as the daughter's share; Castilian brides in the fifteenth century, for instance, were sometimes asked to renounce in writing all rights to the family inheritance. Patrilineage was increasing in importance at about the same time as the provision of a dowry became essential for marriage. By the thirteenth century, the dowry had largely taken the place of bride-price or bridewealth, given by the husband or his family on his marriage. Moreover, women's rights to dower, the money or property provided by the husband to support his widow, became more limited and women's rights to dispose of property more circumscribed.¹⁴ These changes had a direct bearing on women's position in the family and society, and might well reduce their authority and powers of agency in society, the economy and politics.

Considerable regional differences existed as to the laws on women's inheritance and dower. In areas such as England, Scotland, France and the Low Countries in the thirteenth century, landholding by women, whether as heiresses or widows, was accepted. The dowry constituted the woman's contribution to the marriage and, if she was widowed, she received one-third or one-half of her husband's property as her dower. Moreover, in the absence of sons, it was usual for a daughter or daughters to inherit from their father, although in certain regions such as Occitania, Burgundy and the Limousin, where the dowry comprised the daughter's share of the inheritance, she had to surrender her dowry before receiving a part of the family lands. Similar customs applied among Frankish immigrants in the Latin empire of Constantinople, established in 1204.¹⁵

The importance of women landholders is illustrated in the roll of fiefs of 1252 from the *bailliage* of Troyes in Champagne where the main holdings

were in the hands of 213 men and 66 women, the latter comprising 23.7 per cent of the total. Some of these women were holding land in the absence of their husbands in the East or as guardians of minor sons, while others held by right of inheritance or dower. For the thirteenth century it has been calculated that about 20 per cent of fief-holders were women.¹⁶ The significance of prominent noblewomen in north-west Europe in the later Middle Ages is reflected in the wealth and influence of women such as Jeanne and Margaret, Countesses of Flanders, Mahaut, Countess of Artois, and Margaret de Brotherton, Duchess of Norfolk.

Such a situation was not, however, universal. In Germany and parts of Lorraine, it was usual to divide the inheritance among the male members of the family. Rights of heiresses were accepted only occasionally and not necessarily without question, as when Simon III's daughter Mahaut succeeded to the county of Saarbrücken, a move said to be contrary to the custom of Germany and of the church of Metz. Some lordships were transferred to new families as a result of marriage, as when the counts of Mark succeeded to Cleves in 1368.¹⁷

Towns had their own customs. In London, a woman had the right to inherit property in the absence of a male heir and to receive dower from her husband if widowed. Her dower comprised the right to continue living in her husband's house until she remarried or died, and to have a life interest in one-third of her husband's property, or one-half if there were no children. She was also entitled by the custom known as *legitim* to one-third (or one-half) of her husband's goods and was allowed to dispose of these as she liked. In Ghent, sons and daughters benefited from the system of partible family inheritance. On her husband's death, the widow received as her own half of the common property she had held with her husband and a life interest in one-quarter of the property as her dower – property common to husband and wife dated from the time of their marriage. Her dowry remained her own property during as well as after the marriage. In Douai, the position of widows declined as a result of legal changes precipitated by plague, the decline of the textile industry and commercial change. During the thirteenth century, on the death of the husband, his widow became responsible for the whole of the household property. Later changes saw the widow replaced by a patrilineal system of inheritance, and she only retained the property she had brought to the marriage as her dower. In Bohemian towns, it is possible to trace an improvement in the wife's position during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In a system where the right of inheritance lay with sons or male kin, the widow was entitled to only the return of her dowry, but husbands increasingly left property to their wives, either in their own right or jointly with their children.¹⁸

