

Her Infinite Variety

A joyously broad, often hilarious look at the treatment and agency of women in the Middle Ages.

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Illustration by John Broadley

Reviewed: [The Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women's Roles in Society](#) by Eleanor Janega

In his *Decretum*, a tenth-century manual on canon law, Bishop Burchard of Worms directed priests to ask female parishioners if they had inserted live fish into their vaginas and kept them there “for a while” until they were dead, then cooked and fed them to their husbands to stimulate passion. He prescribed two years of penance on the appropriate fast days for a woman who had done this. Medieval theologians took the insatiable lusts of women very seriously: as a friend pointed out, the procedure was apparently considered two thirds as bad as accidentally killing one’s baby, which is discussed two items down in the *Decretum*, for which three years of penance were prescribed.

In *The Once and Future Sex*, Eleanor Janega notes that the likelihood of medieval women having performed such a maneuver is “probably low...no matter how lacking their sex lives might have been.” Did Burchard

believe it was a common practice? It is hard to understand the mechanics, just for starters. His *Decretum* was based on earlier sources, so he might have carried his stipulation to priests across from his exemplar unthinkingly, but medieval theologians were often concerned that ecclesiastics could put novel ideas of sin into parishioners' heads during confession. For the question to have been asked, a husband's being served an ill-used fish had to have been a legitimate concern.

Janega's book is wide-ranging—she takes something of a trawler net approach to the Middle Ages, covering a big area but not always managing to supply details or nuance. She illustrates, often hilariously, the ways women were oppressed, as indeed they were before and have been since, though the particular flavor of oppression has changed. In the medieval era, as now, women were expected to live up to impossible standards of beauty and were defined as “scientifically” different from men, even if the ideas of female beauty and biology were not the same. Janega also argues that women's work was overlooked in the Middle Ages, as it is today. This is a claim that might irk some medievalists.

Burchard, like many medieval thinkers, thought of women as “sex-addled” and “insatiable in their demands.” In this, Janega argues, “the medieval concept of women's sexuality looks almost nothing like ours, except that it was considered wrong.” In his *Etymologies*—a seventh-century encyclopedia explaining human knowledge using (spurious) word origins—Isidore of Seville tells us that “the word *femina* [woman] comes from the Greek derived from the force of fire because her concupiscence is very passionate: women are more libidinous than men.” About two hundred years earlier, Saint Jerome likewise asserted that “women's love is...insatiable; put it out, it bursts into flame; give it plenty, it is again in need.” A Latin poem from thirteenth-century northern France or England advises men not to marry and describes the average woman thus:

Her lustful loins are never stilled
By just one man she's unfulfilled
She'll spread her legs to all the men
But, ever hungry, won't say “When.”

According to the humoral theory that underpinned much medieval thought, women were cold, wet creatures who gravitated toward men, who were hot and dry. In this, women were thought to be similar to cold-blooded animals like snakes that seek the heat emanating from humans. A thirteenth-century medical treatise took this idea a step further, stating that since women are inherently bad (what with the whole debacle involving Eve and the apple), a woman has a “greater desire for coitus than a man, for something foul is drawn to the good.”

Many medieval writers seem to have agreed on what made these horny creatures sexually attractive to men. Texts that describe the appearance of the ideal woman have a lot in common. A number of them describe her as having blond hair, white skin, swelling lips, white teeth, and good breath. These qualities are depressingly familiar from our own day. But some aspects of medieval female beauty may surprise us. Thin, dark eyebrows and high foreheads were prized; the *Roman de la rose* praised women with “small mouths.” Geoffrey of Vinsauf was especially taken with a “neck like a white marble column,” while other writers compared the ideal neck to that of a swan, heron, or antelope. Matthew of Vendôme praised “dainty” and “modest” breasts, a view shared by Guillaume de Machaut, who liked them “white, firm, high-seated/pointed, round,” but—importantly—“small enough.” In *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer describes Criseyde's “brestes rounde and lite” (as well as her “armes smale” and her “sydes longe”). As for the belly, Matthew of Vendôme would have been horrified by the gym-sculpted abs many today prize, instead praising the ideal of a “luscious little belly” that protruded.

As in the twenty-first century, in the Middle Ages the physical attributes considered beautiful were indices of wealth. A little potbelly meant you had leisure time, just as milky white skin meant you did not labor outdoors.

In the thirteenth-century Old French *Roman de silence*, there is a scene in which a beautiful woman uses the juices of a plant to give herself a fake tan and disguise herself as a man of “low station.” Today, the converse among white people is a sign of being upper-class—tanned skin suggests leisure hours spent in sunny climes.

Some writers showed an awareness of female sexual anatomy that might surprise modern readers. As far back as the thirteenth century at least one of them, Pietro d’Abano, had noticed the existence of the clitoris: he wrote that women could be aroused

by having the upper orifice near their pubis rubbed; in this way the indiscreet, or curious [*curiosi*] bring them to orgasm. For the pleasure that can be obtained from this part of the body is comparable to that obtained from the tip of the penis.

