Medieval Women: In their own words

Large print guide

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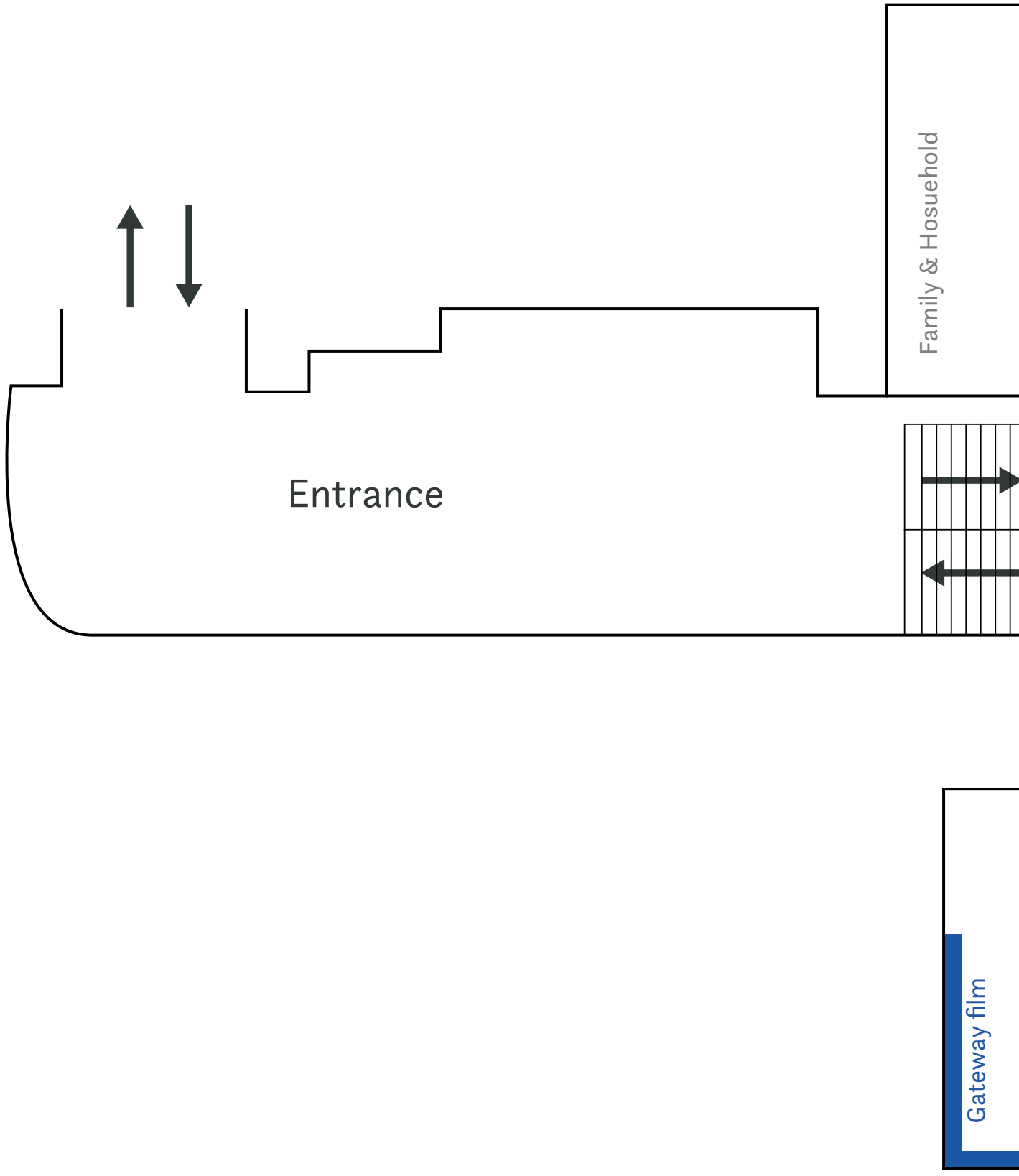
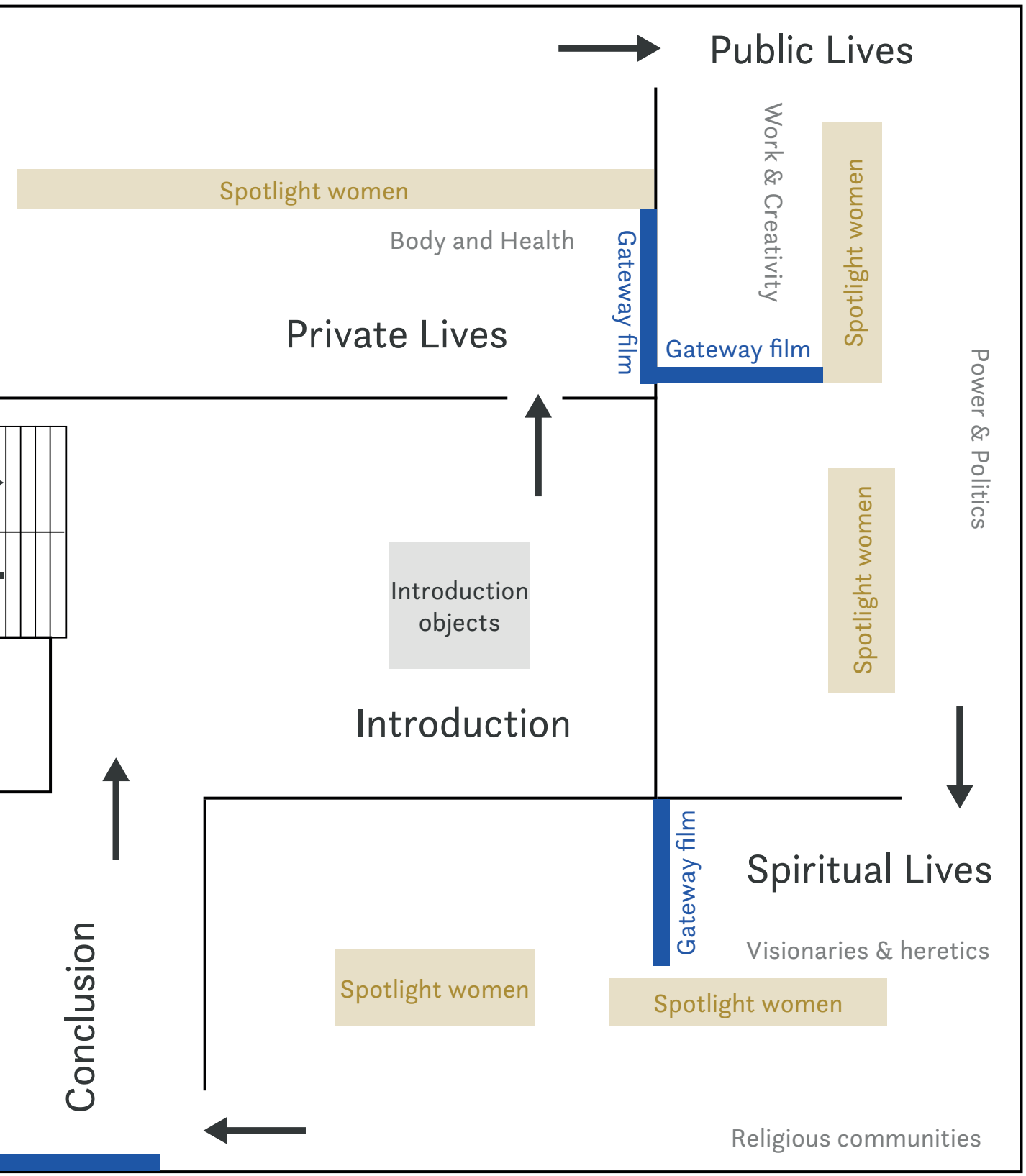

Family & Hosuehold
Entrance
Gateway film


Public Lives
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Content warning

This exhibition includes content relating to sex and sexuality, pregnancy, birth and baby loss, domestic violence, violence against women and children, marital breakdown, mental health and death. Images of human remains feature in films within the gallery.

Resources for support can be found at the end of the exhibition for anyone affected by these issues.

Medieval Women: In their own words

Medieval women's voices evoke a world in which they lived active and varied lives. Their testimonies speak of diverse experiences, revealing female impact and influence across private, public and spiritual realms, and bringing alive experiences that still resonate today.

This exhibition focuses on Europe from roughly 1100 to 1500, a period in which there was strong cultural interconnection across the continent. While most medieval sources from the period were written by and about men, women's surviving testimonies offer remarkable insight into their

contributions to medieval social and economic life, culture and politics, their skilful management of households and convents, and the vibrancy of female religious culture.

This is the story of medieval women, told in their own words.

Seeing medieval women

Statue of Eleanor of Castile from the Waltham Cross, England, 1291–94

Images of medieval women survive in a variety of media, including sculpture, stained glass, paintings and manuscript illuminations. These are rarely realistic portraits, but rather they seek to express an individual's social status and cultural identity. Eleanor of Castile (d. 1290), wife of Edward I of England, was unpopular for much of her reign, largely because of her exploitative land acquisitions. Yet this statue, created after her death on the orders of her grieving husband, portrays her as an ideal queen, majestic, graceful and beloved.

Replica (Original held by Hertfordshire County Council)

Speaking in private

Letter from Alice Crane to Margaret Paston
Windsor (England), 29 June around 1455

Most of the texts that survive from the Middle Ages deal with matters of political, legal, religious or intellectual interest. Personal correspondence, especially that of women, rarely survives. Yet women's letters give an unprecedented view into their everyday lives, their range of concerns and the richness of female relationships. In this letter, Alice, a young woman living in the household of a noble lady, writes to the older Margaret who has been ill. Alice asks after Margaret's health and thanks her for her friendship.

The British Library, Add MS 34888, f. 118

“Thanking you of the great cheer that I had of you when I was with you last with all my heart.”

— Alice Crane

Speaking in public

Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*
Paris (France), 1410–around 1414

Although men dominated the medieval public sphere, some women exerted great influence across public and cultural life. A number of female writers produced influential literary works that shaped European culture. Christine de Pizan (d. 1430), often described as the first professional woman author in Europe, insisted in her writings on women's moral and intellectual equality. In her *Book of the City of Ladies*, she recounted tales of exemplary historical, legendary and biblical women, building a metaphorical 'city' out of women's achievements.

The British Library, Harley MS 4431/2

“God has given women such beautiful minds to apply themselves, if they want to, in any of the fields where glorious and excellent men are active.”

— Christine de Pizan

Translated by Earl Jeffrey Richards (1983)

Speaking spiritually

Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of Divine Works)
England, late 15th or early 16th century

Throughout the medieval period, women had a profound impact on European religious life. Female mystics and visionaries exercised their voices to challenge religious norms, and many gained great fame and influence as religious authorities. German abbess and polymath Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179) was an influential visionary. Her *Liber divinorum operum* (composed 1163–73) records ten visions, beginning with the majestic female figure of Divine Love, which she sees as the supreme life-giving force that permeates the natural world and every human being.

The British Library, Add MS 15418

“And this image of Divine Love spoke: I am the supreme and fiery force, who sets all living sparks alight.”

— Hildegard of Bingen

Translated by Nathaniel M Campbell (2018)

Private Lives

Medieval women's words illuminate their everyday lives and personal worlds. Surviving voices offer glimpses into women's family and domestic life, revealing the joys of friendship and motherhood, the complex management of households and property and the pleasure of falling in love. Their testimonies also speak to the power of the female body, and the skill of female medical practitioners in a society in which healthcare provision was generally informal and domestic.

Body and Health

Medieval attitudes to women were rooted in the belief that their bodies were inferior to men's, while illness and childbirth made the female body vulnerable. Yet the testimonies of medieval women reveal the many ways in which they cared for their bodies, took pride in their appearance and tended to their personal hygiene.

Across medieval Europe, women's bodies were treated through a combination of ancient Greek and Roman medicine, and traditional practices handed down from woman to woman. During the period, new ideas and ingredients from the Arabic world also influenced female medical practice. Though excluded from the medical elite, women physicians, healers and carers brought a depth of female knowledge to the treatment of women's health issues.

Disease woman

The Wellcome Apocalypse
Possibly Erfurt (Germany), around 1420

Most medieval medical diagrams depict the male figure, implying that the male body universally represented human health. The only popular diagram of female anatomy, known as the ‘disease woman’ (displayed right), shows a woman with her internal organs exposed, squatting, perhaps in a birthing position. Labels identify different body parts and their associated diseases, both gynaecological and generic. Although intended as a basic teaching guide, the diagram reinforces the idea of the female body as inherently predisposed to disease.

Wellcome Collection, London,
MS 49

Beware of mirrors and clothes

Der Ritter vom Turm (The Knight of the Tower)
Augsburg (Germany), 1495

Moralists often criticised women for being over-concerned with their appearance. This popular instructional book for girls teaches good behaviour through a series of stories illustrated with woodcuts. This chapter warns against vanity, telling the tale of a young woman who spent too much time getting ready in front of the mirror, only to see the terrifying sight of the devil displaying his rear-end in the reflection. Originally written in French, the text was translated into German by nobleman Marquard vom Stein (d. 1495) for his daughters, Elsa and Jakobea.

The British Library,
IB.6827.

Looking good

De ornatu mulierum (On Women's Cosmetics)
France or England, 13th century

Make-up, perfume and hygiene products were all commonly used in the Middle Ages. This cosmetic recipe collection provides detailed instructions for women on how to beautify their skin, hair, face, lips, teeth and genitals. The text was originally compiled in Southern Italy in the 12th century and became popular throughout Europe. Some of its recipes derive from Muslim women's beauty routines, reflecting the large Muslim populations living side-by-side with Christians in southern Italy at the time.

The British Library,
Sloane MS 3550

At least 30 of the plant ingredients in *De ornatu mulierum*'s recipes continue to have uses in modern cosmetics and pharmacology.

Source: Simona Pisanti, Teresa Mencherini, Tiziana Esposito, et al. (2022).

Hair and beauty

Ivory comb
Italy, around 1360–80

Combs were a fundamental tool for personal grooming. Probably due to their association with personal beauty, ivory combs carved with scenes of romance and courtship were popular lovers' gifts. This one depicts a crowned woman at the centre, holding a pennon (military flag) in each hand, flanked by two kneeling knights in armour. She perhaps commands their hearts or rewards their brave endeavours. A couple flirts on either side.

Victoria and Albert Museum,
151-1879

Medieval cosmetics

These scented recipes are from *De ornatu mulierum* (On Women's Cosmetics), the cosmetic recipe collection seen in the manuscript displayed alongside. Written in 12th-century southern Italy, it was one of the texts included in the *Trotula* compendium of medical and cosmetic treatments for women.

‘Let her have this powder… Let it be mixed with rose water. With this water let her sprinkle her hair and comb it with a comb dipped in this same water.’

