

Life in the Middle Ages: Women

The Medieval woman was very limited in how she lived her life. From the day she was born, she had a male who told her what she could and could not do. Marriages were usually "for convenience," to gain land or property. Henry VII of England searched for a suitable wife after his first wife died and learned that the widow of the King of Naples was available. He sent three agents to find out if she was healthy, attractive, and had money. Their report indicated that she passed the first two qualifications, but failed the third. He remained a widower.

Sometimes, children were only 4 or 5 years old when they were married. The practice of arranging children's marriages was so common that the church said children in the cradle could not be married. If a woman survived childhood without gaining a husband, her choices were to

either get married or go to a convent. In marriage, the husband ruled the family. On certain days, the wife was required to lie at the husband's feet and beg his forgiveness for anything she had done or had failed to do. Then the children did the same at their parents' feet. Wife beating was common, although some rules said that the beating should be "reasonable." Still, women were important in family life, and in Italy they were a power in the family circle.

Women did much of the work during the Middle Ages. They worked in the fields, the same as the men. They spun cloth and made clothing for the family. Even upper-class girls were taught to spin. Women in Paris held a wide variety of jobs in trade and industry. When their husbands died, women continued to operate the businesses. It was said that in London women played an important part in the city's trade.

While many women of the Middle Ages were as illiterate as their husbands and fathers, some education was available in a few places. One of the most famous love stories of the Middle Ages involved Heloise, who fell in love with her professor, Peter Abelard. Their romance cost him his job, and she was expelled from the University of Paris. Women were barred from attending that university after the scandal. However, women still attended Italian universities, and Maria di Novella became a math professor at the University of Bologna when she was 25 years old.

One of the outstanding women of the 13th century was Clare, daughter of a wealthy noble from Assisi. She heard St. Francis speak and decided to live in poverty. She started the order of Poor Clares, and all who joined vowed to live in absolute poverty. Her firmness was shown when the Saracens attacked the town, and she went to the walls; the Saracens were so impressed by her courage that they left the nuns alone. In the care that they took of patients at the convent hospital and their example of self-denial, the nuns made others aware of their own greed and self-centeredness.



St. Clare of Assisi, who vowed to live in poverty and serve others, started an order of nuns called the Poor Clares.

Name _____

Class _____

CHALLENGES

1. What was meant by "marriages for convenience"?

2. Why did Henry VII lose interest in the widow of the King of Naples?

3. What rule did the church have about the earliest age for a boy and girl to be married?

4. What limit was there on wife beating?

5. What were two cities where women were important in trade?

6. Whom did Heloise fall in love with?

7. What happened at the University of Paris after Heloise was expelled?

8. Which woman was a professor at the University of Bologna?

9. What kind of family did Clare of Assisi come from?

10. What was the most important rule for the Poor Clares?
