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INTRODUCTION

WOMEN, THE CHURCH AND THE LAW

Few women of the later Middle Ages, apart possibly from Joan of Arc, are known by name to people in the twenty-first century. Joan of Arc was herself exceptional in taking on the male role of a soldier and raising the siege of Orleans in 1429. Far more is heard of kings, popes, philosophers and scholars than of queens and women mystics and writers. Partly this is due to the subordination of medieval women and the way in which they were viewed by the Church and the law, partly it is due to traditions in historical writing until recent times. The interest in social history and feminism, in the second half of the twentieth century especially, has resulted in women becoming more noticed.

To understand why women were regarded as inferior and subordinate in the later Middle Ages, it is essential to go back to the classical past. The Greeks believed that all matter in the universe, including mankind, was made up of four elements: earth, air, fire and water, in varying combinations. These elements corresponded in the human body to the four humours: choler or yellow bile was associated with fire, phlegm with water, black bile with earth, and blood with air. Each element had its own characteristics: fire was hot and dry, air hot and wet, water cold and wet, and earth cold and dry. Good health was ensured by keeping a balance between the humours, but one or two were usually predominant, giving the personality and appearance their main traits – an individual might be choleric, phlegmatic, melancholic (through an excess of black bile) or sanguine, if blood was the dominant humour.

More significant from the point of view of women was the opinion that in them the cold and moist elements were uppermost. This idea was emphasised by Aristotle, as when he claimed that women matured and aged earlier than men because they were weaker and colder by nature; they were inferior to men who had the heat to grow more slowly. For Aristotle, a woman was an imperfect man. The same point was made in the second century A.D. by the physician Galen who asserted that man was more perfect than woman because of the element of heat.¹

The imperfect nature of women was apparent in their sexual organs. Both Aristotle and Galen believed that men's and women's sexual organs were mirror images of each other. As Galen put it, the organs were formed inside the woman when she was a foetus in the womb and because of her lack of heat could not emerge on the outside of the body; however, he considered this an advantage for humanity, since women were essential for procreation, and the Creator would not have made women imperfect unless there had been good reason for this. Aristotle and Galen differed on the question of the woman's role in procreation. Aristotle distinguished between the man as active and the woman as passive partner, the man providing the form and the woman matter, as befitted the weaker creature. The woman produced menstrual fluid, not semen. The male semen implanted itself in the womb and developed into a foetus, the woman simply providing the site for this development to take place. Galen, however, was aware of the presence of the ovaries which he regarded as small testes, and saw women's semen as having a role in procreation; at the same time he pointed out that the semen of the male had a more important part to play. Both theories are found during the Middle Ages. The recovery of Aristotle's works in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries led to his having great influence on medical science as on other forms of learning. St Thomas Aquinas subscribed to his belief in matter and form, arguing that the foetus received its form from the power of the father's semen.²

Menstruation was a further sign of women's imperfection, and for Aristotle this explained why women did not produce semen. Menstrual blood was regarded as unclean and polluting in classical and medieval times. Yet it was believed that menstrual blood nourished the foetus in the womb and that the breast-milk which fed the baby after birth was a form of menstrual blood. The girl-baby was disadvantaged even in the womb; boys, it was believed, developed on the right side of the womb, while girls on the left suffered from a colder environment from the time of conception.³

These scientific views have to be set against the religious ideas of the Middle Ages. According to the Church, mankind fell from the state of grace through the action of Eve who, according to the story in the Bible in the *Book of Genesis*, was tempted by the devil to pick the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil growing in the middle of the Garden of Eden. God had forbidden Adam and Eve to touch this fruit, but Eve ate it and gave it to her husband. As a result, God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden and condemned them to a life of toil and suffering.⁴ Eve's weakness in succumbing to temptation underlay much of the misogynistic writing of the Middle

Ages. The Fall, taken together with the influence of classical writings and the long tradition of women's subordination, largely explains the Church's deep distrust of women. Although St Paul stressed the obligations of marital partners towards each other, he saw the wife as a person lacking in authority and subject to her husband.⁵ The idealising of virginity by the Church led to the opinion that marriage was second best.