— *De ornatu mulierum* (On Women’s Cosmetics)

Translated by Monica Green (2001)

Hair perfume recipe

Scent notes: rose, clove, nutmeg, musk, watercress, galangal

De ornatu mulierum advises that, while noblewomen should comb this perfume into their hair, they should take care that their hair is not seen by anyone. Instead, they should wear a veil also fragranced with the same perfume.

‘I recommend that day and night and especially when she has to have sexual intercourse with anyone that she hold these things under her tongue.’

— *De ornatu mulierum* (On Women’s Cosmetics)

Translated by Monica Green (2001)

Breath freshener recipe

Scent notes: laurel leaves, musk

The anonymous author of *De ornatu mulierum* claims to have learned this recipe from a Muslim woman who used it to help many people. It is accompanied by instructions for cleaning and whitening the teeth.

Joanna the Not-So-Mad

Hours of Joanna of Castile
Bruges (modern-day Belgium), 1486–1506

This prayer book was made for Queen Joanna I of Castile, who is shown kneeling on the right, facing the Virgin and Child. Joanna is known traditionally as ‘the Mad’, a deeply unfair characterisation of her mental state. She succeeded her mother, Isabella, as Queen Regnant of Castile in 1504. Her father, husband and son conspired to deprive her of the throne, accusing her of being unfit to rule. Confined for life, any mental health conditions that Joanna suffered were probably worsened by decades of mistreatment.

The British Library, Add MS 18852

Grieving a daughter

Matthew Paris, *Chronica Maiora* (Major Chronicle)
St Albans (England), 1250s

Katherine, the fifth child of Eleanor of Provence and Henry III of England, died at the age of three. In this chronicle, the writer Matthew Paris records her death and describes her as *muta et inutilis, sed facie pulcherrima* ('mute and useless, but with a most beautiful face'). The words 'mute and useless' possibly refer to an intellectual disability or degenerative disease. This cruel description contrasts with the account given of her mother's love. The text goes on to describe how the Queen became sick with grief which neither medicine nor comfort could cure.

The British Library, Royal MS 14 C VII

Lidwina of Schiedam

Christian mystic, patron saint of chronic pain and ice skating
Schiedam, the Netherlands
b. 1380, d. 1433

While ice-skating with her friends as a teenager, Lidwina fell and broke a rib. The injury developed into an abscess, the first in a series of debilitating health conditions that kept her bed-bound for much of her life. Lidwina turned to religion to make sense of her suffering and to find purpose, practising extreme self-discipline, experiencing spiritual visions and working as a healer. After her death, worshippers began visiting her tomb and her sainthood was eventually confirmed in 1890. She remains the patron saint of chronic pain and ice-skating.

Chronic pain and ice-skating

Johannes Brugman, *Vita Lijdwine* (Life of Lidwina)
Schiedam (Netherlands), 1498

Interest in Lidwina's life was so considerable that she was the subject of four biographies in the decades following her death. Dutch friar Johannes Brugman completed his account of her life in 1456, based on information he gleaned from people who knew her. This 1498 printed edition is remarkable for its series of twenty vivid woodcut illustrations. The image of Lidwina's skating accident, seen here, is thought to be the oldest image of ice-skating from the Netherlands.

The British Library,
IA.48805

Medical practitioners

Medieval medical manuscripts usually present a view of medicine dominated by university-trained male physicians. Yet in practice women performed many different medical functions, as healers, midwives and even surgeons.

Permission to practise

Petition of Joan du Lee
England, around 1403

The obstacles that one practitioner faced are revealed by this petition, sent by Joan du Lee to King Henry IV around 1403. Joan requested letters of protection enabling her to travel safely around the country performing the art of ‘fisik’ (medicine), without disturbance from people who regarded her with contempt.

On loan from The National Archives, UK,
SC 8/231/11510

Cupping treatment

Collection of medical treatises
England, 15th century

This treatise is illustrated with pictures of a woman administering cupping treatment to a male patient. This treatment involves applying heated glass cups to the skin to form a vacuum. It was believed to draw out toxins and is still practised as an alternative therapy today.

The British Library, Sloane MS 6

In medieval France,
roughly 1.5% of
medical practitioners
whose names survive were women.

Of these, around 36%
were midwives.
The rest included barbers, surgeons,
trained physicians and untrained healers.

Source: Monica Green (1989).

Trota of Salerno

Physician and medical authority
Salerno, Southern Italy
Early to mid-12th century

Trota was a physician who practised at the medical school of Salerno, southern Italy, in the 12th century. She gave her name to a widely consulted collection of texts on women's health, the *Trotula*. Her medical works are notable for being less theoretical and more practical than those of her male contemporaries. Since male practitioners were not permitted to conduct intimate examinations, she was able to practise women's medicine in a more hands-on way than they could.

Treatments for Women

Trota of Salerno, *De Curis Mulierum*
(Treatments for Women)
England, 13th century

Although Trota's name became associated with the entire *Trotula* collection, in reality only one of the constituent books probably originated with her— *De Curis Mulierum*, displayed here. It consists of practical instructions for treating issues ranging from gynaecological conditions to hygiene and skincare, revealing first-hand knowledge of women's bodies and health concerns. The text begins on this page with guidance for inducing absent periods and moderating heavy periods.

The British Library,
Sloane MS 1615

Discoveries in Archaeology: East Smithfield Plague Cemetery

Content warning: this video shows human remains

The bubonic plague of the mid-14th century was one of the deadliest pandemics in human history. According to varying estimates, it killed between 40% and 60% of Europe's population. In London, the authorities created emergency cemeteries at East Smithfield and West Smithfield to accommodate the bodies of thousands of plague victims. Recent analysis of these remains led by the London Museum suggests that the group at highest risk of succumbing to the plague were women with Black heritage.

Women’s healthcare

Much of women’s healthcare focused on their sexual and reproductive health, reflecting the social value placed on childbearing. In the absence of any formal healthcare system, women turned to informal networks of often female practitioners for help with issues of fertility, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth. Methods of treatment ranged from blood-letting, to herbal remedies, to religious and magical charms.

Private Lives

Herbal cures

Tractatus de herbis (Treatise on Herbs)
Southern Italy, around 1300

Details of plants' names, medicinal properties and methods of preparation are supplied in this illustrated herbal treatise. Many plants are recommended for treating gynaecological conditions, such as, on the left, mugwort (*artemisia vulgaris*). Described as 'the mother of herbs', the text claims that it can cure infertility, help menstruating and pregnant women, and prevent premature birth. Mugwort is still used to promote female reproductive health in herbal medicine today, although not enough research has been done to confirm its scientific benefits.

The British Library,
Egerton MS 747

Fertility and contraception

John Mirfield, *Breviarium Bartholomei* (Handbook of St Bartholomew's), London (England), 14th century

This medical compendium was compiled for St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. The chapter on gynaecology includes procedures for testing virginity, making a woman appear to be a virgin, and contraception. Several of the key words in the section on contraception were written in code, suggesting an attempt to control access to this information. One contraceptive method required a woman to wear a charm made from weasel testicles, with the Latin word *mustele* ('weasel') written in code as 'Ixtufmf'.

The British Library,
Harley MS 3

Pregnancy

Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston I
Norfolk (England), December 1441

Margaret, a pregnant young gentrywoman in Norfolk, sent this letter to her husband John while he was staying in London. She asks him to send her a new girdle (waist belt) and some cloth for a gown because she has grown so large. She ends by urging John to ‘please wear the ring with the image of St Margaret that I sent you as a keepsake until you come home’. This was probably a protective amulet since St Margaret of Antioch is the patron saint of pregnant women and childbirth.

The British Library, Add MS 43490, f. 34r
Purchased with the aid of a contribution from the Friends of the National Libraries

Put a ring on it

Finger-ring depicting St Margaret of Antioch
England, 15th century

This 15th-century ring depicting St Margaret is probably similar to the one that Margaret Paston asked her husband John to wear during her first pregnancy. As well as being Margaret Paston's namesake, St Margaret was the patron saint of pregnancy and childbirth. It is likely that the couple saw the ring as protective of Margaret and her unborn child.

The British Museum, AF.910

A safe delivery

Passion of St Margaret
Padua (Italy), 14th century

St Margaret, an early Christian martyr, was widely regarded as the patron saint of pregnancy and childbirth because of the belief that she emerged unharmed from the belly of a dragon. According to medieval legend, St Margaret promised that any pregnant woman who had a copy of her Passion (life story) placed upon her would have a safe delivery. This copy ends with a prayer for a safe birth followed by a childbirth scene that has been smudged, probably by the devotional kissing of women hoping for a safe birth.

The British Library,
Egerton MS 877

Call the midwife

The Sekenesse of Wymmen
England, 15th century

One of the most widely read gynaecological texts during the medieval period was *The Sekenesse of Wymmen*. This section concerns complications in childbirth arising from the position of the baby in the womb, accompanied by anatomical drawings. The text provides instructions to a midwife on how to assist a mother, typically by moving the baby into the optimal headfirst position, or by using other remedies such as hot baths, poultices, ointments and herbs.

The British Library,
Sloane MS 2463

Works like a charm

Birth girdle
England, early 15th century

Parchment girdles (waist belts) covered with protective prayers and charms were produced as amulets for use during childbirth. This example includes a life-sized representation (‘measure’) of Christ’s side-wound, through which he gave birth to the Church according to medieval interpretations. Beside it, the text promises ‘if a woman be travailing with child [giving birth] that day, if she has seen the said measure, that day she will not perish’.

The British Library,
Harley Roll T 11

In medieval England, approximately **1** in every **20** aristocratic women died in childbirth.

Source: Rachel Podd (2020).

Pregnancy loss

Chirurgia (Surgery), a Latin translation of al-Zahrawi, *Kitab al-Tasrif* (The Method of Medicine), Italy, early 14th century

Originally written in al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia) by the surgeon al-Zahrawi (d. 1013), this treatise explains various surgical operations and the instruments required for them. This page describes procedures for removing the remains of a foetus and placenta from the womb after miscarriage. The instruments include a vaginal speculum (which has been misunderstood by the artist) and several types of forceps. This procedure would have been extremely risky for the woman.

The British Library,
Add MS 36617

Choosing a wet nurse

Aldobrandino da Siena, *Régime du corps* (Regimen of the Body)
Northern France, 1265–70

This French healthcare guide provides advice for selecting an ideal wet nurse. The guide states that a wet nurse should have firm breasts, not too large or too small, with milk that is white and not too thin or thick. It explains that she must be healthy and of good character, since any negative characteristics could affect the health of the child. The accompanying illustration shows a woman examining the breasts of a potential wet nurse.

The British Library,
Sloane MS 2435

Paying the wet nurse

Petition to Henry VI from his wet nurse
England, 1423–24

Joan Astley was chief wet nurse to the infant Henry VI and a central figure in the young king's household, responsible for his care and early education. Joan was well rewarded for her service. In this petition, made to the King and his council on 16 January 1424 when he was two years old, she asked for an increase in her annual salary. The petition was successful and her wages were doubled from £20 to £40 per year, the equivalent of over £35,000 in modern currency.

The British Library,
Stowe Ch 643

Florentine in-house wet nurses in the 14th century earned more than twice the amount that other female servants earned.

Source: Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (1988).

Family and Household

Women's lives were shaped by their family relationships and often centred on the home. The home was a place where women cared for their children, practised religion, managed the household and oversaw their property and possessions. Since only boys could go to school, girls often gained their education at home, which – depending on their social station – might include literacy, etiquette or practical skills.

The majority of girls were expected to marry and adhere to the gendered social expectations of the time. Within marriage, women faced unequal legal rights and were subject to their husband's authority. Yet female testimony reveals that traditional women's roles were often far from passive: their words show them pursuing love, supporting their families and building strong social networks.

Girls' education

There was no formal schooling for girls, so usually they were educated at home. Often mothers took responsibility for teaching their daughters. Sometimes families hired tutors or sent their daughters to informal reading schools. The education of girls from upper- and middle-class families generally focused on reading (although rarely writing), domestic skills, good manners and religious knowledge.

A Renaissance princess

Bust, probably of Ippolita Maria Sforza
Naples (Italy), 1472

Ippolita was born into the influential Sforza family, rulers of Milan, and married Alfonso II, Duke of Calabria and later King of Naples. She gained an excellent education and a lifelong love of learning, reflecting the new value placed on aristocratic girls' education during the Italian Renaissance of the 15th to 16th centuries. This is a reproduction of a marble bust believed to depict Ippolita, made by the sculptor Francesco Laurana in 1472. The original was damaged during the Second World War.

Replica (from a cast in the Victoria and Albert Museum)

Educating Ippolita

Cicero, *Cato Major de Senectute* (On Old Age)
Milan (Italy), 1457

As the daughter of the Duke of Milan, Ippolita Sforza benefited from a privileged education. She developed a love of learning from an early age and studied Latin and Greek under several tutors. An example of her schoolbook exercises is this copy of an ancient Roman treatise, which she copied with her teacher Baldo Martorelli at the age of 14. Its opening page features a decorated border with her emblem (a palm tree and silver scales) and an abbreviated form of her name ('HIP, MA').

The British Library, Add MS 21984

Easy as ABC

A primer for a girl
Possibly Bruges (modern-day Belgium), around 1445

This book was probably made for a girl who was learning to read. It features a picture of a classroom scene showing a schoolmistress who holds a wooden paddle, a tool of discipline, while teaching four young girls with books. Two alphabets on the facing page helped the young owner learn her letters. On the following pages are basic Latin prayers that Christian children were expected to master: the *Pater Noster* (Our Father), *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) and *Credo* (the Creed).

The British Library, Harley MS 3828

48%

of aristocratic women from England between 1350 and 1500 made bequests of books in their wills, compared with 18% of noblemen.

Source: Joel T Rosenthal (1981–82)

Jewish women's religion at home

Jewish girls received a similar level of education to Christian girls, including reading, domestic skills and essential religious knowledge. Unlike boys, they were rarely taught Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of the Torah and most Jewish rituals. Yet women still found ways to participate in Jewish religious life, especially in the domestic sphere.

Prayers in Hebrew

Maraviglia's prayer book
Italy, 1469

This Hebrew prayer book, made for a woman named Maraviglia, shows that some women were educated to a high level in the sacred language. It contains unique illustrations of a young woman, perhaps Maraviglia herself, performing rituals. This passage for reading during the *Seder* (the ceremonial meal commemorating Passover), usually illustrated with only male participants, here shows a woman and man raising the seder basket of ceremonial foods.

The British Library, Add MS 26957

A seat at the table

The Sister Haggadah
Eastern Spain, mid-14th century

Illustrated copies of the Haggadah, a book read at the *Seder* (Passover ceremonial meal), were often given as wedding or betrothal gifts among Jews in medieval Spain. This example shows, on the left, an all-male scene of public religious observance, with men and boys reciting the Haggadah in the synagogue. In contrast, the scene of a family at the *seder* table, on the right, includes two women. While the men read the Haggadah volumes, one woman looks directly at the viewer and samples the ritual food.

