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Susan Papino

Shifting Experiences: The Changing Roles of Women in the Italian, Lowland, and German Regions of Western Europe from the Middle Ages to theEarly Modern Period

Abstract

As the culture of the Middle Ages declined and Early Modern period characterized by a revival of humanistic ideals of the Renaissance commenced, the society of Western Europe underwent many changes. Different attitudes emerged concerning cultural values, and the medieval feudal way of life that has often been interpreted as being antiquated and obsolete gave way to more modern political, economic, and social systems.

The question still remains, however, of exactly how women, an often underrepresented part of society, were affected by these so-called modernizing changes. The scope of this research is to basically address this question and examine the manner in which these dramatic cultural differences influenced the experiences of women in Western European society. By studying the changing cultural attitudes towards women and the variations in a woman's status specifically in the Lowland, Germanic, and Italian regions over the course of the Middle Ages, it becomes clear that many of the cultural changes of the later middle ages and early modern period were indeed to the detriment of a woman's role in society.

Specifically, the thesiscompares and analyzes the changing roles that women could employ economically, politically, socially, and religiously. According to other studies conducted on this subject by scholar Joan Kelly "the kind of economic and political power that supported the cultural activity of the feudal noblewomen in the 11th and 12th centuries had no counterpart in Renaissance Italy."[1] And regarding political status, historians Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple maintain that"the extensive powers exercised by women were…largely derived from the rather irregular powers held by the great families of the age," a phenomenon that was reversed with the Renaissance era emphasis on institutionalizing government.[2]

"Shifting Experiences" is essentially an investigation into exactly how a woman's power and place in medieval society was to become greatly compromised as the closing of the Middle Ages approached the opening of the Renaissance. By examining such secondary sources as those mentioned above, as well as primary source documents relating to the lives of various saints and aristocrats, this research is an exploration of the specific ways in which the economic role, political position, and religious characteristics associated with women in the Germanic, Italian, and Lowland medieval cultures evolved over time.

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[1] Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance," in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, eds., Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1995), 17.

[2] Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women Through Family in Medieval Europe, 500-1100" in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 95.

Keywords:
Women
Low Countries, Germany, and Italy
Middle Ages
Early Modern Period
Beguines
Medieval economics
Medieval politics
Feudalism

Faculty Advisor: Professor Joëlle Rollo-Koster
Major: History and Italian

As the Middle Ages progressed, the roles that women could employ economically, politically, and religiously were changed to a great extent. Joan Kelly argues in her article "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" that "the kind of economic and political power that supported the cultural activity of the feudal noblewomen in the 11th and 12th centuries had no counterpart"[3] in the Renaissance era. Further, scholar Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg's work "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, 500-1100" maintains that "during…[the] early period, in the absence of strong, impersonal governmental institutions, royal or aristocratic families assumed the political, economic, and social authority in various areas of Europe,"[4] and women were allowed to "achieve positions of authority and control over wealth."[5] The scope of the research undertaken in this essay is to delve deeper into the queries discussed by such scholars above. According to the evidence largely derived from secondary sources depicting a woman's experience in societies of the German, Italian and Low Country regions of Western Europe, as well as several supplementary primary source documents, definite trends emerge regarding the female spheres of influence. In these regions, the feudal leadership of the earlier Middle Ages emphasized powerful kin connections, and flourishing medieval urban guild economies while the pre-modern Catholic Church's approach towards female saints and religious communities was a relatively generous one. In comparison to these characteristics of the underlying society, the early modern attitudes towards women in these affairs were significantly less munificent. A woman's power

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[3] Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance," in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, eds., Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith (Lexington, MA., D. C. Heath and Company, 1995), 17.
[4] Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, "Female Sanctity: Public and Private Roles, ca. 500-1100," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 105.
[5] Ibid.

and place in medieval society was to become greatly compromised; the closing of the Middle Ages ushered in the opening of the Renaissance, an era in European history marked by an economic culture of conspicuous consumption, a shift from the largely "hierarchical rule of rural medieval society" and monumental changes in "scholarship, secular values, and esthetics."[6]

While there has been much literature composed by scholars concerning the various roles that woman played during of the Middle Ages, the aim of this historical and cultural investigation is to specifically examine the changes occurring in the economic, political, and religious aspects of women's lives in the German, Low Country, and Italian regions of Europe. While many scholarly articles, books, and research projects address the changing position of women in Middle Ages, indeed, do exist, however few directly coincide with the focus of this research.

One of the first aspects of medieval women's studies that must be noted is the regional perspective often reflected in the essays on this topic. More germane to this research is the fact that while some regions have been studied extensively, such as that of France and England, other areas, such as the Lowlands, are less frequently addressed. Examining several compilation texts that aim to describe the topic of women in the Middle Ages helps in understanding this aspect of medieval studies. *Young Medieval Women* edited by Katherine J. Lewis, Noel James Mengue, and Kim M. Phillips, is a collection of published essays and articles discussing the role of women, young women particularly, in the general European medieval culture. The editors cite in the introduction that "through the medium of…individual studies, this collection illustrates

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[6] Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 3.

some of the different ways in which young womanhood was represented, defined and understood."[7] Of the eight studies included in this work, however, six specifically address the manner in which women were treated in England and France. The two additional articles, "A Positive Representation of the Power of Young Women: The Malterer Embroidery Re-examined" by Katherine Gourlay and "Pigs and Prostitutes: Streetwalking in Comparative Perspective" discuss Germanic and general European culture respectively. Other areas of Europe, however, such as the Low Countries, are notably omitted from this study, providing an important context within which the research of this essay can be placed.

Further general studies similarly utilize evidence from the French and English cultures as providing for information about the daily lives of women in the Middle Ages. *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* edited by Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski includes 12 essays which all "offer a more extensive view of women's actions in the Middle Ages and [assess] medieval women's power."[8] Although other areas of Europe are represented with the inclusion of such articles as Stanley Chojnacki's "The Power of Love: Wives and Husbands in Late Medieval Venice" and Martha C. Howell's "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political status in Northern Medieval Cities," much of the information imparted in the essays utilizes data from the English and French medieval cultures. The absence of any discussion of the beguinage way of life in the Low Countries is a notable omission in this representation of the powerful roles that medieval women could employ. The beguinages, which allowed for women to live

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[7] Katherine J. Lewis, Noel James Menuge, and Kim M. Phillips eds., *Young Medieval Women* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), xviii.
[8] Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski eds., *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1988), i.

somewhat autonomously in semi-religious communities, depict a definite sphere of power that was allotted to women in medieval cultures. The absence of their discussion highlights the fact that general compilation works often do not address the experiences of women in every medieval region.

Books and other sources that have been published concerning the various different religious roles and experiences of women during the Middle Ages are also important in understanding the changing position of women in medieval European culture. André Vauchez's *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* is a comprehensive study that provides essential information concerning the altering of women's experiences over the course of the Middle Ages. Vauchez's research begins by discussing the church and the cult of saints in the medieval West. He procedes to describe the typology of medieval sainthood and the signs and significations of sainthood. Particularly important to the research of this essay are the sections that focus on popular and local sainthood[9] and the evolution of the criteria of sainthood from the late twelfth to the early fifteenth centuries.[10] By revealing the differences pertaining to the conceptualization of sainthood as the Middle Ages progressed, Vauchez's work provides an important framework within which the study of the regional changes in medieval women's religious status can be placed.

While Vauchez's work imparts extensive information concerning the changing roles of medieval saints in the religious sectors of society, there are works more specific in nature that are similarly relevant to the study of the changing culture of women across the Middle Ages. Wybren Scheepsma's *Medieval Religious Women in the Low*

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[9] Andrè Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 147.
[10] Ibid., 387.

Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Cannonesses of Windesheim, and their Writing, Hans Geybals' *Vulgariter Beghinae: Eight centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries*, and Walter Simons' *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* discuss the development, historical context, lifestyles, society, and conflicts associated with the beguine movement occurring in the Low Countries during the high to late Middle Ages. Simons, especially, through this in-depth analysis of the entire beguine movement, argues that acting as social factors which helped to shape the beguine's history, the beguinages constitute an important part of medieval women's studies because they were "the only movement in medieval monastic history that was created by women and for women---and not affiliated with, or supervised by, a male order."[11]

The religious perspective of women in medieval culture is also evident in the work *Holy Anorexia* by Rudolph M. Bell. Bell's psychological approach to late medieval female religious actions contrasts markedly with historian Carolyn Walker Bynum's argument in her work *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* that the renunciation of food was an affront to the wealth and power of men as the one resource over which medieval women had power.[12] However, while arguing that "holy anorexia involves a need to establish a sense of oneself, a contest of wills, a quest for autonomy,"[13] Bell suggests an alternative interpretation of the extreme religious actions occurring during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As notable saints of the Middle Ages, such as St. Catherine of Siena born sometime in 1373 or 1374, suppressed their "physical urges and basic feelings---

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[11] Walter Simons, *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries, 1200-1565* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001) 143.
[12] Judith C. Brown, "*Holy Feast, Holy Fast*: A Book Review," *American Historical Review* 94, no. 3 (1989):]735.
[13] Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 8.

fatigue, sexual drive, hunger, pain [to free] the body…[and] achieve heroic feats…[so as to] commune with God,"[14] Bell maintains that the proliferation of excessively penitent female saints is a negative phenomenon affecting the overall perception of female mystics saints.

Other sources that are important in informing the scope of this research are those that address the question of exactly how the position of women in medieval culture altered over time. Joan Kelley's article "Did Women have a Renaissance?", which was mentioned above, serves as such a work. Kelly's argument questions whether the Renaissance was, in fact, time of rebirth allowing for humanistic growth in all sectors of society. Kelly maintains that while the male population of Europe enjoyed a definite intellectual growth, women were instead often stripped of their previously prestigious positions and forced to revert back to living conditions of which they exerted little control. David Herlihy's article "Did Women have a Renaissance?: A Reconsideration" also addresses the changing roles of female sanctity and women in the family. Herlihy argues in this article that while in the "traditional interpretation, the Renaissance represented a triumph of individualism over the collective restraints of traditional medieval society," this triumph characterizes the place of women in sainthood much more dramatically than their place in the family and cultural structure.[15]

Additional articles by Herlihy also coincide closely with the argument of this essay. "Women's Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe" traces the various employment opportunities afforded women in Paris, Germany, Spain, and Italy over the course of the mid to late Middle Ages, the basic argument of this essay being that "the

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[14] Bell, 9.
[15] David Herlihy, "Did Women Have a Renaissance? A Reconsideration," in *Women, Family, and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978-1991* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 56.

participation of women in the urban economies of pre-industrial Europe underwent a profound transformation between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries…by the late fifteenth century, their participation was greatly diminished."[16]

Within the context of all these published sources that concern the role of women in medieval society, this paper seeks to utilize both regionally-specific and general secondary data to compare the economic, political, and religious roles that women employed during he early years of the Middle Ages as compared the centuries to come. To begin this discussion, the changing economic roles of women in the German, Lowland, and Italian medieval cultures will be explored.

The economic culture of industrial cities in medieval Germany provides some of the first indications of the various opportunities that existed for women in the general society of the earlier Middle Ages. The men of German cities overwhelmingly controlled urban craft guilds, codified and enforced laws that affected the lives of men and women alike, and essentially acted as the predominate authorities in religious and political affairs. Medieval German women, however, still had noticeable roles in the production and selling of goods. As Martha C. Howell states in her article "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political status in Northern German Cities" women of every class in the "late medieval cities of northern Europe were active and visible participants in the public realm."[17] One way in which they were such "visible participants" was through manufacturing crafts; they often performed crafts that were unique to their sex. Circumstances in the German city of Cologne particularly demonstrate this phenomenon.

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[16] Herlihy, 69.

[17] Martha Howell, "Citizenship and Gender: Women's Political status in Northern German Cities," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988), 37.

Cologne's "silk-women had exclusive rights to the craft of silk-making,"[18] and actually maintained an all-female guild in this city.[19] Further, David Herlihy's article "Women's work in the Towns of Traditional Europe" asserts that Cologne, as "an important center of silk manufactures" contained two other guilds of yarn makers and gold spinners, which were also controlled by women.[20]

The German female population was also involved in the production and sale of many items that had an integral place in the overall society. They made and sold "beer, bread, pottery, and other goods used both locally and abroad," ran taverns and inns, brokered deals between traveling merchants and the local producers, and borrowed and lent money.[21] While still subordinated to the general leadership of men in the societies of medieval German cities, the manufacturing and vending realms of society accepted female economic participation.

Further indications of a women's tenable role in medieval German economics are evident in the culture's marriage and inheritance customs. During the pre-medieval tribal period of the Germanic culture, women were allowed to enjoy "very few private rights outside the authority of the family." However the subsequent tribal customs of the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, affected by the Roman influence of the civilizations that the tribes had conquered, provided for vast improvements in a women's economic

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[18] Ibid., 38.
[19] Claudia Opitz, "Life in the Late Middle Ages," in *A History of Women in the West: Silences of the Middle Ages* Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Ed. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992) 300.
[20] David Herlihy, "Women's work in the Towns of Traditional Europe" in *Women, Family, and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978-1991*(Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 56.
[21] Howell, 37.

position.[22] The tradition of a newlywed husband presenting his bride a *morgenbabe*, or morning gift, after the consummation of her marriage is one such way in which the customs had changed to allow women to acquire wealth and property. According to Jo Ann McNamara and Suzanne Wemple's article "The Power of Women Through the Family," the morning gifts often consisted of property or other land grant. Further, evolution in the custom of a bridegift also grew to award women grants of land.[23] Initially, the bridegift was sum of money paid by a suitor for his potential wife's hand in marriage. However, into the early Middle Ages "the sum gradually became a symbolic payment, and the bride received as her own an increasingly large portion of the gift contributed by the bridegroom," allowing for women to acquire small personal land holdings.[24] McNamara and Wemple's research into various eleventh century land deeds cite women as being the proprietors of land obtained through the bridgegift custom; in fact, many of the deeds site women as being given "unrestricted ownership" of the property given to them through the bridegift.[25] While the earlier Salic laws and traditions were restrictive, the gradual modification of these customs to provide a woman with both a morning gift and a portion of her bridegift allowed German women to "acquire impressive personal domains and concomitant economic and political power."[26]

An analysis of medieval records relating to the Archdiocese of Salzburg performed by John B. Freed in the article "German Source Collections: the Archdiocese of Salzburg as a Case Study" provides similar information about the feminine partialities

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[22] McNamara and Wemple, "The Power of Women Through the Family" in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages* eds. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988),f84.
[23] Ibid., 87.
[24] Ibid., 86.
[25] Ibid., 87.
[26] Ibid.

that existed in the German laws of the early middle ages. Freed's study traces the records of ecclesiastical corporations, property acquisitions and losses, various disputes, and privileges that were associated with the Catholic church of this region.[27] Specifically, Freed follows the records relating to the Pettaus family lineage from 982 to late thirteenth century. According to the records, the eleventh century Pettau women "retained considerable control of their property after their marriages."[28] The husbands of this lineage did not alienate property barring the consent of both their wives and children, especially if the property was part of the women's inheritance or dowry. Freed's primary source research, thus, further confirms the extent to which women in feudal medieval German society exercised economic power and influence.

