

0:22

Medieval towns were places of freedom. Anyone possessing the rights of citizenship could achieve prosperity by means of hard work and ingenuity. To some extent this was also true of women. They were active in all walks of life.

Title: Women, Progress and Prejudice

0:51

Medieval women were represented in all skilled trades and branches of commerce. In this way they achieved a degree of independence. They had little in common with the biblical image of women.

1:07

In the Bible women are temptresses, luring men into sinful ways with their beauty.

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Many suggest that this uncomplimentary view of women goes back to the story of Creation. God created Eve from one of Adam's ribs. She was abominated for persuading Adam to sample the fruits of the tree of knowledge.

1:43

Eve was devious and deceitful and was frequently portrayed as a serpent. Original sin and banishment from the Garden of Eden was all the fault of Eve, the First Woman.

2:01

But servant girls working in the households of medieval craftsmen were rarely accused of such things. Like the craftsman's wife and his children, servant girls and journeymen were considered part of the family. They all lived and worked under the same roof.

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The family was a team of workers. In the Middle Ages it was the economic and social unit that held civic society together. Frequently several generations lived together. Family members too old to work were cared for by the younger generation.

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The woman of the house was in charge of the servants.

2:58

Her husband, the master craftsman, was head of the household. He represented her in all matters outside the home.

3:08

All the members of the household sat at the same table and ate the same food because they were dependent on one another.

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In civic society they could only survive economically by acting as a family and working as a team.

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Love matches were rare. Women usually married for financial reasons.

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Marriage had to pay off for the families concerned. Daughters were rarely asked for their opinion. Husbands were the statutory guardians of their wives, who were legally and financially dependent on them.

4:07

Most women in the towns worked for a living.
Many were employed in their husbands' workshops.

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Women even did very strenuous jobs, for example as blacksmiths.

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The textile trade was dominated by women. Many of them earned a living with this kind of work. Here we see a woman hackling hemp fibres.

4:42

Then the fibres were wound them round a spindle and spun into yarn.

4:51

Women produced wool, wove material and sewed clothing.

5:02

Frequently they had workshops of their own. In larger towns there were even master craftswomen in the textile trade with guilds of their own.

5:15

But financial matters were supervised by men.

5:23

Midwifery was another exclusively female profession.
Delivering babies was a woman's job.
But if something went wrong, the midwives were rarely able to do much about it.
Many women died in childbirth.

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Life expectancy in general was low. On average, women only reached the age of 29.

6:00

Child mortality was also extremely high. Half of the children died before they were 14.

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Albrecht Dürer's family was no exception. By 1492 his mother had given birth to 18 children. 30 years later only three of them were still alive.

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Unmarried women had a hard time making a living. Many of them came to the town from rural areas, hoping to marry and thus to acquire citizens' rights.

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But they frequently stayed single because they had no dowry. So they ended up as servants in the houses of rich merchants or craftsmen.

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Their job was to run the household in return for board and lodging.

7:11

The servant girls' work was very tiring.
Labour-saving devices were almost unknown.
Everything had to be done by hand.

7:26

Cleaning the house and washing clothes were particularly exhausting jobs.

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Many single women unable to find work as servants resorted to prostitution, earning a living in the urban bathhouses.

7:59

Others tried to make ends meet by selling food or odds and ends. But there was usually so little money to be earned this way that they could hardly keep body and soul together.

8:26

Often they lived in dark, damp, unhygienic cellars, surrounded by dirt and vermin and without sanitation.

8:32

In late medieval towns one fifth of the inhabitants lived in conditions like these. In old age, when they could no longer work, many women had no choice but to go begging.

8:46

Upper-class women lived much more comfortably. At home they spent most of the time in their own apartments, where it was warm and cosy.

9:01

The apartments of patricians' wives were their own domain, the place where they led their private lives:

9:09 ... reading by candlelight,

9:14 ... looking after the children,

9:20 ... doing handiwork

9:24 ... or welcoming guests.

9:33

For many women, entering a convent was an attractive proposition. Here they were free of male tutelage but were still provided for in old age.

9:52

Most convents were founded by aristocratic women and initially only noblewomen were admitted.

10:05

But the convents soon opened their doors to women from the urban middle classes.

10:16

Rich citizens paid handsomely to have their unmarried daughters admitted to a convent.

10:32

Poorer women could only become lay sisters. They worked as servants to the regular nuns.

10:51

Though life in the convent was also subject to many rules, it also gave women opportunities they would not have enjoyed in ordinary town life.

11:03

They could pursue their education and devote themselves to the study of theological and philosophical works.

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And though convent life meant leaving behind worldly things, it also saved them from being married to a man they did not love.

11:40

The nuns spent most of the day in worship and prayer. They assembled in the church for religious services seven times a day, the first at two in the morning, the last at eight o'clock in the evening.

12:07

Five hours of the day were devoted to work.

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Manual labour was an integral part of religious self-denial.

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Nuns were the first women to write books.

12:32

They passed on their knowledge to the novices and pupils of the convent schools.

12:38

They taught reading and writing.

12:44

They copied books and adorned them with beautiful illustrations.

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By the late Middle Ages piety was on the decline. Donations had made many convents so wealthy that asset management became their main concern.

13:07

For that reason many convents were dissolved in the Reformation.

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The new age also brought many changes for women outside the convents. Economic crises severely restricted their potential. Gradually women were excluded from the world of work and had to be content to stay at home and play the role of wives and mothers.