Male inheritance was the norm in southern Europe where it was seen as perpetuating the power of the lineage. It was usual for the eldest son to inherit the principal house and a large share of the property, the rest being divided among younger sons, the girls receiving their dowry.¹⁹ In this

situation, women were at a disadvantage compared with north-west Europe, and changes concerning dowry and dower also weakened their position. Dowries increased markedly in the late Middle Ages and were essential for the woman's maintenance as a widow. The husband's family was bound to return her dowry to the widow after her husband's death, together with any bequest from the husband and any property which he had settled on her at the time of the marriage. However, such a dower settlement was steadily whittled down from the twelfth century onwards. The earliest legislation is found at Genoa in 1143 where the husband's contribution in future was not to exceed half the amount of the dowry or a maximum of 100 Genoese lire. By 1200, the husband's contribution had virtually vanished at Padua, Bologna, Siena and Lucca, and restrictions were imposed during the thirteenth century at Milan and Florence. Such moves meant that wives became virtually dependent on their dowries during widowhood.²⁰

Similar developments came about more slowly in Spain. At Barcelona, the emphasis on a single male heir inheriting most of the family property was becoming more marked by the early thirteenth century, although daughters continued to receive bequests from their parents in addition to their dowries. The dowry was regarded as the wife's property, although usually administered by the husband. The importance of the dowry increased in comparison with dower, but the latter, in the form of a counter-gift from the husband, continued to exist. By the mid-thirteenth century, the dowry was often twice the amount of the husband's contribution. The widow therefore became more dependent on her dowry, although not to the same extent as in some of the Italian cities.²¹

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, moves were afoot to strengthen male inheritance in both northern and southern Europe. These moves were particularly marked among the nobility and reinforced the vision of a family as a dynastic lineage, centred on a male head and rooted in chivalry and the heroism of its ancestors. The entail proved to be an effective means of reinforcing the patrilineage.²² By this means, the succession to the estate was legally settled during the father's lifetime, usually on the eldest son, and could not be overturned after his death. In Andalusia and Estremadura, the entail was used with royal consent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to preserve the unity of the patrimony; in some cases, the daughter could pass on her rights to her son, although she could not inherit herself.

Members of the higher nobility in England created entails to ensure male succession, such as John de Vere, Earl of Oxford (d. 1360), and Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (d. 1369). Male heirs were favoured in Ireland where the Rochefort family of Ikeathy in County Kildare laid down in 1299 that the barony should never pass to daughters. Male entails were also to be found in Scotland, although in view of the number of sons born to the higher nobility in the late Middle Ages, they were rarely needed.²³ In southern France, there was increasing concern to secure the unity of the

patrimony, the Albret family manipulating local custom in order to achieve this. Others used their wills to stress the importance of the eldest son, Armand VII of Polignac going so far in 1343 as to assert that the establishment of the heir was the most important element in his will.²⁴

The laws on dowry, dower and inheritance thought of women as enclosed within the family and saw them primarily as brides, wives and mothers, and as widows. The main concern of the laws lay with property and the ways in which it could be maintained and expanded in the interests of the family; the planned marriage has to be seen in this context. Land and urban property were a valuable but finite resource, and this helps to explain the growing tendency in the thirteenth century and later for dowries to be paid in money and for restrictions to be placed on dower. The changes in law and practice concerning dowry, dower and inheritance reduced women's powers of agency. A widow with landed wealth was able to exercise agency over her family, dependants and tenants, and sometimes able to wield political power. With the changes in the later Middle Ages, patriarchy became more deeply embedded in society.

The failure to see women as individuals and the desire to secure both public order and property lay behind other aspects of medieval law, notably the law on rape. Although the Emperor Constantine made rape a public crime punishable by death, this was regarded as too harsh a penalty in later medieval Europe. Rape was often regarded as a crime against male property, in line with the view that the woman usually lived under the protection of father, guardian or husband. This comes out clearly in changes to the law of rape in England. Whereas the treatise of the late 1180s attributed to Glanvill classed rape as a felony punishable by death and stressed the element of violent assault, 'Bracton's' treatise about forty years later put the emphasis on loss of virginity. Bearing in mind the importance attached to the concept of the virgin bride, and the view that a girl who had lost her virginity might not be regarded as marriageable, the concern with the woman as property is evident. Moreover, although 'Bracton' asserted that the man, if convicted, should be blinded and castrated, this punishment was extremely rare. By the late thirteenth century, in the statute of Westminster II of 1285, rape had been absorbed into the felony of abduction, and the idea that the crime was committed against the family rather than the woman was paramount. This concept was taken further in the statute of 1382 when fathers and husbands were allowed to bring in an appeal for rape, and couples who had eloped were counted as dead for purposes of inheritance.²⁵