There exist additional primary source documents providing examples of ways in which women were afforded economic rights and power. Excerpts from the mid-eleventh century epic poem entitled *Ruodlieb* found in Jacqueline Murray's reader *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages* detail the adventures of the knight, Ruodlieb, and "reveal much about sexual morality and the customs and values governing marriage among the Germanic aristocracy."[29] At one point in Ruodlieb's quest, he oversees the marriage between a young woman and man from the German noble class. The young man states, "I wish this lady to be betrothed to me as my own, so you may be witnesses before me and, I pray, willing ones, when we exchange dowries as is the custom."[30] The words that are spoken about the "exchanging of dowries" are particularly telling. The

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[27] John B. Freed, "German Source Collections: the Archdiocese of Salzburg as a Case Study," in *Medieval Women and the Sources of Medieval History* ed. Joel T. Rosenthal (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1990) 86.
[28] Ibid, 110.
[29] "A Bad Courtship and a Good: *Ruodlieb*," in *Love, Marriage, and Family in the Middle Ages* ed. Jacqueline Murray (Petersborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001), 245.
[30] Ibid., 255.

word "exchange" signifies that the dowries may be equivalent in size and value; while the women in this marriage must present her husband with a dowry, so must he present her with a valuable gift. Further, it is important to note that the author delineates these exchanging actions as being "the custom," highlighting the widespread nature of such economic acts as this. Corresponding with the traditions analyzed in the secondary sources above, these details from the story of Ruodlieb further support the idea that German women in the earlier Middle Ages were economically endowed by the gifts they received from their husbands upon marriage.

German society doubtlessly provided women with the ability to perform fundamental economic functions, as well as the possibility of acquiring property and influence through marriage customs. Studying the culture of pre-modern Low Country culture, however, provides even further evidence supporting the argument that women in medieval Europe were indeed allowed many economic opportunities. The term "Low Countries" refers to the cities and states existing in the areas now known as Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Differing from both the German and southern European societies, the medieval Low Country culture allowed women a unique place in the economic sector of the urban economy. Walter Simon's in-depth study of the facets of the Lowland religious beguinages *Cities of Ladies: Beguine Communities in the Medieval Low Countries 1200-1565* reveals that there was "a wide involvement of women in economic production", most notably the manufacturing textile industries.[31] Simons also maintains that vignettes, law codes, court and guild records, contracts and

[31] Simons, 8.

other sources from Low Country archives depict women as "innkeepers, cloth merchants, painters, fishwives…and teachers."[32]

Further, the inheritance customs of medieval Low Country culture allowed for women to acquire economic influence in society. The restrictive economic nature of a dowry, which was a tangible collection of money, goods, and property given to a man from the family of his prospective wife, did not negatively affect a women's economic role after entering a marriage. Women in such places as Flanders could actually "inherit from their parents like their brothers…and therefore did not need a dowry to marry."[33] Inheritance customs such as these that did utilize a dowry "favored the continuity of small enterprises and encouraged women to take a role in them."[34]

Also, the cultural traditions relating to a woman's economic status during marriage further demonstrates women's economic opportunities in the medieval Low Countries. Married women and widows exerted "secure rights…to certain kinds of property, including houses, in most parts of the Low Countries."[35] An example of how these customs influenced a woman's economic power is evident in the formation of beguinages, which will be discussed in greater detail later in this study. According to Simons, these independent religious communities of women had a high incidence of women patrons. And such a correlation suggests that with their assured property rights, women were afforded "the freedom to endow a religious foundation of their choice."[36] Married women in the Low Countries, according to popular custom, could own land and make important decisions about this property, often independently.

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[32] Ibid., 10.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., 109.
[36] Ibid., 108.

The Italian cultural attitude towards women has often been interpreted as differing greatly from that of the German and Lowland societies. Howell's article clearly states that women in German cities were provided with opportunities that made their economic and position enviable to their southern European counterparts,[37] and David Herlihy maintains in his article "Women's Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe" that "Italy was a land not particularly favorable to women artisans or entrepreneurs due to the social structure of the Italian urban environment"[38] And yet, despite these restrictions and differences that separate Italy from the cultural traditions and practices that existed in northern Europe, Italian women were afforded economic opportunities during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that exceeded the restrictive involvement by which they would be characterized by in later centuries.

A sector of the Italian urban society that particularly highlights the economic characteristics of women is that of the garment and clothing industries of such places as medieval Tuscany. Women had notable influence in the weaving and fabric industries, a fact that is echoed in David Herlihy's quote from historian Robert Davidsohn concerning the number of girls and women in the Florentine silk and woolen manufacturing during the year 1300.[39] Tellingly, evidence from notary records similarly supports the idea that women employed certain economic roles. According to a 1288 account researched again by Herlihy, a woman named Donata who lived in the Italian countryside supported herself by weaving clothes.[40] Judith C. Brown echoes this assessment in her article "Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany," a survey of the changes in women's paid

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[37] Howell, 37.
[38] Herlihy, "Women Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe," 77
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.

employment in Italy from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. Brown clearly states that the records of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries depict the woolen industry of Florence as relying "primarily on female weavers."[41] While the gains of Italian women in the economic sector of society were not exactly comparable to that of other regions of Europe, the few prospects that did exist during the Middle Ages supports the claim that medieval Italian women were not completely economically disenfranchised.

An examination of the economic abilities associated with women in the German, Lowland, and Italian regions of medieval Western Europe reveal that women had the capacity to obtain sizable amounts of land through marriage customs and inheritance laws, and could partake in the public economic realm through the production of textiles and the selling of goods. A medieval women's influence extends even beyond the realm of economic power, however. A study of the politics of these three regions during the Middle Ages demonstrates that the political position of women was often influential.

The same German society that allowed women to partake in textile production and to acquire wealth and property through inheritance laws also recognized women as citizens. Citizenship in such cities as Lille, Bruges, Frankfurt, and Leiden during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries involved a process of registration; according to the records of Bruges, Leiden, and Frankfurt specifically, independent women were often registered "because in these cities citizenship was easily acquired and was obligatory for almost all workers."[42] As "co-managers and co-owners of the household and its

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[41] Judith C. Brown, "Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany," in *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance* Benjamin G. Kohl and Alison Andrews Smith, Eds. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1995), 68.
[42] Howell, 46.

property…[women] were inevitably full members of citizenries with households as their constituent units."[43] German urban women, through their citizenship, fulfilled the "the objective qualifications for governmental positions,"[44] although paradoxically, they were still barred from obtaining such positions by the male-dominated politics of most cities.

The German poem of *Ruodlieb* again provides an important insight into the actual traditions that governed a woman's place of power in noble family life. During one of its episodes, Ruodlieb is hosting a banquet at his home, and his mother is in attendance. Ruodlieb "commanded one higher chair to be placed for his mother, so that she in this way she could be seen to be mistress."[45] The poem goes on to mention that "by giving honor to his mother in this way, and holding her as his liege-lady, he earned praise not only from the people, but from the almighty a crown and everlasting life in heaven."[46] Ruodlieb, a noble, allowed his mother to occupy a position of power at the table, and further, such an allowance endeared Ruodlieb not only to his subjects, but also to the higher power.

In the Low Countries, women were afforded a political role as participants in public political acts. Ellen E. Kittell, in her extensive article "Women, Audience, and Public Acts in Medieval Flanders," describes the integral roles that women employed regarding the link between public performances and law-making in fourteenth century Flemish society.[47] Flanders was unique in that it was little affected by Roman law and rather maintained "a fundamentally Germanic system of law and custom that was based

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[43] Howell, 51.
[44] Howell, 37.
[45] "A Bad Courtship and a Good: *Ruodlieb*," 257.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ellen E. Kittell, "Women, Audience, and Public Acts in Medieval Flanders," in *Journal of Women's History*10 no. 3 (1998): 74.

more on public negotiation among groups than on the arbitrary decisions of constituted authorities."[48] As Flanders' thriving commercial and industrial economy grew around the eleventh century, Flemish communes began to utilize citizen participation by allowing a broad cross-section of their population, a cross-section that included the women of the city, to participate in political affairs. Women thus had "routine appearances in public as chief and effective agents in the variety of oral-aural transactions…were countesses and castellans… [and part of] the legal and commercial lives of most cities"[49] These public audience law systems in turn allowed women to gain influential positions of power, such as Countess Jeanne in 1206 and Countess Margaret and 1280 acquiring the role of ruling over a county.[50] Even single women were systematically afforded similar rights to perform actions in these public hearings as their married counterparts; their independent status did not disenfranchise them from participating in the existing public political arena.[51]

As in the German and Lowland regions, the political climate of Italy during the Middle Ages provided women with definite political abilities that would not be mirrored in the centuries to come. Although the political systems of Italy differed from those of the northern European civilization, as did their economic policies, the prevalence of powerful Italian queens during the early to mid-Middle Ages demonstrates the type of political power that Italian women could indeed wield. Joan Kelley discusses in her article the two queens Giovanna I of Naples ruling in 1343 and Giovanna II of Naples

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[48] Iibd., 75.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid. 78.
[51] Ibid., 82.

ruling in 1414.[52] Giovanna I of Naples was designated as heir to rule over the significant kingdom of Naples, Provence, and Sicily, and Giovanna II was similarly afforded this leadership position through the death of her brother.