The British Library, Or 2884

Reading the hours

A Book of Hours in French
France, around 1400–1425

If a medieval woman owned just one book, it was most likely a Book of Hours, the standard book of popular Christian devotion in late medieval western Europe. Books of Hours provide sequences of prayers to be said at eight fixed times throughout the day. Many were personalised to suit the tastes and needs of their owners. This opening page from a Book of Hours shows a portrait of the unidentified female owner praying with her book, while the Virgin and Child appear before her.

The British Library, Harley MS 2952

Religion at home

Nicolas Finet, *Dialogue de la duchesse de Bourgogne à Jésus Christ* (Dialogue of the Duchess of Burgundy with Jesus Christ), Brussels (modern-day Belgium), around 1468

For many women, home was an important place of religious observance where they engaged in private prayer and devotional reading. Margaret of York (d. 1503), Duchess of Burgundy, commissioned her almoner (or alms distributor) Nicolas Finet to write this personalised treatise for her. It takes the form of a dialogue between Margaret and Christ, who offers her religious instruction. The book begins with a picture of Margaret experiencing a vision of Christ in her bedroom.

The British Library,
Add MS 7970
60

Marriage portrait

Portrait of Margaret of York
modern-day Belgium, around 1468

Margaret of York (d. 1503), Duchess of Burgundy, was renowned for her patronage of books, education and religion. The sister of Edward IV of England, she married Charles the Bold (d. 1477), Duke of Burgundy, in 1468. This portrait was probably painted soon after her marriage. The gold ‘B’ pin on her headdress signifies Burgundy, while the alternating letters ‘C’ and ‘M’ on her necklace stand for ‘Charles’ and ‘Margaret’.

Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Peintures, RF 1938 17

Anne of France, Duchess of Bourbon

Political advisor and governor, author of
Les Enseignements à sa fille
(Lessons For My Daughter)
France b. 1461, d. 1522

Known to her contemporaries as Madame la Grande (‘the Great Lady’), Anne was one of the most powerful women in late 15th-century Europe. She and her husband Pierre governed France for eight years while her brother, Charles VIII, was too young to rule. Anne was deeply concerned with girls’ education, reputedly giving lessons to the daughters of all aristocratic families in France. She authored a book of guidance for her only surviving child, Suzanne (1491–1521).

Motherly advice

Anne of France, *Les Enseignements à sa fille* (Lessons for my Daughter)
Toulouse (France), 1535

Anne of France composed this book of lessons for her daughter Suzanne in around 1505. It provides guidance on how to navigate the pitfalls of growing up to become an ideal princess. Anne offers timeless motherly advice to dress modestly and warmly, as well as warning her daughter to be wary of men with dishonourable intentions and encouraging her to marry her parents' choice. When she grew up, Suzanne had her mother's book published, and this is one of just four surviving copies.

The British Library,
C.125.dd.21.

Erotic poetry

Gwerful Mechain, ‘Cywydd y cedor’
(Poem to the Vagina)
Wales, 18th century

Candid eroticism, audacity and humour characterise the poetry of Gwerful Mechain (d. 1502). She was one of the most extraordinary female voices in medieval Wales, although surviving copies of her works date from a much later period. This, her most popular poem, pokes fun at men who praise all women’s body parts except for what she considers the best one. Gwerful wittily corrects their mistake by praising the vagina at length.

The British Library, Add MS 14870

**“A girl’s thick glade,
it is full of love,**

**Lovely bush, blessed
be it by God above.”**

— Gwerful Mechain, ‘Poem to the Vagina’

Translated by Katie Gramich (2005)

Forbidden love

Letter from Héloïse to Abelard
France, late 14th or early 15th century

The relationship between Héloïse d'Argenteuil (d. around 1164) and Peter Abelard (d. 1142) is one of the most famous medieval love affairs. A renowned scholar, Héloïse met Abelard in 1115. He described her as 'not bad in the face, but her writings are second to none'. After the pair married in secret, Abelard was castrated by order of Héloïse's uncle, and Héloïse became a nun. Her letters, which survive only in later copies, speak of her continued longing for him. 'Why did I marry you and bring about your fall?' she lamented.

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,
Add. C. 271

“Nothing is less under our control than the heart – having no power to command it we are forced to obey.”

— Héloïse

Translated by Betty Radice (2003)

Private Lives

Growing up

‘And I war a maydyn’
England, early 16th century

The female-voice song ‘And I war a maydyn’ (And I was a maiden), probably composed around 1500, tells of a girl’s coming of age. The speaker recounts how she changed from an innocent maiden in the first verse, to a ‘wanton wench’ at the age of 12, to believing at the age of 15 that she was more attractive than all others. The song is set for five voices and may have been sung by adolescent girls, perhaps accompanying a circle dance.

Listen

‘And I war a maydyn’
(And I was a maiden)

The Flower Of All Ships: Tudor Court Music from the time of The Mary Rose.
CRD Records. Directed by Nancy Hadden.

93 days

Canon law (the law of the Church) in the 12th and 13th centuries prohibited sex between husbands and wives on Sundays, Wednesdays, Fridays, many holy days, and all of Advent and Lent, as well as during menstruation, pregnancy and breast-feeding. This left only about 93 officially ‘permissible’ days for sex aper year.

Source: John Baldwin (1994).

Marriage

Most medieval women were expected to get married. Wealthy families arranged marriages as political and financial alliances, with girls often betrothed as children and married as adolescents. Lower down the social scale, women generally married later in life and could more often choose their husband. According to most medieval legal systems, married women's legal rights were severely limited.

Arranged marriage

Hebrew marriage agreement
Lincoln (England), 1271

This document sets out an arrangement for the marriage of Judith and Aaron, both still children, made by their parents. Judith's mother promises to provide a dowry of 20 marks of silver and a precious manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. Aaron's father commits to giving the couple £20 or more and to supply their wedding clothes and feast. The wedding is due to take place four years later, in February 1275.

By kind permission of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, London, Muniments 6797

Grant of lands

Land grant from Ludovico il Moro to Beatrice d'Este, Milan (Italy), 1494

On 28 January 1494, three years into their marriage, Ludovico Maria Sforza (d. 1508), Duke of Milan, gifted his wife Beatrice d'Este (d. 1497) a set of lands around their palace at Vigevano in northern Italy. The grant is recorded in this decorated diploma that features facing portraits of the couple, painted by Giovanni Pietro Birago. In her portrait, Beatrice wears the finest of Renaissance fashions, with accessories including a pearl cross, bejewelled hairnet, and a golden headband known as a *ferronnière*.

The British Library,
Add MS 21413

Without a husband

Confirmation by Matilda de Chauz to Hugh Bard of a grant of land
England, early 13th century

This document was issued to a man called Hugh Bard by Matilda de Chauz, hereditary Keeper of Sherwood Forest (officer in charge of the forest on behalf of the king). The opening line states that Matilda granted her land ‘in my free power, without a husband’, an indication that widows could act without the approval of a male relative. The document is authenticated with Matilda’s seal, showing her wearing an ankle-length dress.

The British Library, Harley Ch 112 G 53

Property rights

Hebrew *starr* (contract) concerning the sale of a house
Norwich (England), 1280

In this document, a woman named Miriam relinquishes her rights to a house in Mancroft Street, Norwich, which her husband, Oshaya ben Isaac, is selling. The house had been given to Oshaya by Miriam's mother, Yiskah, as part of her marriage settlement. But if the marriage ended, Miriam could claim the house as part of her *ketubah* (marriage contract), a feature of Jewish marriage law that provides financial protection to wives. This document assures the buyer that Miriam will not do this.

The British Library, Lansdowne Ch 667

44%

of daughters mentioned in male Londoners' wills from 1309 to 1468 received some form of real estate, compared with 60% of sons.

Source: Barbara A Hanawalt (2007).

16

was the average age of medieval English princesses at marriage.

Source: Kim M Phillips (2003).

Marriage rights

Decretum Gratiani (Gratian's Decretals)
France, second half of the 13th century

This chapter in an influential textbook on canon law (law of the Church) concerns the breakup of marriages. It rules that a wife cannot be separated from her husband except if he sends her away because she has committed adultery. It also states that a wife is completely subject to her husband's authority. The picture shows a husband and a wife, each accompanied by a lawyer, appealing to a seated judge. Tellingly, the judge turns towards the man and away from the woman.

The British Library, Royal MS 10 D VIII

D-I-V-O-R-C-E

bottom

Welsh Laws of Women
Wales, 1250–90s

According to the Welsh lawcode known as *Llyfr Iorwerth* (The Book of Iorwerth), a woman could leave her husband within seven years of their marriage, while retaining her rights and possessions, on one of three grounds: if he had leprosy; if his breath stank; or if he was unable to have sex. To prove the latter, they were to have sex upon a newly washed white sheet; if the man could not ejaculate on the sheet, his wife was entitled to a separation.

The British Library, Cotton MS Titus D II

Adultery

top

Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston I
England, 8 July 1444

Adultery was considered a serious crime, but women were far more likely to be severely punished for it than men. In this letter, Margaret Paston recounts how John Heydon, one of the Paston family's enemies, treated his wife Eleanor when she bore a child that he claimed was not his. Heydon cast Eleanor out, threatening that he would cut off her nose and kill her child if she returned.

The British Library, Add MS 34889, f. 199

18%

of legal cases in 14th-century York dealt with the dissolution of marriages.

Source: Frederik Pedersen (2003).

Just married

Marriage chest belonging to Elizabetta Gonzaga
Mantua or Urbino (Italy), around 1488

For wealthier women, marriage often involved major financial considerations. There was a tradition in Italy of producing decorated bridal marriage chests (*cassoni*). The chests, containing the bride's possessions, were carried through the streets during the wedding celebrations to show off the wealth of her family. This chest was made for the 1488 wedding of Elizabetta Gonzaga of Mantua (d. 1526) and Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino (d. 1508), whose coats of arms feature in the rich golden decoration.

Victoria and Albert Museum, 47-1882

Where there's a will

Will of Margaret Paston
England, 1482

In late medieval England, women could only make valid wills if they were widowed or unmarried. As a widow, Margaret Paston drew up her will in 1482, two years before she died. She began by requesting burial in the aisle of Mautby Church, next to her ancestors, with her marble tombstone to be inscribed 'Here lieth Margaret Paston, late the wife of John Paston'. Margaret then made bequests to a number of religious houses in Norfolk, to lepers and the poor, to her children, grandchildren and goddaughters, and to her servants.

The British Library, Add Roll 17253

The Paston family

Women of letters
Norfolk, England
15th century

The Pastons were a Norfolk family who climbed the social ladder from peasantry to landed gentry during the 15th century. The extraordinary survival of a cache of around a thousand personal letters sent to and from the family gives unparalleled insight into their everyday lives. Some of the most prolific correspondents were the women of the family, recording joys, sorrows, loves, rivalries, friendships and arguments that span several generations. Yet most of the Paston women could not write, and relied on scribes to write down their messages for them.

Be my Valentine

Letter from Margery Brews to John Paston III
Topcroft, Norfolk (England), February 1477

Written by Margery Brews to her fiancé John Paston III in February 1477, this is the oldest surviving Valentine's Day letter in the English language. While the pair desperately wished to marry, their parents were arguing over the financial settlement. Margery describes John as her 'right well-beloved Valentine' and expresses her unhappiness about the fraught negotiations. Luckily, their families reached an agreement and they married in autumn of that year.

The British Library, Add MS 43490, f. 23
Purchased with the aid of a contribution from the Friends of the National Libraries.

“She made him gentle cheer in gentle wise and said he was verily your son.”

— Agnes Paston

Illicit love affair

top left

Letter from Constance Reynyforth
to John Paston II
Cobham (England), 21 March 1478

Constance Reynyforth, who had a love affair with John Paston II, is known only from this letter. In it, she relays her plan to trick her family into letting her secretly meet with him. She asks him to send one of his servants to collect a forged letter, supposedly from her uncle, summoning her to his household. While Constance's fate is unknown, the illegitimate daughter she had with John, also named Constance, was raised by the Paston family. Margaret Paston bequeathed 10 marks to her in her will.

The British Library, Add MS
27446, f. 10

Finding a husband

bottom left

Letter from Elizabeth Clere to John Paston I
England, 1448

In this letter, family friend Elizabeth Clere writes to John Paston I about possible marriage matches for his sister Elizabeth Paston. She explains how unhappy Elizabeth is living with her mother Agnes: ‘she was never in so great sorrow as she is nowadays’. Apparently, Agnes beats Elizabeth at least once or twice a week, sometimes twice a day, leaving ‘her head broken in two or three places’. She adds that John should burn the letter so that Agnes will not find out what she has written.

The British Library, Add MS 34888, f. 34

“She may not speak with any man without her mother accusing her of behaving badly.”

— Elizabeth Clere

Disowned daughter

Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston II
Norfolk, 1469

Margery Paston was disowned by her family after she secretly married the family's estate manager, Richard Calle. Her mother, Margaret, was horrified that Margery had demeaned the family's status by marrying a servant. In this letter, Margaret recounts how she and her mother-in-law Agnes unsuccessfully attempted to get the marriage invalidated by the Bishop of Norwich. Margaret informs her son John II that she will no longer have Margery in her house, telling him 'remember, that we have lost of her but a brethel [good-for-nothing]'.

The British Library, Add MS 34889, ff. 83v-84

Public Lives

Women's testimonies reveal their diverse contributions to medieval economy, culture and politics. Medieval women carried out important work as labourers, businesswomen and artisans. As authors, they produced popular and influential works including romantic poetry, philosophical and moral prose, stories, history-writing and instructional manuals. Royal and aristocratic women often took on political roles, using their positions to gain power in a male-dominated world.

Work and creativity

The voices of medieval women speak of their success in a wide variety of roles. In addition to doing unpaid household chores, women were employed in agriculture, domestic service and artisan trades as well as contributing to family businesses and running businesses of their own.

Although it was considered normal for women to work during medieval times, they faced unequal pay as well as fewer opportunities and greater obstacles. Work could be fulfilling for women, but it could also be exploitative. Nonetheless, their testimonies reveal how women's productivity shaped medieval society.

Bringing in the harvest

The Luttrell Psalter
Lincolnshire (England), 1325–40

The picture in the lower margins of these pages is one of a series in the manuscript that depict arable farming in rural Lincolnshire, or perhaps an idealised version of it. On this page, three women reap barley with sickles, one of them stretching to relieve her aching back. Behind them, a man gathers the cut sheaves for stacking on the right. The manuscript was made for Sir Geoffrey Luttrell (d. 1345), Lord of Irnham, Lincolnshire, whose wealth was built on the toil of rural labourers like these.

The British Library, Add MS 42130
Purchased with the assistance of the Art Fund.

Art Fund_

Gender pay gap

Farmer's account roll
Stebbing, Essex (England), 1483–84

This unusually detailed account roll from a manor in Stebbing, Essex, paints a striking picture of employment on a large arable farm between 1483 and 1484. Twenty-seven men and sixteen women were hired to bring in the harvest that summer, with a clear gender pay gap in their wages. Male workers received 4 pence per day while female workers earned only 3 pence. Women also generally worked fewer days than men, presumably because they had other domestic duties to juggle.

