Taking the muddle out of the Middle Ages **by Sophia Nugent-Siegal**

As the pervasiveness of fantasy and speculative fiction in popular culture attests, the Middle Ages, represented either historically or "re-imagined" (as in George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*), is all the rage nowadays. Yet for a period so embraced by pop-culture, what do we really know about it? Less than we think, it seems to me (as a student of history and long time SpecFic nerd), and certainly less than such a significant period in history deserves. The " facts" –or rather the stereotypes—seem clear. Well, there were lords and peasants, women were downtrodden and the church was all-powerful. However, while there is a grain of truth in all these statements, it can't be said to be a terribly large one, and the pejorative associations with the term " medieval" reflect both our misconceptions and the cultural imperative of modernism (and its bastard child, postmodernism) to equate the past with everything bad and the present with everything good.

For a start, there wasn't any class of people in Europe called "peasants" who possessed solidarity. There were serfs or bondsmen, free tenants, and minor landowners, all of whom farmed and would be lumped together by moderns looking at them as "peasants". The vast majority of the Medieval population was involved in food production, even the great lords being in a sense glorified farmers. The difference between a poor knight and a prosperous yeoman, for example, may never have been as gaping a caste chasm as you might imagine.

Moreover, there were always plenty of people who didn't fit into the feudal system at all. Medieval society also included merchants, traders, craftsmen and artisans, for example, who organized themselves into Guilds and aspired to the sort of freedoms granted the burghers of London, who elected their own mayor. The townsmen might have been a minority but they were an important minority, able to eject a government if it failed to keep their support—as the Londoners drove out the Empress Matilda.

Finally, the lords were not what we might imagine either. Just as the "peasants" were a variegated group, so the aristocracy saw vast differences amongst themselves. We think of the peasants kneeling before the nobles, but everyone but a king had to kneel to pay homage to their lord. Even princes bent the knee to their liege, as did the heir to the English throne who had to "do homage" to the French King for Normandy so long as the Crown and Duchy remained united. And, of course, even a king had to bow before the Church.

Which surely makes the Church all-powerful, right? In fact, the conception (or misconception) of the intellectual totalitarianism of the Middle Ages has bedevilled our consideration of it. The period contained as much intellectual debate as any other. The scholastics' excesses are often pilloried, but we fail to consider the extent to which Medieval philosophy laid the groundwork for so much later analytical philosophy. The eleventh century argument between Anselm and Gaunilo about whether God's existence is logically entailed because the universe is (or is not) inconceivable without Him, is hardly a sterile investigation of an unimportant intellectual corner (it actually strikes me that

the pious Gaunilo playing devil's advocate came up with rather more convincing arguments for atheism than a great many modern true believers in the notion!). Moreover, it appears to be a largely undigested fact that the universities were first established between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries and actually had as their task the imparting of a rather wider spectrum of knowledge than is expected of today's graduates (the Medieval curriculum ranging from medicine to geometry to divinity).

The attitude of the Church to "social issues" was not subject to much debate. Oddly enough, the philosophers and theologians were more concerned with the nature of god and reality than with the sexual behaviour of human beings, unlike their modern successors! However, when it was voiced, discussion of social issues was again less extreme than our assumptions might lead us to imagine. Contrary to modern expectations, Medieval commentators such as Peter the Chanter in the late twelfth century, for example, were ready to countenance contraception if pregnancy might be a life-threatening risk to the wife's health and her husband refused to abstain.