Besides the powerful queen figure, other feminine rulers also prevailed in medieval Italian political culture. Matilda of Tuscany, who ruled during the eleventh century, reigned as a powerful countess in this region of Italy. She played an essential role in the conflict between Pope Gregory and Emperor Henry IV. Upon being excommunicated from the church due to his defiance to the Pope, Henry IV attacked Rome and drove Gregory into exile.[53] It was Matilda's armies that defended the Pope's church both during the Pope's lifetime and after his death.[54] Further, Matilda persistently excluded her husband from handling her property and allowed it to remain solely under her control.[55] As with the other women Italian rulers mentioned above, Matilda maintained a definite sense of autonomy, and had been granted a political leadership position.

There, indeed, was a place in the economic and political sectors of society in the German, Lowland, and Italian regions of medieval Europe for the female population. The feudal and family-oriented government structure allowed for women to acquire political power, and the important economic roles that women played in society further influenced their significant status in the cultures of these regions---as David Herlihy states, "women in the early Middle Ages…played a major role in the display of kin connections; they were also stations in the flow of wealth down the generations; they

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[52] Kelly, 17.
[53] John O'Malley, "Excommunicating Politicians," *America* 191, no. 8 (2004): 9.
[54] McNamara and Wemple, 95.
[55] Ibid., 92.

were supervisors, managers, producers."[56] Through changes in the political, social, and economic systems of each region, women gradually began to lose much of the economic and political powers that they previously enjoyed, however. In order to demonstrate the extent to which women suffered a loss in status and influential visibility as the Middle Ages approached the opening of the Renaissance, it is prudent to again analyze the German, Lowland, and Italian regions specifically and the changes that occurred in these areas over time. By comparing the society of the later Middle Ages and early modern period to that of the earlier medieval times, the disparities that existed for women are made remarkably evident.

Women in medieval German economic culture, as mentioned above, were active in the textile industries and allowed financial power through inheritance and marriage customs. An examination of the economic actions in later German society reveals a very different feminine condition, however. One of the first aspects of women's economic involvement that was affected was their role in the textile industry. There was a general increase in both the guild and governmental regulations imposed on women workers.[57] Research performed by Merry Weisner cited in Judith Brown's article states the consolidation of guilds in sixteenth and seventeenth century Nuremburg resulted in "regulations excluding women from traditional occupations and relegated them to the margins of the world of work."[58] In 1421 a major conflict emerged in Cologne concerning religious female weavers and local linen weavers, resulting in a restriction of the number of looms the women could operate.[59] In the town of Strasbourg, the later

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[56] Herlihy, "Women Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe,"51.
[57] Ibid., 83.
[58] Ibid., 69.
[59] Ibid., 84

Middle Ages saw reductions in the roles of women in the woolen industry; "women at Strasbourg as indeed in many towns were reduced to helpers and auxiliaries."[60] And women in sixteenth century Nurnberg "successfully protested an ordinance of 1530 [that] deprived them of the right to employ maids in their workshops…their victory was only temporary,"[61] demonstrating the losses in female influence occurring in the later years of the Middle Ages.

Other economic changes ensued regarding a women's place in society as well. The bridegifts and morning gifts that allowed women to procure economic power through the acquirement of property underwent a series of reductions as the Middle Ages progressed. The earlier gifts often included deeds for property, while over the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries, "fewer deeds gave the wife outright ownership, and even the usufruct was generally restricted to the use of the husband and wife jointly, not to the wife exclusively."[62] Eventually "daughters claim on the inheritance gradually gave way to the dowry provided by her family,"[63] and the morning gift and bridgegift customs were changed entirely.

Also, a weakening of the feudal system in Germany also accelerated the reduction of a woman's economic role in society, for the extensive "powers exercised by women were…largely derived from the rather irregular powers held by the great families of the age."[64] As the *Constitutio de feudis* of 1037 was passed by Konrad II, women were thereby excluded from the inheritance of fiefs, a measure which over time greatly affected their ability to obtain property and in turn an economic status in society.

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[60] Ibid.
[61] Opitz, 302.
[62] McNamara and Wemple, 96.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 95.

To better demonstrate the assertion that women indeed did lose economic clout in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is useful to examine the laws of German communities during this time. Such regulations are available for the German town of Madgeburg for the year of 1261. One law providing information about the measures that are taken after the death of a husband states that a widow "shall have no share in his property except what he has given her in court, or has appointed for her dower…if the man has no provisions for her, her children must support her as long as she does not remarry."[65] Unlike the customs described in such studies as that conducted by John Freed concerning the Archdiocese of Salzburg, married German women in later medieval society had a very tenuous grasp on property. The economic power that women could accrue through land inheritance prior the later Middle Ages is not at all mirrored in the inheritance laws described for this specific thirteenth century German town

Other evidence exists that demonstrates the economic losses women incurred during the later Middle Ages as well. *The Ladies Tournament*, a German tale of courtly behavior composed by an anonymous author during the thirteenth century, discusses the proprieties and traditions associated with noble marriage and family life. Although the general pretense of the story is of a community of men and a community of women conversing over matters of courtly rules rather than being an epic tale, its purpose is similar to *Ruodlieb*'s in that it provides insight into the traditions governing marriage in German society during that time. In Sarah Westphal-Wihl's analysis of the story, a marriage is described, as it is in the story of Ruodlieb; however, rather than an exchange of dowries, "the only marital assignment mentioned in the text is the dowry…there is no

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[65] "Customs of Madgeburg," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 71.

hint of a contribution from the groom's side, or of any informal exchange of gifts."[66] According to Westphal, the dowry emerged as a custom in Germany by 1200, and although the earlier customs of morning gifts and other gifts on the part of the husband still existed, they are not mentioned in the text of *The Tournament of Ladies*. This telling omission highlights a growing emphasis on the dowry of a woman, and the concurrent diminishment of a man's gift to his bride. From the time of *Ruodlieb* during the eleventh century to that of the *Tournament*, women's ability to acquire property and through marriage customs had been altered greatly.

The women of Germany were losing economic influence as the Middle Ages progressed, and comparable losses affected women in the Low Countries as well. Simon's work reveals that while some "women may have occupied prominent positions in trade and in a few crafts during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and early fifteenth centuries…their numbers declined in the next decades."[67] Also, like in the German regions of Europe, restrictions were increasingly placed on female industrial workers; in both Ghent and Flanders "in 1374 the wives of fullers or women of any sort were forbidden to wash any types of clothes."[68] Further restrictions were also delineated concerning the economic tasks undertaken by women in beguinages: "because the beguines were able to produce goods cheaply, they found themselves drawn into disputes with the guilds and corporations who considered the beguine activities to be unfair

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[66] Sarah Westphal-Wihl, "*The Ladies' Tournament:"* Marriage, Sex, and Honor in Thirteenth-Century Germany" in *Sister and Workers in the Middle Ages* eds. Judith M. Bennett, Elizabeth A. Clark, Jean F. O'Barr, B. Anne Vilen, And Sarah Westphal-Wilhl (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 172.
[67] Simons, 8.
[68] Herlihy 83.

competition."[69] The earlier urban culture that allowed for a high degree of female participation was doubtlessly being challenged.