The eleventh-century Persian philosopher and physician Ibn Sina—known in the medieval West as Avicenna—wrote that men should caress a woman’s “breasts and pubis, and enfold their partners in their arms, without really performing the act.” This last clause reminds us that although some medieval men appeared to understand the mechanics of female pleasure, they nonetheless thought that the point of sex—the main “act”—was penetration, hopefully leading to procreation. Some writers suggested that for a woman to conceive she had to experience pleasure, which is heartening, but Janega justly cautions that this could have “dehumanizing consequences,” because it was thought that sex workers were “incapable of pleasure and driven solely by an interest in money” and could not become pregnant. The biological fathers of infants born to sex workers could thereby absolve themselves of responsibility for their children.

Janega’s final chapter on women’s work is a feast of beguiling detail. Here the lives of ordinary women surface from the records in a way that is sometimes impossible in the earlier chapters on beauty and biology, where most sources are the literary and philosophical writings of a learned male elite. We’re told, for example, that in 1327 Alice de Brightenoch and Lucy de Pykeringe were sentenced to jail time for theft: both women allowed people to bake bread in their ovens for a fee, but they “falsely, wickedly, and maliciously” stole from their neighbors by siphoning off dough through a hole in a table, beneath which an accomplice was stationed.

Here the argument is that women “were working at every level of society alongside or in partnership with men—and received almost no credit for doing so.” This is a large claim that I don’t really go along with. The picture is surely more complex. In her brilliant recent biography of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, Marion Turner notes, for example, that there were new economic opportunities for women in the aftermath of the Black Death in Europe, when their right to trade as *femmes sole* was formalized, allowing them to run businesses, train apprentices, and take care of their own taxes.

In other words, women were working for themselves. When women did work in partnerships with men, it is hard to know if they were given credit for what they did. So it pays to follow the money and examine transfers of property after death. Barbara Hanawalt’s work on peasant families in medieval England reveals that 65 percent of men made their wives executors. As she observes, “Most men leaving wills, therefore, trusted their wives to raise a family of young children and run both the house and lands.”

That surely suggests confidence in what women could do. The same was probably true in other social classes. In 1448 the Norfolk gentrywoman Margaret Paston wrote to her husband in London and asked him to buy “11b of almonds,” “11b of sugar,” and “some cloth for gowns,” as well as “two or three short poleaxes” and “some crossbows.” She had been left behind on the family’s estates to raise the children, run the manors, and protect the properties from attack.

Of course, even if wives had a degree of economic power and were valued by their husbands, that does not mean all women's work was valued, especially that of women at the fringes of society. Sex work was disapproved of but still permitted in some law codes. Some writers even felt it was necessary. Both Augustine and Aquinas wrote that if sex work did not exist, men would have too much pent-up sexual energy, especially in urban areas, which could lead to rioting and violence.

In London sex workers had to wear a special striped hood and were forbidden to live in the city itself. A statute of 1393 stated that they should "keep themselves to the places thereunto assigned, this is to say, the Stews [bathhouse brothels] on the other side of [the river] Thames, and Cokkeslane." Janega writes that sex workers found outside the Stews risked being "stripped to their waist" as a "powerful form of public shaming," though the Anglo-Norman source doesn't seem to say this. It states that a woman would have to forfeit the "garnymment q[u]ele use per le dessus et le chaperon"—"the upper garment she shall be wearing, together with her hood." "Garnymment" can mean "garment," but it seems most often to mean an outer layer—the Middle English and Anglo-Norman dictionaries define it variously as "a coat, cloak, gown"—as well as armor or riding gear. So it appears more likely that the women, rather than risking public shame, stood to lose the cloaks and hoods that advertised them as sex workers, thereby temporarily impeding their ability to work.

Janega also writes that when sex workers died they could not be buried in consecrated ground. I failed to find a source to support this idea. She cites the example of Crossbones Graveyard in London, which is a cemetery on the south bank of the Thames in an area where brothels were situated in the medieval period. But there is no archaeological evidence that the graveyard itself is medieval, and the first mention of it in written sources is by the antiquarian John Stow in 1598. Stow was a great collector and preserver of medieval manuscripts, so he is often a useful authority, but his sourcing of the information in this case amounts to vague hearsay:

I have heard of ancient men, of good credit, report, that these single women were forbidden the rites of the church, so long as they continued that sinful life, and were excluded from Christian burial, if they were not reconciled before their death.

The Once and Future Sex is great fun; I often snorted aloud while reading it. Janega's discussion is joyously broad, but she skitters in places rather than digging down. "Women's infidelity was a much larger concern than men's," she observes. Katherine Harvey's 2021 *The Fires of Lust: Sex in the Middle Ages* adds nuance here. Harvey cites multiple examples from law codes that show how women were punished for adultery, yet she notes that court records from northern France and Flanders reveal that adulterous men, not women, were more often punished publicly:

In Arras (1328), five times as many men were fined for adultery, and in Tournai (1470) fourteen times as many men were punished. In late medieval Ghent, Bruges, and Ypres, the ratio for adultery convictions was approximately 80:20 male to female.

