

WOMAN IN THE MIDDLE AGES

SOME people still cherish romantic ideas about the Middle Ages. They form visionary pictures of the typical medieval lady living on the principles of popular hagiography and doing embroidery in a high tower of ivory, while her husband was in the Holy Land. Indeed, she must have smiled, as we do, when St. Thomas, writing on the adornment of women, says that it is unlawful for a Christian woman to paint her face, unless it be for a valid reason, such as re-capturing the affections of an erring husband.

Some theologians loved to make catalogues and put woman in just her right niche in the social universe; but she was an inveterate Pagan at heart, and had a disconcerting way of popping out of her bandbox. If the scholastics *would* call her the unregenerate daughter of Eve, they must abide by the result if she became the cause of all evil.

The Aristocracy, on the other hand, placed woman on a pedestal. Opinions were varied: Jacques de Vitry writing in the thirteenth century, says of Eve that 'she had no rest until she had succeeded in banishing her husband from the garden of delights.' On the other hand, a manuscript at Cambridge says: 'Woman is to be preferred to man, to wit: in material because Adam was made from clay and Eve from the side of Adam, and in conception because a woman conceived God,' and so on.

As the cloister became the citadel of the finest spirits of Christendom, there arose the vision of woman as the supreme temptress. St. Bernard chases away his brightly garbed sister who had come to visit him. Blessed Humbert of Romans will not have a monk take the hand of his own mother. Of course the monk

Blackfriars

had the advantage, for he was armed with a quill: illiterate woman was dumb when he dubbed her inferior. She needed Chaucer's championship when he makes the wife of Bath say it was impossible for a priest to speak well of a woman unless she's a saint, and that women are longing to get their own back again. The *ménagier* of Paris, a bourgeois who lived about 1393, says he never believed the preposterous tale of Patient Griselda. Yes, the pinched clerk might talk of Obedience till he was blue in the face, woman would rove till she received the beating which her husband might give her by right of Canon Law.

The aristocratic and chivalrous ideal of woman was opposed to this ascetic theory, and for this Our Lady is responsible. Mary's dear graciousness, her queenly ways pervaded the manners of men: she walked on earth as if it were her own Paradise, and her very wardrobe was strewn in the wild flowers of the fields—Lady's Smock, Lady's Slipper; the very sin of Adam was called *felix culpa*, because without it we would not have needed her. The service of some beautiful lady was included in the educational curriculum of the young knight. *L'amour courtois* may have given birth to such follies as the Courts of Love, but it had a civilising effect on manners.

From the thirteenth century onwards, the *bourgeoise* and the woman villein appear on the scene. Here is the normal woman, neither saint nor temptress, who in Anglo-Saxon days called her spouse 'my mann.' The woman trader comes into existence in many towns. The harassing demands of daily toil tend to make man and wife equal, with the result that medieval tales begin to tell of the henpecked husband. In Italy, woman finds her champion in St. Bernardino of Siena, who says in one of his sermons that all the travail 'is of the woman only, and the man goeth singing on his way.' The woman villein lives upon her little holding

Woman in the Middle Ages

and gives her due of work and produce. Two very important industries are directed at home solely by woman—the brewing of ale and the spinning of cloth. However, women were paid lower wages than men, and they were sought after to do the dairy work for that reason.

The problem of the unmarried girl of the upper classes was easily solved: she became a nun. Thus, some convents, owing to the fact that many girls had no real vocation, were little more than pious boarding-houses. Each nun had her own room, sometimes a sitting room or oratory, plenty of leisure to see friends in the guest-parlour, sometimes a table apart with special food. St. Teresa gives us a glimpse of the gallants who gossiped in Spain behind convent grilles. One cannot always think of the English convent as a strong spiritual city apart, where the more fiery spirits could flee from the world and pour forth the ardour of their prayer and penance. That is more common in Latin countries. It is true that the more perfect life is often the hidden one, but the type of religious superior who survives in English records is, on the whole, the born housewife and organiser, respected for miles around for her charity and her skill as a leech.

Nuns received a better education than they would have done in the world, but sometimes even so it was mostly composed of gaps. Surely it was a naughty little sister who did not love her Latin who composed the following delicious grumble:

*Sono tintinnabulum
Repeto psalterium
Gratum linquo somnium
Cum dormire cuperem
Heu misella!
Nichil est deterius tali vita
Cum enim sum petulans et lasciva.*

Blackfriars

Which may be freely translated :

What time the bell doth utter,
The Psalter I must mutter,
From out my warm bed creeping,
Where I fain would still be sleeping;
Misery me!
What a life! so dull and fussy,
Can you wonder I'm a hussy?

