

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## WESTERN EUROPEAN HISTORY – Gender Relations

### Contents

Ancient Period  
Postclassical Period  
Early Modern Period  
19<sup>th</sup> Century  
20<sup>th</sup> Century

#### ANCIENT PERIOD

There are two periods of classical antiquity—the Minoan period in archaic Greece, and the later centuries of the Roman Empire—when something approaching humane standards were applied to the upbringing and training of girls and young women. Such was not the case even of the early Roman Republic and we have to assume, from almost no evidence, that the same is true of the western provinces of the Roman Republic and Empire. Settled life, the condition in which women have the best chance for a social existence, was not common in the provinces—with their occasional migrations, their frequent and brutal health conditions—and even settled life, itself likely to be devoted to agricultural occupations, then food preparation, and most of all sexual reproduction, hardly provided opportunities for personal or even familial growth.

#### POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Confining ourselves to Western Europe we will need to wait until the Christian factor grows prominent in Rome—from the third century on, perhaps—until we see the potentials of this new and struggling religion, which gradually permeated the Roman provinces, nudging out rural paganism, which was rooted there, and would remain stubbornly, in pockets, throughout the first millennium. Elements of paganism which exalted earth, moon and fertility goddesses were omnipresent in prehistorical Gaul and Britannia, and it was not impossible to graft, onto those elements, a new cult in which a divine Virgin sat next to god, humility and grace were prioritized, and sooner or later opportunities arose for women to play active roles in the new institution.

**Church.** While men carried out the administrative efforts of the Catholic Church, from the beginning, and in the farther reaches of Empire as the Church spread, there was from early days an opportunity for women to serve in the church, notably as deaconesses—though very specifically not in a priestly function, a bone of bitter contention in the Catholic Church to our day. The role of deaconess, which was available to provincials, and soon the role of Abbess, or directress of a nunnery, were far from the usual aspirations of ‘west European provincial’ women, and yet in some cases opened purviews and possibilities for women, which had during the early post classical centuries been unimaginable.

**Early Middle Ages (476-1000)** In general the development of the convent, inside the growing monastic practice of the Church, was providing multiple opportunities for women’s occupational lives. The role of Abbess, in particular, became a springboard for women of power and ability to make themselves heard within the increasingly open society. An example would be Hilda of Whitby (614-680), who founded and led the powerful Abbey of Whitby, and proved to be a leader in the formulation of ecclesiastical policy. Short of that kind of female prominence, of course, there was a growing front of occupations in which women could not only provide for their families, but could move into the spheres of commercial production. Spinning was one of these occupations: by the High Middle Ages (1000-1300 C.E.) efficient spinning wheels had replaced the spindle and distaff; brewery was a traditional female occupation, and was a home activity until the introduction of hops; midwifery became an increasingly specialized task, specific to women, and as this science developed, with subsequent benefit for female lives, the mortality

of numerous women—especially as nutrition improved--rivalled that of their male counterparts; many women lived into their seventies. For the vast majority of peasant women, however, although they seem to have enjoyed social equality with their mates, the ceiling of life was typically only twenty five years, for much of this early mediaeval period.

**High Middle Ages. (1000-1300).** The High Middle Ages saw the rise to prominence of a number of powerful and/ or highly literate women throughout western Europe. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) was wealthy and much sought after, deeply involved in patronage of some of the most talented writers of her time—like Chretien de Troyes, the author of *Perceval*. Other women of talent and ability emulated the achievements of Eleanor, while in various cases—of queens regnant—artistic and secular power were joined. It is noteworthy that female artisans, like their male counterparts, began in this period to organize in guilds.