Women's vices were a popular subject for preachers, writers and poets in the later Middle Ages. Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) was a prominent churchman and crusader, well known for his support of the beguines, the religious women of the Low Countries, and in particular of Mary of Oignies whom he regarded as his inspiration. He was also a prolific preacher and fully aware of women's shortcomings. He expected wives to obey their husbands; Eve was created from Adam's rib, not from his head, in order to reduce women's arrogance. Women were self-willed, quarrelsome, disobedient, weak, deceitful and untrustworthy.⁶ Two traits were particularly emphasised by churchmen: women were lustful and had an insatiable sexual appetite, and they lacked reason and therefore needed to be subject to a man's guidance.

The antithesis of Eve was the Virgin Mary, the woman who obeyed God's call to become the mother of his Son, Jesus Christ, who redeemed the world through his death on the cross and his resurrection. She epitomised obedience to God's will, whereas Eve stood for disobedience. The cult of the Virgin became more prominent from the later eleventh century, and carvings and paintings of her increased as the Gothic style took hold in Europe. Depictions of the Coronation of the Virgin of the late twelfth century put her on the same level as Christ, but subsequent images show her in an attitude of submission to her Son. Later medieval depictions of the Virgin and Child emphasised her human qualities as a mother, and these human qualities come out in the visions of women mystics. However, this concern with the Virgin's humanity did not give rise to a more positive view of women, because Mary was the outstanding exception to women's general nature – she was not only mother but virgin, a status impossible for any other woman to achieve.⁷ Mary inspired deep devotion, was regarded as a model of the Christian life, was called upon as intercessor, and adopted as patron by cities and churches, but she did not alter the way in which women were viewed by the Church in the later Middle Ages.

Preachers and writers were bound to speak in general terms in order to make their point. The reverence for authorities, whether classical philosophers or Church Fathers, meant that it was highly unlikely that views on women's status and imperfections would be overturned. These views

permeated social attitudes, but do not give the whole story as to how women were regarded. One thirteenth-century woman disagreed with the traditional interpretation of the Fall. She argued that Adam disliked the original Eve whom God had created and killed her, whereupon God created a second Eve out of Adam's rib. She was loved excessively by her husband and this passion became more important to him than God's commands. This writer saw Adam as responsible for the Fall.⁸ Christine de Pisan argued vigorously in the early fifteenth century that women possessed both intelligence and strength of character. She based her views on her own experience and on classical myths and the lives of the saints. She accepted the concept of obedience to one's husband, but regarded women as rational beings and expected them to act independently if the need arose.⁹

As with Church writings, the law emphasised women's subordination. The laws in later medieval Europe varied widely, with customary law usual in the North and Roman law increasingly adopted in the South, and with state law, promulgated in both city-state and kingdom, coming to play a more significant role between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries. Yet despite the differences, all types of law regarded women as inferior to men and treated them as daughters, wives and widows rather than as individuals in their own right. They were widely regarded as irrational and incapable, and in the interests of social order needed to be kept under male control.

Many women lacked legal identity. It was usual all over Europe for minors to be represented by father or guardian and for the wife to be represented by her husband. In areas of customary law, however, women who were described as *femmes soles* had the right to their own legal identity and might conduct business on their own and bring cases in the courts. These women might be the wives of townsmen who were working independently of their husbands, or sometimes the wives of nobles. Most *femmes soles* were widows and were frequently to be found in northern France, the Low Countries and England. In parts of Italy, however, no woman enjoyed independent legal status during her father's lifetime, unless she had been emancipated from his control, and even the widow needed a *mundualdus*, or male legal guardian, to conclude deeds and contracts. This applied in Florence and a number of other cities, and although the *mundualdus* appears on occasion to have been bypassed, the underlying assumption remained that women were incapable of acting independently in law.¹⁰

Women's inferior status was particularly marked in relation to property. The growing emphasis on primogeniture and agnatic lineage (or patrilineage) restricted women's rights of inheritance and, in certain parts of Europe, of

dower. From the eleventh or twelfth centuries, descent in the male line became increasingly the norm, with the largest share of the inheritance passing to the eldest son. It was accepted that daughters had a right to a share in the family property, and in many areas the dowry came to be regarded as the daughter's share; Castilian brides in the fifteenth century, for instance, were sometimes asked to renounce in writing all rights to the family inheritance. Patrilineage was increasing in importance at about the same time as the provision of a dowry became essential for marriage. By the thirteenth century, the dowry had largely taken the place of brideprice or bridewealth, given by the husband or his family on his marriage. Moreover, women's rights to dower, the money or property provided by the husband to support his widow, became more limited and women's rights to dispose of property more circumscribed.¹¹ These changes had a direct bearing on women's position in the family and society.