The language used in rape cases in Venice has been described as 'distant and antiseptic' and penalties were on the whole lenient. Although cases involving children attracted heavier punishments, the state does not appear to have been much concerned with the victimisation of women, although rape among the upper class was treated more seriously. With children, the fear that the rape might make them unmarriageable led to the investment of fines levied on the rapist for the girl's dowry, as in a 1467 case when a man

raped his adopted daughter and 100 ducats of the 150 ducat fine was invested for her dowry. On the whole, however, rape was not regarded as a serious crime and there was little idea of protection for the raped woman.²⁶

In both Germany and northern France rape was punishable by death, although again sentences were usually much more lenient in practice. As in Venice and England, the protection of a woman's sexuality was hardly a concern, although the rape of children was taken more seriously. In adult cases, the woman might well find that she was fined more heavily than the man. The number of prosecuted cases was relatively few. In the register of the Officiality of Cerisy of 1314–1457, covering part of Normandy, there were twelve cases of rape and attempted rape; all concerned virgins and women of higher status, and it can be assumed that many cases went unreported. A woman needed the backing of a powerful network to bring a prosecution and secure a conviction. The register of criminal cases of St-Martin-des-Champs at Paris between 1332 and 1357 contains six instances of rape, and the court's main concern centred on urban violence rather than rape itself. The general attitude can be summed up in a case of 1391 from Cerisy when a man was fined 5 sous for breaking into the house and raping Alice, widow of Jean Hoquet, while Alice was fined 15 sous for allowing sex to take place.²⁷

The situation concerning rape emphasises the subordination of women. The concept of woman as property rather than as a person in her own right was dominant, and the family unit under the control of her father or husband was all-important. Legal practice was in line with classical and ecclesiastical views of women as weak, emotional and irrational. Sumptuary legislation, aiming to control material consumption, was also intended to keep women in their rightful place in society and the state. Again, the underlying assumption was that women were weak, extravagant and pleasure-loving, and that their vices, unless checked, would undermine both family and the state.

Sumptuary legislation was issued in Italian communes from the mid-thirteenth century, but became more general in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its apparent ineffectiveness did not stop its promulgation. Although the laws paid increasing attention to clothes and fashion, they also sometimes included furnishings and celebrations such as weddings and funerals. In the kingdoms of England and France, Philip IV's regulations of 1294 and Edward III's of 1363 were concerned with maintaining the hierarchical ordering of society, ensuring that each social order wore appropriate clothes and, in 1294, had appropriate furnishings. To take just one of the English provisions, craftsmen and yeomen and their wives and daughters were not to wear cloth costing more than 40 shillings per cloth; the women were not to wear silk veils, and for furs were allowed only lamb, rabbit, cat and fox.²⁸

The fifteenth-century legislation of the north and central Italian cities was particularly critical of fashion and extravagance in women's clothing.

