

HISTORY PERSONAL INVESTIGATION:

'There is no specifically feminist literature in the Middle Ages.' Discuss.

mythical

• *form*

Supra

symptoms

15800

paspeah 12

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were easily tempted, easily deceived, and were therefore morally weaker than men⁴. It supposed that, by their very nature, women were destined to sin. St Paul, whose letters form a vital part of the New Testament, was especially derogatory about the role of women, demanding, in his First Epistle to Timothy, that

a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.⁵

This perception of women was not confined to the Bible alone, however. It was common thought throughout Europe. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most illustrious abbots of the 12th century, and a major preacher of the 2nd Crusade, stated in one of his sermons that 'Eve was the original cause of all evil, whose disgrace has come down to all women', while the Renaissance Italian poet and scholar Petrarch thought that 'woman is an enemy of peace, source of impatience, cause of quarrels which destroy tranquillity, woman is a real Devil.'

With such considerable opposition towards their sex, the vast majority of women in the Middle Ages were allowed little choice about the direction their lives would take⁶. Most had two alternatives: either marry and embrace a life without legal independence, where obedience to the will of one's husband was expected above all else, and where there was a high risk of dying in childbirth, or become a nun, and surrender themselves to a solitary life of prayer and work, enclosed within the cell of a monastery or abbey⁷. With these restrictions in mind, then, the layman's assumption that medieval women were without a voice is more understandable. In a society where men controlled government, justice, marriage and the Church, which woman would be foolish enough to speak out and risk incarceration or execution?

However, there were individual women who subverted the stereotypical, subservient image of their kind. In the remainder of this essay, I shall investigate three such women: the 12th century Benedictine abbess, Hildegard of Bingen, the early 15th century English Anchoress, Julian of Norwich, and the 14th century Venetian-born author, Christine de Pizan. By analysing their lives and writings, I shall illustrate how the voices of these women, isolated voices speaking out against the inferiority of their sex, are evidence of a distinct medieval feminism.

Margaret Walters is one of many to suggest that the first European women to speak out for themselves and for their sex, women such as Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich, did so within a religious framework, and in religious terms⁸. Hildegard of Bingen was an extraordinary woman. At an early age, some have speculated around 8, she started to have

⁴ Bovey, A, *Medieval Realms: Women*. Available: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/historiccitizen/medieval/women2/medievalwomen.html>. Last accessed 20th April 2012

⁵ 1 Tim. 2:11-15.

⁶ Bovey, A, *Medieval Realms: Women*. Available: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/historiccitizen/medieval/women2/medievalwomen.html>. Last accessed 20th April 2012.

⁷ Bovey, A, *Medieval Realms: Women*. Available: <http://www.bl.uk/learning/historiccitizen/medieval/women2/medievalwomen.html>. Last accessed 20th April 2012.

⁸ Walters, W, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, p6, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

visions and her parents offered her as an oblate to the Church. While for some this would have seemed like a form of imprisonment, leading a life that was more comparable to solitary confinement, for Hildegard, the life of the convent seems to have been genuinely fulfilling⁹. For, within her monastery of Disibodenberg in Germany, Hildegard was offered the freedom to read and write and develop her own distinct voice, communicating and interpreting what she experienced to those who lived and worked with her.

Hildegard can be seen as a feminist figure, because her actions seemed to undermine the restrictions and conventions that generally applied to the majority of her sex. The major medieval liberal arts were preaching, letter writing, and poetry and Hildegard involved herself in all three, producing a prolific collection of work that, to this day, has yet to be fully collated and analysed. This in itself, an instance of a woman reading, writing, and speaking in public about complex religious ideas, at a time when education was poor and generally awarded only to men, is shocking. But what is even more astounding is that this woman, at the age of 60, conducted preaching tours around the whole German Empire, when the Church explicitly forbade women to do so. She defied those male theologians such as the Dominican Giordano da Pisa, who declared that 'Not everyone is granted the office of preaching, which is above all forbidden to women altogether and forever (though we must note that Giordano was writing a little later than Hildegard).'¹⁰