An examination of the Italian economic status of women in the later Middle Ages and early modern period again echoes the phenomena characterizing the changes in German and Lowland culture. David Herlihy's investigation on the types of work that women performed in medieval society reveals that fifteenth century condition of Italian "urban working women is consistently bleak."[70] His survey of Bologna includes very few women as actually working outside; "women participated minimally in the Bolognese work force."[71]

A survey of Tuscany reveals a similar dearth of female economic involvement in the community; "few in number, the occupations that Tuscan women held in 1427 are also humble."[72] And according to Judith Brown's research, "in contrast to the large numbers of working women mentioned in documents of the late thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries, the records of the next two centuries reveal very few" women working in Florence.[73] Women continued their employment in traditional female work, such as midwifery, wet nursing, and domestic service; however, the large variety of female occupations "evident in the notorial records and literary sources of the pre-plague period" have no counterpart in the early Renaissance sources.[74] Female weavers and silk workers, which were of primary importance of the Florentine textile industry, were increasingly excluded by guild restrictions during the fifteenth century. In Florence,

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[69] Hans Geybels, *Vulgariter Beghinae: Eight centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2004), 116.
[70] Herlihy "Women Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe," 87.
[71] Ibid., 88.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Brown, "Women's Work in Renaissance Tuscany," 68.
[74] Ibid., 69.

as throughout Europe, "there was an inverse relation between the ability of guilds to regulate economic activity and the extent of female participation in the labor force."[75]

The political influence and opportunities that had been previously exercised by women throughout Europe were also being questioned and reformed over the course of the Middle Ages. Martha Howell argues that a shift from a family to an individual as the "constituent civil unit" caused a definite decrease in the public roles that a woman could employ in late medieval Germany.[76] By the twelfth century "public power was gradually being recaptured from the great aristocratic families" by other forms of government, and as the new "rulers slowly developed an impersonal machinery for government, queen and empresses…were excluded from public life."[77] Aristocratic familial rule gave way to a more individualistic and male-dominated political systems, and women thus lost the power that their secure place in a feudal family had provided them. No longer having the authority to control their noble families and the land over which their families ruled, women in later German medieval politics lost much of the influence that they had enjoyed in the feudal system of the earlier Middle Ages.

Women in the Low Countries suffered similar losses in political influence. According to Rudolph Michel Dekker's survey of Dutch history "Getting to the Source: Women in the Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands, "originally, when a count suffered an untimely death---a common occurrence---his widow could become regent. But with growing frequency, male relatives, especially the dead count's brothers, seized

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[75] Ibid.
[76] Howell, 51.
[77] McNamara and Wemple, 96-97.

the occasion to take power."[78] The formation of states in the Netherlands during the sixteenth centuries also led to a "more rationalized and formalized functioning of political power… [that] eventually pushed women off the scene."[79] A specific occurrence of such a loss of female political authority is clearly represented in the case of Countess Beatrix of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. The countess played an important role in defending the area of Middleburg against Flemish troops during a conflict of 1290. Over time, however, the "countess's government involvement declined."[80]

The decrease in female political influence also occurred as familial leadership policies changed in Italy. According to Diane Owen Hughes' survey of Italian medieval historiography "Invisible Madonnas? The Italian Historiograpahical Tradition and the Women of Medieval Italy," their political exile is "the product of a communal policy that consciously sought to crush a social and political world over many of whose territories noble women in fact held sway."[81] As the feudal system was faced with the budding authority of the city state during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, "they confronted women who through inheritance or marriage exercised control over lands and men in the Italian countryside and even the city itself."[82] City states were formed in the various regions of Italy, feudal systems began to be replaced, and the power of women was perceived as threatening to this type of political and system and thus accordingly reduced. Corresponding with Hughes' assessment of the negative impact of a republican government on an Italian's women political abilities is David Herlihy's discussion of the

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[78] Rudolph Michel Dekker, "Getting to the Source: Women in the Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands" *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 2 (1998): 166.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Hughes, 30.
[82] Ibid..

communes of Italy in his article "The Towns of Northern Italy." Herlihy, like Hughes, states that the growing republican form of government under which Italian communes were organized was an "institutional obstruction to the visibility of women."[83]

To demonstrate the extent to which the political ideals of the Renaissance negatively affected women, it is useful to examine Joan Kelly's description of Elisabetta Gonzaga, a duchess who was idealized in Baldassare Castiglione's guidebook for nobility.[84] Elisabetta was praised by Castiglione for her inability to lead armies and handle weaponry, activities which were perceived as being unfeminine.[85] Further, she had decided upon the death of her husband that her adopted son, rather than herself, should assume the late duke's pursuits.[86] Docile and removed from any position of power, Elisabetta spent her life having placated her "father, brother, and husband."[87] Renaissance write Castiglione looked upon these powerless qualities in a positive light, and tellingly depicts Elisabetta as the new standard for noble women.

This examination of the changes occurring in women's economic and political roles over the course of the Middles Ages clearly reveals that the position of women declined in the lay sector of society. Over time in each region, restrictions were passed concerning the extent of a woman's economic societal position, and many of the exclusive production rights that they once exercised were compromised. Further, in all three regions, the power that women exercised through their position as aristocrats in the family-centered politics of feudalism was called into question as "institutions outside the

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[83] David Herlihy, "The Towns of Northern Italy," in *Women in Medieval History and Historiography* ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987) 134.
[84] Kelly, 18.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

household were being created to administer public affairs."[88] Because much of the political influence that women experienced in the earlier years of the Middle Ages was closely associated with their family connections, this influence declined as the role of the family generally weakened in European politics.

While the economies and political systems of medieval Europe, indeed, must be studied to fully examine the facets of medieval culture, there remains an additional part of the society that influenced daily life to a very great extent---the Catholic Church. For this reason, the final part of this discussion will address the ways the religious roles and representations of women changed from the early Middle Ages to the Renaissance. The evolution of medieval women in religion and among the religious institutions is conspicuously characterized by the compromising of women's religious influence and saintly roles. Just as women no longer were afforded the opportunity for economic involvement and political leadership, their position and representation associated with the Catholic Church was similarly affected. In order to fully demonstrate the various ways in which the course of the Middle Ages is marked by a decline in women's religious capabilities, this section will discuss the changes in women's religious cultures from both a general and regional perspective, again focusing on the regions of Germany, Italy, and the Low Countries. As with the political and material realms of medieval society in these diverse regions, women in the eyes of the Catholic Church were stripped of their influence with the passage of time.

Some of the most important indicators of the trends that existed regarding the role of women in early medieval religion are the general characteristics associated with female sainthood during these years. Evidence concerning a woman's ability to achieve

[88] McNamara and Wemple, 96.

certain active roles in the church suggests that women were afforded opportunities to participate greatly in religious affairs. Jane Tibbetts Schulenberg, in her article "Public and Private Roles," states "it appears that in barbarian Europe of the early Middle Ages, women enjoyed a certain potential and indeed wider opportunities in the 'public' realms as confirmed by their selection to the celestial gynaeceum."[89] Further, women in the early Middle Ages were sought by their male counterparts in church matters to "aid in missionary work, to establish churches, monasteries, and centers of education."[90] Although typically denied access to the secular church hierarchy, women "were rewarded with recognition of sainthood for their roles as pious queens, abbesses, consecrated virgins/nuns, hermits, and martyrs."[91] Many of the specific women saints from the early medieval period were engaged from the cloister as powerful abbesses who played an important role in the founding of monastic institutions. The trends that existed regarding women and the acquisition of sainthood clearly demonstrate female religious as often obtaining their saintly status through good works, learning, and leadership.

