



ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE AND THE QUARREL OVER MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S POWER

Perhaps because medieval historians have such difficulties in treating the entire Middle Ages in a single semester, we split our courses into two, a bifurcation in our teaching that creates a tendency to adhere to Marc Bloch's First Feudal Age, Second Feudal Age dichotomy.¹ Such periodization, splitting the Middle Ages at the eleventh century, right in the middle of a time of considerable change, is distorting to the more general history, but creates an even more distorting periodization in medieval women's history. Early feminist medievalists asked, as Joan Kelly did, "Did women have a Renaissance?" and tended to identify a Golden Age for women in the very early Middle Ages, even before 750 AD.² They saw a decline of women's position that started with the Carolingians and got dramatically worse by the twelfth century. If as the suggestions of Joan Kelly seemed to imply, women's history was the reverse of the standard trope, then women did not only not have a Renaissance, but the periodization of early medieval/late medieval makes it appear that medieval women did not have a twelfth-century Renaissance, either; women indeed find little place in discussions of the discovery of the individual, the revival of Latin letters, the esteem for all things antique, and the new interest in science and the world of nature of twelfth-century Renaissance studies. Heloise, Hildegard, and Eleanor are too often left completely out of the story, or presented as evidence of progressive erosion of women's power and authority.³

In such early scenarios the reign of Eleanor of Aquitaine as Queen of France was pivotal: the last gasp of the earlier, better, Golden Age. If some of us also saw in Katherine Hepburn as our last great strong actress of the twentieth-century classic era of film, that only confirmed the "decline of women's power and status after Eleanor" thesis. How could a Queen of England, like Eleanor of Aquitaine, locked up in a nunnery by her husband be anything but powerless? Such periodization should be resisted, replaced by something more subtle, with many ups and downs for different groups and individuals in different places.

Why was Eleanor the last gasp in that particular scenario? Early studies by feminist medievalists saw the later Middle Ages as dire, in part because modern [male?] historians had so often repeated what seem to be the increasingly misogynist statements about women by twelfth-century authorities like Bernard of Clairvaux; in that view medieval misogyny was a cumulative, ever worsening problem.⁴ But more recent evaluations suggest differently. Studies of scriptoria and women's libraries, like those of Felice Lifshitz for the early centuries, show that religious women read and copied selectively, ignoring or excising from their sources the most misogynist parts; work on nuns'

self-esteem like that of Penelope D. Johnson for later times suggests that such misogyny may have passed many women right by.⁵ But for the later Middle Ages there was also the *Frauenfrage*, the women's problem or question, which in explaining what seemed to [male?] historians the extraordinary number of regular and extra-regular communities of religious women in the later Middle Ages had come to the conclusion that these were only the result of a late medieval demographic anomaly: large numbers of women without husbands.⁶ Associated with the *Frauenfrage* are such interpretations as Eileen Power that religious houses for women, regular or extra-regular, were primarily dumping grounds for unwanted girls, with the associated assumption that marriage was [and should be] the norm.⁷ Finally, certainly when I began teaching medieval women we had available very few women's voices from the later Middle Ages and were stuck with that created by Chaucer in the wife of Bath, or that frustrating "Autobiography" of Marjorie Kempe.

But was the apparently increasing misogyny of the later Middle Ages reflective of the decline in women's power, or might it not be viewed a backlash, a response to the very real power and authority held at least by aristocratic women, both secular and religious, of the later Middle Ages? And a misogyny that medieval women did not necessarily buy into? And a misogyny that feminist medievalists are increasingly rejecting as the standard discourse? In this sense, Joan Ferrante's *To the Glory of Her Sex* is a breath of fresh air, for she sees the glass nearly full instead of half empty. This is in great contrast to the standard modern discourse of medieval history and literature [written by men?] that seems to have extracted out the most misogynist bits for repetition and ignored the women's literature Ferrante treats.⁸ There is much in recent feminist work to extol, and the audience response to our presentations at Kalamazoo brought to light so many new studies! Still, much of that work stands in rather un-theorized isolation from any more general paradigm. It is time to reformulate the question of periodization because it is ill-founded in the following ways.

First, the idea of a Golden Age of the early medieval period ignores the fact that the economic situation of everyone in medieval Europe had begun to improve by about the year 1000 AD, if not earlier. If we evaluate all aspects of life for women or men before and after 1000 AD, the second period was clearly richer, more diverse, healthier, had better weather, more agricultural and economic successes, and more opportunities for more people overall than had the early Middle Ages. That it was also more repressive probably has to do with greater wealth too.⁹ While women's access to power, prestige and wealth, may have gotten relatively worse in comparison to that of men in parallel social niches, for everyone, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in western Europe saw general prosperity and greater security.

