

A Colourful Tapestry: The Work Women Did

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES TO TEACHERS

As Henrietta Leyser notes in *Medieval Women—A Social History of Women in England 450–1500*, while women are no longer in danger of being completely left out of history, many nineteenth century attitudes still mar the way teachers and students “see” European Medieval women. Although it is certainly true that in political, social and economic life, Medieval women were not formally the equals of men, the popular notion that women were restricted only to household and field tasks on peasant holdings is incorrect. Rather, women wove and were woven into a vast, variegated tapestry of work. For example, women laboured as brewsters, laundresses, bakers, dairymaids, mowers, servants, embroiderers, weavers, butchers, goldsmiths and ironmongers, to name just a sampling of their tasks. Additionally, lifestyles during the Medieval period were exceptionally diverse (Boulding, 1976), a reality that makes it difficult to “pin down” women as a simple category. Class, marital status, religious, rural-urban considerations, and an emerging, rigidified gender division of labour were all at play. Social history which seeks to reveal the life experiences of people throughout history at every rung on the social ladder, has been particularly fruitful for women. Stereotypes are exposed and more interesting, multi-dimensional people appear. This is especially true for the women of the European Medieval period, who must have grown accustomed to languishing in texts as variations on very limited themes: stooped peasants, grim nuns, scheming queens and, rarely, those, such as Joan of Arc, who aspired to sainthood.

This unit is self-contained and does not require additional materials other than the texts that are being used in the classroom to establish a general familiarity with the period. Short visits to the library, especially if students undertake extension activities, may be helpful. The unit on Medieval Women by Judith Coffin, published in “The Bookmark,” (March 1994, Volume 35 Number 3) the journal of the BC Teacher-Librarians Association and available through BCTF Lesson Aides, is also extremely useful. As well, there are many readable works of scholarship about Medieval European women which have been published recently. All have sections on women at work and all remind readers that work in the period from 450 of the Common Era (CE) through 1450 CE, is work that was performed in the countryside. Until just over 200 years ago, 90 percent of Europeans lived in and around rural villages and the work that they did was rooted directly and immediately in the land. The value of women's labour in that context has never been calculated and, until feminist historians began to pay attention to it, was largely ignored. If the lives of peasant women still living during the twenti-

eth century are any indication of the burden borne by women of the same class during the Medieval era, it was a heavy one indeed, and more than equal to that borne by men.

LESSONS 5 TO 10—GRADE 8

PRESCRIBED LEARNING OUTCOMES

- identify and clarify a problem, an issue, or an inquiry.
- gather and organize a body of information from primary and secondary print and non-print sources, including electronic sources.
- interpret and evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources.
- compare daily life, family structures, and gender roles in a variety of civilizations.
- describe how societies preserve identity, transmit culture, and adapt to change.
- demonstrate understanding of the tension between individual rights and the responsibilities of citizens in a variety of civilizations.
- compare basic economic systems and different forms of exchange.
- compare the changing nature of labour in rural and urban environments.
- construct, interpret, and use graphs, tables, grids, scales, legends, and various types of maps.
- identify factors that influence the development and decline of world civilizations.
- compare daily life, family structures, and gender roles in a variety of civilizations.
- analyze the effect of commerce on trade routes, settlement patterns, and cultural exchanges.