Women's clothes were expected to identify them with the group to which they belonged, not set them apart as individuals. The sumptuary law at Bologna of 1474 allowed the wives and daughters of knights to wear cloth of gold, those of notaries and bankers to have gold sleeves, and those of important artisans to wear crimson. Wives and daughters of humbler craftsmen were permitted to have crimson sleeves. The desire to maintain a proper social order is apparent in this legislation. There was also a desire to limit expense; the 1398 law at Bologna gave the reasons for the legislation as the desire to curb expenditure which husbands could not afford, and the wish to have a strong community and to please God; excess in clothing was regarded by the Church as a manifestation of the sin of pride.²⁹

The views of the Church and the provisions of the law influenced the lives and activities of women throughout the later Middle Ages, and women lived and worked within these parameters. Yet anyone looking round them at society would have been aware of the sheer variety existing among men and women. The prologue and stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* describe a number of women who were highly individual. Some like Constance and Griselda were idealised, but women like the prioress and the wife of Bath were to be found in late fourteenth-century towns. There was far more to medieval women than the traits highlighted by the preachers and legislators.

In order to discover women's actual experience, we need to look at as wide a range of sources as possible. Women appear comparatively rarely in the chronicles describing wars and great political events. Other records, however, proliferated in the later Middle Ages, as kings, lords, towns and Church developed their jurisdictional and governmental powers, and a written bureaucratic culture became the norm.³⁰ Documents were needed to record legal proceedings, levies of military forces and taxation, economic and social regulations, and religious grants and dispensations. Accounts were kept to record receipts and expenditure not only in the state but in households and manors. Although references to women in most of these sources are few, since the documents were mainly concerned with their husbands as heads of the family, a detailed picture of women's lives, responsibilities and activities emerges when all the available information is put together.

Occasionally, the women's own voices can be heard in wills and letters which provide an insight into social and religious attitudes and family relationships. Although most women lacked education, some of their writings are outstanding, notably the mystical works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Inevitably, the records provide more information on women of the elite and on the religious life than on labourers and the poor, although even here a considerable amount can be gleaned. Problems arise for the historian when assumptions made in the records result in particular groups being overlooked. Because marriage for women was taken for granted, it can, for instance, prove difficult to detect

women who never married, even though they were probably numerous in the towns.³¹

The women of the later Middle Ages have to be set in the context of their social relationships in order to see how far and in what ways they could exercise agency despite the limitations imposed by the Church and the law. Both men's and women's activities were affected by the ideas current in the society around them, and by the political, economic and social conditions of time and place. The wife who was dependent on her husband would have a degree of agency within her household and in her responsibility for husband and children. Possibly she also had agency through her social networks and paid work, although practice varied as to what was regarded as acceptable and suitable, whether women worked at home or elsewhere, or whether they embarked on businesses on their own account. It was far more usual to find women working in the crafts in the towns of northern Europe than in Italy. Yet even in northern Europe, opportunities for women became more limited at the end of the Middle Ages. Customs varied from town to town; the women's guilds of Paris and Cologne were not found in London, and the Paris guilds of the late thirteenth century disappeared before the end of the Middle Ages.

Women, like men, have to be seen in the context of their place in the social hierarchy. Status was determined not only by wealth; in fact there were wide variations of wealth within particular social groups. A family's social order prescribed its lifestyle, privileges and obligations. Those of the lowest social groups found that they were restricted not just by poverty but by the demands of lords and masters and by the lack of free legal status. These people included serfs, who were declining in numbers in the later Middle Ages, and slaves, who were to be found mainly in the towns and ports of the Mediterranean region. Social groupings overlapped and it was possible to move both upwards and downwards on the social scale. On the whole, however, men and women were expected to conform to the attitudes of their own order. The social context of women's lives overlapped with the religious, and they were influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the Church's doctrines and practice. The sacraments of the Church, such as baptism and marriage, marked important rites of passage. Religious worship focused on Mass. Some women adopted the religious life, as nuns, beguines or members of the third orders. Lay women's piety centred on worship, pilgrimage and charity, and their religious practice overlapped with their household responsibilities.³²

Disaster and conflict often made life difficult for the men and women of the later Middle Ages. Their lives were inevitably affected by the demands of the state for armies and money, and warfare, devastation or siege led to loss of kin and livelihood, malnutrition or famine. Little is known about what happened to countless displaced people. Life was always uncertain, and from 1347 recurrent outbreaks of plague made early death more frequent than before. It was against a background of conflict and uncertainty, as well

as in the context of religious, social and legal ideas and practices, that later medieval women lived their lives.