The British Library,
Add Roll 66051

Names and wages of women labourers from the Stebbing farmer's account roll

Alson Pyknot, 9 days, 27 pence
Cateryn Clarke, 1 day and a half, 4½ pence
Cateryn Lytyll, 1 day, 3 pence
Clemens Gedyng (or Redyng), 4 days, 12 pence
Hanne Reynold, 3 days, 9 pence
Hanne Whever, 2 days, 6 pence
Helyn Boknam, 3 days, 9 pence
John Hasteler ys wyfe, 1 day, 3 pence
John Mechyll ys wyfe, 1 day, 3 pence
John Rede ys wyfe, 6 days and a half, 19½ pence
Jone Whever, 3 days, 9 pence
Laurens ys wyfe, 14 days and a half, 43½ pence
Marget Pers, 3 days, 9 pence
Maryown Torkys, 4 days, 12 pence
Mayn Boys, 12 days and a half, 37½ pence
Rychard Boknam ys wyfe, 1 day, 3 pence

Producing food

Régime du corps (Regimen of the Body)
France, 1450–1500

In every medieval household, women – especially lower class and servant women – were closely involved with producing and preparing food. In a lengthy section about the health benefits of different foodstuffs, this healthcare manual includes illustrations of women engaged in food preparation. The woman on the left-hand page is preparing rice, and the one on the right is preparing bran.

The British Library, Sloane MS 2401

Moneylender and murder victim

Close Roll recording a debt owed to Licoricia of Winchester
England, 1234

This is the earliest documented reference to Licoricia of Winchester, perhaps the most successful Jewish businesswoman in medieval England. She is first recorded lending money in 1234, as a widow, and in time she became one of King Henry III's chief financiers. In 1277, Licoricia was murdered at her home in Winchester, along with Alice of Bickton, her Christian maidservant. It was almost certainly an antisemitic crime, but no one was ever convicted, despite her sons having identified the assailants.

On loan from The National Archives, UK, C 54/46

Silk working

Woven silk with geometric design
Spain, around 1400

In al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), a flourishing silk industry created luxury textiles that were highly sought after throughout Europe. The skilled work of cultivating, processing and spinning silk in al-Andalus was probably carried out largely by women. The 12th-century geographer al-Zuhri noted that it was the women's fine spinning that gave Andalusi silk its high price. This classic design bears the calligraphic Arabic inscription 'Glory to our Lord the Sultan', alternating with floral and interlace knot-work designs.

The Whitworth, The University of Manchester, WAG T.13792

26%

of women employees in Paris around 1300 worked in the production of silk.

Source: Sharon Farmer (2017).

Slavery

Certificate of sale for an enslaved Russian woman
Venice (Italy), 7 February 1450

This document may look insignificant, but it is the only surviving mention of Marta, an enslaved Russian woman. On 7 February 1450, Marta was sold in Venice to Angelo Gadi, a merchant from Florence, for 36 gold ducats (roughly £10,000). In the certificate, Marta is described as around 22 years old, healthy in mind and body, and free from epilepsy. It is noted that she might previously have been pregnant, a significant detail because female slaves were often expected to provide sexual services to their masters.

The British Library, Add Ch 15340

82%

of slave contracts drawn up in Venice between 1360 and 1499 were for women, whose average age was 22.5.

Source: Sally McKee (2008).

Women of the brothel

Ordinances for English soldiers during the Hundred Years' War
England, mid-15th century

There was a fine line between lawful and illicit sex work in medieval Europe. Outside of authorised brothels, sex workers could face considerable stigma. The final clause of these rules for English soldiers campaigning in France in the 1420s states that, while the soldiers can visit brothels, they are forbidden from bringing sex workers back to their lodgings. If any man finds a 'common woman' staying in the camp he should confiscate her money, 'take a staff and drive her out' and 'break her arm'.

The British Library,
Lansdowne MS 285

Sex worker

The questioning of Eleanor Rykener
London (England), 1395

Eleanor Rykener, a sex worker, was born John Rykener but lived and presented as a woman. She was brought for questioning before the mayor's court in London after being arrested for committing 'that detestable, unmentionable, and ignominious vice' (probably meaning sodomy). In the court proceedings, displayed here, she describes her precarious existence at the margins of society, not only engaging in sex work but also odd-jobbing as an embroideress and a barmaid.

The London Archives, City of London Corporation, Plea and Memoranda Roll A34

At least

18%

of working women in 14th-century Exeter were engaged in more than one occupation. All recorded female brothel proprietors also worked in other professions, such as brewing or embroidery.

Source: Maryanne Kowaleski (1986).

Alice Claver

Silkwoman
London, England
d. 1489

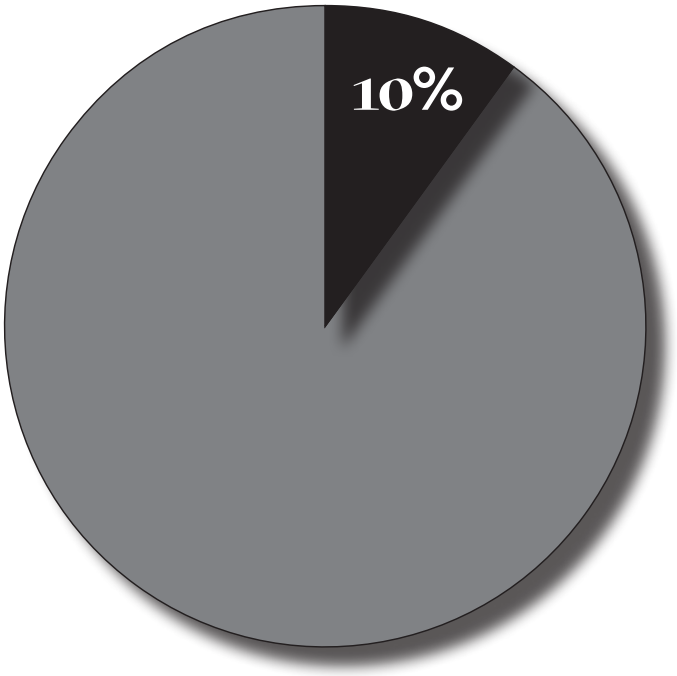
In medieval Europe, silkwork was an industry sustained chiefly by women. As a successful silkwoman, Alice ran a business handcrafting and selling intricate silk items. She probably began her career as an apprentice in her early teens, before marrying Richard Claver, a wealthy mercer (cloth merchant). After Richard died in 1456, Alice chose not to remarry and continued her business throughout thirty years of widowhood. She was probably one of the London silkwomen who petitioned Parliament four times between 1455 and 1484 seeking economic protection for their profession. Parliament granted most of their requests.

Silkwoman to the king

Wardrobe accounts of Edward IV,
April–September 1480
England, 1480

This account of the finery purchased by King Edward IV of England records numerous payments to Alice Claver for gorgeous handcrafted items made of silk. On these pages, seven out of nine payments are to Alice for items including sewing silk, silk-covered buttons, ribbons, mantle laces, fringes of gold, yellow, green, red, white and blue, a red garter richly wrought with silk and gold, and laces and tassels for garnishing the king's books.

The British Library,
Harley MS 4780



About 10% of apprentices in medieval London were girls.

Source: Stephanie R Hovland (2008).

Hebrew scribe

Isaiah di Trani the Elder,
Sefer ha-Makria' (Book of the Reader)
Rome (Italy), 1293

Pola of Rome, a professional Hebrew scribe from an eminent family of scribes and scholars, copied this impressive manuscript of discourses on Jewish law. The three surviving manuscripts of her work demonstrate her high level of scribal training and excellent command of Hebrew. Displayed here, Pola's colophon (scribe's statement) at the end of the manuscript explains that she wrote the book at the request of a relative, Menahem ben Benjamin, and gives thanks to God for guiding her in the work.

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford,
MS. Canonici Or. 89

‘Menahem b R Benjamin the righteous, my relative, came to me, persuaded me, compelled me and urged me to write for him this holy book.’

— Pola of Rome

Translated by Michael Riegler and Judith R Baskin (2008)

Criminal notary

Seal of Juliet D rer of Lübeck, criminal notary
Germany, 1480

This bronze seal matrix, made around 1480, enabled Juliet D rer of the city of Lübeck (in modern-day Germany) to witness legal agreements. It names her as a criminal notary, someone who was authorised to oversee the signing of documents. The design contains a coat of arms with an angel above, and with Juliet's name inscribed around the border. By using the seal to add a wax impression to each document, Juliet would confirm the transaction's legitimacy.

The British Museum, 1900,0618.7

Illuminator and bookseller

Marco Polo, *Le devisement du monde*
(The Description of the World)
Paris (France), around 1333–40

A prolific illuminator (book illustrator and painter) and businesswoman, Jeanne Montbaston ran a commercial manuscript-making workshop in 14th-century Paris. Her name only appears in the records after her husband's death in 1353, when she took over running the business. Jeanne illuminated this copy of Marco Polo's account of his travels to Asia and Africa, probably as a commission for the king and queen of France. In the opening miniature, displayed here, she depicted the Polo brothers setting out on their expedition.

The British Library, Royal MS 19 D I

The first woman printer

Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi, *Behinat ha-'Olam* (The Contemplation of the World)
Mantua (Italy), around 1476

This is the first known book in Europe printed by a woman under her own name. Its printer, Estellina Conat, is also the first known female printer of Hebrew texts. She worked in a family workshop in Mantua (northern Italy). The book contains a philosophical poem written after the expulsion of Jews from France in 1306. Displayed on this page, the colophon (printer's statement) declares: 'I, Estellina, the wife of my worthy husband Abraham Conat, printed this book'.

The British Library, C.50.a.5.

Early woman printer

Eike von Repgow, *Sachsenspiegel*
Augsburg (Germany), 1484

Women's contributions to early European printing were usually not recorded since most worked anonymously in family workshops. Anna R gerin is often incorrectly described as the first woman in Europe to print under her own name. She took over her husband's printing business after his death, apparently working in partnership with her brother who was also a printer. At the end of this compendium of German customary law she announces: 'printed and completed by Anna R gerin'.

The British Library, IB.6602.

Women writers

The vast majority of named medieval authors were men. It was less common for women to receive a high enough level of education or to have the financial means to support themselves as authors. Nevertheless, the small number of women who did make a name for themselves as authors are some of the most striking voices of the Middle Ages.

Marie is my name

Marie de France, *Fables* and *Lais*
Possibly Oxford (England), 1250s–70s

Marie de France (active 1180s) wrote stories of magic, romance and chivalry. She is one of the first recorded female authors in Europe, yet her identity is a mystery. At the end of her *Fables*, displayed here at the lower right, she states: *Marie ai nun, si sui de France* ('Marie is my name and I am from France'). She may, however, have been writing in England. This manuscript is one of the earliest surviving copies of her works and the most complete.

The British Library, Harley MS 978

Listen

Comtessa de Dia, ‘A chantar m’er de so qu’eu no volria’ (I must sing of what I’d rather not)
Southern France, late-12th century

In southern France from the 11th to the 13th centuries, musicians and poets known as troubadours composed songs in Occitan (a language spoken in southern France) about chivalry and romance. This is the only song by a *trobairitz* (female troubadour) for which both the music and the lyrics survive. Written by an author known only as Comtessa de Dia (Countess of Die), the song is a heartfelt lament after her lover left her.

Music of Medieval Love. Early Music New York. exCathedra Records USA. Directed by Frederic Renz.

‘I must sing of what I’d rather not,

I’m so angry about him whose friend I am,

For I love him more than anything.’

— Comtessa de Dia

Translated by Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, Laurie Shepard, and Sarah Melhado White (1995)

Up to 14% of named medieval
troubadours were women.
Female troubadours are called *trobairitz*.

Source: William D Paden (2006).

Princess and historian

Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*
Augsburg (Germany), 1610

Anna Komnene (1083–1153) is renowned for writing the *Alexiad*, a history of the reign of her father, the Byzantine emperor Alexios I Komnenos. In the work, she expresses strong opinions, such as her distaste for the Crusaders, and depicts strong women. Anna wrote the *Alexiad* from a nunnery, where she was exiled after trying to depose her brother. Composed in Greek, the history draws upon her Classical education. This is the first edition of the *Alexiad* to be published in print, over 460 years after Anna wrote it.

The British Library,
1053.c.6.

‘I desire now to give an account of my father’s deeds, which do not deserve to be consigned to forgetfulness nor to be swept away on the flood of time.’

— Anna Komnene

Translated by E R A Sewter (1969)

A guide to hunting

Boke of Saint Albans, a compilation of texts on hawking, hunting and heraldry
Westminster (England), 1496

This verse treatise on hunting, 'Bestys of Venery' (animals for hunting), is written in the first-person from a woman to a child. It ends by recording her name as 'dame Julyans Barnes'. No one has managed to identify this woman, and some have doubted whether she was a real author. Yet medieval women are often invisible in the historical record, and would anyone have doubted the attribution if it were to a man?

The British Library, C.11.b.5.

Listen

Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya,
‘Response to Abu Ja’far’

In the original Arabic, and translated by
Yasmine Seale (2024)

Passionate exchange

Ibn al-Khatīb, *al-Ihātah bi-mā tayassar min ta'rīkh gharnāta* (The Complete Source on the History of Granada)
Possibly Egypt, 1878–89

In al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), Muslim women from elite families were celebrated for their literary skills. One of the most famous was Hafsa bint al-Hajj al-Rukuniyya, a 12th-century poet from Granada. This later manuscript contains a poetic exchange between Hafsa and her lover Abu Ja'far, composed after a night they spent together in a garden. Abu Ja'far's poem describes the whole garden made happy by their lovemaking. Hafsa's response, puncturing this sentimental view, exemplifies the sharp, ironic, even anti-romantic strain often found in Andalusi women's poetry.

The British Library, Or 3023

“Believe me, love —
the garden took no joy
in what we did together
there.
Hostility is rather
what it showed us.
Envy too.

The river was not clapping
with delight at our being
so close, nor was the turtledove
cooing for anything

but its own love.
Enough with pretty thoughts,
although they suit you well.
They are not always wise.

I hardly think the sky
displayed its stars
for any reason but
to be our spies.”

— Hafsa bint al-Hajj

Translated by Yasmine Seale (2024)

Christine de Pizan

First professional woman author in Europe
Paris, France
b. 1364, d. around 1430

Born in Italy, Christine moved to Paris as a young child when her father accepted a position as court astrologer to Charles V of France. After the death of her husband in 1389, Christine had to find a way to support herself and her two young children. She turned to writing, becoming a prolific author and attracting patronage from the French royal family and aristocracy. Known as the first professional woman author in Europe, Christine often commented on the politics of her time and defended the moral and intellectual character of women.

