

The Use of Power and Influence by a Medieval Woman

By: Tina Cooper



Close your eyes and try to picture a medieval woman. I wonder, was she a woman sitting near a window, doing needlework and waiting for her lord to come home from battle? These images have been branded not only in our minds but the general public as well through literature and current media such as motion pictures and romantic fiction. How realistic of a picture does this pose to the general public? These women did needlework yes, but could also be a very influential force in medieval society. Depending on your definition of power, these women exercised much more power or "influence" than many resources have revealed to us in the past. If you think of power as the ability to act effectively on persons or things, and authority or influence as recognized and legitimized power, women could use power quite often and authority was reserved for men.

Discovering the life of a medieval woman can be a lot tougher than tracing that of a man. There are fewer resources available for us to trace a medieval woman's way of life as opposed to that of a man with equal station at the time. Manorial Court Rolls do not show, as example, a woman's private influence over her husband, only the legal matters involved in the case. This leaves little room for individuality. It is however, a view focused on essential activities. In addition, illiteracy was common among the peasants so there aren't many diaries or memoirs to use as a resource for the daily life of the peasant woman. Some of the primary reasons there are limited resources available on women can be blamed on the chroniclers themselves. They often wrote about the things important to the time such as war, politics, and government, all these being primarily male dominated roles. Chroniclers were just as bad about rumor as we are today particularly where details of violence, scandal, and gossip were concerned. Women were referred to in a lesser degree than men in matters such as births and deaths because of the importance of inheritance through the male line. For obvious reasons, monastery chroniclers kept better records for their patronage families. If we use only the writings of chroniclers, we are left to assume that a woman's main importance was in connection with marriage and children.

To get a better understanding of women as individuals we can use three principal sources. Household accounts furnish great detail on the life of a noblewoman especially on her style of living, her social connections, and her standing within the community. Personal wills and letters also shed a great deal of light on the private aspects of a medieval woman's life. These documents show where a woman's main interests lay. Religious beliefs and practices and personal relationships can be studied from these resources, along with bequests which throw considerable light on personal possessions such as, clothing, jewels, furnishings, plate and books. One must remember to use these resources carefully though due to the fact that these were often dictated and we must rely then on the clerk who took them down.



The amount of authority a woman had may have depended a lot on which sphere of society that authority was being exercised in. Dividing society into either private (domestic) and public spheres may explain the differences in the seemingly non-existent use of power by women. The public sphere was considered to be the domain of men. This sphere included politics, legal rights and obligations, and the market. Therefore, this seems to have been the sphere of real power and authority. The private



beyond their control.

(domestic) sphere was generally considered the domain of woman. The private sphere included wives, mothers, family, and immediate household. The information above helps us understand why women had little access to public power but it also shows us why it was necessary for women to sometimes use other means to control their surroundings to their desired end. A point to think on is, we should not underestimate the fact that a woman's self-interest may have been the driving force in her pursuit of influence (power). We also cannot assume that women were always helpless victims of society unable to affect forces that may have seemed

In defining the private sphere, the scope of a woman's self-interest included wives and mothers working to advance the interests of their spouses and children. Simply by her management of the household she allowed her spouse to leave home and give his service for the crown which in turn could supply him with prestige and power through his military endeavors. A medieval woman could be forced to use many methods, not always acceptable ones, to reach a desired outcome. The contribution of money and support through dowry, wage labor, household works, production, patronage and hospitality, were many of the acceptable ways. The use of affection within her household gave her influence because it could directly result in loyalty to her. Wifely persuasion could be used as in the instance of convincing a spouse to donate funds to the church. Her offspring could also be influenced through her motherly guidance. One not so attractive, her use of sexual attraction to influence not only her husband but also other members of the opposite sex, may work to her benefit. There were other unattractive means for her to gain influence that were feared and unaccepted but necessary to use occasionally. Gossip could often result in a desired end along with plain old lying or deceit.

In the public realm, participation in politics and public offices was restricted to men. Women could not be tithing representatives, be pledges in court, bring litigation, or plead courts until a widow and termed "femme sole". They were also excluded from the office of alester regardless of the fact that they, as brewers, were best qualified and most knowledgeable. Enforcement records of the assize of bread and ale show that women were some of the most active of commercial brewers and bakers in the countryside. This again, is an example of the importance at the time of barring women from powerful positions. Countrywomen were never allowed to serve as reeves, townswomen, mayors, and never went to parliament. The legal system recognized women only through their fathers or their husbands. The head of the household was usually the husband in legal matters and they therefore had the fullest legal rights. A woman's ability to acquire property through marriage or inheritance improved in the early Middle Ages, their economic and political position within the family and consequently within a wider public sphere. It is speculated that there was a significant decrease in the power of the aristocratic woman after the 12th century when the growing power of the state and the risk of formal education restricted women from following previous paths of power. They have also traced similar changes in power and influence exerted by women on religious life. Cluniac and Gregorian movements restricted public power wielded by abbesses in the early Middle Ages. Advancement of monasteries over nunneries may have been due to the belief in a woman's sexually enticing and unstable nature. As mentioned before, there was some relief if a woman became a widow. She then had





extensive legal rights and was allowed to participate more in the public realm. A woman's public power however, always stopped short of sanctioned authority.

There was an actual life cycle to a woman's authority. As a maid, her power grew with the inheritance of land. As a wife, this power waned with marriage. With her marriage, her lands and legal status went to her husband. As a widow, it increased again by becoming the head of the household. Widows, owed suit to court, answered complaints and pursued litigation without the intervention of a man. Widows were sought after for marriage. If a man could convince a widow to marry him it could mean an increase in power and wealth among influential families for himself and his family. Once widowed, she was responsible for her own lands until she remarried. Many chose to remain widows, a reasonable choice under the circumstances.

There are many aspects to a medieval woman's life not discussed here. All of which centered on her ability to see the chance for use of power and utilize it to her fullest capabilities. We may not necessarily like some of her avenues but they were very necessary at the time in order for a woman to at least have her own personal opinions and designs come into reality. She was restricted but not as oppressed as movies and many romantic fiction novels would have us believe. Medieval women were very similar to the women of today, looking out for the interests of her family and working to have a voice in her society.



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