

UNIT SUMMATION

As a general survey wrap-up, teachers may wish to give an 'open book' quiz at the conclusion of the unit, or students could prepare for a 'closed book' approach.

QUESTIONS FOR GENERAL SUMMARY

General Background, the Manor and the Towns

1. What jobs done by women in the family economy were also done for wages in the market economy?

2. Why were women not paid wages for their family economy jobs? _____

3. What reasons might a rural husband—whether squire or peasant—give for not paying wages to his wife?

4. What reasons might a prosperous guild master give for paying women workers lower wages than those paid to men? _____

5. Women's wage rates sharply declined in the later Medieval period at the same time as two other developments. What were they? _____

6. Even though there were more women than men living in many towns at certain times after 1350, women were gradually excluded from a number of occupations. Give some reasons that might explain this development. _____

7. What was the job of the midwife? _____

8. What happened to the status of the midwife after 1600? Why? _____

9. What were some of the tasks done by "camp followers"? _____

10. Which occupations of Medieval townswomen are ones that today are organized into a well-known union? What is the name of that union? _____

GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

The Medieval Period in Europe extends from about 450 of the Common Era (CE) until about 1450 CE. These dates mark the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Renaissance respectively. At one time, this period was popularly known as the Dark Ages because some scholars and students believed that for one thousand years after the disintegration of the old Roman Empire, not a great deal of learning, inventiveness, discovery, or exciting artistic activity occurred in Europe. In the last hundred years, however, historians have altered that view, peeling back layers of research material to illuminate a brighter, more complicated past than was previously known.

During the Medieval Period, as now, women made up half the world and, of course, did at least half the work. Unfortunately, the term *dark age* could easily be applied to general knowledge about the situation of women in Europe during that one-thousand-year span of time. Very recently, though, since about 1970, more women historians, with specific interests in the history of women, have researched and written about the lives of Medieval women. Of particular fascination has been the topic of women at work. Historians have examined the kinds of work women did, where and when they did it and how they carried out that work. The “why” of women’s work at the time, is, on the surface at least, fairly clear. Without women’s labour, children would not have been born and raised, fields would not have been sown and harvested, animals would not have been cared for, clothing would not have been made or cleaned, and food would not have been prepared. This list of jobs concentrated in the *family economy*, although far from complete, makes clear the diversity and importance of women’s activities. Those activities extended in profusion beyond the confines of the home for much of the Medieval period. Even though the institutions of work in the *market economy*, particularly the guilds, were overwhelmingly male, such “town work” employed women in a startling array of jobs. From working with gold to tanning leather, women worked. And, without doubt, whether performed in well-appointed manor houses, modest village cottages, crowded town homes, or the fields that bordered them, women’s work was *socially necessary*. As historian James Farr remarks, “Female participation in the economy...was certainly not confined to the household. Or rather, we should say that the household economy was closely and dynamically connected to the market economy and so that a female role in the ‘family economy’ often meant a pronounced contribution to the market economy itself.” (107–108)

By the 14th century (the 1300s), European society was experiencing changes that were slow and small at first. Then, within 300 years, these small drops of change became a great torrent. Social mobility grew, and gradually, more and more people began to move around the countryside, increasingly settling in towns. The 1347 Black Death epidemic that killed about a third of the entire population of Europe, multiplied the numbers of moving women and swelled their numbers in English towns so that, in some places, women outnumbered men. From the 14th century right through the 17th century, in European towns overall, there were between 20 and 30% more women than men (Zinsser p. 357). In the towns, both women and men found work in the manufactories that had grown from small workshops. Some of the earliest “big factories” on the European continent were in the textiles industry, where thousands of “bluenails” worked. This descriptive term was used to identify workers whose fingernails had turned blue from the dyes used. At about the time that factories were growing in size, with greater numbers of workers and increasing production, many of the great European guilds began to exclude women from membership. Such rules were often ignored. For example, even though women were excluded from the dyer guilds in Flanders, many women worked as dyers there, “...some even owning dying enterprises.” (110, Farr)

THE MANOR

Most Europeans in the Medieval period lived in small villages in the countryside. The villages were usually attached to a manor house, where the local gentry resided. Women's lives in the manor house were organized hierarchically, with a mistress overseeing the work of many labourers.