**Late Middle Ages** (1300-1500) Significant female voices, from the late middle ages, echo from figures as widely separated as brilliant mystics (like Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, and Saint Teresa of Avila, all of whom have remained staunch pillars of the Catholic tradition) and social critics like Christine de Pisan, whose books were opinion shapers. Christine came out as a strong opponent of misogyny in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, and her *Treasure of the City of Ladies* provides life style advice for women of all classes, with an eye to their distinctive needs. In her advice to women of royal status, she offers vigorous advice for the avoidance of conflict, and above all warfare, the consequences of which, for all involved, surpass in horror anything that can easily be anticipated.

**Marriage and law.** Women's marriage rites (and rights) and economic freedom varied greatly during the millennium under consideration here. In the purely legal sense women were their husbands' property, during the entire period we consider, and yet, as we often see in the cases where the husband predeceases the wife, the wife can take over the husband's property and business, as well as the right to pass on the family inheritance as she chooses. This of course would be an exceptional case, and would in any event in no way apply to women serfs, to which group the majority belonged, especially in the earlier Middle Ages. Women of the lower peasantry had their rights—including rights of the bedroom—and the right to be buried where they liked, apart from their husbands. But from this serfdom to Me Too is a step!

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Splendor.** From the early Renaissance on, there is social space for women to shine, and for women of fortune and character to build strong positions in business, politics, the arts and high society; we are talking the power figures, like Lucrezia Borgia, who step out from the pages of illustrious families and are everywhere—conspicuously in those culture cities of Northern Italy (close neighbor to France), through which the goods and ideas of the Renaissance were beginning to flow. There is that face to the splendor of women in early modern society, just as in the eighteenth century French salon, with Mme. De Sevigne et. al., Parisian ladies of great cultivation were to dominate and shape social/literary trends.

**Males.** Nevertheless, throughout this early modern period of emergence from the mediaeval perspective, and into the implications of capitalism, there is arguably an inclination toward the male perspective, toward the captains of industry whether in the market place or the battlefields of politics. (Even the Church, or churches, are growing lofty male superstructures, astride which are the power figures of *those* institutions.) The underlying energies of the capital system implicitly superseded those of the feminine. Which is not to say that the element of money, the currency of capitalism, was of no interest to western European women—who were after all on their ways to forming the largest 'consumer market,' the market for 'retail goods,' invented by western need. But it is to say that men had gained frontal position in the conflict between the genders. Whose, after all, were the voices of literature, the spiritual insider voices of the 'early modern period,' except those men—Marlowe, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Jonson, Donne, Racine, Boileau, Descartes—who were the interpreters of the world to the early moderns?

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Undervaluation.** The narrative we track, here, will be foreknown to all. We write it from the twenty first century, in which the multitudinous cries for gender equality, which have pockmarked the last two centuries, have arguably been heard by those males in the West of Europe who have ears to hear. It is not long, however, since we read (and I think more or less accepted) passages like the following, from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Charles Bingley watches the Bennett sisters occupied at their parlor activities, and cannot restrain himself from expostulating:

*It is amazing to me, said Bingley, how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are. All young ladies accomplish. Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished.*

**Depreciation.** From such a passage we easily look back on a long history of devaluing of women's abilities, and doubtless linger on examples like that of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the prophet of human liberation, who nonetheless found women valuable chiefly for their coquetry, and advised them to shoot no higher than needed to keep their men interested in them. The disparagement history is by no means justified, as we saw in a few spotty references to female mystics like Julian of Norwich, social critics like Christine de Pisan, mothers of the church, military leaders (Joan of Arc) or women of noble birth, cultural sophistication, and large secular influence like Eleanor of Aquitaine. Nor was the enlightenment perspective, of the eighteenth century, likely to miss the needs for an enlightenment of an entire half of their population.

