

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Young Historians Conference

Young Historians Conference 2014

Apr 29th, 9:00 AM - 10:15 AM

The Catholic Church: Shaping the Roles of Medieval Women

Ashley N. Just
Clackamas High School

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians>



Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Just, Ashley N., "The Catholic Church: Shaping the Roles of Medieval Women" (2014). *Young Historians Conference*. 16.

<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians/2014/oralpres/16>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Young Historians Conference by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Ashley N. Just

Balzer

Western Civ

The Catholic Church: Shaping the Roles of Medieval Women

It's no argument that Hollywood loves to sexualize and objectify women. Countless advertisements show scantily-clad women in provocative positions. Carl's Jr. recently went so far as to run a series of burger commercials featuring women in bikinis "sexily" eating burgers. Some advertisements try to convince men that their product will make gorgeous women desperate for them; others promise women that their product will make them more attractive to men. In the media, at least, a disproportionate number of women are portrayed seductively and/or objectified.

And yet, although men are applauded for their sexual conquests, women themselves are encouraged to remain chaste. This paradoxical connection between women and sexuality has its roots at least 1,000 years in the past, with the proliferating power of the Medieval Catholic Church.

In the Middle Ages, many members of the Church began to see sex and lust as a sin created during

The Fall. This led them to believe women--the descendants of Eve, cause of The Fall--were weak,

and prone to sexual sin (Bitel 104). The Church thus prompted women to remain chaste and subservient, not only to avoid their own sin, but also to prevent them from bringing men to sin. In

this way Christianity weakened the power and position of women in Medieval Europe by portraying them as weak temptresses more susceptible to sin, instead encouraging obedient, chaste,

and subservient behaviors.

After the emergence of Christianity with the preachings of Jesus of Nazareth around 28CE, the religion began to spread throughout the western world. The conversion of Constantine in 312CE was particularly influential, causing the conversion of the majority of Rome. From there, Christianity spread like the plague; "Gaul was largely Christian by 400, Ireland by 500, Italy and Spain Orthodox Christian rather than Arian by 60. The Anglo-Saxons converted in the seventh century, Germany during the eighth, Scandinavia not until after 1000" (Bitel 97). This was partially due to the fact that, until Islam appeared in western Europe in the eighth century, there was no significant opposition--no alternative religious organization or set of beliefs popular enough to rival the Church (Fouracre 157). This, coupled with the lack of separation of church and state in medieval times, gave the Church significant power over Medieval social ideology.

Separation of church and state is a modern concept in the context of history. In the Middle Ages, it was nonexistent. As Fouracre describes, "Imbued with wealth and power, church leaders were magnates on a par in wealth and social status with secular leaders" (157). Medieval society was a hierarchy, with the aristocracy ruling the political and social scene. Being elevated to the same social status as the aristocracy, the Church thus possessed significant power. Lower class society looked up to the aristocracy for political guidance and the Church for spiritual guidance--in combining the two, the Church came to rule society. Indeed, the King or Emperor often worked in close relationship with the Pope, relying upon the Church's backing and validation to receive the support of his subjects. This immense political and theological power allowed the policies of the

Church to become a major factor in social ideology, particularly in regard to women.

The Medieval Church was also closely involved in the formation of law and the activities of the courts. This allowed it to manipulate the law to fit what it was preaching--including matters of sexual conduct. In this way, the Church influenced common social practices of the Middle Ages (Fouracre 157). By making it illegal not to follow the teachings of the Church, the Church was able to shape the position of Medieval women through the image of them it presented. With such a broad reach throughout Western Europe and the power it possessed in the government systems, the philosophies of the Church were able to shape Medieval culture. What the Church said about women quickly became the way they were seen by the common people, which in turn shaped the expectations Medieval society had for women.