First professional woman author in Europe

Christine de Pizan, ‘The Book of the Queen’
Paris, 1410–around 1414

As well as authoring texts, Christine also personally supervised the creation of richly decorated manuscripts of her works for presentation to her noble patrons. This, the largest and most splendid example, is a collection of around thirty of her works made for Isabeau of Bavaria (d. 1435), Queen of France. The frontispiece shows Christine presenting the book to the queen in her chamber, surrounded by ladies-in-waiting.

The British Library, Harley MS 4431/1

Inspired by Minerva

Christine de Pisan, *Le livre des faits d'armes et de chevalerie*
(The Book of Deeds of Arms and of Chivalry)
London (England), 1434

Christine's works were popular among educated audiences throughout medieval Europe, including England where this manuscript was made. Christine set her pen to a wide range of topics including those traditionally regarded as masculine, in this case warfare and chivalry. In the prologue to the book, Christine explains why she, a woman, feels justified in writing about warfare by reference to Minerva, the Roman goddess of war. The frontispiece shows Christine writing her book, inspired by Minerva.

The British Library, Harley MS 4605

Power and politics

Women played an active role in shaping the political issues of their day. Medieval queens and aristocratic women could wield power through their dynastic status and connections, while women lower down the social scale engaged with politics through protest and discourse.

Women in power often had to negotiate many complex demands. Some shocked their contemporaries by overstepping the expectations of feminine conduct, while others found acclaim by exercising power through acceptable channels such as patronage. In a political culture dominated by men, women found various ways to claim agency for themselves.

Protest

Medieval women were active and vocal in standing up for their rights. They were major participants in popular uprisings that took place across Europe, such as the Peasants' Revolt in England (1381). Individually, women defended their rights within the legal system and occasionally as authors of political writings.

Speaking up for her rights

Nicolosa Sanuti, *De ornatu mulierum*
(On the Ornament of Women)
Bologna, 1453

When the Church in Bologna imposed laws restricting what women (but not men) could wear, noblewoman Nicolosa Sanuti (d. 1505) wrote this treatise in protest. She argues that through their many contributions to society, women have earned the right to wear what they want. Although unsuccessful at getting the law repealed, Nicolosa's book gained admiration in intellectual circles. This beautiful copy was probably made for Nicolosa's lover, the ruler of Bologna, Sante Bentivoglio (d. 1462), whose coat of arms is at the bottom of the page.

The British Library,
Sloane MS 2377

“It is unjust for women to be denied the rights accorded to their husbands.”

— Nicolosa Sanuti

Translated by Catherine Kovesi (1999)

Speaking for her freedom

Maria Moriana, Petition to the Mayor and Sheriff of London
London (England), probably 1486–96

The rarest medieval women's voices to survive are those of the most marginalised and powerless. Maria Moriana (whose name is derived from the word 'Moor') was an immigrant and probably a woman of colour. Her petition records the resolute words of a woman deprived of her freedom. Imprisoned by her master after refusing to be sold, she presents herself as 'your oratrice' (female orator), describing her master's behaviour as 'unlawful' and 'contrary to all right and conscience'. We do not know what became of Maria.

On loan from The National Archives, UK, C 1/148/67

“The said Phillip offered to sell your said oratrice for the sum of twenty pounds and your said oratrice would in no wise agree to the said sale.”

— Maria Moriana

Speaking words of dissent

Account of the Peasants' Revolt in Cambridge England, early-16th century

In the summer of 1381, angry people across England protested against high taxation and other injustices in a major uprising known as the Peasants' Revolt. In Cambridge, the unrest was particularly motivated by people's resentment of the University, whose many privileges threatened their livelihoods. This account tells how rioters burned University documents in the marketplace. It culminates with an old woman named Margaret Starre scattering the ashes of the documents in the air, crying, 'Away with the learning of clerks! Away with it!'

The British Library, Arundel MS 350

‘Away with the learning of clerks! Away with it!’

— Margaret Starre

30

women's names are listed in the King's pardons for participants in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt.

Source: Sylvia Federico (2001).

The ideal queen

Most queens gained their status by marrying a king, and their success was dependent on bearing him an heir. They were expected to be models of virtuous behaviour, weaving peace between kingdoms and making requests to their husbands on behalf of their subjects. In practice, many queens were judged harshly by contemporaries and later historians for failing to live up to this limiting ideal.

Building her house

Miroir des dames (Mirror of Ladies)
France, 1428

This treatise on queenship was originally written in Latin for Jeanne I, queen of Navarre (d. 1305), by her confessor, Durand de Champagne, who are both depicted on the right-hand page. Drawing on the scriptural verse ‘A wise woman buildeth her house’ (Proverbs 14:1), the text describes how a queen must metaphorically fortify her exterior house (the kingdom), and decorate her interior house (her conscience). On the left-hand page is the coat of arms of Henry VII of England, who perhaps used this copy for the education of his daughters.

The British Library, Royal MS 19 B XVI

Making a queen

Coronation Book of King Charles V of France
Paris (France), 1365

On 19 May 1364, Charles V (d. 1380) and his wife Jeanne de Bourbon (d. 1378) were crowned king and queen of France at the Cathedral of Reims. Charles commissioned this illustrated account to commemorate the event. On these pages, Jeanne's coronation culminates with the archbishop placing the crown on her head. He then prays that, following the examples of Old Testament female role models, she will be fruitful like Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, strong like Judith, and a good intercessor for her people like Esther.

The British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius B VIII

Women rulers

Across Europe, royal houses favoured male heirs in their rules of succession. Yet occasionally when there was no close male heir, women became rulers in their own right. Often female rulers faced challenges to their rule from those who were unwilling to accept women in positions of power.

Born to rule

Genealogy of Joanna I of Naples
Italy, mid-14th century

Joanna I (d. 1382) inherited the kingdom of Naples from her grandfather. Throughout her 39-year reign, she continually had to defend her throne against male relatives who sought to take it from her. This illuminated genealogy, made for Joanna or one of her close followers, emphasises her innate right to rule. It begins with classical gods and mythological heroes, followed by a sequence of popes and kings, concluding with Joanna depicted in a large roundel, seated on a throne and wearing a blue robe and a gold crown.

The British Library, Add
MS 57529

Lady of the English

Foundation charter of Bordesley Abbey by Empress Matilda
Devizes, Wiltshire (England), 1141–42

Matilda almost became the first ruling queen of England. After her father, King Henry I, died and her cousin Stephen seized the throne, Matilda opposed Stephen in a civil war. For a brief period in the 1140s, while King Stephen was in prison, Matilda in effect ruled England in her own right. In this document Matilda is styled ‘empress’ and ‘lady of the English’. Its seal depicts her crowned and holding a sceptre, and the silk seal bag may have been fashioned from one of her dresses.

The British Library, Add Ch 75724
Purchased with the aid of a contribution from the Friends of the National Libraries.

Trade negotiations

Instructions by Margaret III, Countess of Flanders, for trade negotiations with England
Arras (France), 19 December 1404

Margaret III, Countess of Flanders in her own right and Duchess of Burgundy by marriage, was a female ruler who conducted diplomatic negotiations with another state, and on her own terms. In 1404, after her husband's death, she sent messengers to Calais to make a treaty of commerce between Flanders and England. This is Margaret's set of instructions to her messengers, describing which privileges they should seek and when to consult further with her. Margaret's seal is affixed below the text.

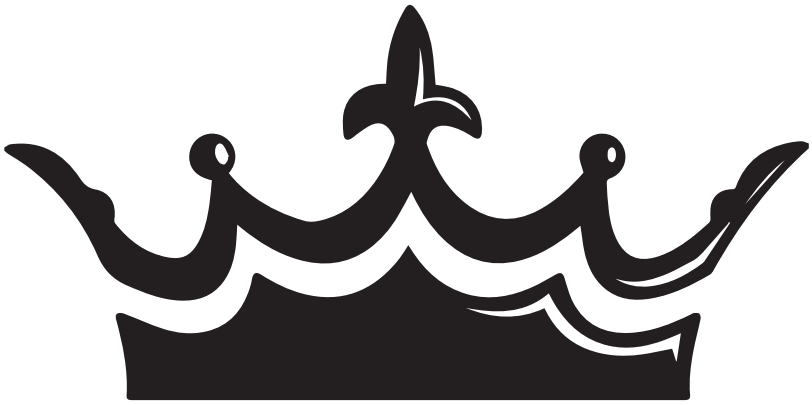
The British Library, Add Ch 62467

Child bride

Letter of William Fraser, bishop of St Andrews, to King Edward I
Scotland, 7 October 1290

In 1290, a seven-year-old girl set sail from Norway, her homeland, to Scotland. Margaret, Maid of Norway, had inherited the title Queen of Scots when her grandfather died in 1286. She was supposed to marry Prince Edward of England (the future Edward II), uniting the two kingdoms. But Margaret never arrived. On 7 October, the Bishop of St Andrews informed King Edward I that Margaret had died *en route*, perhaps in Orkney; she never set foot on the Scottish mainland.

On loan from The National Archives, UK, SC 1/20/68



In Europe between 1100 and 1600 there were twenty reigning queens whose rights depended on birth rather than marriage.

Source: Armin Wolf (1993).

Isabella of France, Queen of England

Queen consort, political rebel and ruler
France/England
b. 1295, d. 1358

Married at the age of 12, for many years Isabella was a loyal wife to Edward II of England. But Edward's mistreatment of Isabella eventually led to alienation. She took issue with how he showered his favourite and possible lover, Hugh Despenser, with titles, land, influence and lavish gifts at the expense of herself and the country. Together with her lover, Roger Mortimer, Isabella led a successful invasion of England in September 1326. They deposed Edward, and installed Isabella's son, the 14-year-old prince, as the new king, Edward III.

Matchmaker

Marriage contract of Prince Edward and Philippa of Hainault
Mons (Belgium), 27 August 1326

In summer 1326, Isabella of France negotiated this royal marriage contract with the Count of Hainault, betrothing her son, Prince Edward, to the Count's daughter Philippa. The two youngsters had taken a shine to one another while Isabella and Edward stayed at the Count's court. This alliance with Hainault provided Isabella with the money, troops and ships that she needed to invade England and install her son on the throne. On 27 September, she set sail with her army from Dordrecht (in the Netherlands) to England.

The British Library, Add Ch 77738

Invader

Jean de Wavrin, *Recueil des croniques et anciennes istoires de la Grant Bretaigne* (collection of chronicles and ancient histories of Great Britain) Bruges (Belgium), 1471–83

This chronicle recounts the events of Isabella of France's invasion of England in 1326. It is illustrated with an imagined view of the scene, showing Isabella crowned, dressed in armour and holding a mace at the head of her army, although it is unlikely that she actually donned armour or did any fighting. In the background, Hugh Despenser, favourite and possible lover of her estranged husband Edward II, is shown being hanged, drawn and quartered.

The British Library, Royal MS 15 E IV

Political satire

Satirical and propagandist badges depicting Isabella of France
London (England), around 1327

From 1326–30, the young Edward III was a puppet king while his mother Isabella and her lover Mortimer governed in his name. Isabella was not a popular ruler. These satirical badges insinuate that she was an over-bearing mother and driven by lust. One shows the queen threatening Edward with a stick while he pleads for mercy. The other shows Isabella steering a boat in which the helm is a phallus. She also has a crowned phallus, perhaps symbolising Mortimer, perched on her arm.

The British Museum,
1856,0701.2096 and WITT.269

The Queen's own image

Seal impression of Isabella of France
England, 1308–1358

This rare original seal impression would once have been attached to a document that Isabella issued. In contrast to the satirical badges, this shows how Isabella wanted to be seen by the world. Her crown, sceptre and ermine-lined cloak are emblems of royalty and majesty, the coats of arms of England and France represent her distinguished marriage and ancestry, while the pose with her hand on her breast denotes sincerity and humility.

The British Library, Seal XXXVI 1

Margaret of Anjou, Queen of England

Queen consort and leader in the Wars of the Roses
France/England
b. 1430, d. 1482

The marriage of French princess Margaret of Anjou to Henry VI of England in 1445 was supposed to bring peace to both realms. Yet Margaret's time as Queen of England was anything but peaceful. Henry's poor leadership skills and unstable mental health plunged the kingdom into a bloody civil conflict, the Wars of the Roses. The opposing sides were the Yorkists, led by Richard, Duke of York, and the Lancastrians, represented by Henry. In the face of Henry's inaction, Margaret led the Lancastrian side in the conflict in an attempt to secure the throne for her young son.

A wedding present fit for a queen

‘The Talbot Shrewsbury Book’
Rouen (France), around 1444–45

During 1444 to 1445, Margaret of Anjou was escorted from France to England in great splendour for her marriage to Henry VI. She received this sumptuous collection of romances and chivalric treatises as a wedding gift from John Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury and one of Henry’s senior commanders in France. The opening miniature shows Talbot presenting the book to Margaret who sits enthroned with Henry.

The British Library, Royal MS 15 E VI

Margaret’s lion

Barbary lion skull
London (England), 1420–80

An account book recording expenses for Margaret of Anjou’s lavish journey to England to marry Henry VI in 1444 to 45 includes payments for the upkeep of a lion. It specifies that the lion would travel to England with Margaret and be kept in the Tower of London. This skull of a Barbary lion was discovered in the moat of the Tower in the 1930s and has been carbon-dated to the period 1420 to 1480. Could this be Margaret’s lion?

Item on loan courtesy of the Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London, NHMUK ZE 1952.10.20.16

Queen on the run

A Selection of items from the Fishpool Hoard
Deposited Ravenshead, Nottinghamshire (England), 1464

Consisting of 1,237 coins and nine pieces of jewellery, the Fishpool Hoard is the largest hoard of medieval gold coins ever discovered in Britain. It contains 223 newly minted coins from Scotland, France and Burgundy, all allies of the Lancastrians during the Wars of the Roses. Margaret of Anjou had visited each of these courts in 1461 to 1463 seeking support for the Lancastrian cause. The hoard may therefore represent Margaret's fundraising efforts in this period.

The British Museum,
1856,0701.2096 and WITT.269

Social climber

St Albans benefactors' book
England, begun 1380 with additions until the 16th century

Depicted here are Eleanor Cobham and her husband, Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, on the occasion of their admission into the confraternity (a religious and charitable association) of St Albans Abbey on 25 June 1431. Eleanor rose from a position in the lower gentry to become one of the most powerful women in England as Humfrey's mistress and then wife. Humfrey was the uncle and heir of Henry VI of England, meaning that he and Eleanor could have become king and queen if Henry died young.

The British Library, Cotton MS Nero D VII

Fall from grace

Horoscope of Henry VI
England, 15th century

Eleanor fell victim to court politics when she was accused of witchcraft in 1441. She was arrested for allegedly conspiring with two male astrologers and a folk healer, Margery Jourdemayne, the ‘Witch of Eye’, to make horoscopes predicting the king’s early death. All were found guilty: Eleanor was imprisoned for life and the others executed. An alternative horoscope displayed here (on the right-hand page) contradicts the one produced for Eleanor, apparently predicting a more favourable outcome for Henry.