The Mistress—supervises the following tasks:

1. Caring for domestic animals and poultry.
2. Making butter and cheese.
3. Butchering livestock for consumption in the manor and for sale at the market.
4. Tending the kitchen garden.
5. Preparing and preserving food.
6. Organizing spinning, weaving and sewing.
7. Teaching domestic skills to young women boarding at the manor.

In addition, as this lengthy quotation from Elise Boulding's study of women throughout history illustrates, the mistress of the manor occasionally extended her activities.

Enterprising women could expand the domestic workshops of the manor houses beyond the usual dozen women and girls. In the towns of northern Europe these manor house ladies sometimes supervised a number of workrooms where women worked at making silk and wool cloth. Such supervision usually entailed maintaining dormitories where women "of all conditions and ages" could live, although occasionally workers would come in by the day. These establishments were in fact pre-industrial factories. (pp. 481–482)

Peasant Women

The Married and the Unmarried

The peasantry was a large class of people in Europe who, as tenants, farmed small plots of land owned by the local gentry. In feudal times, the peasantry (in some areas known as serfs) also owed to the lord certain duties. As this very restrictive system changed, some peasants specialized in the tasks they had done in their homes, on the land and for the lord. For **married peasant women** in England in the 14th century, there was no strict male-female division of labour and there were no tasks a peasant woman might not be called on to perform (Leyser, p 144). Some of the tasks that they did were:

1. Milking cows
2. Shearing sheep
3. Caring for poultry and for pigs
4. Growing vegetables and herbs,
5. Baking bread in the communal oven
6. Plowing and harvesting the fields
7. Making ale

In each village, making ale (done by the brewster or ale-wife) was an extremely important task. Ale, a fermented beverage that in Medieval England had the consistency of watery porridge, is made with barley. Most people, including children, drank ale. Water was considered to be unhealthy and actually it often was—water quality was suspect at best. Ale making was arduous, time consuming work, and, while most was done by women, women were almost never employed as ale-tasters, who maintained standards and granted licenses. That job, which had higher status than making the ale, was the preserve of men.

Single women in villages were most often employed as day labourers or "in service." Working "in-service" (living as a servant in the home of a family not your own) may have entailed a main responsibility as a dairymaid

or a laundress. Many tasks which involved water were a main responsibility of women. Hauling water, bathing infants, cooking with boiling water, and cleaning all had to be done! "Washing in particular seems to be a job only done by women." (Leyser, 151) "**Cottager women**" worked as day labourers and tended their own gardens. Sometimes, women day or wage labourers performed seasonal or casual tasks. Among these were:

1. Haymaking
2. Mowing
3. Breaking stones for road-mending

In addition, women rarely left their modest homes. The following long quotation (Leyser 150–151) describes a typical peasant house in Medieval Germany.

The hearth is situated almost in the centre of the house, and is so placed that the peasant's wife, who spends most of her time sitting and working there can see everything at once. No other type of building has such an ideal yet comfortable vantage point. Without having to get up from her chair, she can overlook three doors, greet people entering the house, offer them a seat, while keeping an eye on her children, servants, horses and cows, tending cellars and bedrooms, and get on with her spinning and cooking.

As is obvious, the peasant woman householder had a central role to play, even if the family didn't have many possessions.

THE TOWNS

Until the middle of the 17th century (the 1600s), European towns were not very populous, most people lived and worked in the countryside. But, towns were always centres of manufacturing and trade. And, in the towns, a key institution for organizing, standardizing and protecting craft work was the Guild. Guilds are very old institutions and they have changed much over time. Elise Boulding points out that "There is a persistent myth that women were equal with men in the original guilds, and were gradually pushed out by industrialization." (486).

In reality, there were two kinds of guilds. The **merchant guilds**, dating from the 12th century (the 1100s) included people from many different crafts focussed on selling their wares. Women were members of these guilds but never enjoyed the same status as did men. The **craft guilds** evolved as demand for special kinds of products—*crafts*—increased. Women were important in these organizations, too, "... both as business partners and workshop helpers." (Boulding, p. 486). As in the merchant guilds, however, women in the craft guilds did not have equal rights and privileges with the men. In fact, in guilds with both female and male membership, women were rarely permitted to train as apprentices. The most common way for a young woman to become involved with a guild was through marriage. By marrying a man with guild membership, a servant girl who had managed to save sufficient funds to accumulate a dowry could raise her social status. As a guildsman's wife, she was responsible for managing a household, caring for children, dealing with accounts, and aiding her husband in the pursuit of his craft. Small families were the rule and, when compared with families of similar status in the 20th century, had few possessions and even fewer luxuries.

