Female figures from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance

What do we know about medieval women, about their real lives? Hidden beneath what most men[1] have written about them, their appearance is reduced to fleeting forms, to images in illuminations or stained-glass windows, such as Isolde the blonde, the golden-haired Flamenca,[2] or Douceline,[3] the Provençal Beguine. Their voices? Almost inaudible. Whether goddesses, madonnas or witches, women then made their entry in a history of representations.[4]

The rediscovery of Aristotle in the Middle Ages had a major influence on thinkers of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. A long-lasting division of spaces and functions between domestic and public spheres emerged. This division took hold based on the physical nature of masculinity and femininity. Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–1430), outraged at having been born a woman, spoke of herself and others "as if Nature had given birth to monsters" and blamed God. The way men looked at women was the source of constraints that shaped their place in society and in written works. Obedience, temperance, chastity... But many other features can be seen in the works of poets and musicians.

From the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, women dared make their voices heard which elicited numerous reactions that this recording brings to life: amazement and admiration, but also mistrust and increased control by the established holders of knowledge and the power to speak. The challenge of this recording is to give voice to these women, in a more or less roundabout way, in order to shed new light on the traditional meaning of the texts that the ensemble has chosen to perform, and, indirectly, on the women who wrote or inspired them, thereby transforming them from objects to subjects.

What remains of these faceless "fair" ladies, reduced to "beautiful bodies with fresh colours", ordered by the clerical and feudal culture of the time to preserve their "honour" while accepting, or being forced to accept, the courtship and the judgement of men? The famous words attributed to François I are still engraved on a window of his château at Chenonceau: "Often women vary / He who trusts them is a fool."

A chantar m'er de so qu'eu no volria

At the time of the troubadours and *fin'amor,* or "courtly love", one woman's complaint proves heart-rending here in the Occitan song of the Comtessa de Dia – famous and poignant, unique in its genre. It is all the more precious as we rarely see the name of a twelfth-century female author – just a title, in fact, because no one has identified this countess or her handsome, fickle lover, to whom she directs terrible reproaches. A far cry from the dream lady that Bernart de Ventadorn, her contemporary, wanted to see as his equal "in desire and pleasure", while complaining about women who are "all the same", attractive but deceptive.

Santa Maria leva

One of the 427 thirteenth-century *Cantigas de Santa María*, in Galician-Portuguese, composed in the circle of King Alfonso X the Wise, presents the two women that the Church of the time placed in opposition, like the wise and foolish virgins in St. Matthew's Gospel (25, 1–13): Eve and Mary. Here, their femininity remains confined to a

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[1] Georges DUBY, *Dames du XIIe siècle*, 3 vol. (Paris: Gallimard, 1995–6).

[2] Heroine of the eponymous Occitan novel.

[3] Her *Vida* was written by one of her companions, a rare occurrence in the Middle Ages. See also *Voix de femmes au Moyen Âge. Savoir, mystique, poésie, amour, sorcellerie (XIIe-XVe siècle)*, ed. Danielle REGNIER-BOHLER (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2006), pp. 283–370.

[4] See the series *Histoire des femmes*, ed. GEORGES DUBY and MICHELLE PERROT, from the 1990s onwards.

stained-glass encounter: each of the two women is simply confronted with the image of the other. The Latin poets also knew how to play on the letters of their names, going from Eva to Ave, from carnal love to Marian worship, from guilt to salvation.

Honte, paour, doubtance de meffaire

This fourteenth-century *ballade* by Guillaume de Machaut – "shame, fright, fear", not only of committing a fault, but also of dishonouring oneself – depicts female life under male domination. And the author goes on to list the constraints to which the young medieval woman was subjected if "she wanted to duly preserve her honour", i.e. her body. Such was the straightjacket she was forced to wear.

La belle se siet au piet de la tour

Guillaume Dufay (c. 1400–1474) depicts "the belle sitting at the foot of the tower" as she tries to make her father – the man on whom she depends to choose a husband – heed her in a song whose topic is echoed in folklore: the fair maiden would rather die with her beloved, who is sentenced to be hanged, than live without him.