The Once and Future Sex is not aimed at an academic audience. Literary scholars will not be surprised that "by analyzing literature, we can learn about the cultures of a period, what people considered important, and what made them tick." Many would dispute the description of the *Roman de la rose* as a "novel" or the Middle English poem *Pearl* as an "epic." There are several of these infelicities. Janega states that Alison, the protagonist of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," is "a woman who is willing to have sex with her suitor in a washing tub." If Chaucer had described sex in a washtub, I would consider it my civic duty to quote it, but the text is clear: three tubs used for kneading bread hang from the ceiling, and once Alison's husband is safely asleep in one of them (part of a scheme to enable the adultery), she and her suitor get out of theirs and steal off: "Doun of the laddre stalketh Nicholay, And Alisoun ful softe adoun she spedde;/Withouten wordes mo they goon to

bedde.” (“Down the ladder stalks Nicholas and Alison softly sped down; without words they go to bed.”) There they engage in the “bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,/Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryngge” (“task of mirth and of solace/Till the bell of morning rang out”).

These are small details. Does it matter for the book’s argument that Nicholas and Alison were not in a washing tub? Does it matter that *Pearl*—a jewellike poem about grief—is recast as an epic? Almost certainly not, but there are places where this highly readable book opts for generalization over particularity, such as the suggestion that *The Canterbury Tales* is “a compendium of anecdotes about what was wrong with women.” That’s a view that omits “The Knight’s Tale,” with its idealized presentation of Emelye, or “The Franklin’s Tale,” in which a woman loves her husband so much that she prepares to kill herself when she is wooed by an unwanted suitor and then lists a catalog of twenty-one other faithful women from history and mythology who have stayed similarly true.

This kind of reductiveness risks telling a blanket story of oppression. One example deserves unpacking. In a section on life at court, Janega writes that

women’s expected duties included carrying the lady of the house’s train as she made her way to chapel and helping with embroidery. The men’s might include being called to war or sent on diplomatic missions.

It’s a passage that doesn’t ring true. Juxtaposing embroidery with diplomacy and war and thereby casting it as something boring and contained repeats a tired patriarchal categorization of art forms that consigns needlework to irrelevance precisely because it was often practiced by women.

A single work sees off this idea: the famous Bayeux Tapestry is a 230-foot piece of embroidery depicting the events leading up to the Norman Conquest of England in 1066. It depicts, as a recent work put it, “political intrigue, extreme violence [and] graphic nudity.”

This is stitchwork that is big and sexy and political; it was most likely made by female artisans. Janega’s characterization here is at odds with what she says elsewhere in the book. “Medieval Europeans regarded embroidery as an art,” she writes, citing the early Irish law code *Bretha im Fhuillemu Gell*, which states that “the woman who embroiders earns more profit even than queens.” Why treat it with flippancy elsewhere? Her depiction of court women as creatures consigned to a life of sad train-carrying also feels misplaced. On February 20, 1440, Helene Kottanner, a servant of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, took part in an audacious plan to secure the succession by smuggling the Hungarian crown out of the stronghold of Visegrád in a pillow. The crown was placed onto a sled and rushed to the queen; within hours of its arrival she gave birth to a baby boy, Ladislaus the Posthumous, who was crowned king of Hungary three months later. Kottanner almost certainly did carry her lady’s train and help with embroidery, but she also engineered a coup during a political crisis and recounted it afterward in a memoir.

And it wasn’t only men who were “called to war or sent on diplomatic missions.” In a later part of the book Janega discusses Eleanor of Aquitaine, who negotiated with Pope Innocent II on her husband’s behalf and went on the Second Crusade. Janega might just as well have pointed to Urraca, the twelfth-century queen of Castile, described by multiple sources as “a leader of armies” in battles she had with Moorish forces, rebellious magnates, and her estranged husband, Alfonso el Batallador (Alfonso the Battler). Of course, these women were royal, so their experiences were unusual, but such examples are also important.

As a reader of history, I don't just want to read about drudgery and discrimination; I want to read about the women who gamed the patriarchal system as well. As a historian, I believe feminist history is at its best when it is twofold—delineating structures of oppression but also not allowing our own patriarchal biases to restrict our view, making us assume that women were voiceless and powerless just because traditional histories of the period haven't thought their endeavors worth discussing.

Janega is doing something important. To make the Middle Ages—a period so widely misunderstood—legible and exciting is vital work. My hunch is that historians do a disservice to the general reader when they shun complexity in favor of broad-brush abstractions, because the delight is in the detail. What specialist or nonspecialist is not enthralled to learn that Burchard of Worms seems to have thought women put live fish into their vaginas?