

STORIES OF WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Maria Teresa Brolis
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The Middle Ages, like virtually all periods of human civilization, has largely been documented from the male point of view. Medieval monarchs and the nobility relied upon traditional monastic skills of copying books of antiquity and document-making to fulfill functions of record keeping. As centres for learning and repositories for manuscripts, monasteries played an indelible role in preserving the primary materials that have been relied upon by historians to decipher what life was like during feudal times.

That convents founded by women in the Middle Ages are of equal significance in having left a paper trail for historical source materials is a refreshing discovery, chronicled by author Maria Teresa Brolis in her recently translated book, *Stories of Women in the Middle Ages*. Brolis' collection of distilled historical portraits of sixteen famous and lesser-known women fittingly begins with a narrative about Hildegard von Bingen. Through a quoted passage of Hildegard's book, "*Causae et Curae*," Brolis illuminates Hildegard's extraordinary skill in imagining and narrating metaphorically and with deep sensitivity a woman's orgasmic experience. The passage dispels preconceived notions of women in medieval times as being repressed and not having a voice. As abbess of her own independently founded religious order, Hildegard promoted the arts and even staged theatrical religious representations, accompanied by musical instruments

typically played in festivities at court. The cunning diplomacy with which Hildegard overcame a hierarchical ecclesiastic directive to silence her community is instructive of how a woman in feudal times could be assertive and outspoken.

And while Hildegard's strength of character was rooted in her creativity and lifelong love of learning, the legacy of Queen Eleanor—wife of King Louis VII of France and King Henry II of England—stemmed from her skill in juggling the demands of motherhood with political commitments. The mother of eight children, including the English king, Richard the Lion Heart, Eleanor traveled extensively, accompanying her first husband on a crusade to the Holy Land and ministering to her children who lived abroad and owing to the plagues that incessantly raged during feudal times, were prone to falling seriously ill.

An era of tremendous political upheaval, the Middle Ages spawned gothic architecture, the expansion of trade routes owing to the Crusades, and institutions such as the university, artisan and merchant guilds, monasteries, and convents. Disillusionment with the overarching influence exerted by the Catholic Church—its hypocrisy and corruption—sowed the seeds for asceticism, mysticism and its embrace, in particular, by women like Joan of Arc and Clare, the companion of St. Francis of Assisi and founder of the Order of Poor Ladies. Brolis' book wouldn't be complete without chapters dedicated to these two saints and to a lesser known mystic, Bridget the Pilgrim. Bridget's privileged Swedish background afforded her opportunities for education and travel to religious sites such as Santiago de Compostela, in Spain.

In chronicling Bridget's life, Brolis alerts the reader of the risks of historical biographies becoming steeped in

mythology. "The challenge of these pages is to provisionally remove the halo from the Swedish prophetess in order to try to discover just how much her story is one of an intense woman and not of stereotypical ideal." To separate fact from fiction, and to catch "...a glimpse of Bridget's universe", Brolis studied *Kristin Lavransdatter*, which she describes as "...the most beautiful novel ever written on the European Middle Ages from the female point of view – the masterpiece by the Norwegian author Sigrid Unset, Nobel prize winner for literature in 1928."

To decipher the lives of ordinary women in the Middle Ages, Brolis researched the last wills and testaments of women in the Bergamo region of Italy. To alleviate poverty, monetary bequests to convents and other foundations were commonly expressed. In describing bequeathed possessions—furnishings, works of art and even good clothing—Brolis casts a lens on the values espoused by women from the upper class of feudal society.

By delving into the lives of ordinary as well as extraordinary women, Brolis paints an authentic portrait of the everyday challenges confronting the female contingent of medieval European society. Through her discussion of historiography—the study of historical documents—we also acquire an appreciation of the obstacles inherent in weaving a realistic account about women during patriarchal feudal times and in tackling the medieval feminine mystique.

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