Considerable regional differences existed as to the laws on women's inheritance and dower. In areas such as England, Scotland, France and the Low Countries in the thirteenth century, landholding by women, whether as heiresses or widows, was accepted. The dowry constituted the woman's contribution to the marriage and, if she was widowed, she received one-third or one-half of her husband's property as her dower. Moreover, in the absence of sons, it was usual for a daughter or daughters to inherit from their father, although in certain regions such as Occitania, Burgundy and the Limousin, where the dowry comprised the daughter's share of the inheritance, she had to surrender her dowry before receiving a part of the family lands. Similar customs applied among Frankish immigrants in the Latin empire of Constantinople, established in 1204.¹²

The importance of women landholders is illustrated in the roll of fiefs of 1252 from the *bailliage* of Troyes in Champagne where the main holdings were in the hands of 213 men and 66 women, the latter comprising 23.7 per cent of the total. Some of these women were holding land in the absence of their husbands in the East or as guardians of minor sons, while others held by right of inheritance or dower. For the thirteenth century it has been calculated that about 20 per cent of fief-holders were women.¹³ The significance of prominent noblewomen in north-west Europe in the later Middle Ages is reflected in the wealth and influence of women such as Jeanne and Margaret, Countesses of Flanders, Mahaut, Countess of Artois, and Margaret de Brotherton, Duchess of Norfolk.

Such a situation was not, however, universal. In Germany and parts of Lorraine, it was usual to divide the inheritance among the male members

of the family. Rights of heiresses were accepted only occasionally and not necessarily without question, as when Simon III's daughter Mahaut succeeded to the county of Saarbrücken, a move said to be contrary to the custom of Germany and of the church of Metz. Some lordships were transferred to new families as a result of marriage, as when the counts of Mark succeeded to Cleves in 1368.¹⁴

Towns had their own customs. In London, a woman had the right to inherit property in the absence of a male heir and to receive dower from her husband if widowed. Her dower comprised the right to continue living in her husband's house until she remarried or died, and to have a life interest in one-third of her husband's property, or one-half if there were no children. She was also entitled by the custom known as *legitim* to one-third (or one-half) of her husband's goods and was allowed to dispose of these as she liked. In Ghent, sons and daughters benefited from the system of partible family inheritance. On her husband's death, the widow received as her own half of the common property she had held with her husband and a life interest in one-quarter of the property as her dower – property common to husband and wife dated from the time of their marriage. Her dowry remained her own property during as well as after the marriage. In Bohemian towns, it is possible to trace an improvement in the wife's position during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In a system where the right of inheritance lay with sons or male kin, the widow was entitled to only the return of her dowry, but husbands increasingly left property to their wives, either in their own right or jointly with their children.¹⁵

Male inheritance was the norm in southern Europe where it was seen as perpetuating the power of the lineage. It was usual for the eldest son to inherit the principal house and a large share of the property, the rest being divided among younger sons, the girls receiving their dowry.¹⁶ In this situation, women were at a disadvantage compared with north-west Europe, and changes concerning dowry and dower also weakened their position. Dowries increased markedly in the late Middle Ages and were essential for the woman's maintenance as a widow. The husband's family was bound to return her dowry to the widow after her husband's death, together with any bequest from the husband and any property which he had settled on her at the time of the marriage. However, such a dower settlement was steadily whittled down from the twelfth century onwards. The earliest legislation is found at Genoa in 1143 where the husband's contribution in future was not to exceed half the amount of the dowry or a maximum of 100 Genoese lire. By 1200, the husband's contribution had virtually vanished at Padua, Bologna,

Siena and Lucca, and restrictions were imposed during the thirteenth century at Milan and Florence. Such moves meant that wives became virtually dependent on their dowries during widowhood.¹⁷

Similar developments came about more slowly in Spain. At Barcelona, the emphasis on a single male heir inheriting most of the family property was becoming more marked by the early thirteenth century, although daughters continued to receive bequests from their parents in addition to their dowries. The dowry was regarded as the wife's property, although usually administered by the husband. The importance of the dowry increased in comparison with dower, but the latter, in the form of a counter-gift from the husband, continued to exist. By the mid-thirteenth century, the dowry was often twice the amount of the husband's contribution. The widow therefore became more dependent on her dowry, although not to the same extent as in some of the Italian cities.¹⁸