The British Library, Egerton MS 889

Living in style

The Foundress' Cup
England, 15th century

Eleanor and Humfrey shared a love of high living, culture and learning. This silver-gilt cup, one of the finest surviving examples of 15th-century English metalwork, has their joint coat of arms enamelled inside. This suggests that it was originally made for them, providing a glimpse of the splendour of their life together. The cup was later bequeathed to Christ's College, Cambridge, by Lady Margaret Beaufort in 1507.

Women and the Crusades

Beginning in 1096 and lasting for several centuries, Christians from Western Europe launched a series of military expeditions to the Eastern Mediterranean and elsewhere. Known as the Crusades, their aim was to expand Christendom and recover Jerusalem from Muslim rule. The First Crusade (1096–99) ended with the creation of four western-ruled states in conquered territories in the region. Women were involved at every level of crusading, as crusaders and their opponents as well as ordinary people whose lives were affected.

Public Lives

Crusader Queen

The Psalter of Queen Melisende of Jerusalem
Jerusalem, 1131–43

From 1131 to 1143, the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem was ruled by Melisende, a powerful and respected queen. The daughter of an Armenian mother and a French father, Melisende supported both Eastern and Western Christian institutions. This blend of traditions is reflected in her personal Psalter (book of psalms). While the text is in Latin (the language of the Western Church), the illustrations, by an artist named Basilius, are in an Eastern Christian style and feature Greek inscriptions.

The British Library, Egerton MS 1139

Bound in style

Carved ivory plaques from the Melisende Psalter
Possibly 12th century, Jerusalem or Northern Europe

These ivories were once attached to the covers of the Melisende Psalter. It is uncertain, however, whether or not they were original to the manuscript when Melisende owned it. Both ivories represent ideals of kingship: the back cover represents a king performing acts of mercy, while the front cover depicts scenes of King David surrounded by virtues battling with vices. One of the central panels shows the virtue Humility as a crowned woman triumphing over Pride, perhaps alluding to Melisende herself.

The British Library, Egerton MS 1139/1

Settling in the Holy Land

Cross of Sibylle of Flanders
Meuse Valley, 12th century

At the base of this intricately carved cross, made of walrus ivory, is a prostrate female figure, raising her hands to the crucified Christ. The inscription names her ‘Sibille’, identifiable as the countess of Flanders, who acted as regent while her husband was on crusade in the 1140s. After visiting Jerusalem in the 1150s, Sibylle refused to return home with her husband, instead entering a convent just outside the city. The cross itself formed part of the cover of a gospel book.

Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Objets d’art, OA 2593

Sultana of Egypt

Ibn Wasīf, Kitāb jawāhir al-buhūr wa-waqāʿī al-umūr
(Book of the Pearls of the Sea and the Chronicle of Affairs)
Possibly Egypt, 1658–59

Shajar al-Durr (d. 1257) rose from enslavement to become the first Sultana (female sultan) of Egypt and Syria. She took control when her husband, Sultan Al-Sālih Ayyūb, died shortly after the crusader army of Louis IX of France invaded Egypt in 1249. Her decisive actions allowed her armies to defeat the crusaders. This later history recounts Shajar al-Durr's remarkable story, including her Turkic origins, how she came to Egypt and her role in the Crusades. Her name is written in red on this page.

The British Library, Add MS 25731

Making money

Gold dinar of Shajar al-Durr
Cairo (Egypt), 1250

Although Shajar al-Durr ruled for only a short period, she still found time to assert her status through minting coins in her name. In Islamic lands, minting coins was the exclusive right of the sultan or caliph and a public expression of their power. In this rare surviving coin of Shajar al-Durr, the inscription establishes her role as wife and mother to males of the royal dynasty, and glorifies her in uniquely female terms as 'queen of the Muslims' (*malikat al-muslimīn*).

The British Museum, 1849,1121.294

End of an era

The conquest of Tripoli, from the Cocharelli Codex
Genoa (Italy), 14th century

By the end of the 13th century, the crusaders were rapidly losing ground. In 1289, the crusader County of Tripoli (Lebanon) was conquered by Qalawun, Sultan of Egypt. This image of the Fall of Tripoli shows its last western ruler, Lucia, Countess of Tripoli, with Bartholomew, Bishop of Tortosa, sitting in the centre of the fortified city with the battle raging all around.

The British Library, Add MS 27695

Black Agnes and the siege of Dunbar

Andrew Wyntoun, *Orygynale Cronykil*
Scotland, 15th century

In 1338, the English besieged Dunbar Castle in Scotland. In her husband's absence, the defence was led by a countess known as 'Black Agnes', perhaps owing to her fierce reputation or dark complexion. According to the poet Andrew Wyntoun, during breaks in the fighting Agnes would send her women to sweep the battlements mockingly. The siege was unsuccessful, the English commander bemoaning, 'Come I early, come I late/I find Agnes at the gate.'

The British Library, Royal MS 17 D XX

Holding the fort

Letter from Margaret Paston to John Paston
Gresham, Norfolk (England), 1448

‘Send me crossbows, arrows, poleaxes and armour for the servants.’ So wrote Margaret Paston in haste to her husband in 1448, after their manor house at Gresham (Norfolk) had been seized by enemies who wanted their land. John Paston was in London, fighting to recover their house in court, while Margaret was in Norfolk asserting their claim on the ground. In the letter, Margaret then turns to more domestic matters, asking John for a pound each of almonds and sugar, and cloth to make gowns for the children and a hood for herself.

The British Library, Add MS 34888, f. 29

Patronage

Royal women were major cultural patrons, meaning that they provided financial support for art, architecture, literature, learning, religion and professions. Since patronage was considered virtuous, it was an uncontroversial way for elite women to exert influence in society.

Patronage of science

John Somer, *Kalendarium*
England, around 1463

Although women were generally excluded from scientific education, they still contributed to science through their patronage. Joan of Kent (d. 1385), Princess of Wales, commissioned astronomer John Somer (d. around 1409) to create this almanac. A sophisticated work of astronomy, it provides accurate predictions of the movements of the sun and moon over the skies of England. The pages on display in this luxurious later copy show diagrams of solar and lunar eclipses together with their precise times of occurrence between 1411 and 1462.

The British Library, Royal MS 2 B VIII

Patronage of professions

Book of the Fraternity of the Assumption of Our Lady
London (England), 1475

This image of Elizabeth Woodville, Queen of England as the wife of Edward IV, marks her admission to the confraternity (a religious and charitable association) of the London Skinners (traders in animal furs). By honouring her in this way, the Skinners were perhaps hoping to cultivate Elizabeth as a potential mediator on their behalf. In 1479, Elizabeth interceded with the king on behalf of the London Mercers (cloth merchants) over subsidy payments they owed, and eventually thanks to 'the queen's good grace' Edward eased his demands.

The London Archives, City of London Corporation, Worshipful Company of Skinners collection, CLC/L/SE/A/004A/MS31692

Patronage of universities

Indenture of Lady Margaret Beaufort
London (England), 1505

Lady Margaret Beaufort founded two Cambridge colleges, Christ's (1505) and through her estate St John's (1511). She also provided funds to establish a readership in Divinity in her name, which continues to this day, as well as an equivalent post in Oxford. The indenture's richly decorated opening page includes Margaret's coat of arms, marguerite flowers (referring to her name), red roses (the heraldic badge of Lancaster) and portcullises (the heraldic badge of the Beaufort family).

The British Library, Lansdowne MS 441

Matriarch of the Tudors

Portrait of Lady Margaret Beaufort
England, 16th century

Lady Margaret Beaufort (d. 1509) was an astute politician, a patron of culture, and matriarch of the Tudor dynasty. She gave birth to her only child, the future King Henry VII of England, aged just 13; she may have had no more children owing to complications arising from a difficult pregnancy or labour. In this portrait, Margaret wears a widow's garb and holds a prayer book in her hands, an indication of her piety and learning.

The Master and Fellows of Christ's College, Cambridge

Queen mother

Charter of Eleanor of Aquitaine
Fontevraud Abbey (France), 1199

Eleanor (d. 1204) was Duchess of Aquitaine in her own right, and queen consort of both Louis VII of France and Henry II of England. She spent her long life working to advance the interests of her dynasty, which included two sons who became kings of England and five daughters who married into major royal houses across Europe. In this charter, she makes a gift to Fontevraud Abbey, where she had retired in her seventies and was buried upon her death, aged 80.

The British Library, Add Ch 54007

Spiritual Lives

Surviving accounts show that religion could be a significant source of power for medieval women. Some women dedicated their lives to God by joining a convent and becoming nuns, while others led a religious life in society. Although they were excluded from becoming priests, a number of women became renowned as influential religious leaders. Their words speak of the intensity of their devotion, their sophisticated spirituality, the skilful management of their convents, and the richness of female religious culture.

Visionaries and heretics

Some medieval women drew strength from their spiritual connection with God, and gained great fame and influence as religious authorities. Many of these women had extraordinary spiritual visions, which moved them to devote their lives to religion. They wrote or dictated accounts of their visionary experiences and the mystical knowledge they gained, many of which survive today.

Yet religious views that threatened the status quo risked a charge of heresy, the consequences of which could be dire. Religious authorities might claim that women's visions were sent not by God but by the devil. Women who attracted attention for their spiritual life walked a fine line between sainthood and condemnation.

The quantity of a hazelnut

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Short Text)
England, mid-15th century

The *Revelations of Divine* Love by Julian of Norwich (d. around 1416) is the first work in English definitely authored by a woman. In the text, Julian recounts a series of 16 extraordinary visions that she experienced during a bout of serious illness in 1373. This is the only surviving copy of her first version (the 'Short Text'), created soon after she recovered from the illness. In the page on display, Julian sees the whole of creation as a hazelnut-sized ball resting in her hand, prompting her to realise the profundity of God's love.

The British Library, Add MS 37790

‘He showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut in the palm of my hand, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought, “What may this be?”’

— Julian of Norwich

Revising her work

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (Long Text)
Possibly Cambrai (France), around 1675

Sometime after her illness, Julian became an anchoress — a woman who voluntarily lives enclosed in a cell to devote herself to God. She spent her time alone meditating on the meaning of her spiritual visions. Many years later she composed a second version of her *Revelations* (the 'Long Text'), which explains the theological meanings of the visions in much greater detail. This version survives only in 17th-century copies made by exiled English nuns in Paris and Cambrai.

The British Library, Stowe MS 42

Speaking truth to power

Letters of St Catherine of Siena
Florence (Italy), 15th century

The Italian visionary Catherine of Siena (d. 1380) was one of the most influential figures of 14th-century Europe. Although she died aged just 33, nearly 400 of her letters survive, offering friendship, guidance and sometimes fiery condemnation to many of the leading figures of her time. In this astonishingly forthright letter from June 1376, surviving in a 15th-century copy, Catherine urges Pope Gregory XI to move the papal court from Avignon to Rome. Gregory did eventually follow Catherine's advice in 1377.

The British Library, Harley MS 3480

‘I long for God to free you from all half-heartedness and sentimentality, and make you a new man – I mean transform you in burning, blazing desire.’

— Catherine of Siena

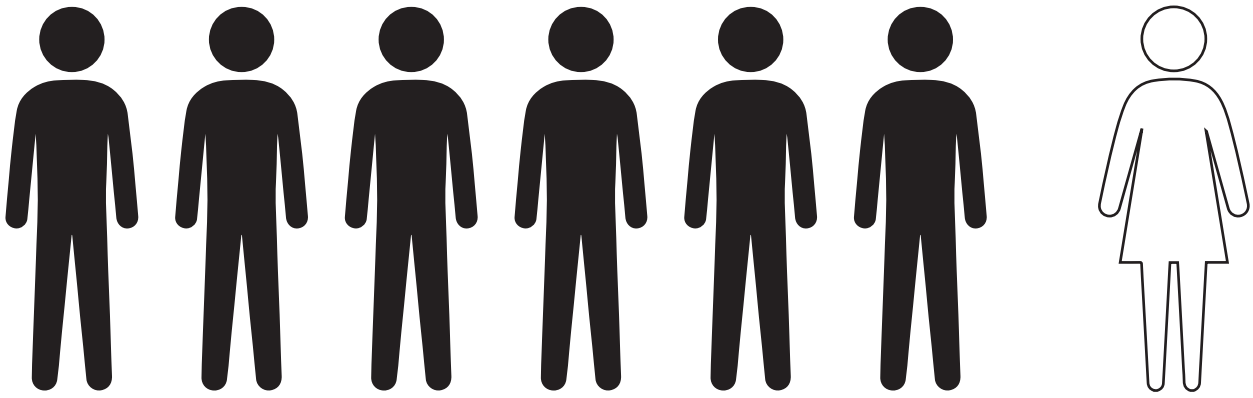
Translated by Suzanne Noffke (2001)

Bridge over troubled water

The Orcharde of Syon, a Middle English translation of Catherine of Siena, *Il dialogo della divina provvidenza*
(The Dialogue of Divine Providence)
Westminster (England), 1519

Catherine of Siena dictated her major spiritual treatise, *Il dialogo*, to her secretary during 1377 to 1378. Presented as a conversation between herself and God, the text provides a detailed account of Catherine's spiritual teachings developed through years of visionary experience. This printed English translation was made for the nuns of Syon Abbey in Isleworth, Middlesex. The woodcuts illustrate many of Catherine's visions, for example on this page she witnesses Christ as a bridge over the troubled waters of the world.

The British Library, C.11.b.6.



Male saints outnumbered female saints by roughly six to one in the years around 500 to 1500.

Source: Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg (2006).

Heretical views

Mirror of Simple Souls, a Middle English translation of Marguerite Porete, *Miroir des simples âmes*
London (England), 1450s–60s

Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake for heresy in Paris in 1310. Church authorities took issue with her belief in the soul's mystical union with God, outlined in her treatise, *Miroir des simples âmes*. Even more threatening was her status as an independent woman, unattached to any formal religious Order, who was determined to share her ideas through writing and public speaking. Although the Church demanded that all copies of her treatise be destroyed, anonymised copies continued to circulate, including this English translation.

The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS. Bodley 505

Heretical confessions

Book of Sentences of the Inquisition of Toulouse
Toulouse (France), 1307–23

This manuscript contains the statements of over 300 people accused of heresy in trials held in Toulouse. Most are Waldensians, members of a movement that embraced poverty and rejected non-biblical beliefs. On these pages, sisters Johanna Garin and Hugua Roana confess involvement with Waldensian activities. Hugua says that her parents invited Waldensians to stay at their house and bewitched her so that she could not tell anyone. Both were condemned to perpetual imprisonment on a diet of bread and water.

The British Library, Add MS 4697

Discoveries in Archaeology: The Anchoress of All Saints, Fishergate

Content warning: this video shows human remains

In 2007, archaeologists excavated the former medieval church of All Saints, Fishergate, in York. They discovered an unusual skeleton buried in the apse, the holiest part of the church. It belonged to a middle-aged woman suffering from severe and debilitating health conditions. Research suggests that she might have been Lady Isabel German, an anchoress who lived at All Saints in the 15th century. This rare discovery shows how despite her physical suffering, the woman was cared for and honoured by her community.