As for the extent to which real people listened to the Church or followed its dictates with any consistency in practice, a few examples will suffice. Far from dominating men's behaviour, it took churchmen some considerable time to prevent the kings of France living polygamously, or with kidnapped nuns, or giving their bastards equal inheritance rights. In the sixth century (as chronicled by poor Gregory of Tours), they did all three, not to mention engaging in such constant fraternal feuding that the land was never free from civil war. Eventually, only one brother survived, at which point he was near death, and the cycle began all over again with *his* sons. The Church furnished the ambassadors who tried to make peace, and offered sanctuary to malefactors even when their enemies threatened to burn a church down with its bishop in it—but the Franks had the swords and spiritual authority has limits. Even in the increasingly regularized world that followed the twelfth century, a doctrine such as clerical celibacy faced stiff resistance. Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon, for example, eulogizes his father, a fellow ecclesiastic, as a star of the church. Meanwhile, Henry himself was a father and grandfather to successful clergymen. The Church did wield increasing influence through its control of marriage, but even then "little customs" tended to "curtsy to great kings," as the practice of divorce on the basis of consanguinity tends to demonstrate. If, for example, one has married one's fourth cousin in full knowledge of that fact, then the relationship is a poor excuse (one would have thought) to divorce him and marry one's third cousin instead, as Eleanor of Aquitaine did when she left the French King for Henry II of England! As for less exalted mortals, both the church and civil law recognized any public promise as a binding marriage, even if the words were spoken in a tavern—something men who professed their undying love to barmaids could discover to their cost.

The supposed tyranny of the Church can be most clearly seen to be an incorrect caricature of the great struggle waged throughout the period between Church and State. This was of course the great age of the Church, and its power *was* massive, but surely if something absolutely dominates then it remains

unquestioned, whereas, in fact, questioning the power of the Church was something almost every king at some point did.

An illusory union of Church and State might be said to lie behind the institution of the Holy Roman Empire, but the illusion covers much pushing and pulling (and posturing) of which the Investiture Controversy is but the most visible manifestation. A gallery of quotations from sovereigns across Europe and across the period could easily be cited. Even in the twelfth century, Henry I, son of William the Conqueror, could dilate on England's status as an Empire and his freedom from interference within his own dominions, in a manner reminiscent to the modern ear of his great-great-great (etc.) grandson, Henry VIII. While the papacy did grow steadily in influence over the thousand years from Rome's fall to Luther's revolt, it should always be remembered that the rise of the papacy never went uncontested at any time.

While the Church-State relationship was a constant subject of controversy, male-female relations, that subject of vast controversy in the twentieth century, were not. Men were officially superior to women in the eyes of law and Church. The search for proto-feminist sentiment in the Middle Ages, therefore, will come up empty—thus far our image reflects a reality. However, even this, on further analysis, is far from the whole truth.

In the first instance, class was much more important in determining status than gender. A noblewoman who stood in the role of lord could hold the office of sheriff, for example. Women were often assigned to command fortresses. Queens may not have often ruled in their own right, but they certainly led armies and administered justice on several occasions—they were the standard choice for regent when the king was absent. This is true not only of paradigmatically domineering ladies such as Edward II's Isabella, or of queens cursed with weak, feckless or extremely unlucky lords (e.g. respectively, Henry VI's Margaret, Eleanor of Aquitaine ruling for her sons Richard and John, and King Stephen's Matilda, leading the royal army while her husband was in prison) but also of quite ordinary spousal relationships where the King was but momentarily absent. A strong monarch such as Henry I could leave his wife Matilda in charge when he went to the Continent because he could trust that her interests were much more permanently aligned with his than any of his nobles. This is not to imply that life was always easy for women at the top of the social pyramid (the marriage game was a mine-field in which the stakes were singularly high, and choices more often in one's parents' hands than one's own), but it did mean that, within the framework of Medieval society, powerful women existed.

What then about "ordinary" women, obliged to live in the world of work? Because businesses were run as family enterprises, women could be found in almost every conceivable occupation. There were even some occupations dominated by women, such as ale-brewing. However, as families never clearly separated the world of work from home, women could be found in businesses such as saddleries and tanners' shops. Sometimes, given the unpredictability of spousal life expectancy, women even ran these enterprises in the same way noble widows could wind up acting as large feudal lords via familial morbidity.

Looking around the Medieval world, one could see women doing the most unexpected things—perhaps my favourite example is the husband and wife team who ran a pub and copied and illuminated manuscripts (in one of which one can see tiny and delightful pictures of both of them writing).