• During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, moves were afoot to strengthen male inheritance in both northern and southern Europe. These moves were particularly marked among the nobility and reinforced the vision of a family as a dynastic lineage, centred on a male head and rooted in chivalry and the heroism of its ancestors. The entail proved to be an effective means of reinforcing the patrilineage.¹⁹ By this means, the succession to the estate was legally settled during the father's lifetime, usually on the eldest son, and could not be overturned after his death. In Andalusia and Estremadura, the entail was used with royal consent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to preserve the unity of the patrimony; in some cases, the daughter could pass on her rights to her son, although she could not inherit herself.

Members of the higher nobility in England created entails to ensure male succession, such as John de Vere, Earl of Oxford (d. 1360), and Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (d. 1369). Male heirs were favoured in Ireland where the Rochefort family of Ikeathy in County Kildare laid down in 1299 that the barony should never pass to daughters. Male entails were also to be found in Scotland, although in view of the number of sons born to the higher nobility in the late Middle Ages, they were rarely needed.²⁰ In southern France, there was increasing concern to secure the unity of the patrimony, the Albret family manipulating local custom in order to achieve this. Others used their wills to stress the importance of the eldest son, Armand VII of Polignac going so far in 1343 as to assert that the establishment of the heir was the most important element in his will.²¹

The laws on dowry, dower and inheritance thought of women as enclosed within the family and saw them primarily as brides, wives and mothers, and

as widows. The main concern of the laws lay with property and the ways in which it could be maintained and expanded in the interests of the family; the planned marriage has to be seen in this context. Land and urban property were a valuable but finite resource, and this helps to explain the growing tendency in the thirteenth century and later for dowries to be paid in money and for restrictions to be placed on dower.

The failure to see women as individuals and the desire to secure both public order and property lay behind other aspects of medieval law, notably the law on rape. Although the Emperor Constantine made rape a public crime punishable by death, this was regarded as too harsh a penalty in later medieval Europe. Rape was often regarded as a crime against male property, in line with the view that the woman usually lived under the protection of father, guardian or husband. This comes out clearly in changes to the law of rape in England. Whereas the treatise of the late 1180s attributed to Glanvill classed rape as a felony punishable by death and stressed the element of violent assault, 'Bracton's' treatise about forty years later put the emphasis on loss of virginity. Bearing in mind the importance attached to the concept of the virgin bride, and the view that a girl who had lost her virginity might not be regarded as marriageable, the concern with the woman as property is evident. Moreover, although 'Bracton' asserted that the man, if convicted, should be blinded and castrated, this punishment was extremely rare. By the late thirteenth century, in the statute of Westminster II of 1285, rape had been absorbed into the felony of abduction, and the idea that the crime was committed against the family rather than the woman was paramount. This concept was taken further in the statute of 1382 when fathers and husbands were allowed to bring in an appeal for rape, and couples who had eloped were counted as dead for purposes of inheritance.²²

The language used in rape cases in Venice has been described as 'distant and antiseptic' and penalties were on the whole lenient. Although cases involving children attracted heavier punishments, the state does not appear to have been much concerned with the victimisation of women, although rape among the upper class was treated more seriously. With children, the fear that the rape might make them unmarried led to the investment of fines levied on the rapist for the girl's dowry, as in a 1467 case when a man raped his adopted daughter and 100 ducats of the 150 ducat fine was invested for her dowry. On the whole, however, rape was not regarded as a serious crime and there was little idea of protection for the raped woman.²³

In both Germany and northern France rape was punishable by death, although again sentences were usually much more lenient in practice. As

in Venice and England, the protection of a woman's sexuality was hardly a concern, although the rape of children was taken more seriously. In adult cases, the woman might well find that she was fined more heavily than the man. The number of prosecuted cases was relatively few. In the register of the Officiality of Cerisy of 1314–1457, covering part of Normandy, there were twelve cases of rape and attempted rape; all concerned virgins and women of higher status, and it can be assumed that many cases went unreported. A woman needed the backing of a powerful network to bring a prosecution and secure a conviction. The register of criminal cases of St-Martin-des-Champs at Paris between 1332 and 1357 contains six instances of rape, and the court's main concern centred on urban violence rather than rape itself. The general attitude can be summed up in a case of 1391 from Cerisy when a man was fined 5 sous for breaking into the house and raping Alice, widow of Jean Hoquet, while Alice was fined 15 sous for allowing sex to take place.²⁴