**Advocacy.** Not only were women, as consumers, proving to be a potentially powerful economic force, but advocates for the wider social and political presence of women were making themselves heard on behalf of their gender. John Stuart Mill, the brilliant parliamentarian and philosopher, fought for women, and in his writing argued for the substitution of 'the rights of the person, 'rather than of 'man.' Olympe de Gouges, in her ironic drama, *The Defence of the Rights of Woman*, 1791, mocked the pretensions of 'man' forever to prioritize his own rights. Mary Wollstonecraft (in 1792) published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she fiercely defended women's powers of thought and imagination. And of course, if we move to the far end of the century, we come upon the burgeoning of the suffragist movement, which already in the 1890's had its origins among figures like the two 'proto feminists' just mentioned.' While the right to vote was conferred on women in Britain and Germany in 1918, it was not conferred on French female voters until after 1945, and then only if the candidate for suffrage was literate.

**Achievements in literature.** Simply to respond to our earlier remarks on men, who dominated the western European literary scene, in the Early Modern Period, a note here on the prominence of some of the most effective female writers of the nineteenth century: (France) Mme. De Stael; Georges Sand; (England) George Eliot; Jane Austen; Charlotte and Emily Bronte; Mary Wollstonecraft; Mary Shelley.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Birth.** Despite the new century's overwhelming prominence in war, international conflict, genocide; despite the amazing advances of twentieth century 'mankind' in plumbing the atmosphere and the atom; despite world-changing social experiments like Communism and renovation within the Catholic Church; despite these factors of secular change, the overall changes in twentieth century women's lives, in at least the western corner of Europe, were of unique importance, given the central importance of 'the lady who gives us birth.,' and makes it all possible.

**Liberation.** It has been a cliché of the century, applicable here and there, and since WW II especially in Europe and North America, that women have become relatively 'liberated .' We are, after all, in the century in which, among educated women, European and American, the thinking of such freed and brilliant women as Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*, 1970 ) has seemed to point the way to a new and newly realized woman. And this seeming achievement, clearly, was based on the emergence of a technologically upgraded domestic world, in

which women (as well as their spouses) were freed from servitude to the sink, the laundry basket, and the soaking pail of baby's diapers.

**The world.** Milestones of technical and social development have accompanied, and seemed to support, this new perspective: since WW II, especially, women have found themselves employed outside home, as participants in the visible productive world—not behind the curtains in the living room; women have gained prominence in academia, medicine, and politics—Western European women rising to prominence in all these fields; environmental conditioning, for these dramatic advances, being provided by the introduction of the birth control pill (1960) and in many places the ready and sanitary availability of abortion, one more milestone of seeming advance, on which women have been able to rely, for the creation of independent lives. Western European women, thanks to the wars their men fought for them, have won the right to fight right beside Joe and Bill, to share the burden of defending the flag with your last breath.

### Discussion questions

Does the childbearing role of woman limit the freedom she can ultimately enjoy, and which men enjoy by nature of their different biology? Do we see, in the twentieth century, attempts by women to minimize their biological limitations, by sharing with spouses, by insisting on paid leaves at their workplaces, by mental preparation for a fresh new postpartum life? Is there an advocacy, in our time and in areas like western Europe, for stay at home moms, for the 'old fashioned' values, which are not long in the past but seem to have faded?

The Biblical narrative of Adam and Eve gives Eve a bad rap. The snake is the temptress, but Eve is the one who bites the apple, and the Christian tradition—to speak not of Islam or Judaism, who have their distinct but related traditions-- has never tired of shifting the blame for the Fall onto her. Does this thought inheritance underlie a basic conflict between woman and the Church? After all, wasn't the Catholic Church a haven for women, in its earlier centuries? And aren't the pews of your local church—no NOT mosque--largely filled by skirts and blouses?

In 1979 the UN published the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women*. This is one of many conspicuous documents and proclamations which pepper our earwaves, as we try to adjust our western (thus 'enlightened') cultures to high standards of behavior toward the women in our lives, who after all constitute more than half of the globe's population. Yet right here and now, in the corner of western Europe (and the U.S.), there is a loud outcry from women, bitterly resentful of their mistreatment by men. Are women increasingly victimized in our time, as members of society? Have such movements as Me Too a representative character? Or are they isolated voices expressing highly individualized pain?

### Readings

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