Santa Maria amar

Another *cantiga* suggests that the abbess, a devotee of the Virgin, is pregnant, due to the devil having led a man astray. The Virgin, however, comes to the aid of the woman who might be thought to have sinned, without judging her, and is far from condemning the poor woman, unlike her monastery companions. This is a brief glimpse into a life of seclusion, pressure and jealousy – an image of misguided feminine solidarity. While the bishop – the representative of male ecclesiastical power – to whom the abbess was handed over by the nuns, had her stripped, the Virgin saved the abbess's reputation and the child's life. A miracle, indisputably.

Medée fu en amer veritable

The anonymous author of this piece taken from the Chantilly Codex distorts the figures of legendary lovers to criticise his lady's disdain, like a plaintive and ultimately ridiculous lord of the past. The author must have drawn on a version of the *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure (twelfth-thirteenth centuries). From the twelfth century onwards, along with the refinement of morals sung by the courtly poets, a worried reflection on human love developed, focused from the outset on deception, as here, with the ephemeral couple formed by Medea and Jason, then on misfortune with Helen and Paris, and finally on inconstancy with the example of Briseida between her two successive suitors.

Phyton, le merveilleus serpent

We had fun choosing Phyton, Guillaume de Machaut's "marvellous serpent" and laughing with the lady who became a serpent like Mélusine (but here with seven heads, like the Beast of Revelation), and who shames the spurned lover – an allusion to the *ballade Honte, paour...* mentioned above. Were women monsters? A man says so here, and that is also what the moralists of the time wrote, while the aesthetics of cruelty, violence and laughter went against the courtly ideal. The tale entitled *La Fille du comte de Pontieu* (The Daughter of the Count of Pontieu) is a case in point, as are some of Marie de France's *lais* and Rutebeuf's *fabliau*, *La dame qui fait trois fois le tour de l'église* (The Lady who went round the church three times), which ends with the pithy quip: "When a wife has a fool for a husband, she does as she pleases with him."

O crudel donna

The siren has been a famous figure since Homer and Ulysses in the *Odyssey*: part woman and part fish in medieval representations, she tries to seduce men with the beauty of her face, but above all with her bewitching song, which lures them into deep, deadly abysses. This anonymous Italian author continues to bemoan female deception, using another mythical animal as a symbol for women, the unicorn. A Greek physician[5] from the fifth century BC described the unicorn as a wild white ass with a red head, a horn a foot and a half long, a swift and powerful animal, impossible to capture and very difficult to kill, associated with the lion for its aggressiveness. The curative virtues of various parts of the unicorn's body were also emphasized in the twelfth century by the great abbess and physician Hildegard von Bingen. According to Isidore of Seville: "If a virgin girl is placed before a unicorn, as the beast approaches, she may open her lap and it will lay its head there, with all ferocity put aside, and thus, lulled and disarmed, it may be captured." The allusion is clearly to male fantasy.

Ha, Fortune, trop as vers moy grant tort

Finally, an anonymous *ballade*, only one stanza of which appears in the Chantilly Codex, explains misfortune by the ill fate that befell the lover. A divinity of destiny in ancient times, Fortune holds the rudder of human life, indifferent to the fate of each individual.

Such were the images of the bustling Middle Ages, when the Church was instituting Christian marriage as a sacrament. The female body was at the heart of this history of representations as an instrument of perdition and an indelible sign of original sin. The love sung by poets, whether in the *oc*, *oïl* or *sì*[6] language, according to Dante's classification in his Latin treatise *De vulgari eloquentia* (1303), is rarely that experienced by women, with the exception here of the Comtessa de Dia and the "belle" at the foot of the tower. The selected texts give us the opportunity to hear real women express themselves through the words of men, as if in filigree: frivolous, amorous, grieving, wise or cunning, in the end totally human, and seemingly close to us.

This programme offers a literary and mystical concert, far from the distorted image of an idealised or caricatural woman, and lets hidden, even stifled voices emerge. "There is no such thing as happy love," they seem to be saying.

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Translated by Dennis Collins

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[5] Ctesias of Cnidus, in *Indica*.

[6] The words for "yes" in Occitan, Old French, and Italian (and Iberian languages).