Becoming an anchoress

Order for enclosing an anchoress
London, 15th century

Anchoresses were women who chose to be walled up in a cell adjacent to a church in order to devote themselves completely to contemplation of God. These pages from a book of rites used by a bishop contain the ritual for enclosing an anchoress, including a symbolic funeral accompanied by the prayers and hymns used for the burial of the dead. The initial letter shows a bishop blessing an anchoress who, wearing a long shroud-like veil, turns her back on the world and enters her cell.

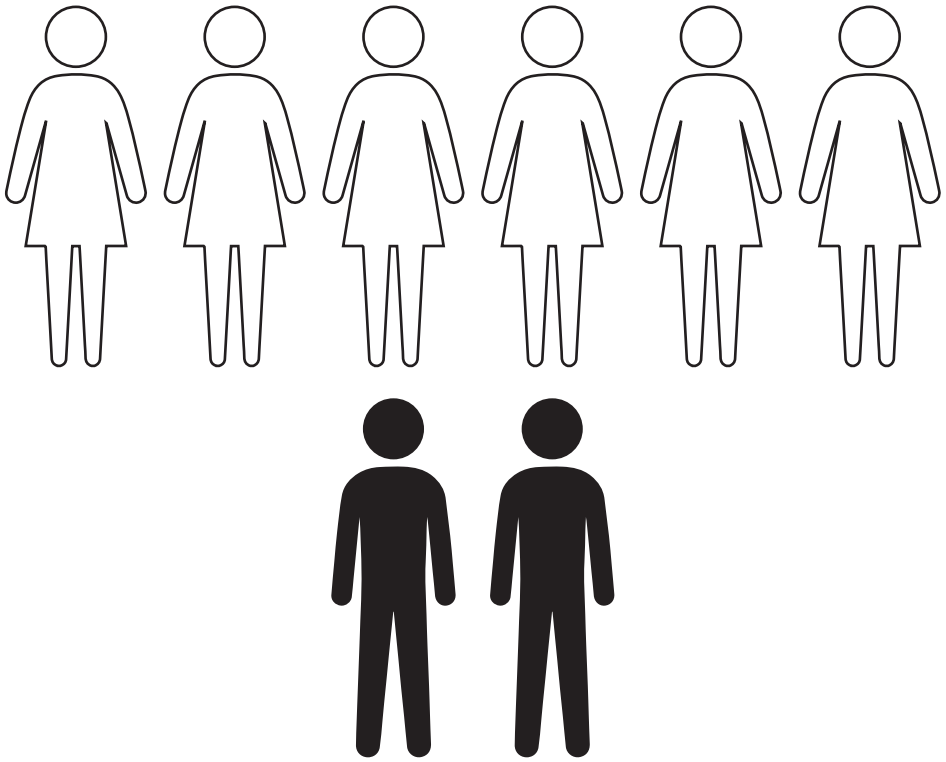
The British Library, Lansdowne MS 451

The purrrfect companion

Ancrene Wisse (Anchoresses' guide)
England, 1240

The *Ancrene Wisse* is a guidebook composed by a priest around the 1210s for three sisters who wished to become anchoresses. This is one of the two oldest surviving copies and an important example of the early form of Middle English language. The work includes spiritual advice about meditation, as well as practical instructions for daily life. The page on display advises that anchoresses should not keep any animals except one cat ('ne schule ye habben nan beast bute cat ane').

The British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C VI



In medieval England female anchoresses outnumbered male anchorites by roughly five to two.

Source: AK Warren (1985)

Margery Kempe

Christian mystic and author of the first autobiography in English
King's Lynn, Norfolk
b. around 1373, d. after 1438

Born to a wealthy merchant family in King's Lynn, Margery married and had 14 children. After the birth of her first child, she started experiencing spiritual visions. Eventually she persuaded her husband to agree to a sexless marriage and she devoted her life to religion, travelling widely on pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostela among other places. She often attracted controversy for her loud weeping and outspoken views.

Telling her story

Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*
England, around 1445–50

Margery was determined to record the story of her turbulent life. Unable to write herself, she twice attempted to dictate her *Book*, initially to a man who wrote illegibly (perhaps her son), then to an extremely reluctant priest. The result was the earliest autobiography in English: an extraordinary account of the experiences of a female mystic and her struggles for recognition in a male-dominated religious world. Margery's Book was lost for centuries, until this — the only surviving copy — was discovered in a country house in 1934, while the owner was searching for ping-pong balls.

The British Library, Add MS 61823

Margery censored

A Shorte treatyse of contemplacyon, taken out of the boke of Margery Kempe ancresse of Lynne
London (England), 1521

Until the discovery of the manuscript copy in 1934, *The Book of Margery Kempe* was known only from a printed pamphlet of extracts published in two editions in the early 16th century. The extracts omit Margery's voice and biographical details, reducing her work to a series of passages in which Christ instructs her about living a spiritual life. This edition even describes her in the title as an anchoress, concealing the freedom and extensive travel of the real Margery.

The British Library, C.37.f.19.

Joan of Arc

Christian mystic and military leader
Domrémy, France
b. around 1412, d. 1431

During the Hundred Years' War, when English armies occupied much of France, a French peasant girl heard heavenly voices telling her to fight the English and to help the Dauphin Charles – son of the French king – accede to the throne. Heeding the call, Joan became the hero of the French army at the Siege of Orléans, when she rode into battle alongside the soldiers and inspired a spectacular victory. A year later she was captured by the Burgundians, allies of the English, subjected to a gruelling trial and burned at the stake for heresy.

Send gunpowder

above showcase

Letter from Joan of Arc to
the citizens of Riom
Moulins (France), 9 November 1429

When Joan of Arc sent this letter to the citizens of Riom, she was planning to besiege the town of La-Charité-sur-Loire but her army's supplies were running low. She entreated the city to assist by sending gunpowder and military equipment. Being illiterate, Joan dictated her letter to a scribe, but signed her own name, 'Jehanne', at the end. This is the earliest of three surviving examples of Joan's signature, her large uncertain letterforms suggesting her unfamiliarity with writing.

Ville de Riom, Archives municipales, AA 33
Loan supported by Joanna and Graham Barker

Joan on trial

Proceedings of the Trial of Joan of Arc for Heresy
France, 15th century

Joan was put on trial for heresy in 1431. A court of learned churchmen subjected her to 15 interrogation sessions from February to March. Joan's astute and steadfast responses in the face of hostile questioning are recorded in this copy of the trial documents. The court found her guilty, judging that her visions were sent not by God but by the devil, and that her wearing of men's clothing transgressed divine law. On 30 May Joan was burned at the stake in the marketplace of Rouen.

The British Library, Egerton MS 984

Re-writing history

Proceedings of the Rehabilitation Trial of Joan of Arc
France, 1455

By the 1450s, England had lost the Hundred Years' War to France. Charles VII of France, who owed his crown to Joan's efforts, initiated a posthumous retrial in 1455–56 to overturn the original heresy verdict. This is one of three official copies of the Rehabilitation Trial proceedings, copied and authorised by the notaries who were present in the courtroom. In contrast to the records of the original trial, this contains the testimonies of Joan's family and comrades about her life and virtues.

The British Library, Stowe MS 84

Re-imagining Joan

Chronicle of France
France, late 15th century

This chronicle of the reign of Charles VII of France dates from the period after the Rehabilitation Trial when the French monarchy was establishing Joan's legacy as a political hero. It opens with an image of Joan appearing before Charles at his court. Contrary to the accounts of the peasant girl who wore men's clothing, the artist has depicted Joan in feminine aristocratic dress. It seems that rehabilitating Joan's reputation meant normalising her appearance to fit conventional expectations of women's presentation.

The British Library, Royal MS 20 D VIII

Saint Joan

Joan's story has been the inspiration for countless works of art and literature in the centuries since her death. Bernard Shaw's play *Saint Joan* premiered in 1923, three years after the Catholic Church officially declared her a saint. It chronicles Joan's life, death and legacy, presenting a hero whose unwavering belief in her own convictions leaves her at odds with the values of society. In this speech, Joan realises she has been abandoned by Charles VII, the Church and her supporters at court and has to stand alone.

Condola Rashad in Manhattan Theatre Club's production of *Saint Joan* on Broadway at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, New York, 2018

Visionary scents

Medieval visionaries often described their visions as intensely multisensory, sometimes experiencing strange smells during their spiritual encounters. Heavenly visions might be accompanied by the pleasant fragrance of flowers and spices, whereas hellish visions might bring the frightening odours of fire and brimstone.

‘A light smoke came in the door with a great heat and a foul stink. After this the fiend [devil] came again with his heat and with his stink… The stink was so vile and so painful.’

— Julian of Norwich

A vision of the devil

Scent notes: fire, brimstone, smoke, sulphur, fetid, vegetal, bodily, excrement.

In Julian of Norwich's 16th and final vision, she describes an encounter with the devil accompanied by a foul smell. While sleeping she witnesses the terrifying presence of the devil, grinning, red and black-spotted, taking her by the throat. Waking from sleep, she sees smoke and smells a foul and fiery stench.

‘Sometimes she felt sweet smells with her nose; it was sweeter, she thought, than ever was any sweet earthly thing that she smelled before.’

— Margery Kempe

The presence of angels

Scent notes: sweet, syrup, strawberry, honey, caramel, pink, bright, vibrant, joy

When Margery Kempe is in Rome, she mystically marries Christ in one of her visions. Afterwards, she periodically smells indescribably sweet odours, hears sounds and melodies, and sees ‘many white things flying all about her on all sides, as thickly… as specks in a sunbeam’. Initially she is afraid, until Christ reassures her that ‘these betoken that you have many angels around you’.

Religious communities

For women who felt a spiritual calling or wished to escape the domestic path of marriage and motherhood, nunneries offered important opportunities for education, creativity and self-expression. Nunneries were communities of women devoted to Christian religious life, led by an elected female leader, the abbess or prioress.

Nuns took vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and lived enclosed lives, following strict rules. Yet many found fulfilment in the daily pattern of prayer, worship and work, embedded in a community of women. The voices and artworks of nuns reveal the rich culture that flourished in medieval convents.

The ideal abbey

La sainte abbaye (The Holy Abbey)
Paris (France), 1290s

Owned by the Cistercian nunnery of Notre-Dame-la-Royale at Maubuisson, this manuscript contains a spiritual treatise concerning an ideal abbey. In the text, the officers of the convent are said to represent virtues: for example, the abbess is charity and the prioress is Holy Wisdom. The accompanying miniature, showing nuns attending church, illustrates many of the roles within the convent.

The British Library, Yates Thompson MS 11

The ideal abbey

The Abbey of the Holy Ghost, a Middle English translation of *La sainte abbaye* (The Holy Abbey), Yorkshire (England), 15th century

This manuscript, made for a nun in West Yorkshire, contains a Middle English translation of the French text displayed alongside. Its depiction of the ideal abbey shows nuns caring for a sick sister in the infirmary (top left), digging the abbey's foundations (centre left), processing in church (top right), teaching a novice (centre right), and offering charity to a man on crutches (lower right). On the lower left, four devilish sisters — Pride, Envy, Grouching and Ill-Deeming — unsuccessfully attempt to enter the abbey.

The British Library, Stowe MS 39

Becoming a nun

Some women were placed in a nunnery by their parents, whereas others joined of their own choice. All medieval nuns took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and devoted their lives to worship and prayer. Many never left their nunnery, living in strict enclosure within its walls.

Spiritual Lives

Nuns' clothing

top left

Blessing for nuns' clothing
Venice (Italy), around 1430

When women joined a nunnery they adopted nuns' clothing. The pages on display contain the texts for the ceremony of blessing the vestments and veils of novice nuns. This culminates in the prioress placing the veil on the novice's head, symbolising her new status as a 'bride of Christ'. The manuscript was made for Agnesina, prioress of the Augustinian convent of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Murano (an island in Venice), who may be the nun represented praying to the Virgin and Child in the decorated initial.

While the official age to become a nun was 16, girls as young as 6 or 7 could be presented to convents by their parents (known as ‘oblates’).

Source: Eileen Power (1922).

Rules for nuns

bottom left

The Rule of St Clare
Northern Italy, 1446–48

St Clare of Assisi was the first known woman to write a monastic rule. She began a religious Order of nuns, known as the Poor Clares, who lived according to the ideal of absolute poverty (owning no property) promoted by St Francis of Assisi. Clare spent most of her life pushing for papal approval of her rule, which she finally received two days before her death in 1253. This copy, which includes a depiction of St Clare in the initial letter, belonged to the convent of Santa Maria di Rosate in Bergamo.

The British Library, Add MS 40076

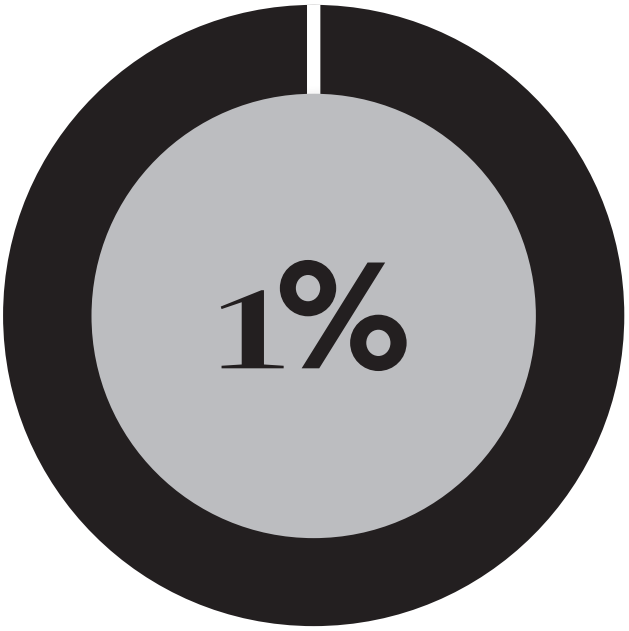
Rules and reform

bottom right

The Rule of St Clare in German
Freiburg (Germany), around 1475-1500

In the 15th century, the Poor Clares – a religious order established by St Clare of Assisi – were swept by reform movements promoting a return to the earlier strictness of the order. A nun called Sibilla von Bondorf wrote and decorated this German translation of the rule for the Poor Clares of Villingen as part of an effort to reform their convent. This picture shows Christ as the Good Shepherd returning a 'lost sheep' (in the form of a small woman) to the fold, symbolising the reform of the Villingen nuns.

The British Library, Add MS 15686



In medieval Europe, fewer than 1% of women became nuns.

Source: Josiah Cox Russell (1944).

Nuns' pets

top right

Huw Cae Llwyd, request for a pet ape for Annes
Wales, around 1500

Annes, abbess of Llanllŷr, a small Cistercian nunnery in Wales, wanted a pet 'ape' (probably meaning a monkey). She commissioned a bard, Huw Cae Llwyd (d. 1504), to write this poem and perform it before a prominent knight who she hoped would grant her wish. Nuns often kept pets, especially dogs, cats and birds, prompting disapproving comments from bishops who regarded pet-keeping as a worldly distraction. Monkeys, however, were an uncommon pet that only the wealthiest could afford. Whether Annes succeeded in getting her monkey is unknown.