In addition to this, Hildegard's visions and writings gained such renown that she was consulted by many important religious and secular figures, including two popes, Eugene III and Anastasius IV, the statesman Abbot Sugger, and even the German emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. In Hildegard, then, we see a powerful woman, whose intellect and influence were on a par with the leading ecclesiastical figures of the age, and who, by taking on roles reserved almost entirely for men, challenged the stereotypical image of her sex. I would argue that this makes her distinctly feminist.

Moreover, Hildegard's 'feminism' can also be detected in her writing, and especially in the way she uses womanly, and specifically maternal, imagery in her interpretations of religious texts: in one work she writes, 'God showed me his grace again, as... when a mother offers her weeping child milk.'¹¹ Furthermore, in her discussion of the role and image of Eve, what Hildegard stresses, unlike many of her contemporaries, is not Eve's role in the birth of 'Original Sin', but rather her role as mother, the giver of life, the 'mother of all the living.' In fact, Hildegard goes even further. In her exegesis of Revelation 12, she goes against tradition, magnifying the role played by the Devil in the Fall:

The ancient dragon, seeing that he had lost the place where he wanted to set up his throne... sharpened his wrath against the woman, because he recognized that her childbearing was the root of the whole human race. Hating her mightily, he said to himself that he would never cease to pursue her until he drowned her in the sea.¹²

⁹ Walters, W., *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, p6, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.
¹⁰ Giordano da Pisa, *Prediche sulla Genesi recitate in Firenze nel 1304*, p17, ed. Domenico Moreni (Florence: Maghiari, 1830).
¹¹ As quoted in: Walters, W., *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, p7, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.
¹² As quoted in: Thompson, A., *Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and Priesthood*, Church History, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), p356.

To suggest that the reason the Devil chose to tempt Eve, because of envy of her and her pre-destined role to be the mother of all living beings, is seemingly an attempt to mitigate Eve's culpability and, by extension, the culpability of her sex. Hildegard's imaginative interpretation of this passage is again a subversion of the stereotypical image of her kind, and we can argue, therefore, that she is expressing distinctly feminist ideas.

However, we must note that Hildegard never openly criticized the misogyny of her society in her writing, as Christine de Pizan did two centuries later, but what we can see is that her interpretations of the Bible placed a great focus on the equality of men and women, and on the dignity of a woman's role, a role that works alongside the role of man and that has equal importance in society. Augustine Thompson has noted that Hildegard, in writing about procreation, misquotes a passage from the Bible, saying that 'Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman'.¹³ Assuming that this misquote is intentional, Hildegard's message is clear: that men and women occupy complementary roles, and that, for procreation at least, both are equally important. In her *Liber divinorum operum*, she declares that

man and woman are joined to each other so that the work of one happens through the other, because the man would not be called man without woman, nor woman be called woman without man... Neither could exist without the other.¹⁴

So, though Hildegard was never openly critical of the chauvinistic stance of her society, we can see that she did advocate equality and respect for her sex, and this is an idea that is

Julian of Norwich, a late 14th/early 15th century English anchoress and mystic, lived a far simpler conventual life than Hildegard of Bingen. She never undertook immense preaching tours across Europe. But her visions were just as vivid and, as with Hildegard, they led her to question the role of women from within a religious framework. Julian also used maternal imagery in her interpretations of religious ideas and texts. But Julian's ideas were far more drastic and more explicit. Where Hildegard often used maternal imagery as similes to describe God's care and grace, Julian saw God as a being who embodied both paternal and maternal images. She maintained that the image of God as a mother had the same stature as that of God as a father.¹⁵ She wrote that 'As truly as God is our father, so truly is God our mother'.¹⁶ She develops this idea further, relating how Christ is himself

the kind, loving mother who knows and recognises the need of her child, and carefully watches over it. The mother can give her child milk to suck, but our dear mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and he does so most generously and most tenderly...¹⁷