Within the context of this broadly defined characterization of female saints and religious women in the early Middle Ages, an examination of the specific religious experiences of women in particular regions can further exemplify this point. Following the pattern of the above section, the region of Germany is the first to be explored. Schulenburg maintains that the "golden age" of German females saints during which new religious opportunities arose occurred during the tenth century.[92] The vitae of specific saints who were recognized during this time exemplify the extent to which this time

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[89] Schulenburg, 121.
[90] Ibid., 121.
[91] Ibid., 105.
[92] Ibid., 106.

period really was the height of female religious power in Germany. Saint Hadeloga of the eight century, the founder and abbess of the Kitzingen monastery, has been remembered for being charitably involved in various construction and building activities in the surrounding community; it was under her leadership that a stone bridge was constructed over the river Main at Kitzngen, a fact is asserted emphatically in the German tradition.[93] Other German saints who have been associated with participating directly in such projects are abbess-saint Landrada of the seventh century, who aided with her "own hands" in the construction of a church for Saint Mary, and the eighth-century abbess-saints Herlindis and Renildis played an integral role in the actual building of a monastery at Eyck.[94] Further, Charlotte Woodford's description of German religious female's scholastic achievements, "Women as Historians: The Case of Early Modern German Convents" notes that there are "many well-known writings from nuns from the medieval period"[95]

To complete this survey of the roles that women could employ in the religious sector of German society, it is useful to examine the text of a specific woman: Hildegard of Bingen. Hailed as one of the "foremost women of her day," Hildegard was an abbess, author, and respected mystic during the twelfth century.[96] Although her example is exceptional and her actions cannot be viewed as the prevailing norm for medieval Christian women, her writings do provide important insight into the relations that a woman had with male religious counterparts. An excerpt of one of her writings, "Letter to her Nuns" reveals the extent to which she was able to exert power and authority. In

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[93] Ibid., 110.
[94] Ibid., 111.
[95] Charlotte Woodward, "Women as Historians: The Case of Early Modern German Convents" in *German Life and Letters* 52, no. 3 (1999): 271.
[96] Emilie Amt, ed., *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 233.

this letter, which was written to describe the manner in which Hildegard had secureed the land for their monastery, there are several allusions to Hildegard's respected status. She writes "I came here with the approval of my superiors and with God's aid I have freely taken possession of it for myself and those who follow me."[97] Hildegard had the endorsement of prevailing authorities, and was also a charismatic leader with many followers. She continues: "[I] demanded from the abbot named above the freedom of the place and the possessions of my daughters…, all these things were granted to me through written contract in legal codex."[98] Demonstrating a definite sense of power and authority, Hildegard is allowed the power to appeal to higher authorities, and is an advocate for the women who are her followers. It is still important to recognize Hildegard's singularity; however the words and the authoritative tone of this letter doubtlessly demonstrate a woman who maintained a powerful religious role in twelfth century Germany.

The religious development of the Low Countries differs somewhat from that of other regions, and the rise of women in the religious sector of society occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, rather than in the earlier medieval period as in Germany. However, the contrast between the religious roles of women during this time compared to their diminished role during the early Renaissance years similarly mirrors the changes that occurred in the German religious culture a few centuries previous.

The most important religious aspect of Low Country female church involvement is the development of beguine communities. It was around 1200 that "lay women of the southern Low Countries began to lead a new kind of religious life that became popular

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[97] "Hildegard of Bingen: Letter to her Nuns," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 234.
[98] Ibid.

rapidly."[99] According to Hans Geybel's study *Vulgariter Beghinae: Eight centuries of Beguine History in the Low Countries*, "the movement was part of a much wider religious renewal of the period, involving lay movements (some heretical) and sharing common elements with many other religious movements."[100] This new religious life cannot be attributed to one founding leader; rather, the "earliest manifestations of the movement are unusual and fascinating precisely because communities of like-minded women seeking a novel way of life, pursuing similar goals and connected by various individuals who moved between them, sprang up in different places in the southern Low Countries within a relatively short time.[101]

From these informal beginnings, the movement began to change during the second quarter of the thirteenth century. It was during this time that the beguine communities had begun to acquire property, and they first began to identify themselves as having a membership in a defined institution.[102] Of these newly delineated beguine settlements, there were different manners of social organization. The most common was the convent style in which the women lived in a convent-like setting overseen by a single superior (called a mistress) and attended a parish church in order to exercise their religious worship.[103] According to the primary source description of the laws prescribed to the beguinages of Ghent, a woman named the "conventual mistress" is identified as overseeing the actions of the other women there. The second type, court style, was less prevalent in the Low Countries. The beguinage courts were larger than the convents, and

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[99] Simons, 35.
[100] Geybels, 157.
[101] Ibid., 37.
[102] Ibid., 48.
[103] Ibid., 50.

included numerous service buildings such as a brewery, bakery, or small farm.[104] Their size was often large enough to merit the appointment of parish priest to serve the beguinages of the court style.[105]

Women who chose to live as beguinages wished to devote themselves to a life of prayer, contemplation, study, and good works.[106] They were often either "virgins who lacked the money to afford a dowry, or young women who could not remarry because of the principles of monogamy."[107] Entering a beguinage was a viable alternative to marriage; "archival documents from beguinages sometimes testify directly to the fact that beguines indeed regarded their life as an alternative to, or rather, as an escape from marriage."[108] The women of the Ghent beguinage described in the primary source first considered membership because "suitable marriages were not possible,"[109] coinciding with Geybel's description of the types of women who entered beguinages. And while nuns were required to renounce their property upon entering a convent, women who participated in the beguine lifestyle "still had rights of ownership;"[110] women participating in this movement during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were able to maintain their property rights while simultaneously avoiding both marriage and the involvement in the stricter female monastic institutions that existed at that time.

Their little contact with the outside world was comprised of charity, manual work, and teachings, making their basic principles for daily life differ somewhat from both a completely contemplative way of religious life. The presence of court style beguinages

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[104] Ibid., 51.
[105] Ibid., 51.
[106] Ibid., 61.
[107] Geybels, 47.
[108] Ibid., 71.
[109] "Description of the Beguines of Ghent," in *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* ed. Emilie Amt (New York: Routledge, 1993), 264.
[110] Geybels, 114.

especially demonstrates the extent to which beguines allowed women to be involved in various labor initiatives: "manual labor curbed idleness and improved prayer and spiritual exercise."[111] In fact, during the Middle Ages their manual labor tendencies actually provided an important economic role in the urban milieu; "certain branches of the textile industry rapidly… [became] a booming industry in most towns during this period."[112] The primary source description of the Ghent beguinages cites the fact that "manual work, washing the wool and cleaning the pieces of cloth sent to them from the town" allowed them to earn enough money to subsist and also donate charitably to their parish church.[113]

This source also provides important information concerning their educational initiatives. The discussion of the Ghent beguinage mentions the fact that the women of these particular beguines "have such respectable manners and are so learned in domestic affairs that great and respectable persons often send them their daughters to be raised."[114] Further examples of such education educational aims are evident in the notable beguine figure Marie of D'Oignies could understand Latin and "explain the scripture"[115] during the thirteenth century.

The impressive number of beguine communities in southern Lowland countries demonstrates the extent to which women were able to exercise a minimal sense of dependence by participating in this movement. During the thirteenth century, in such cities as Ghent, 1.7 percent of the population is cited as being part of a beguinage, and a survey of mid-thirteenth century, 4.4 percent of the population of Liege were involved in

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[111] Geybels, 115.
[112] Ibid., 85.
[113] Ibid., 265.
[114] "Description of the Beguines of Ghent," 266.
[115] Simons, 121.

the movement.[116] Such popularity demonstrates through the beguine movement, many women in the Low Countries were provided the opportunity to work, pray, and learn in a semi-autonomous community.

Women were afforded the right to exercise an often influential role in religious affairs, as well as the opportunity to develop their own semi-religious opportunities in the German and Low Country regions of Europe. These powerful roles, however, were soon to be greatly compromised. As changes occurred at both the papal and local hierarchical levels in the later medieval and early modern periods, the view and scope of female religious participants in society also changed.