Among other exciting undesirables in nunneries were rich widows who took up their abode as boarders. These women, who had ruled large estates and who were full of *aplomb*, imagined that they could learn the virtue of Obedience. We read accounts in the records of episcopal visitations of the havoc they sometimes caused. If the widow were rich and aristocratic, she became superior. Then she could keep pet monkeys, and have private feasts. We read letters from Bishops telling them not to wear jewels. Some of them whacked their subjects, tore their hair, and maliciously revealed the secrets of their religious lives.

But it is easy to fall into the habit so often indulged in by Professor Coulton and Miss Eileen Power—that of minding the one lost sheep rather than the ninety and nine others. And anyone who would catch a glimpse of religious life in all its exquisite perfection should read *La vie mystique d'un monastère de Dominicaines au moyen âge, d'après la chronique de Töss*, by Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache¹—a most fascinating book. Hidden away in that tiny obscure convent, nuns grew like beautiful flowers in the far mountains, and conversed with the saints and angels. By their penances they made good the lapses of others in the dear family of God. Here is what Blessed Henry Suso, a friend of these nuns, says of suffering: 'Suffering

¹ *Librairie Académique Perrin.*

Woman in the Middle Ages

arrayeth the soul with a rose and purple garment ; for a crown she weareth red roses and for sceptre a green palm ; a flashing ruby clasps her virginal cloak.

The medieval treatise *Hali Maidenhead* tries to entice women into nunneries by saying that marriage was 'licking honey off thorns.' Still, there were true women who of their own free will chose the religious state, not as a refuge, but in response to an irresistible call. A passage in the writings of Blessed Battista Varana (1458-1527) crystallises this : 'The jealous Lover who suffereth no fellowship . . . had shown Himself to the eyes of her soul as one with His back turned to her, walking away toward a low doorway, through which He passed, stooping, leaving her ravished by the exceeding beauty of His garment and the gold of His hair . . .'

When this seeking for the Beloved was shared by a fellow religious, an immortal friendship would spring, such as that between two Dominicans, Blessed Diana and Blessed Jordan. His letters² incite Diana to greater perfection by depicting the joys of Heaven, and counsel moderation in her austerities. There are some very human little bits, such as the passage where he shows concern that she has hurt her foot in the garden, and also in his last letter of all, where he rebukes her gently for grieving during his long absences, and says : 'For the rest, dear, what we are writing to each other is but little ; the fire of charity with which we love each other in the Lord is to be found in our inmost hearts.'

But how could this serene detachment be the unvarying rule in a social order which too often regarded the religious life as a convenience? And it is no wonder that a deadly *accidie* led to such precipitation in

² French translation by M. Aron. *Vie Spirituelle*. Collection Dominicaine.

Blackfriars

the pronunciation of the Office that Satan sent special devils to collect the last syllables in a bag to hurl them at the nun on her Judgement-day. There was also a little devil two inches high, sent to sit on a lettuce leaf in refectory because one heedless nun fell to her food without crossing herself. One or two relieved their *ennui* by taking rabbits to choir, and some nuns at Godstow frequented the parlour so often to speak with the undergraduates of Oxford that the Bishop was forced to remonstrate.

A word in passing about the medieval housewife : a good source of information is the *Ménagier de Paris*, who wrote a treatise for his young wife at the end of the fourteenth century. He tells her how to get rid of rats and how to catch fleas in bed by putting a lighted candle on the floor. In those days it was even necessary for the young housewife to know of a recipe to kill wolves and foxes. The maids are to be forbidden to curse and say, 'Bloody bad day,' and the younger ones must not sleep in a room overlooking the high-road. Here is one course only from a supper in three courses. The passage has been chosen at random from this book, so rightly called the medieval Mrs. Beeton : 'Venison à la frumenty, pasties of doves and larks, tarts, crayfish, fresh herring, fruits, clarry, pastries, medlars, pears, peeled nuts.' Lavish hospitality made great demands on the housewife, and, moreover, she would have to supervise the entire dairy-work, the salting of meat for the winter, the weaving, the brewing, the comfits and preserves and special fruit-wines, the medicaments—for she was expected to physic all her dependents. For recreation, she would make chaplets for weddings, buy wax candles for feasts, procure the musicians and acrobats, and strew the floor with freshly-picked violets (a necessity). And then, of course, she might go hawking, play chess and blind man's buff, ask riddles and tell tales.