The Medieval Church was a major advocate for celibacy. This belief can be attributed, for the most part, to St. Augustine. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, St. Augustine lived a promiscuous life of sin. His conversion, however, saw a complete reversal of his philosophy in this regard. Augustine "became particularly upset by the act of coitus... Sexual lust, he argued, was an inevitable aftermath of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden" (Bullough 185-186). In drawing this comparison between sex and Original Sin, Augustine made a particularly powerful argument for celibacy. Lust did not exist in Eden--it was only after Original Sin and mankind's expulsion from the Garden that it came into existence (Bitel 104). Thus, if it didn't exist in paradise, it must be a sin, and a significant one if it was directly derived from Original

Sin. It was only through complete and total celibacy that this sin could be avoided. Augustine was

such an influential figure in the Church that he was canonized in 1303. As a result, his words carried great weight--philosophy was quickly adopted by the Church and other influential figures,

leading to its prominence in Christianity.

The concept of sex as sin was solidified by the late fifth century, with the publication of a whole system of penitential literature addressing sexual sins. The *Synod of North Britain* and the *Preface of St. Gildas on Penance* were primarily focused on addressing the sins of monks and clergy, however the *Synod of the Grove of Victory* and *Excepts from a Book of David* were more general, applying to common people as well as religious leaders (Bullough 187). Essentially, the books listed various sexual acts and the accompanying penance required to receive forgiveness.

The addition of set punishments thus made it clear to members of the Church that sex was a sin not

only in the eyes of a few significant religious leaders, but in the eyes of the Church as a whole.

The Medieval Church generally saw women as inherently weaker than men. As the philosopher Philo taught, "the male was superior to the female because he represented the more rational parts of the soul, while the female represented the less rational" (Bullough 188). Thus, though both men and women experienced lust, it was women who were generally unable to control

themselves. In their weakness, they led men into sin, harming not only their own salvation, but that

of the male society as well. Augustine expanded on this belief by arguing that women not only tempted men into sin, they were the sole cause of male lust. As Bitel describes it, "in Augustine's real world... men got erections because women inspired them. Women were not evilly sexual beings themselves but weak extensions of the male body" (104). As extensions of the male body,

women were not fully human. This made them weaker, and less capable of resisting their sexual urges, therefore leaving them more prone to acts of sexual sin (Bitel 104). As women gave in to their urges, they became temptresses. Too weak to control their sexuality, they flaunted it. Their

lack of control then made it more difficult for men to remain chaste and pious, surrounded as they

were by weak, sinful women.

In their weakness, women put both themselves and the male population at risk of sin. Thus,

if women were too weak to control their urges, it was the responsibility of the inherently stronger man to refuse their advances and help them stay on the path of chastity. Only through total celibacy, excluding acts of procreation while married, could women hope to achieve a superior state

of rationality and be elevated to the level of man (Bullough 189).

It was also during this time that Aristotelian biology became generally accepted. This theory

argued that "man is fertile and perfectly formed, and contributes soul to the offspring, whereas woman is infertile and deformed, and contributes body to the offspring" (Polinska 50). In other words, women provided children with the physical aspect of life, while men provided the spiritual

aspect. This widespread belief seems to argue that something is intrinsically wrong with women, calling them "deformed" and "a defective man". Further, it argues that women's roles in reproduction are limited to the physical--which the Church argued was ultimately insignificant in the grand scheme of life, and should be carefully controlled and restricted to prevent it coming between the worshipper and the Lord. Men, however, provided the incredibly important soul to the

child. The theory thus implies that women are less connected with spirituality and religion than men. Aristotelian biology once again suggested that women were naturally more sinful due to this

weakened connection, however it also added the concept that women should be submissive and subordinate to the superior gender due to their innate inferiority.

Ultimately, all of these arguments trace back to one immortalized woman: Eve. Eve was the

first sinner, eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and extending that sin to

Adam (Gen. 3.6). Eve was also the first woman, and as a result, many in the Medieval Church saw

all women as descendants of Eve, carrying with them the stain of her sin. Tertullian writes, "do you

not know that you are (each) an Eve?.. You are the devil's gateway... *you* are the first deserter of

the divine law... on account of *your* desert----that is, death----even the Son of God had to

die" (Tertullian). Eve, as a woman, was weak, and unable to resist temptation. In the eyes of the

Church, she was responsible for mankind's Fall. She tempted Adam into sin and disobeyed God--

for this she and all womankind as descendants of Eve were punished, collectively, with the pain of

childbirth (Gen. 3.16). Women's punishment for Eve's act thus tied them to her act of sin, making them carry the guilt of her sin and the same tendency toward sin that Eve possessed.