Women's literacy indeed is another area where our perspective diverges sadly from the truth. In the very early Middle Ages practically no one outside the Church could read—hence the enshrining of literacy as the test by which one could prove oneself to be a churchman under English law—but those few inside the Church included some women, learned abbesses and the like. As culture revived, the fairly widespread existence of books made especially for noblewomen (with little illustrations of St. Anne teaching the Virgin to read, for example) testifies to the fact that female aristocrats, if not quite receiving the widest possible education available to their brothers, were certainly literate. It should also be remembered indeed that some women were a great deal more than merely literate—the twelfth century can boast a multi-lingual female author such as Marie de France, for example.

As for women's financial and legal status, our picture here, as in the case of the world of work, is actually of a nineteenth, rather than a fourteenth, century reality. Widows in the Medieval period were entitled to a full third of the marital property, a standardized measure not depending on the caprices of a husband's will. At the church door, this third was promised by the husband and marriage contracts tended to outline which properties were meant. Divorce didn't entail being cast away with nothing either—dowries were meant to be returned on annulment. Husbands might try to hold on to lands, but they did not succeed. Eleanor of Aquitaine, for example, took Aquitaine with her when she left the King of France, while King John found himself compelled to surrender the earldom of Gloucester when he put away his first wife.

In some ways marriage law *was* stacked against women. Lords were not above forcing their tenants to marry each other in order to have a man to work lands for them, for example; and even amongst the less abject denizens of the age there were some coerced marriages which, despite its usual policy against such things, the Church disdained to annul. However, on the other hand, these same new laws, especially those against breach of promise and bigamy, actually upheld women's rights against men who, in many another age (including our own), would have been able to seduce and abandon them.

Then again there was always one other legitimate career path for women other than marriage—that is the religious life. A sizable minority of the population of both sexes (perhaps three percent) lived in holy orders. While it is true that nunneries (like monasteries) could serve as warehouses for inconvenient relations, they could also be centres of learning and of power. Because so much land was in the keeping of the Church, abbesses, just like their male counterparts, often wound up as large feudal landholders. The prestige of such positions should not be underestimated. In Anglo-Saxon England and Merovingian France, for example, queens and princesses often became abbesses, and while the high value of royalty later on removed the Church from

consideration for a princess who otherwise could cement an alliance with a foreign power, bastard daughters of kings and the legitimate daughters of great lords continued to occupy such roles. Some nuns also wrote books on a variety of subjects, having more leisure to devote themselves to study than did their married counterparts.

Medieval society was, in fact, a complex organism in which the Church was central but never really dominant, and in which women played varied and often prominent roles. The history of a great many places and times around the world can be written with scarcely a mention of any woman's name, whereas one cannot imagine the Middle Ages in Western Europe without the cavalcade of Matildas, Eleanors, Isabellas and Margarets which fills its pages.

Overarchingly, we tend to look upon "the Middle Ages" as a unit, as though nothing changed from the Roman Empire's fall to the Renaissance. We also tend to think of Medieval Europe as a uniform whole. Nothing could be further from the truth. The thousand years of the Middle Ages contained as much change as any other millennium in human history. Equally, the Europe of the time was most varied, stretching from the ancient decaying Empire of Constantinople to the oft-partitioned Italian peninsula, to Charlemagne's new and quickly fractured Holy Roman Empire, to the barbarous realms of Scandinavia and the even more barbarous Russia. The image of "the Middle Ages" which we have in our minds is the twelfth/thirteenth century England of Geoffrey of Monmouth's King Arthur, or of the legend of Robin Hood. However, this does not encompass the sixth/seventh century world in which the real Arthur might have lived. Then, micro-kingdoms run by barbarian chieftains dominated one half of the Continent, while, on the other, the Byzantines fought desperately for their survival against first the Persians and later the Arabs. This period, called variously "the Dark Ages", "Late Antiquity" or "the Early Middle Ages" is neither antiquity nor modernity and therefore is 'Medieval'. Nor does our conception comprehend the cosmopolitan world of the fourteenth/fifteenth century, a time of international trade and of the international Gothic style. This was a world in which an Italian banking house could, for example, be bankrupted by an English king. Admittedly, however, one grim constant remained: the Byzantines were still fighting for their survival, this time against the Turks.