Woman in the Middle Ages

This middle-aged bourgeois concludes by moral advice: 'be moderately privy with your husband's kinsfolk and very distant with . . . all idle young men who be dancers.' For the maiden: 'Go not out with roving eyes and head horribly reared up like a lion . . . and walking mannishly.'

Many writers have sought to shock us by saying that infidelity was the result of loveless child marriages arranged in the interests of the property. They forget that husband and wife who had been together since childhood were bound by very strong ties. Truly, it became a fashion to flirt during one's husband's absence at the Crusades; on the other hand, it was a relief from the great responsibility thrown upon the wife's shoulders at such a time, especially if some vindictive neighbour laid siege to your castle. Moreover, she had to be amateur farmer and tramp the wet fields with a 'houppelande' over her head, and shout to the men-servants from her window to make them get up in the morning. The superintending of the nursery did not take up much of her time, for though she had many children, many of them died, and the new-born baby was taken out to nurse and rather forgotten for a while. When it grew up a little, it was sent to learn breeding in some other great household. The modern cult of the child did not exist, and, as the story of Griselda shows, a woman was more absorbed in her husband than in her children.

For the town housewife of low degree, there were all the social amusements afforded by religion, such as Miracles, Guild processions, and preachings. Ah yes, the sermon was larded with entertaining anecdote. It was amusing to go and hear one's pet foibles in dress, one's horned head-dresses and crested shoes, scourged by the wandering friar. And if the land were Italy and the preacher St. Bernardino of Siena, it would add spice to the proceedings when he said that

Blackfriars

it was a great grace to be a woman, because 'more women are saved than men.'

Space forbids our lingering on the women professors at the University of Bologna, or on the clever woman in early fourteenth century Paris who had to pay a fine to the medical faculty for practising medicine, although she had been enormously successful in her practice. Slight mention can be made of scholarship among women in general. Judged from modern standards, the ignorance of women outside the cloister was something barbarous. Few nuns wrote on anything but divine things. Hroswitha of Gandersheim had a passion for Terence, and when she wrote six comedies, her love scenes, says Miss Waddell, 'cry out from the printed page.' St. Gertrude, finding the study of Greek and Latin authors too absorbing, renounced it when she dedicated her life anew. However, she made her nuns study Theology, the Scriptures, and Classical literature.

Those who have read George Moore's version of Eloise and Abelard may have been struck by the brilliance, the depth of learning, the grasp, and the power of speculation shown by the youthful Eloise when Abelard taught her in that 'tiny room overlooking the Seine and a miniature Paris.' But this was unusual: the average woman outside a convent could read her Missal and the Breviary. Now this sounds but little until one has read Francis Thompson on its supremely 'civilising' influence to realize that the 'Offices of the Church are suggested poetry.' 'The very arrangement of the liturgical year . . . is based on a deep parallel between the evolution of the seasons and that of the Christian soul of the human race.' She knew her Missal, and she was thoroughly grounded in that one essential of a good education—the moral principles of the Catholic Faith. Blanche de Castille was not learned, but she gave a saint to the world when

Woman in the Middle Ages

she said she would prefer her son to die than to commit one mortal sin. It really seems as if a woman had to be a saint, in those days, before she could produce fine literature. St. Catherine of Siena could not write; she had to dictate everything. But who could equal that marvellous description of the scaffold scene when she tells us how she lent some of her own courage to a desperate young man, and how with her white habit crimsoned with his blood, she looked up and saw the cohorts of Heaven welcoming his soul. St. Joan of Arc, likewise, could not sign her own name, but she had been nurtured by Mother Church, and her witty, concise answers to the Judges have become proverbial.

So many examples might be given to show that a woman had to be a saint in full use of the Gift of Counsel before she could give birth to anything memorable in literature. The Holy Ghost must tip her pen with showers of fire. She had a message, and it was given her to speak immortal words. One point is very striking: in modern times we get saintly women among the housewives—Elisabeth Leseur and Marie Christine. In the Middle Ages, the only two married saints of any note were both of royal blood, St. Margaret of Scotland and St. Elisabeth of Hungary, who (like Angela of Foligno) really only became a saint after her husband's death. Probably the explanation of this strange social phenomenon is that any trace of the slave mentality hindered the free workings of the Holy Ghost, and it was left to a more enlightened age to produce women whose husbands helped them to become saintly.

MARGARET TROUNCER.