¹³ As quoted in: Thompson, A., *Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and Priesthood*, Church History, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), p357.
¹⁴ As quoted in: Thompson, A., *Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and Priesthood*, Church History, Vol. 63, No. 3 (Sep., 1994), p357.
¹⁵ McNamer, S., *The Exploratory Image: God as Mother in Julian of Norwich's Revelations of Divine Love*, *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (March 1989), p21.
¹⁶ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, p296, ed. Edmund Colledge, James Walsh, Paulist Press, 1978
¹⁷ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, p62, ed. Elizabeth Spearing, transl. A.C. Spearing, Penguin UK, 1998.

clear point.

focused point.

equal + judgement.

culpability + judgement.

Julian's ideas about the femininity of God, and this image of God as both mother and father, challenged the medieval perception that women were inferior beings. Julian's perception of God raised women from being merely symbols of sinfulness, depravity and culpability, to symbols of divinity and affection. Her ideas suggested that man and woman were equals.

What is even more interesting about Julian, within the context of our discussion about feminism in the Middle Ages, is her reinterpretation of the Fall. In a vision she experienced on 13th May 1373, Julian imagined two characters, a lord and a servant, representing God and Adam respectively. Sent on a mission by the lord, the servant accidentally falls into a dell, and is gravely injured (thereby falling into sin) and becomes powerless to fulfil his master's request. Julian tells us that the lord watches the event from afar and doesn't blame him for the unfortunate situation.

This parable is extraordinary, in a feminist context at least, because, in this reimagining of the Fall, Eve is not tempted. Here, we can see that Eve is not responsible for 'Original Sin'. In fact, here, Eve plays no part at all. By removing her from the parable and making Adam the representative of all mankind, Julian also removed the justification given for the subjugation or, perhaps more appropriately, relegation of women within the Church and the rest of medieval Europe. Julian of Norwich can be seen as evidence for feminism in the Middle Ages because she, like Hildegard, expressed ideas that defied the stereotype of her sex at the time and undermined the misogyny that seemed to pervade the Western world.

Of the three women I have chosen to investigate in this essay, it is the 15th century Venetian, Christine de Pizan, who gives us the greatest, or rather the clearest, example of feminism and of feminist literature in this period. Like Hildegard of Bingen, she lived a life that defied the limitations of medieval European society. Married at the age of 15, she was left a widow with three children by the time she was 25. She was unique amongst European women because she was one of the first to earn a living through her writing alone, using this money to support her mother as well as her children, and it was by living by the pen that she was able to overcome her grief at the loss of her husband, Etienne de Castel, in 1389. Instead of remarrying, something that was certainly expected of her by her contemporaries, she put herself through an intensive programme of study, realising that she had to educate herself if she was to survive in medieval society. We must note her prolificacy: she completed over 40 works in her lifetime, and sent these to various members of the court, receiving commission in return. Christine's image, one of intelligence and independence and strength in the face of adversity and despair, is undoubtedly feminist, for it does not conform to the typical medieval perception of her sex.

What is most interesting for us in our investigation of feminism in the Middle Ages, however, is that within her writing, she explicitly confronted and criticised the misogyny of 15th century Europe. In an effort to end the vilification of women, for example, in her *Querelle du Roman de la Rose* she debated and challenged parts of one of the most admired, and most popular, medieval French allegorical poems, in which women were portrayed as weak, inferior beings, seemingly obsessed only with frivolity. In this debate, Christine interestingly masks her criticism of this perception of women by adopting a fake, womanly frailty.

Furthermore, in her most famous work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine writes an impassioned plea for her sex, addressing the major concerns about women that had been raised by the leading male scholars of European society. In this work she imagines a

supposedly

judgment

supposedly

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conversation between herself and three divine ladies, Reason, Justice and Rectitude, whom she questions about the difference between the two sexes.