The situation concerning rape emphasises the subordination of women. The concept of woman as property rather than as a person in her own right was dominant, and the family unit under the control of her father or husband was all-important. Legal practice was in line with classical and ecclesiastical views of women as weak, emotional and irrational. Sumptuary legislation, aiming to control material consumption, was also intended to keep women in their rightful place in society and the state. Again, the underlying assumption was that women were weak, extravagant and pleasure-loving, and that their vices, unless checked, would undermine both family and the state.

Sumptuary legislation was issued in Italian communes from the mid-thirteenth century, but became more general in Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its apparent ineffectiveness did not stop its promulgation. Although the laws paid increasing attention to clothes and fashion, they also sometimes included furnishings and celebrations such as weddings and funerals. In the kingdoms of England and France, Philip IV's regulations of 1294 and Edward III's of 1363 were concerned with maintaining the hierarchical ordering of society, ensuring that each social order wore appropriate clothes and, in 1294, had appropriate furnishings. To take just one of the English provisions, craftsmen and yeomen and their wives and daughters were not to wear cloth costing more than 40 shillings per cloth; the women were not to wear silk veils, and for furs were allowed only lamb, rabbit, cat and fox.²⁵

The fifteenth-century legislation of the north and central Italian cities was particularly critical of fashion and extravagance in women's clothing.

Women's clothes were expected to identify them with the group to which they belonged, not set them apart as individuals. The sumptuary law at Bologna of 1474 allowed the wives and daughters of knights to wear cloth of gold, those of notaries and bankers to have gold sleeves, and those of important artisans to wear crimson. Wives and daughters of humbler craftsmen were permitted to have crimson sleeves. The desire to maintain a proper social order is apparent in this legislation. There was also a desire to limit expense; the 1398 law at Bologna gave the reasons for the legislation as the desire to curb expenditure which husbands could not afford, and the wish to have a strong community and to please God; excess in clothing was regarded by the Church as a manifestation of the sin of pride.²⁶

The views of the Church and the provisions of the law influenced the lives and activities of women throughout the later Middle Ages, and women lived and worked within these parameters. Yet anyone looking round them at society would have been aware of the sheer variety existing among men and women. The prologue and stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* describe a number of women who were highly individual. Some like Constance and Griselda were idealised, but women like the prioress and the wife of Bath were to be found in late fourteenth-century towns. There was far more to medieval women than the traits highlighted by the preachers and legislators.

In order to discover women's actual experience, we need to look at as wide a range of sources as possible. Women appear comparatively rarely in the chronicles describing wars and great political events. Other records, however, proliferated in the later Middle Ages, as kings, lords, towns and Church developed their jurisdictional and governmental powers, and a written bureaucratic culture became the norm.²⁷ Documents were needed to record legal proceedings, levies of military forces and taxation, economic and social regulations, and religious grants and dispensations. Accounts were kept to record receipts and expenditure not only in the state but in households and manors. Although references to women in most of these sources are few, since the documents were mainly concerned with their husbands as heads of the family, a detailed picture of women's lives, responsibilities and activities emerges when all the available information is put together.

Occasionally, the women's own voices can be heard in wills and letters which provide an insight into social and religious attitudes and family relationships. Although most women lacked education, some of their writings are outstanding, notably the mystical works of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Inevitably, the records provide more information on women of the elite and on the religious life than on labourers and the poor, although

even here a considerable amount can be gleaned. Problems arise for the historian when assumptions made in the records result in particular groups being overlooked. Because marriage for women was taken for granted, it can, for instance, prove difficult to detect women who never married, even though they were probably numerous in the towns.²⁸

In view of the availability of records, how can medieval women be viewed from the vantage point of the present day? Women's history has developed substantially in the past thirty years as historians have come to realise the influence which women were able to exercise not just within the family but in the political, economic and religious world, despite the attitudes of the Church and the law. It is important not only to look at women's gender from the biological point of view but to see its social and cultural construction. As far as their reproductive functions were concerned, women had a common experience which transcended the boundaries of class, race and time. Yet the social construction of gender brings out the differences in their experiences over both place and time.²⁹