Notes

- 1 M. Schaus (ed.), *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe. An Encyclopedia* (London, 2006), pp. 308–15; J.M. Bennett and R.M. Karras (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 2–5. D.M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London, 1999), pp. 1–8.
- 2 K.M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens. Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester, 2003), p. 11; M.K. McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society 1300–1620* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 35.
- 3 G. Duby and M. Perrot (eds), *A History of Women in the West*, 5 vols (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992–4), II, C. Klapisch-Zuber (ed.), *Silences of the Middle Ages*, pp. 49–50; C. Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society in Later Medieval England* (Stroud, 1995), pp. 32–5; A. Blamires (ed.), *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended* (Oxford, 1992), p. 41.
- 4 Blamires (ed.), *Woman Defamed*, pp. 39–42, 47.
- 5 Klapisch-Zuber (ed.), *Silences of the Middle Ages*, pp. 51–5, 58–9; Rawcliffe, *Medicine and Society*, pp. 172–5.
- 6 *Genesis*, chapter 2, verse 8–chapter 3, verse 24.
- 7 St Paul, *Letter to the Ephesians*, chapter 5, verses 22–33; *First Letter to Timothy*, chapter 2, verses 11–15; Blamires (ed.), *Woman Defamed*, pp. 37, 63–74.
- 8 Both men were writing in the first third of the thirteenth century; J. Murray, ‘Thinking about gender: the diversity of medieval perspectives’, in J. Carpenter and S-B Maclean, *Power of the Weak. Studies on Medieval Women* (Urbana and Chicago, 1995), pp. 9–16.
- 9 Blamires (ed.), *Woman Defamed*, pp. 144–7.
- 10 P.S. Gold, *The Lady and the Virgin. Image, Attitude and Experience in Twelfth-Century France* (Chicago, 1985), pp. 43–75.
- 11 J. Beer, ‘Woman, authority and the book in the Middle Ages’, in L. Smith and J.H.M. Taylor (eds), *Woman, the Book and the Worldly* (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 64–7.
- 12 These views were forcefully expressed in Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, (trans.) R. Brown-Grant (Harmondsworth, 1999); and in Christine de Pizan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or The Book of the Three Virtues*, (trans.) S. Lawson (Harmondsworth, 1985).
- 13 T. Kuehn, ‘Cum consensu mundualdi: legal guardianship of women in quattrocento Florence’ *Viator* 13 (1982), 309–33; reprinted in T. Kuehn, *Law, Family and Women: Towards a Legal Anthropology of Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 212–37.
- 14 D.O. Hughes, ‘From brideprice to dowry’, *JFH* 3 (1978), pp. 276–85; D. Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1985), pp. 77–8, 82–103; M-C. Gerbet, *La noblesse dans le royaume de Castille. Etude sur ses structures sociales en Estrémadure, 1454–1516* (Paris, 1979), pp. 170, 182.
- 15 R. Hajdu, ‘The position of noblewomen in the *pays des coutumes*, 1100–1300’, *JFH* 5 (1980), pp. 122–44; R. Hajdu, ‘Family and feudal ties in Poitou, 1100–1300’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1977–8), pp. 117–39; R.L. Wolff, ‘Baldwin of Flanders and Hainaut, first Latin emperor of Constantinople: his life, death and resurrection, 1172–1225’, *Speculum* 27 (1952), p. 284; J. Hudson, *Land, Law and Lordship in Anglo-Norman England* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 108–18; G.W.S. Barrow, *Kingship and Unity. Scotland 1000–1306* (London, 1981), pp. 43–59; M-T. Caron, *La noblesse dans le duché de Bourgogne*