At the start of the work, Christine despairs, realising a great disparity between the opinions of 'philosophers, poets and orators... unanimous in their view that female nature is wholly given up to vice' and the virtuous, intelligent characters, the 'princesses and countless ladies of all different social ranks who have shared their private and personal thoughts with me'.¹⁸ Christine is forced to conclude, however reluctantly, that, as so many great men cannot all be wrong, 'God has surely created a vile thing when He created woman'.¹⁹ But, in a dream, Christine is visited by Reason who reminds her that even philosophers make mistakes. Reason scolds Christine:

Return to your senses and stop worrying your head about such foolishness. Let me tell you that those who speak ill of women do more harm to themselves than they do to the women they actually slander.²⁰

Here, Christine presents her reader with a revolutionary, and undoubtedly feminist, stance because she deliberately challenges the supremacy of the structure that is medieval male scholarship. She undermines man's supposed dominance and superiority over women, by promoting women as figures who are more than worthy of respect, rather than deriding them as inheritors and embodiments of Eve's sinfulness.

Reason calms the despairing Christine further and testifies towards the worth of Christine's sex by drawing on famous women from history, figures such as Lavinia, the daughter of Evander and wife of Aeneas, a woman possessed of supremely good sense, who held her kingdom together as regent following her husband's death, or the Greek woman Sappho, who is esteemed throughout the world as an 'extremely fine poet and philosopher'. At the end of the first section of the work, Reason concludes that 'God has never criticised the female sex more than the male sex', arguing that God views man and woman with equal importance, something that wouldn't seem out of place in the tracts of 19th and 20th century feminists.

What is most exciting about Christine's work, in my eyes at least, is that she explicitly addresses issues that feminists such as Wollstonecraft and Woolf were still talking about centuries later in their major polemic works. In particular she criticises the reasons used by many of her contemporaries for denying women the right to an education. Christine argues, using Lady Rectitude's voice, that:

There are absolutely no grounds for assuming that knowledge of moral disciplines, which actually inculcate virtue, would have a morally corrupting effect [on women].

¹⁸ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p2, ed. Rosalind Brown-Grant, transl. Rosalind Brown-Grant, Penguin UK, 1999.
¹⁹ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p3, ed. Rosalind Brown-Grant, transl. Rosalind Brown-Grant, Penguin UK, 1999.
²⁰ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p5, ed. Rosalind Brown-Grant, transl. Rosalind Brown-Grant, Penguin UK, 1999.

Indeed there's no doubt whatsoever that such forms of knowledge correct one's vices and improve one's morals²¹.

Christine again presents her reader with a groundbreaking, feminist idea, because to give women an education is to give them knowledge, and knowledge is truly powerful. Giving medieval woman an education would undoubtedly threaten male dominance in medieval society.

So, from our analysis of these three women and their writings, can we suggest that there is a distinct feminist literature in the Middle Ages? In my opinion, although these women

promoted ideas and perceptions of their sex that would be approved of by modern feminists, to label these women and their writings as 'feminist' would be to superimpose upon them an

identity of which they had no concept. We must recall again that feminism was a political

movement that only had its origins in the 19th century. In truth, it is a movement that has no place in the Middle Ages. But what we can suggest is that in writing about the nature and

role of their sex in society, these women, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, and

Christine de Pizan, and many more like them, prompted women to realise their potential,

resist male oppression and criticise misogynistic perceptions of their sex. We can suggest

that, though these women and their writing cannot be said to be truly feminist, they certainly

represented the beginnings of feminism and their writings the beginning of a feminist

literature.

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A solitary and awful place,

empty forest and virgin expanse.

Source very well evaluated - perspective

understood - perhaps a little more insight

have been made of the historical context.

²¹ Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, p40, ed. Rosalind Brown-Grant, transl. Rosalind Brown-Grant, Penguin UK, 1999