Because it is more a shadow of legend than an attempt at real history, our understanding is both oddly obsessed with Western Europe and oddly obsessed with England. We know nothing of the East of the continent, little of the South, and even less of the far West (which is to say that Byzantium and realms like Poland, Bohemia and Hungary are a blank to us, Italy and Spain are vague, and Scandinavia and Russia vaguer). This is a shame, not only because history in all periods possesses the most amazing long-distance causal arcs (let us think, for example, of the pattern connecting the Far East with the Roman Empire, i.e. with the falling dominoes of climate change on the Chinese steppes causing the Huns to attack certain Germanic tribes, who themselves attacked other tribes, who in turn sought to cross the Roman border), but also because the whole story of the Middle Ages is the story of gradual horizon-widening as people from distant places slowly formed themselves into a larger system.

As the smallness which we persist in characterizing as the "truth" about the Middle Ages in fact reflects the mere parochialism of local village life, rather than the wider realities of the Middle Ages' vast empires and far-ranging expeditions such as the Crusades, so the perception of the Middle Ages as authoritarian results from a confusion of abstraction with practice, a confusion which much more reflects the post-seventeenth century world than it does the rougher and readier Medieval mindset. In fact, looked at aright (in a literal rather than ideological sense), this was a great age of individualism. In what other period could the six sons of a minor Norman knight build themselves an Italian empire in a generation, beating back the Byzantines and capturing the Pope, as the brothers de Hauteville did in the eleventh century? The very realms were personally constituted, coming together and pulling apart through the lives of individuals via marriage, death or conquest, and always personally subsisting in the sovereign. From the wars of Henry II's children against him, to the Hundred Years' War, to the Wars of the Roses—or indeed William's conquest of England—no period could surely furnish so many conflicts in which no larger religious, social or ideological point was at stake than the inheritance rights of individuals.

The Church's strength lay in its position as the only force in society possessed of an ideological structure, but it too disintegrates into a host of individual personalities on closer inspection, albeit having to toe more of a party line than in other areas. Far from being blind servants of dogma, great Medieval churchmen had to work out what later *became* dogma, and they had to decide individually how to react to political crises. A case in point is the position of the poor Bishop of Bath taken captive by forces (for the moment) loyal to the Empress Matilda, who found himself resolving a "political dilemma" by relinquishing two noble prisoners captured by his own soldiers in order to save himself. The Middle Ages was, in some ways, a communitarian period; in others, it really was every man for himself.

The Medieval story is a story both of expansion and of the gradual trammelling of dominant individuals by powerful groups and wider social forces—but here again we have returned to generalisations and these are inevitably misleading. The Middle Ages seems to be more prone to these generalizations (and thus falsifications) than many another period (perhaps only the nearly three thousand years of the complex history of Egypt being subsumed under the heading of "the ancient Egyptians" can match it). We speak of the English Renaissance as distinct from the Italian (or indeed from the Polish) Renaissance. The Middle Ages, however, remains to us a stubborn blur.

What I have tried to do is point up some of the most conspicuous large-scale divergences between our assumptions and reality. However, there is no substitute for going out and discovering the past in all its intricacy by really studying its details, discovering the world of Charlemagne as distinct from the world of Chaucer, the world of Icelandic sagas as apart from that of courtly romances. While university courses on the Middle Ages are either (with a few exceptions) largely absent or spotty in coverage in this country, this will be difficult. However, a new mechanism for Internationalism, the Internet, can

provide us with access to a vast array of Medieval source materials, enabling us to research the Middle Ages for ourselves, and this we can all do, reviving a little of that energetic individualism by which the Middle Ages was marked.