Thus, the view of women as the weaker sex is ultimately derived from Eve. Eve was created from one of Adam's ribs (Gen. 2.21-23). As such, she was again an extension of man and

not her own person, derived from just one small piece of man. Her origin also implied that she had

an obligation to be subservient and obedient to man. Eve and all women owed their existence both

to God and to Adam, for providing the rib from which they were created. The way for them to

repay this debt seemed to be obedience and subservience to the men in their lives, to make up for the loss they caused. As for the connection between sexuality and women, this can be described in

The Fall. As Augustine describes, lust arose only after mankind's Fall. If Eve caused the Fall, this

meant that sexual sin too was caused by her, and was therefore among the sins all women carried guilt for. As Tertullian wrote, women were just as guilty of Original Sin as Eve, and were therefore just as guilty of creating sexual sin as Eve. Only through celibacy could this inherited sin be lessened.

This portrayal of women as "susceptible to sin, inherently flawed, and in need of men's assistance against the weak powers of their bodies" (Polinska 49) is what limited the power and position women could achieve in Medieval society. The Medieval Church presented an image of women as incapable of governing. How could a woman lead society if she struggled just to control her own sexuality? She couldn't. As previously explained, Medieval society believed that it was more difficult for women to control their lust, thus it was the responsibility of the man to lead her along the path of celibacy. This made women spiritually dependent on men. In turn, this led to the expectation that women would be obedient and submissive to the men guiding them, accepting everything they were told. This portrayed them as second class citizens--servants to the men in charge of them. With this class position came a lack of power or influence; authority commands strength, which the Medieval Church asserted women lacked.

Further weakening the influence of women in society was the argument of women's

inherited sin. Women's implicit sexuality and tendency toward pleasure, derived from Eve, led them

to tempt men into sin in their lapses in virtue. If women were to have influence in society, this influence could be used to lead the entire empire or country into sin. Were she to possess power, her tempting and seduction could be extended across a wider range than the few men in her company. This would ultimately cause God to turn his favor from them, resulting in a wide assortment of struggles for the people, including disease, famine, war, and poverty. It was better for women to be invisible and focus on controlling their sexual urges through celibacy. As

Bullough writes, "the woman who could control her sexuality, even go so far as to denying her sex,

could enter on a higher plane of rationality equal to that of the male" (189). Woman should thus focus on the difficult task of denying her sexuality--even to the point of cross dressing, as some saints did to escape temptation and the sin of their sex (Bullough 190)--before she could hope to achieve any sort of influence near to that of a man. And in this act still, the power she was gaining

was not as a woman, but as a man.

There is an argument that the growth of Christianity in the Middle Ages improved the power of women rather than weakened it. Proponents of this argument insist that Christianity brought with it the requirement of equality, as both men and women were creations of God. As creations of God, they therefore had to be regarded as ultimately good, as all that God created was

good (Bullough 186). Although it's true that this does seem to be a constitutional argument of the Christian faith today, it was not the view that was held by the Medieval Church. The Church at this

time focused more on the aspects of the Bible that described women as feeble, and sinful--daughters of Eve. Tertullian's words, for example, as quoted earlier went so far as to blame

women

for the death of Jesus. It can be assumed that his logic was that Jesus died to free humanity of its sin, which was a direct result of Eve's Original Sin. What's more, he even goes as far as to say, "*you* are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack" (Tertullian). This seems to imply that women are worse even than the Devil. Eve persuaded Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit when the Devil lacked the courage to tempt him directly. This image of women clearly does not condone equality, rather, the complete opposite.