The British Library, Add MS 14998

Building works

bottom

Register of Crabhouse Priory
Norfolk (England), around 1470

The heads of convents could wield great power and undertake ambitious projects. When Joan Wiggenhall (d. 1444) became prioress of Crabhouse Priory of Augustinian nuns in Norfolk in 1420, she set about rebuilding virtually the whole complex. These pages from one of the Priory's account books record her building works. They include rebuilding the great barn, extending the prioress' lodgings, rebuilding the church, repairing the precinct walls, repairing and heightening the bakehouse, raising and re-roofing the steeple and rebuilding and slating the cloister.

The British Library, Add MS 4733/1

Feeding the convent

top left

The charge belonging to the office of the cellaress of Barking
Barking (England), 15th century

The cellaress was the senior officer of the convent responsible for managing its provisions. This detailed account of the cellaress' duties at the wealthy Benedictine abbey of Barking (now east London) perhaps represents the 'handover notes' drawn up by one cellaress for her successor. It records allowances of food and money made to the nuns, varying according to the Church's calendar, including beef on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, and herrings, almonds, rice, figs and raisins during the major fasting periods of Advent and Lent.

The British Library, Cotton MS Julius D VIII

Preserving records

top right

The Cartulary of Coldstream Priory
Coldstream, Berwickshire (Scotland), 15th century

Most nunneries supported themselves through incomes from their lands, which they received as gifts from pious laypeople. The documentation for these land grants was often copied into a book called a cartulary. The nuns of Coldstream Priory (Berwickshire) asked the scribe John Laurence to make this cartulary for them in 1434. An inscription states that they wanted a new account of all their landholdings because of the age of their documents and through fear of English invasion.

The British Library, Harley MS 6670

Nuns in prayer

A nun's breviary
Northern Germany, second half of the 15th century

This prayer book contains the texts of the Divine Office, the series of eight Latin services that nuns performed daily in church. The page on display shows the beginning of the Psalms, divided up for recital over the course of a week. The accompanying picture shows a nun, perhaps the owner of the book, praying before the Crucifixion. In 2022, a British Library cataloguer noticed that the manuscript is signed by a female scribe: 'Sister Modesta wrote me, praise be to God'.

The British Library, Harley MS 2975

Religious music

Leaf from a Gradual (music book for use in Mass)
Cologne (Germany), 1330s–40s

From around 1315 to 1360, the Poor Clares' convent of Cologne ran a thriving workshop producing decorated manuscripts both for their own use and on commission. The nuns worked collaboratively, with different sisters carrying out specialised tasks. After the convent closed in 1802, many of its manuscripts were broken up and sold as single leaves. This leaf from a choir book includes a portrait of a kneeling nun in the lower margin. An accompanying inscription identifies her as Sister Isabella von Geldern, who gave 20 marks towards making the book.

The British Library, Add MS 35069

Spiritual Lives

According to the Benedictine rule, nuns (as well as monks) were expected to spend up to 3 hours a day reading, and 3.5 to 4 hours in common prayer.

Source: Columba Stewart (1998).

St Bridget of Sweden (Birgitta Birgersdotter)

Christian mystic and founder of the Bridgettine Order
Sweden
b. around 1303, d. 1373

Bridget, a Swedish noblewoman and mother of eight, dedicated herself to a religious life after the death of her husband in 1344. Acting on Christ's instruction in a vision, Bridget moved permanently to Rome in 1350, where she became an influential religious authority. In another vision, Bridget was instructed to found a religious order of nuns and monks, the Order of St Saviour (or Bridgettine Order).

The British Library, Royal MS 20 D VIII

Bridget as visionary

Bridget of Sweden, *Liber Celestis Revelacionum* (Heavenly Book of Revelations), Middle English translation
Northern England, 15th century

After devoting herself to a spiritual life, Bridget received some 700 visions. She initially wrote them down in Swedish. Priests then translated them into Latin, the language of the Church, and edited them to form the *Liber Celestis*, a vast record of her spiritual experiences. In the late Middle Ages, the text was widely read and translated into many languages. This sole surviving copy of an anonymous translation into a Middle English northern dialect includes an illustration of Bridget seated writing her book.

The British Library, Cotton MS Claudius B I

Those who enter

Bridget of Sweden, *Regula Sancti Salvatoris*
(The Rule of St Saviour)
England or possibly Sweden, 1435–57

The Bridgettine Order was the last religious order for women to be established in the Middle Ages. Its founder, Bridget of Sweden, said that the rule of the order was revealed to her in a vision by Christ. This vast compilation of Latin texts by and about Bridget was copied for the Bridgettine house of Syon Abbey in Isleworth, Middlesex. Drawings in the margins illustrate aspects of Bridget's teachings. On this page, the open door represents Christ's promise to protect all those who enter the Bridgettine order.

The British Library, Harley MS 612

Commemorating the dead

The Syon Martyrology
England, 15th century

One of the prime functions of religious houses was to pray for the souls of the dead. This book records the death dates of sisters, brothers and patrons of Syon Abbey for the commemoration of their souls on the anniversaries of their passing. This page includes entries for Abbess Elizabeth Gibbs (30 August) and King Henry V, founder of Syon Abbey (31 August). The bookmark on movable tape, written in the hand of Mary Nevel (d. 1557/58), nun of Syon, is a Latin cheat-sheet providing variant word forms for praying in Latin.

The British Library, Add MS 22285

Church services

The Myrroure of Our Lady
London (England), 1530

This book contains an English translation of the Latin readings used in church services in Bridgettine monasteries. The nuns of Syon Abbey had these readings translated into English because, as the prologue explains, many of the sisters sing and read the Latin without understanding the meaning. This printed copy, decorated with woodcuts of St Bridget, was published at the request of one of the abbesses, probably Elizabeth Gibbs (note the monogram EG below Bridget's feet).

The British Library, C.11.b.8.

Hildegard of Bingen

Christian mystic, polymath and abbess
Germany
b. around 1098, d. 1179

Sent to live in the Benedictine nunnery of Disibodenberg in Germany when she was eight years old, Hildegard later founded and became abbess of the nunnery of Rupertsberg. Hildegard was a polymath (knowledgeable in many subjects). Among her many achievements she was a visionary and prophet, an author of visionary, medical and musical works, a prolific letter-writer and a beloved leader of her religious community. Her story reveals the heights of scholarship and political power to which women could ascend within a convent.

A female polymath

Hildegard of Bingen, *Ordo virtutum*
(Play of the Virtues)
Germany, 1487

Hildegard composed her musical play, *Ordo virtutum*, around 1150, to be sung at her convent. It tells the story of the struggle for a human soul between personifications of the virtues (voiced by the nuns) and the devil (voiced by a man, probably one of the convent's priests). This passage includes florid music for a female voice, interrupted by the spoken role of the devil, who is incapable of anything so heavenly as singing.

The British Library, Add MS 15102

Listen

Hildegard of Bingen,
Ordo virtutum (Play of the Virtues)

Hildegard von Bingen, *Ordo Virtutum*.
Ensemble Belcanto. EMC records.
Directed by Dietburg Spohr.

Strange and irregular practices

Hildegard of Bingen, letter to the Congregation of Nuns in Andernach
Germany, early 16th century

Hildegard was a prolific letter-writer who exerted great religious and political influence through her network of correspondence. This letter, in which Hildegard responds to criticism of 'strange and irregular practices' at her convent, gives a vivid picture of life under her leadership. Hildegard defends her decisions to allow her nuns to wear loose hair, white silk dresses and gold crowns, arguing that, unlike married women, virgins are not subject to dress restrictions.

The British Library, Harley MS 1725

Nuns as artists

Religious Orders live according to the principle of *ora et labora* (‘pray and work’). In some medieval convents, women fulfilled this principle by making religious books and artworks. Such creative endeavours were understood as a kind of worship, combining religious devotion with manual labour.

Making music

The Seligenthal Gradual (music book for use in Mass)
Landshut (Germany), 1260 and 1462

This choir book was made by the nuns of the Cistercian Abbey of Seligenthal in Germany and was used there for hundreds of years. A nun called Elisabeth wrote it at the request of the abbess in 1260. Then Sister Elisabeth H ttlen, choir mistress of the convent for 35 years, added extra material to the book in 1462, as she explains in the inscription in the lower margins of these pages. It survives in near intact condition, with its medieval binding, bookmarks and silk curtains to protect the painted letters.

The British Library, Add MS 16950

Printing pictures

Woodcut prints from the Abbey of Mariënwater
Rosmalen (Netherlands), around 1495–1510

The Bridgettine Abbey of Mariënwater in the Netherlands was a particularly active book-producing centre, with both nuns and monks participating. They embraced the technology of print, which in 15th-century Europe was still in its infancy as a medium for book production. The Mariënwater community created large numbers of hand-coloured woodcut prints of religious images. These were inserted into books as a convenient way to enhance devotional texts with imagery and colour.

Above left: The Crucifixion with St Bridget of Sweden.

Below left: The Infant Christ in the Sacred Heart.

The British Museum, 1856,0209.81 & 1856,0209.84; 1856,0209.83 & 1856,0209.82

Printing pictures

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Above right: The Virgin and Child in glory, flanked by St Catherine and St Barbara.

Below right: The Holy Family.

The British Museum, 1856,0209.81 & 1856,0209.84; 1856,0209.83 & 1856,0209.82

Encyclopaedic knowledge

Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* (Etymologies)
Munsterbilzen (modern-day Belgium), 1130–74

This impressive manuscript was copied at Munsterbilzen Abbey, a Benedictine convent, by eight nuns who listed their names at the end: 'Gerdrut', 'Sibilia', 'Dierwic', 'Walderat', 'Hadewic', 'Lugart', 'Ota' and 'Cunigunt'. The text, a major encyclopaedia encompassing a wealth of classical learning, demonstrates the advanced level of education available to the Munsterbilzen sisters. The page on display shows an illustrated list of ancient rulers.

The British Library, Harley MS 3099

Sewing prayers

Middle Dutch prayer book
Netherlands, around 1517–23

Made for a woman in the Third Order of St Francis, this prayer book contains many hand-coloured prints. Several originate from the Dutch Bridgettine monastery of Mariënwater, including this woodcut of the Virgin Mary entering the Temple. Many are decoratively sewn in with brightly coloured silk threads, such as the green and red cross-stitch seen here, bringing together the meditative activities of prayer and textile work that were central to women's religious culture.

The British Library, Add MS 14042

Artist extraordinaire

The Life and Miracles of St Francis of Assisi
Freiburg (Germany), 1478

Sibilla von Bondorf (d. around 1524) was a celebrated scribe and artist at a time when most craftspeople were anonymous. She was a nun in the Order of Poor Clares (named after its founder St Clare of Assisi), who created manuscripts for women's religious communities. In this image, she painted St Clare and a group of nuns mourning over the dead body of St Francis. The scene, rarely depicted in medieval art, invites the viewer to share in the nuns' emotional responses.

The British Library, Add MS 15710

Embroidery in the convent

Embroidered altar band
Possibly Beverley (England), early 14th century

We know from documentary sources that medieval women were skilled at producing embroidery. Yet we can rarely identify their work because most surviving textiles are anonymous. This is the only piece of medieval English embroidery that is signed by its maker: sewn on the back are the words ‘Lady Joan of Beverley, a nun, made me’. Joan probably embroidered this piece as an act of religious devotion, especially given its purpose to decorate the altar of a church.

Victoria and Albert Museum, T.70-1923.
Given by Monsieur G Saville Seligman

Sole survivor

Scenes from the life of John the Baptist
Alsace (France), 1175–1200

The women's community of Hohenburg Abbey (or Mont Sainte-Odile Abbey) in Alsace, led by the abbess Herrad of Landsberg, was renowned for its learning and its skill in creating beautiful books. Its most celebrated work, a vast illustrated encyclopaedia called the *Hortus deliciarum* (Garden of Delights), was destroyed in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. This series of painted scenes from the life of St John the Baptist is thought to be the only surviving creation from its workshop.

The British Library, Add MS 42497

Afterlife of an abbess

Mortuary roll of Lucy of Hedingham
England, 1225–30

The Benedictine nuns of Castle Hedingham Priory in Essex marked the life and passing of Lucy, their first prioress, by creating this roll in her honour. It begins with a picture showing Lucy's funeral and her soul rising to join Christ and the saints in heaven. This is followed by a letter written by Agnes, Lucy's successor as prioress, praising Lucy's virtues and expressing the community's grief. Special messengers then took the roll to over 122 religious houses in southern England, each of which added their own message in memory of Lucy.

The British Library, Egerton MS 2849/1 and /2

Sample of Religious Houses from the Mortuary Roll

1 Name: St Botolph's Priory
Place: Colchester, Essex

2 Name: Blackmore Priory
Place: Blackmore, Essex

3 Name: Barking Abbey of nuns
Place: Barking, Essex

4 Name: St Bartholomew's Priory
Place: London

5 Name: Bury St Edmunds Abbey
Place: Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

6 Name: Carrow Priory of nuns
Place: Norwich, Norfolk

7 Name: Bungay Priory of nuns
Place: Bungay, Suffolk

8 Name: Campsey Priory of canonesses
Place: Campsea Ashe, Suffolk

9 Name: Davington Priory of nuns
Place: Davington, Kent

10 Name: St Augustine's Abbey
Place: Canterbury, Kent

11 Name: Dover Priory
Place: Dover, Kent

12 Name: St Mary's Abbey of nuns (Nunnaminster)
Place: Winchester, Hampshire

13 Name: Wilton Abbey of nuns
Place: Wilton, Wiltshire

14 Name: Sherborne Abbey
Place: Sherborne, Dorset

Dissolution of the monasteries

The Battel Hall Retable from Dartford Priory
England, around 1410

This painting was probably made for the church of the Dominican nuns of Dartford Priory. It features a selection of mostly female and, in some cases, notably Dominican saints: St Dominic, St Agatha, the Virgin and Child, St Margaret, St Catherine of Alexandria and St Catherine of Siena. After Henry VIII dissolved Dartford Priory in 1539, the faces of the saints were violently scratched away — a poignant reminder of the widespread destruction of medieval religious culture from the 16th century onwards.

Courtesy of Leeds Castle Charitable Foundation

Medieval Women: A Legacy of Words

Medieval women have left a rich legacy of words, artworks and recorded experiences. Their stories are so numerous that this exhibition has covered only a fraction of those that are known. New discoveries are being made all the time in libraries, archives and archaeological excavations that bring further lost lives and voices to light. Through these traces, medieval women declare that they existed, that they had personality, presence and vital things to say. It is our task to seek them out and learn from them.

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We’re dedicated to reducing our carbon impact and embedding sustainability within our programming. This includes reducing the environmental impact of our exhibitions. Find out more by reading our sustainability strategy here:

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