There were complex demographic consequences in the change from early medieval to high Middle Ages. Any argument about the "rough and ready equality" of men and women of the early Middle Ages masks the harsh reality of nearly equal shares in an extremely impoverished world. Frequent famine and little iron in the diet leading to high mortality in childbirth meant that

there was a dearth of women. Whereas the wergilds found in barbarian law codes for women in the childbearing ages may have been higher than men's, this reflects also a much higher mortality rate for women. We must wonder if this shows women more valuable, or only treats them as childbearing commodities. Life expectancies increased with the level of material culture for everyone. Women of the lower classes had much higher living standards after the year 1000 than in the early Middle Ages, more recourse to labor-saving devices like water-powered grinding mills, or spinning wheels. Women of the early Middle Ages did not survive as well relative to men as they would later when men embarked on Crusades, or died fighting in real or play battles like tournaments. And this meant that they were much more often pressed into service as child-bearers with little real option to lead religious lives or lives as single-women.

Related were technological advances of the high Middle Ages that favored women's survival, while warfare of the high Middle Ages did not favor men's. Although queens like Eleanor of Aquitaine or Marguerite of Provence, Louis IX's queen, accompanied their husbands on crusade and had many children, other women might have children spaced farther apart as a result of their men being away. Castles were defensible by stay-at-home wives with a few knights under their control. Because crusades took husbands away for long periods of time, years at a time, they allowed those lady-castellans some relief from constant childbearing. Career necessities of commuting long-distance to crusades in warrior class families after the millennium, added to a new emphasis on clerical celibacy, thus meant that fewer women got pregnant; those who did, got pregnant less frequently after the millennium than in the early Middle Ages. Fewer and better-spaced pregnancies overall must have improved the life expectancies of women at the top of society. With regard to the right to own, alienate, or administer property, while women rarely got initial shares equal to their brothers', they often ended up inheriting, ruling, or acting as regents because of the disproportionate deaths of men from disease and injury on those crusades as well as crusader departures. Eleanor was only one of many women who acted while men were away, and the periods of power taken on by her daughters and granddaughters at various stages of their lives is quite amazing.¹⁰

Moreover, such women in the later Middle Ages could make real choices about married versus religious lives, or at least choose to enter religious lives later in life. Whereas a previous generation of [male?] historians, even those supporting the notion of investigating women's history, conceived of marriage as the only desideratum for women, today we can think about the choice to not marry as a freedom and a success, not an oppression or a failure. Women leading religious lives in the Middle Ages had full, rich, and powerful lives, not lives of deprivation. The early medieval scarcities of childbearing women brought attacks on women who wanted to take themselves out of the reproductive market to become nuns, and the general poverty meant that few lived long enough to exceed the childbearing age and retire to rule nuns.¹¹ But the reduced pregnancies and better maternal health that ended the scarcity of women by the high Middle Ages meant that many more women could become

members of religious communities, often ones where they exercised some of the same social functions that they had earlier as the wives of priests. Moreover it allows us to identify a new category of postmenopausal women who may or may not have chosen to give up power to their children or grandchildren, often preferring to continue to rule in their older years, and support religious communities for women rather than necessarily enter them. Yet the best-kept secret of later medieval history is the large number of women's religious communities.¹² Those communities have enormous unpublished archives that need investigation, and it turns out that those archives document not only religious women, but the secular noblewomen who tended to support monastic houses for women to which they might retire (if necessary), or to which they could turn as efficacious recipients of alms for prayers.¹³ Such materials for women of the later Middle Ages, from all sorts of archival depositories, remain, disproportionately to those for men's houses, unpublished.

So I hope the next great move in medieval feminist history will be the investigation of the many still unpublished archives that could throw light on women in the later Middle Ages. Along with that will come an expansion of our classifications of women: to rich, poor, peasant, castellan, young girls, married, and widowed, we must add the category, possibly one hardly ever found for the early Middle Ages, of the postmenopausal woman, usually a widow of power and authority, who could make different choices once the childbearing age was past. She is distinct from the young and still nubile woman who can act as an heiress or regent for her children, but was still a pawn in the marriage game. This category of the postmenopausal woman of power and authority is one with which we must perhaps investigate Eleanor of Aquitaine, but can be applied to many other women of her time and later.¹⁴

There is then abundant archival work to inform new theories and better periodization. Such research is slow and time-consuming and may result in fewer publications, so I am not necessarily advocating it for feminist medievalists without tenure, although getting one's toes wet in the archives before completing the Ph.D. makes it easier to return to the archives later. But those of us who have tenure and are marching our last children off to college, should consider that instead of being enticed into the illusory powers of deanships and committee work which could as easily be done by men, that we turn to the great unfinished tasks of archival research. If we remain at home with caregiving tasks, we should at least turn to the more careful translation and reediting of source materials for teaching in which the parts about women have been left out or women's versions of texts dismissed as aberrant. The accumulation of work on resources not at this point part of our standard knowledge about medieval women will contribute to new paradigms about the complexities of women's lives, particularly in the years after the year 1000 AD, but also a less rosy-eyed view of the early medieval period. Such theory must, I think take seriously women's spiritual concerns (and take on the modern monopolization of the history of medieval religious orders by men) as well as women's actual control of material resources. It will be based on the work not only of those of us who have been placed by Fortuna's wheel in Research I institutions where we train the next generation of medievalists, but particularly by