There were some "women only" guilds throughout the European continent. A case in point is Paris in the 13th century (the 1200s) where there are records of 15 all-women guilds that routinely apprenticed women who could then proceed through training to become guild mistresses. A mistress was the equivalent of a master; skilled, fully trained and independent. There were also all-women guilds in England. Despite these associations, however, most townswomen were excluded from valuable skills training and, even in small home workshops, women's additional responsibilities in childbearing and housework took up much time. Of course, inferior training meant low wages. In the workshops of Europe, women's salaries were set as a proportion of men's—from three quarters to one-half, and this difference increased as factories grew in size and more people moved from the countryside into the cities.

Skilled working women in England in the Middle Ages had a number of jobs open to them. The poll-tax returns from Oxford in 1380 show that women were employed in the following crafts:

Occupation	Numbers of Women
SPINSTER	37
SHAPESTER	11
TAPSTER	9
SUTRICE	3

The following types of work were open to women or men and the most likely townswomen to be employed in them were married. Merchants were traders representing all social and economic classes, from street hawkers to shopkeepers.

**Unrestricted on Grounds of Gender:
Married Women in Towns**

- huckster selling ale, bread, fish
- armourer
- book-binder

- merchant
- fletcher
- carrying thatch, turves or tiles
- loading wool onto ships
- saddler

All Women Guilds

- silk—in England, the silk trade was restricted to women for some time
- embroidery
- millinery
- special garments

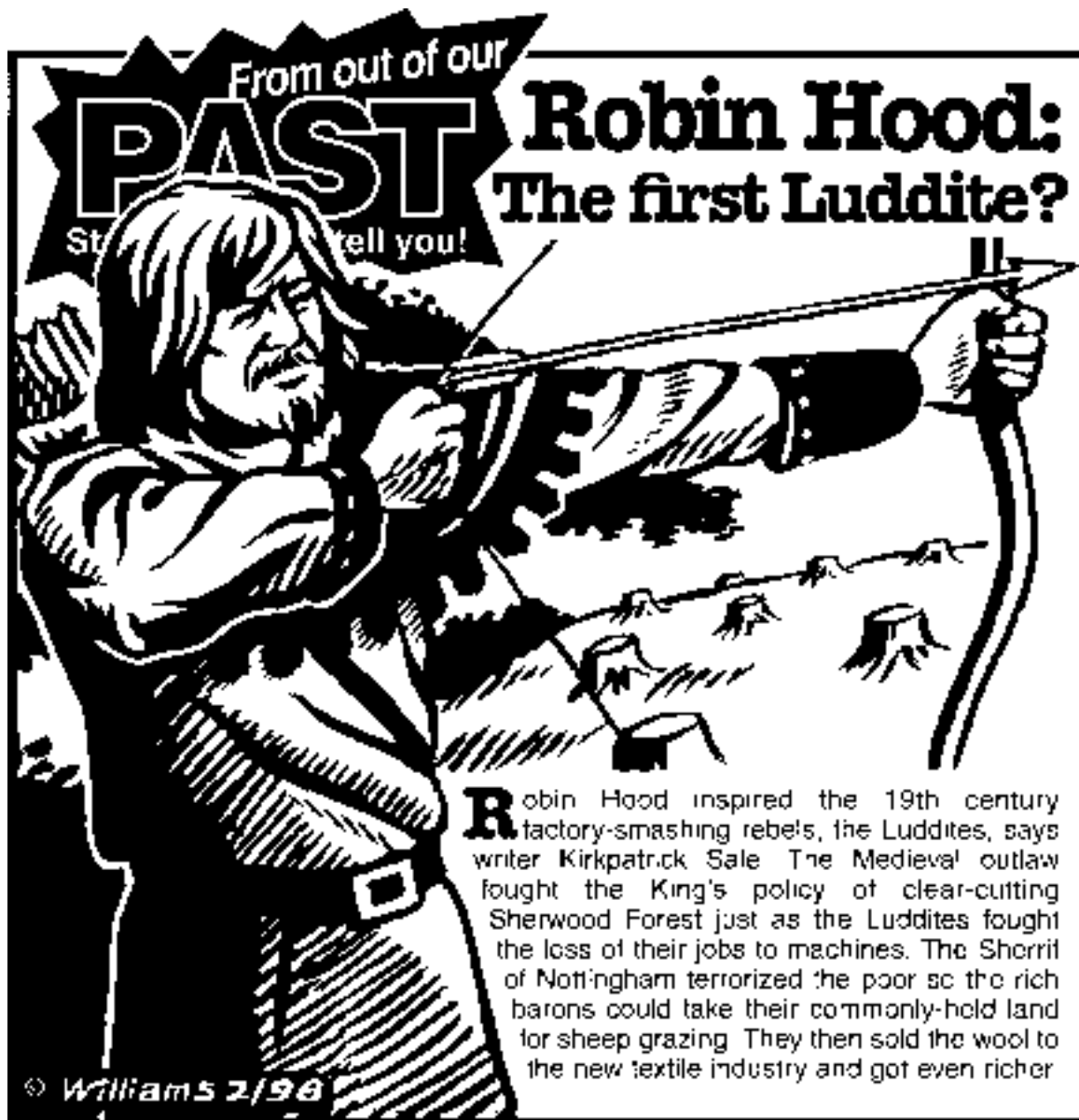
Another craft open to women was weaving, although most weaving was done by men, partly because looms were costly. Poor women often engaged in the following textile and garment trades. Such female domination seems to be an ancient tradition, extending to the present day. A famous, mostly women, union is the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union.