Mirroring the preceding discussion of women's roles in early medieval times, the general characteristics and changes that occurred in the later Middle Ages regarding women in religion provide a context for the study of these changes. Basically, with the reform ideology of the later Middle Ages, a "new idea of women is presented for women, one which denigrated female participation in the public realm while it glorified the private role of cult of domesticity."[117] Religious women were being discouraged from the active work of their predecessors, and twelfth century reformers like Idung of Prufenwing started to argue that women should confined to cloistered way of life,[118] an idea that was put into action by Pope Boniface VIII's papal bull *Periculoso* in 1298.[119] The powerful abbess and queen saints of the earlier centuries were being replaced with

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[116] Simons, 60.
[117] Schulenburg, 117.
[118] Ibid., 117.
[119] Jennifer Ward, *Women in Medieval Europe 1200-1500* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), 185.

women who obtained religious prominence through a more mystical rather than active life direction.[120]

With this general information about the changes occurring in the underlying religious culture, it is possible to then discuss the specific phenomenon of mysticism, and the ways in which the rise of mysticism signifies a definite change in a woman's religious status. It is difficult to define the growth of mysticism as being an overwhelmingly negative or positive process. According to David Herlihy's article "Did Women have a Renaissance?: A Reconsideration," charismatic women such as Catherine of Siena "were individualists in the full meaning of the word, trusting in their interior voices, critical of the male-dominated establishment and the manner it was leading society."[121] And as mentioned earlier, Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* maintains that the penitent acts of fasting performed by later medieval female saints can be interpreted as means to rebel against male influence and power in the church. And yet, while mysticism indeed did allow for a greater number of female saints who seemed to exert a powerful influence over their followers, it is important to note that these women "acceded all the more easily to sainthood because they were mere nothings" in society.[122] Their seemingly widespread predominance must not be mistaken for the acquisition of real power and authority. In fact, Andre Vauchez in his work *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* states that the clergy members who often immortalized the stories of these women "were fascinated not by their qualities as wives and mothers, but the effective, irrational, and even pathological aspects of their personality."[123]

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[120] Vauchez, 378.
[121] Herlihy, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?: A Reconsideration" 56.
[122] Ibid., 384.
[123] Ibid., 385.

Further, the development of the mendicant orders of nuns, which often called upon women to live harshly austere lifestyles further exemplifies the negative nature of female religious extremity in the later Middle Ages. Again utilizing Vauchez's research, women in mendicant orders essentially "were struggling to transcend by an excess of heroism the strict limits within which their daily lives were led,"[124] a fact that challenges the assertion that the later Middle Ages was a time in which the prevalence of new female religious orders signified increasing female religious significance. Because the mendicant orders called for a "*personal* responsibility for salvation… [and for] women to take charge of themselves,"[125] women were allowed in this religious movement to act in extreme ways perhaps as an impulse to the restrictive conditions attributed to them by the underlying society. According to this evidence, it would seem that the rise of mystic sainthood and mendicant orders during the later Middle Ages signifies a shift in a woman's possible religious roles. Women saints and religious could not longer be found in leadership or authoritative positions but rather were relegated to the realm of self-inflicted religious anguish.

Within this depiction of the extent to which women had lost their religious influence in society through reform and by studying the trends in female sainthood of the later Middle Ages, an examination of the changing experiences of religious women from a regional perspective is in order. Charlotte Woodford's article about the role that religious women played in the recording of history mentions that in the years of the early Renaissance, "nuns cease to figure as authors in the history of German literature."[126] While, as mentioned earlier, there survive many texts from the nuns of the medieval

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[124] Ibid., 352.
[125] Bell, 149.
[126] Woodford, 271.

period, "very few such writings are known from the early modern period."[127] According to Woodford, stricter laws were enacted regarding women in the German territories after the Reformation had rendered much of the region Protestant, and many of the convents were forced to close.[128] The powerful abbesses who participated in community-building and other such projects no longer were prevalent in the German religious tradition, and they were replaced with women who were more mystical in nature such as Mechtilde of Madgeburg of the mid thirteenth century and Mechtilde of Hackeborn if the later thirteenth century.[129]

The rise and subsequent fall of the beguinages' religious prominence in the Low Lands provides an even more striking example of the extent to which women in the later medieval religious culture were affronted. Wybren Scheepsma, in his work *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings* states that "the success of the beguines…led ultimately to their severe persecution at the hands of the Inquisition."[130] In 1298, Pope Boniface VIII passed a bull insisting on the enclosure of all nuns, which would affect the beguinages' actions performed outside the beguine walls. Further, the first decree of Boniface's pronouncement in 1298 was directed towards women specifically: it "denied the beguines the right to call themselves religious because they did not promise obedience, renounce private property, nor follow an approved will."[131]

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[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Vauchez, 378.
[130] Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The Modern Devotion, The Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings*, trans. David F. Johnson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 3.
[131] Ward, 185.

The most powerful criticism that affected the fall of the beguine way of life, however, was the council of Vienne, occurring in 1311 and 1312. It was during this time that the beguines were formally denounced as "faithless women," affecting their institutional church credibility.[132] One of the main facets of beguinage life that was criticized was the members' abilities to preach and interpret religious texts; the charges of Vienne "betray a…fundamental anxiety in dominant church milieus…over the ambivalent nature of beguine life and most importantly about beguine claims for an active, female, apostolate." Vienne issued a decree censuring "the women commonly known as beguines who, as if insane, discoursed on the Trinity and divine essence, leading simple people in error under the pretext of sanctity," restricting the educational aspects of the beguine culture.[133]

Threatened by the ability of women to preach and interpreted religious texts, the aftermath of Vienne was marked by beguine women being "forced to disappear or to be assimilated into other orders, such as the Cistercian ones."[134] The council's decrees were published in 1317, and in 1318 Pope John XXII issued a bull, *Ratio Recta* that was specifically directed as detecting heretical beliefs among beguinages.[135] As a measure was passed by Pope John XXII in 1320 that was meant to examine the orthodoxy of the beguine way of life, the bishops of Low Country dioceses began to conduct numerous inquiries into the many beguinages that existed in the areas over which the presided.[136]

As the inquisitions ended in 1328, those beguinages that were organized in the court style were pardoned. The impact of these inquiries, however, greatly devastated the

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[132] Simons, 133.
[133] Geybels, 77.
[134] Ibid., 159.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Simons, 135.

predominance of beguine communities in the Low Countries. Fourteenth and fifteenth century rules strictly defined the occasions during which women could leave the beguinage to have contact with the general society because of the papal decree calling for all female orders to be claustrated, and also prescribed a strict code of dress on the women living in the communities.[137] Their numbers declined steadily, and it was not until the counterreformation of centuries later that they again achieved any type of cultural prominence.[138]

The description of the rules governing the Ghent beguinages mentioned earlier date from the year 1328; and, although they provide an important insight into the general characteristics of beguine life, the fact that they were composed after the inquisition allows them to also provide information about the changes that occurred in later beguine communities. One of the rules mentioned that highlights the formalizing and restrictive effect of the inquisition on beguine life is related to dress; it is stated that "all wear the same color and style of clothing, so that they may thereby very strictly avoid anything that might distinguish them from the others or be suspect."[139] The clothing of the women is thus delineated as being a way to prevent persecution of any type of suspicions, and also renders the women of the beguinage more similar to the nuns of already established orders. Other aspects of the description also indicate that the independent nature of the beguines had been affected by the year 1328. The document includes a section that asserts, "their way of living, in fear of God and in obedience to the holy Mother Church, has been such that nothing unusual or suspect has ever been heard concerning their

[137] Ibid., 136.
[138] Ibid., 142.
[139] "Description of the Beguines of Ghent," 266.

congregation."[140] Because this beguinage is delineated as not being unusual and suspect, it is insinuated that other beguine congregations were characterized in this fashion. Finally, in the section describing the government and corrections exercised among beguines, the author writes "no one may be away from the Beguinage for long or spend the night in the town without…permission," and "those who go out are required to avoid anything suspect in all their movements, and in the places they go, and in the persons they meet."[141] Just as the papal bull *Periculoso* and the council of Vienne and subsequent reforms prescribed, the women of this beguinage, as were all religious women during this time, were restricted in their movement outside of the beguinage walls. Further, the constant warnings against interacting with suspect individuals, as well as vigilance concerning personal appearance and comportment illustrate the fearful attitudes towards beguinages that existed in the underlying Lowland culture.