- 1315–1477 (Lille, 1987), pp. 194–201, 216–18; J. Verdon, ‘Notes sur la femme en Limousin vers 1300’, *Annales du Midi* 90 (1978), pp. 319–29; J. Smith, ‘Unfamiliar territory: women, land and law in Occitania, 1130–1250’, in N.J. Menuge (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Law* (Woodbridge, 2000), p. 31; P. Lock, *The Franks in the Aegean* (London, 1995), pp. 302–5.
- 16 T. Evergates, *Feudal Society in the Bailliage of Troyes under the Counts of Champagne* (Baltimore, 1975), pp. 69–71.
 - 17 B. Arnold, *Princes and Territories in Medieval Germany* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 151, 239, 242; M. Parisse, *Noblesse et chevalerie en Lorraine médiévale* (Nancy, 1982), p. 186; F.L. Carsten, *Princes and Parliaments in Germany from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1959), p. 261; E. Ennen, *The Medieval Woman*, (trans.) E. Jephcott (Oxford, 1989), pp. 239–40.
 - 18 C.M. Barron and A.F. Sutton (eds), *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500* (London, 1994), pp. xvii–xxi; D. Nicholas, *The Domestic Life of a Medieval City: Women, Children and the Family in Fourteenth-Century Ghent* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1985), pp. 25–8; J. Klassen, ‘The development of the conjugal bond in late medieval Bohemia’, *JMH* 13 (1987), pp. 161–78; M.C. Howell, *The Marriage Exchange. Property, Social Place and Gender in Cities of the Low Countries, 1300–1550* (Chicago, 1998), pp. 1–26.
 - 19 Gerbet, *Noblesse*, pp. 206–10; J. Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch, 1216–1380* (London, 1980), pp. 66–7; D. Nicholas, *The Growth of the Medieval City* (London, 1997), pp. 197, 247–8.
 - 20 C.E. Meek, ‘Women, dowries and the family in late medieval Italian cities’, in C.E. Meek and M.K. Simms (eds), *‘The Fragility of her Sex?’ Medieval Irishwomen in their European Context* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 138–9.
 - 21 S.P. Bench, *Barcelona and its Rulers, 1096–1291* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 256–7, 268–72.
 - 22 J.C. Ward, ‘Noblewomen, family and identity in later medieval Europe’, in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 249–54. In England, however, joint tenure of property, found from the late thirteenth century among all social groups, strengthened the position of the married woman; J.C. Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1992), pp. 26, 36; R.M. Smith, ‘Coping with uncertainty: women’s tenure of customary land in England c. 1370–1430’, in J. Kermode (ed.), *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England* (Stroud, 1991), p. 45.
 - 23 Gerbet, *Noblesse*, pp. 197, 206–10, 213–26; G.A. Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 47–9; C. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1987), pp. 140–4; R. Frame, ‘Power and society in the lordship of Ireland 1272–1377’, *PandP* 76 (1977), pp. 25–6; J. Wormald, *Lords and Men in Scotland: Bonds of Manrent, 1442–1603* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 79.
 - 24 R. Boutruche, *La crise d’une Société. Seigneurs et paysans du Bordelais pendant la guerre de cent ans* (Paris, 1947), pp. 386–8; A. Jacotin, *Preuves de la Maison de Polignac*, 5 vols (Paris, 1898–1906), II, pp. 1–11.
 - 25 K. Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens. Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 6–9; K.M. Phillips, ‘Written on the body: reading rape from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries’, in Menuge (ed.), *Medieval Women and the Law*, pp. 128–42; J.B. Post, ‘Ravishment of women and the statutes of Westminster’, in J.H. Baker (ed.), *Legal Records and the Historian* (London, 1978), pp. 150–64; J.B. Post, ‘Sir Thomas West and the statute of rapes, 1382’, *BIHR* 53 (1980), pp. 24–30.
 - 26 G. Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros. Sex, Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 89–108; the quotation is taken from p. 90.