- spinning, carding and combing wool
- currying leather
- sewing up shoes and gloves
- knitting caps
- making gloves

Just as peasant women did hard, manual labour, so too did poor working townswomen. "Women carried stones, brought water for the mortar mixes, bunched thatch for roofs, collected moss and bracken to cushion the roof tiles of houses" (Zinsser, p.361). Women also carried sand and bricks, cleaned out latrines, and dug ditches. A strong sense of self and family preservation as well as willingness to sweat and strain led poor women into every sort of service work imaginable! There were women pedlars, selling goods as diverse second hand clothes, tallow and wheat from door to door. In the textile industries—where there were considerable numbers of women—they tatted lace, spun thread and carded linen and wool.

By the 17th century, occupations such as silk-weaving that had been dominated by women were controlled by men. Other jobs which had once included women also changed. In the English town of York, men replaced women who had been surgeons. Women doctors had been especially influential in Italy, in university towns such as Salerno, where educated women workers held real power. But by the 1600s, however, women doctors had disappeared. Male doctors had taken over and, although they were trained in universities, they were not really knowledgeable about the science of medicine or about matters of hygiene! Women successfully retained their dominance in midwifery, the long-respected occupation of helping women give birth. At the same time, though, the status of and pay for this occupation was downgraded. Sheila Rowbotham, an English historian, has this to say: "The original disapproval of having a man at a birth was conveniently discarded by the rich and fashionable. Women midwives were confined to the poor." (p. 27) Only recently in British Columbia have midwives regained their status and recognition as skilled health workers.

Not all women in the towns of Medieval Europe were gainfully employed. Some townswomen were very poor and others, mainly those without the required permission to move into and trade from the towns, resorted to crime, including prostitution. Some of the poor were fined for moving illegally from town to town, others came before the court for gleaning in fields just outside the town walls, still others became "camp followers." These women moved across the countryside attached to armies, where they cooked, washed, dug trenches, and nursed wounded men.



Robin Hood inspired the 19th century factory-smashing rebels, the Luddites, says writer Kirkpatrick Sale. The Medieval outlaw fought the King's policy of clear-cutting Sherwood Forest just as the Luddites fought the loss of their jobs to machines. The Sheriff of Nottingham terrorized the poor so the rich barons could take their commonly-held land for sheep grazing. They then sold the wool to the new textile industry and got even richer.