To elucidate this, women have to be set in the context of their social relationships. As seen above, they were regarded as subject to father and husband, although in many parts of Europe the widow had more independence. There is a direct link between family relationships and women's access to property, and property in the later Middle Ages provided the basis of power. Changes over women's rights of inheritance and property holding are the principal key to changes in the position of women in the later Middle Ages. Wealth and property conditioned a woman's lifestyle. The wife, who was dependent on her husband for support, usually lived her life within her household, her main responsibilities being the care of husband and children; the widow with property of her own might choose to extend her influence outside the home.

Men's and women's activities were inevitably affected by the ideas current in the society around them. This applied in the area of paid employment. Practice varied across time and place as to what was regarded as acceptable and suitable, whether women worked at home or elsewhere, or whether they embarked on businesses on their own account. It was far more usual to find women working in the crafts in the towns of northern Europe than in Italy. Yet even in northern Europe, opportunities for women became more limited at the end of the Middle Ages. Customs varied from town to town; the women's guilds of Paris and Cologne were not found in London, and the Paris guilds of the late thirteenth century disappeared before the end of the Middle Ages.

Women, like men, also have to be seen in the context of their place in the social hierarchy. Status was determined not only by wealth; in fact there were wide variations of wealth within particular social groups. A family's social order prescribed its lifestyle, privileges and obligations. Those of the lowest social groups found that they were restricted not just by poverty but by the demands of lords and masters and by the lack of free legal status. These people included serfs, who were declining in numbers in the later Middle Ages, and slaves, who were to be found mainly in the towns and ports of the Mediterranean region. Social groupings overlapped and it was possible to move both upwards and downwards on the social scale. On the whole, however, men and women were expected to conform to the attitudes of their own order.

The social context of women's lives overlapped with the religious. The majority of men and women in later medieval Europe were members of the Roman Church, and discussion in the following chapters will focus principally on them. Their lives were influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the Church's doctrines and practice. The sacraments of the Church, such as baptism and marriage, marked important rites of passage. Religious worship focused on Mass. Some women adopted the religious life, as nuns, beguines or members of the third orders. Lay women's piety centred on worship, pilgrimage and charity, and their religious practice overlapped with their household responsibilities.

Religious affiliation marked out the minority communities of Muslims and Jews, and their beliefs and practices also had a deep effect on women's lives. The Muslims were to be found mainly in Spain, in the areas reconquered by the Christian kings during the thirteenth century, especially in Valencia and Murcia. Most Muslims lived in the country, although there were substantial groups in the important towns. They were allowed to practise their religion and to retain their customs, but their lives were increasingly restricted towards the end of the Middle Ages, and persecution increased especially after the fall of Granada in 1492. Contact with Christians was always limited, since they were not allowed to live in Christian houses or to employ Christians as servants and wet-nurses, and they were instantly recognisable by prescribed forms of dress.³⁰

The Jews were to be found in many parts of Europe, mainly in the towns. The Church recommended the segregation of Jewish communities; according to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Jewish contact with Christians was to be limited to economic dealings, no Jews were to employ Christians, and they were to build no new synagogues. These recommendations were for

a long while not observed in Spain, which had prosperous Jewish communities until the persecutions and pogroms of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Jews in Europe were always vulnerable to persecution; Edward I expelled them from England in 1290, Philip IV of France tried to do the same in 1306, and many of the cities of Germany, Italy and eastern Europe drove their Jewish communities out in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The greatest expulsion was from Spain in 1492. Like the Moors, the Spanish Jews in the fifteenth century became increasingly restricted, having to wear prescribed badges and clothing. It was laid down that no Christian woman was to enter an area inhabited by Jews or Moors, and Jewish and Muslim communities were equally eager to protect their own women.³¹

Disaster and conflict often made life difficult for the men and women of the later Middle Ages. Their lives were inevitably affected by the demands of the state for armies and money, and warfare, devastation or siege led to loss of kin and livelihood, malnutrition or famine. Little is known about what happened to countless displaced people. Life was always uncertain, and from 1347 recurrent outbreaks of plague made death more frequent than before. It was against a background of conflict and uncertainty, as well as in the context of religious, social and legal ideas and practices, that later medieval women lived their lives.