14 *Women in Medieval Europe 1200–1500*

- 27 Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, pp. 123–31; W. Prevenier, ‘Violence against women in a medieval metropolis: Paris around 1400’, in B.S. Bachrach and D. Nicholas (eds), *Law, Custom and the Social Fabric in Medieval Europe. Essays in honor of Bryce Lyon* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1990), pp. 262–84.
- 28 A.R. Myers (ed.), *English Historical Documents 1327–1485* (London, 1969), p. 1154.
- 29 D.O. Hughes, ‘Sumptuary law and social relations in Renaissance Italy’, in J. Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements. Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 69–99; T. Dean (ed. and trans.), *The Towns of Italy in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 2000), p. 203.
- 30 For England, this development is analysed in M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record. England 1066–1307* (Oxford, 1993).
- 31 This area of research is now being tackled, as in J.M. Bennett and A.M. Froide (eds), *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250–1800* (Philadelphia, 1999).
- 32 The majority of men and women in later medieval Europe were Christian, following the doctrines and practices of the Church centred on the pope at Rome. Jews, Muslims and other ethnic groups will be considered in [Chapter 7](#) (‘Ethnic minorities: Jews, Muslims and slaves’).

1 Upbringing

Upbringing and education, in the widest sense of the terms, were designed to fit children for their adult lives. This was the basic premise for all social groups, although there were inevitably considerable differences between them, depending on the status and expectations of the children's families. More emphasis was put on the training of boys in both treatises and practice, but girls were not neglected. There was considerable discussion in the treatises as to how to instil feminine virtues and to fit the girl for her future life as wife and mother, or as a nun. In accordance with contemporary ideas on gender, girls came to accept that women were subordinate and that they were expected to be quiet, peace-loving and obedient. Parents provided their daughters with religious and moral training and this was reinforced by parish priests, friars' sermons and by godparents, neighbours and friends. Socialisation by the community was a vital element in children's upbringing. Parents were also concerned to provide the practical training that a girl needed. Although many girls of the elite were taught to read, the main emphasis was put on housekeeping and social accomplishments. Daughters of peasants and artisans learned the skills of the housewife as well as ways in which they could earn money; their training was predominantly practical. The girls who were in most danger of neglect were bastards and orphans, especially among the poor, but steps were taken in various parts of Europe to make some provision for them.

The views of Philippe Ariès that childhood was a discovery of the eighteenth century and that medieval children were regarded with indifference by their parents has come under strong criticism from medieval historians. Ariès considered that in an age of high infant mortality parents sought to safeguard themselves against the possible death of a child, a view attacked by Shulamith Shahar in her book titled *Childhood in the Middle Ages* in which she argued for the strong bond existing between parent and child, and by Joel Rosenthal, emphasising the concern and affection for children in an age when life was often tough.¹ Both artistic and documentary evidence bears out the emotional involvement of parents with their children. The emphasis on the human qualities of the Virgin and Child and the growing importance attached to St Joseph led to the depiction of the Holy

Family in human terms, and showed the importance attached to the relationship between parent and child.² A painting of the Virgin and Child, dating from about 1435 from the workshop of Robert Campin, showed the Virgin at home playing with her Child; a fire blazed in the hearth, the baby's bath stood ready, and there was a basket of clean nappies on the floor. Such scenes had their counterpart in real life. Parents rejoiced at the birth of their children, nurtured them with care and grieved when they died. A young mother at Châteaueverdun found it almost impossible to tear herself away from her baby when she left home to rejoin the Cathars. Alessandra Strozzi described how the death of her son caused her the greatest pain that she had ever felt.³ Such expressions of emotion are rare. Parents' bequests to children in their wills were expressed in formal language, but show a caring attitude in the desire that the child should have some provision for the future.