Essentially, the fall of the beguine movement in the later Middle Ages is a telling indicator of the changes occurring in a woman's religious capabilities. Forced to conform to strict policies created and enforced by the men of the religious hierarchy, the once economically self-sufficient and semi- autonomous beguinages were altered irrevocably. The women in post-1328 beguine settlements did not have the power to exercise their own leadership and control in manners relating to the settlements, and their religiously-independent initiatives were called into serious question. As the church began to alter its policies at the close of the Middle Ages, women in the Low Countries suffered a definite reduction in the ability to retain any type of religious influence. The dominant and relatively secure status of the beguines in the thirteenth century as compared to the

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[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.

beguine movement's precarious remains after the Council of Vienne clearly illustrates a diminishment in a women's religious influence in the Low Countries as the Middle Ages progressed.

Along the medieval time continuum, women's religious status and ability changed greatly in both the German and Low Country civilizations. And yet, the case of religion and sainthood in Italy perhaps provides the most telling example of the extreme ways in which a woman's position was reduced. Late medieval Italy was home to a great many mystics, whose ambiguous power is discussed in the preceding section. The proliferation of this type of sainthood in Italy, in turn, demonstrates the ways in which women lost religious prominence in the later Middle Ages. The discussion of specific women saints from late medieval Italy will aid in illustrating this fact. One of the most well-known and charismatic saints in later medieval Italian culture is St. Catherine of Siena, who was born and lived during the fourteenth century. She participated in extreme fasting that, according to Rudolph Bell, "went far beyond the austere or ritual fasting of even the most holy men and women of her day."[142] She lived in a constant state of penance, "wearing only rough wool and [she] exchanged her hairshirt, the dirtiness of which offended her, for an iron chain bound so tightly against the hips that it inflamed her skin."[143] St. Catherine attempted to capitalize upon her popularity and following by creating a reformist movement in the Catholic Church. Her efforts were somewhat well-received by Pope Greogory XI; however, with the election of Urban VI "her efforts at Chruch reform came to a dismal end."[144]

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[142] Bell, 24.
[143] Ibid., 43.
[144] Ibid., 53.

Receiving mystical visions from God regarding her family and the state of the Catholic Church, St. Catherine's extreme lifestyle clearly fits into Vauchez's description of a mystic saint who exercised intense actions and almost "pathological" tendencies. She was unsuccessful in bringing about the church reform that she devoted much of her life to, demonstrating her inability to exert any real power or authority---it was her fascinatingly extreme and grotesque actions that more impacted her legacy. Further, St. Catherine did not write the product of her visions; rather she depended on the presence of a religious confessor.[145] Although the Italian St. Catherine indeed did acquire religious prominence, she did so not through proactive reform and the ability to exercise any type of religious authority, but by intensely brutal self-deprecating actions.

The stories of other mystical Italian female saints similarly characterize women as having a tenuous and damaging religious role in later medieval society. The article "*Dominae* or *Dominate*? Female Mysticism and the Trauma of Textuality" by Dyan Elliott describes the life of mystical saint Frances of Rome who lived in 1430, and the manner in which a mystic's confessor negatively affects her autonomy. St. Frances, who had a variety of visions in her life in which she was spoken to by God, is described as having a tumultuous relationship with her religious confessor and scribe John Mattioti, to whom she relayed her visions. John forced Frances to speak while being enraptured by holy spirits, and would employ a policy of "holy obedience" that required her to discuss in great detail the content of her visions.[146] Also, to demonstrate France's credibility as a woman who had truly been communicating with God, John conducted experiments, such

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[145] Ibid., 23.
[146] Dyan Elliot, "*Dominae* or *Dominate*? Female Mysticism and the Trauma of Textuality" in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom* eds. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1998), 71.

as asking people to poke or prod her when she was in a state of ecstasy and inviting religious authorities to touch her while in the immobile condition.[147] St. Frances indeed was afforded a unique sense of religious power and authority by having the ability to converse with God and other heavenly entities. And yet, the constant presence of her confessor John greatly compromised this sense of independent power and rendered Frances more helpless than authoritative.

St. Frances is one of the many female mystics who "tended to become more dependent on their confessor/scribes as the Middle Ages progressed."[148] Basically, although there was an increase in the number of lay female mystics over the course of the Middle Ages,[149] it is again important to note that this phenomenon cannot be mistaken for an increase in female religious influence. Rather, the presence of confessors worked to reduce these women's religious independence; "even in the most auspicious cases, the apparent autonomy enjoyed by the female mystic in the recital of her visions is deeply compromised by the involvement of an amanuensis---no matter how discreet or benignly intended the role."[150] Female mystics were often revealed the words of God from an intermediary male spirit, and it was only by discussing these visions with an institutionally-appointed male confessor that they were presented any type of credibility.[151] Further, the life of St. Frances also reveals that it was compliance and not assertiveness that marked a mystic's relationship with her confessor. The mystics of fifteenth century Italy, like those existing in other parts of Europe, essentially were in a powerless position of extreme dependence. While eleventh century Hildegard of Bingen,

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[147] Ibid., 73.
[148] Ibid., 54.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid., 76.
[151] Ibid.

as a mystic, insisted on "wakeful lucidity throughout the reception of her visions,"[152] those of the fifteenth century were in no way allowed such an integral role in their personal religious matters. The increase of lay female mystics occurring during the late Middle Ages in such places as Italy, thus, is also an increase in female religious dependence.

Joan Kelley argues in her article "Did Women have a Renaissance?" that the culture of medieval Europe allowed women to have a much more authoritative role in societal affairs. Investigating further into this hypothesis, the research compiled in this essay works to reveal the ever-diminishing economic, political, and religious roles that women were afforded by the underlying culture. The German, Low Country, and Italian regions of Europe represent a relatively diverse cross-section of the European medieval community on which the conclusions of this study are based. And in each region, as the Middle Ages approached the Renaissance, women lost status and influence in various different ways. In Germany, women in earlier society were involved exclusive in craft guilds. They also had the power to obtain wealth and authority through inheritance customs and the family-centered feudal way of life. Powerful abbesses exercised influence in their monasteries, and played an integral role in community building. In the Low Countries, such cities as Ghent and Flanders also boasted of female craft guilds, and women exercised a form of legal authority in Flemish public matters. Beguinages provided women with an almost independent religious way of life, and many women chose to live in this manner instead of pursuing marriage or a formal religious vocation. Even in Italy, a region whose economic and political development differs greatly from that of other parts of Europe, women in such cities as Florence participated in textile

[152] Ibid., 77

production, and were able to acquire political power through feudal connections. Gradually, these positive attributes changed; there is not one specific year, or even century, that can be recognized as the impetus for the loss of these roles. Rather, as religious and political reforms were passed, traditions and customs were altered, government structures were changed, and the familial culture of the Middle Ages gave way to the public institutions of the Renaissance, women began to disappear from public and influential positions. In each region discussed, this process differed, and in each region, women were affected in different ways at varying points in time. By the beginning of the Renaissance, however, women in all three regions had clearly suffered a loss in influence, as is demonstrated by the specific discussions of the changing economic, political, and religious functions that women could enjoy. Joan Kelly's argument, thus, is supported; women clearly did not have a Renaissance, and the modern period was a time in which they suffered a loss of much of the influence and status that they had enjoyed in the previous centuries.

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