those who labor in the vineyards of undergraduate education, the unsung (but I hope not unthanked and unappreciated) heroines of our profession who have in the world of medieval feminist scholarship so often backed up the efforts of those women training that next generation of specialists. To discover the women of power of the post-Eleanor of Aquitaine age, the women of power of the post-Katherine Hepburn age must begin to travel the routes and rediscover the archives which reflect the activities of Eleanor and her daughters and granddaughter, or her mother-in-law the Empress Matilda, or the many ruling or regent Queens, countesses, and Ladies of castles of their times. There is still much work to be done, and if in doing it we rediscover more women very much like ourselves, all the better.

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¹ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London, 1961).

² Women are not very apparent in either Charles H. Haskins, *Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1927), or *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century*, edited Robert L. Benson and Giles Constable, with Carol D. Lanham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

³ Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women have a Renaissance?" in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, ed. R. Bridenthall and C. Koonz, first ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 175–201, repr. in Kelly, *Women, History and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–50; depending especially on Marion Facerger Meade, "A Study of Medieval Queenship: Capetian France 987–1237," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 5 (1968): 3–48, and David Herlihy, "Land, Family, and Women in Continental Europe, 701–1200," *Traditio* 1 (1962): 89–120; cf. idem, "'Did Women Have a Renaissance?' A Reconsideration," *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 13 (1985): 1–22.

⁴ R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), 314–15, includes the famous quote from Bernard's "sermones in Cantica," 65: (PL 183, 1091), "To be always with a woman and not to have intercourse with her is more difficult than to raise the dead. You cannot do the least difficult: do you think I will believe that you can do what is more difficult?" Jean Leclercq, on the other hand, in *Women and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, 1989) attempts to argue, rather incoherently, that Bernard was not a misogynist.

⁵ Felice Lifshitz, "Demonstrating Gun(t)za: Women, Manuscripts, and the Question of Historical 'Proof,'" in *Vom Nutzen des Schreibens. Soziales Gedächtnis, Herrschaft und Besitz im Mittelalter*, ed. Walter Pohl and Paul Herold (Vienna: österreichischen Akademie Des Wissenschaften, 2002), but see also Penelope D. Johnson, esp. *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁶ Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages: The Historical Links between Heresy, the Mendicant Orders, and the Women's Religious Movement in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century, with the Historical Foundations of German Mysticism*, trans. Steven Rowan, with an introduction by Robert E. Lerner (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1995, first published in German as *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, 1935).

⁷ *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge, 1922); feminist reaction to her apparent distaste for nuns may bring us to discount too much the value of this book for its information on religious women managing property, etc.

⁸ The importance of how we read the evidence is everywhere apparent; see for example Joan M. Ferrante, *To the Glory of her Sex: Women's Roles in the Composition of Medieval Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁹ The classic statement is Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages*; on dissent, see Robert. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁰ On this see Miriam Shadis and Constance H. Berman, "A Taste of the Feast: Re-considering Eleanor of Aquitaine's Female Descendants," *Eleanor of Aquitaine, Lord and Lady*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and John Carmi Parsons (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 177–211. See also Berman, "Abbeys for Cistercian Nuns in the Ecclesiastical Province of Sens: Foundation, Endowment and Economic Activities of the Earlier Foundations," *Revue Mabillon* 73 [1997]: 83–113), and Shadis, "Piety, Politics, and Power: The Patronage of Leonor of England and her Daughters Berenguela of Leon and Blanche of Castile," in *The Cultural Patronage of Medi-*

eval Women, ed. June Hall McCash (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 202–27. Good new work is found in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. Theodore Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) and Fredrik L. Cheyette, *Ermengard of Narbonne and the World of the Troubadours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹¹ See suggestions of this in Lisa M. Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹² See the evidence being compiled by the NEH-funded “Medieval Religious Women’s Lives and Communities, 500–1500,” directed by Mary Martin McLaughlin and Suzanne Wemple, 1982–86, now on-line as MATRIX. <http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu/>

¹³ On the efficacy of religious women’s prayers, see my argument in Constance H. Berman, “Dowries, Private Income, and Anniversary Masses. The Nuns of St. Antoine-des-Champs (Paris),” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 20: (1993): 3–20.

¹⁴ A few names to include are Matilda of Courtenay, countess of Auxerre, Nevers, and Tonnerre; Eleanor of Vermandois; Isabelle countess of Chartres and her daughter, Matilda of Amboise; Blanche of Castile; possibly Ingebourg of Denmark; Eleanor of Provence; Eleanor of Castile; and Isabelle of Aubigny, countess of Arundel.