Didactic treatises proliferated from the thirteenth century, sometimes prompted by the parents themselves and highlighting the overall importance of the mother's role in upbringing. Vincent of Beauvais wrote *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* at the end of the 1240s at the request of Queen Margaret of France, in order to meet the educational needs of the queen's son Louis and probably also of her daughter Isabelle. The knight of La Tour-Landry compiled his book for his daughters in 1371–2, considering it as a substitute for his personal guidance during his inevitable absences. Giovanni Dominici wrote for an upper-class Florentine mother in the early fifteenth century. The thirteenth-century treatise of Walter de Bibbesworth was specifically designed to help the English noblewoman, Denise de Montchesney, to teach her children French. At least one mother, Elizabeth of Bosnia, queen of Hungary (d. 1382), composed her own book of instruction for her daughters, but this has not survived.⁴ For people lower down the social scale, advice was dispensed in sermons, pastoral handbooks and vernacular poems. Many of the treatises circulated widely. The work of Vincent of Beauvais continued to be read in the fifteenth century, while *De regimine principum* by Giles of Rome was translated into English in the fourteenth century by John Trevisa.⁵ The book of the knight of La Tour-Landry was translated into English by Caxton at the request of 'a noble lady with many noble and fair daughters'; possibly this was Queen Elizabeth Woodville who had five daughters. Although many of these works paid more attention to boys than to girls, they took the upbringing of girls seriously, realising that adult life required serious preparation.

Childhood was divided into distinct stages of which the first two, infancy between birth and the age of seven, and childhood between the ages of seven and fourteen, were of particular relevance for girls. By the third stage of adolescence, envisaged as lasting from the age of about fourteen or puberty to at least twenty-one, most girls were at work or married. During infancy, it was the mother who was primarily responsible for the child, although in elite families she would not carry out physical care and would have a

wet-nurse to breastfeed the baby. By the age of two, the child would have been weaned and the greatest risk of infant mortality was over, although death remained an ever-present threat in medieval families. During infancy, writers put their emphasis on both physical care and the beginnings of moral and religious training. For Giles of Rome, the diet of milk was to be followed by one of soft food, and wine was forbidden; the child was to be kept from crying, to get used to cold, and to play in moderation; the telling of stories to the child was encouraged. Vincent of Beauvais and Bartholomew the Englishman were equally concerned with the care of the child, Vincent stressing the need to develop harmony between soul and body, and Bartholomew urging the need to give attention to the child, especially early on.⁶

Children's toys have been found in excavations, although it can be difficult to identify particular objects as toys. Certainly children had rattles, tops, dolls and toy animals, and a finger puppet was found in a London excavation. Some of the dolls were used for religious instruction as well as play and were owned by grown-ups as well as children. As children grew older, their toys imitated adult life, and the miniature jugs and plates which have been discovered were probably the property of girls beginning to learn housekeeping skills. Children generally enjoyed games and could make toys out of all sorts of objects. The avoidance of games by young children was regarded as one of the signs of a potential saint.⁷

From the age of about seven, the education of boys and girls began to diverge. Mothers continued to be responsible for their daughters, although among the nobility a mistress might be put in charge. It was the duty of the mother or mistress to instil the moral precepts and manners which girls needed for the adult world. The recommendations in the didactic treatises applied particularly to girls of the elite. Vincent of Beauvais considered that parents should keep their daughters at home and maintain a close watch in order to preserve their chastity. Girls were to be instructed in modesty, humility and silence; gossip and personal adornment were to be discouraged, and the company a girl kept was to be carefully vetted. Similar recommendations were made by Giles of Rome, as well as by preachers who extended the clerical message to a much wider circle of families; Guibert of Tournai emphasised chastity and modesty, and an absence of make-up for older girls.⁸ The importance of manners is also found in vernacular literature, such as the poem 'How the Goodwife Taught her Daughter', dating from the mid-fourteenth century and probably written by a cleric. The poem depicts the mother teaching her daughter, as she had previously been taught by her mother, and urging her to be mild and true, wise and of good reputation. The poem may also have been used by women who were training servants and apprentices.⁹

This teaching was very much in line with late medieval clerical views of women. The knight of La Tour-Landry drew on biblical and ecclesiastical sources and was helped by two priests and two clerks of his household. The