This view was not exclusive to men in the Church--women in the Church like St. Birgitta also advanced the view of an inferior, obedient woman who should not hold power. Birgitta accepted the traditional beliefs that expected subordination of women, and even went so far as to further beliefs in the inferiority of the female gender. Her life "was characterized by a refusal to sever the bonds with male authority. Her background placed both social and ecclesiastical limitations on her ability to conceive of possibilities for women apart from male structures." (Bechtold 100). Though she lived toward the end of the Middle Ages, her views are representative of those of many women of the Medieval Church. They accepted the doctrine they'd been taught since youth, that women were weak and the lesser sex, and their gender should therefore be denied (Bullough 190). Though one take on Christianity does argue for equality of all people, this was not the view the Medieval Catholic Church pressed.

The Medieval Church championed an image of women as weak and prone to the sin of lust, encouraging instead obedience to the men in their lives and a life of celibacy. This in turn diminished the ability of women of the time to maintain any respected form of power or influence.

Though this image was prevalent in the Middle Ages, it did not end with the time period. Many of

these beliefs extended through the Industrial Revolution and the Puritans' colonization of the New

World. In fact, many of these doctrines are still evident in the misogyny and objectification of women in the modern society. The Church's image of women as intrinsically sexual beings has stood the test of time--in the modern act of "slut-shaming," for example. Slut-shaming is the act of

criticizing a person for sexual behaviors deviating from traditional expectations for his or her gender, often aimed to make him or her feel guilty. In modern society, it's best seen in the way men

are rewarded for having multiple sexual encounters, while women are criticized, and labeled

"loose" and "sleazy". This expectation for women to control their sexual desires, but not men, is a

derivative of the Church's argument that women were the cause of sexual sin in both genders. It is

therefore their responsibility to remain chaste for both men and women. Media is particularly guilty

of the objectification of women; one look at Robin Thicke's music video for "Blurred Lines" is evidence enough. The video features topless women dancing around the singer, while he ogles them. The lyrics themselves are condoning of rape, describing how Thicke hates the supposed "blurred lines" of sexual consent (Thicke). The women in his video are presented as objects to provide men's pleasure, as opposed to intellectuals. Throughout the video, they do little more than

stand around looking pretty, jumping up and down. They've once again been reduced to their sexuality and made to be obedient to men, providing them pleasure whenever asked.

Some 1,000 years after the Middle Ages, the ideas presented by the Church still haunt

women in our society. While women have made astonishing steps forward in the last few years, we cannot assume that we've achieved total equality. We're close, but we still have things to improve on before women and men can truly stand as equals.

Works Consulted

- Bechtold, Joan. "St. Birgitta: The Disjunction Between Women and Ecclesiastical Male Power." Ed. Joan Bechtold, Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 88-102. Print.
- Bitel, Lisa M. *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1100*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.
- Bullough, Vern L. "Sex Education in Medieval Christianity." *The Journal of Sex Research* 13.3 (1977) : 185-196. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2013.
- Ferrante, Joan. "Public Postures and Private Maneuvers: Roles Medieval Women Play." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler, Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988. 213-229. Print.
- Fouracre, Paul. "Cultural Conformity and Social Conservatism in Early Medieval Europe." *History Workshop*. 33 (1992) : 155-159. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.
- Hodges, Laura F. "Noe's Wife: Type of Eve and Wakefield Spinner." *Equally in God's Image*. Ed. Joan Bechtold, Julia Bolton Holloway, Constance S. Wright. New York: Peter Lang, 1990. 30-36. Print.
- Polinska, Wioleta. "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16.1 (2000) : 45-62. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.
- Schulenburg, Jane Tibbetts. "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles." *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Mary Erler, Maryanne Kowaleski. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988. 102-125. Print.

Tertullian. "De Cultu Feminarium." *Documenta Catholica Omnia*. pg. 19-44. Web. 1 Dec. 2013.

Thicke, Robin. "Blurred Lines." *Blurred Lines*. Pharrell, 2013. Music Video.