Finding Truth in the Myth of Lady Godiva: Femininity, Sex, and Power in Twelfth Century England

Allison Archer

> Traditional history, all about politics, wars, and revolutions, has devoted few pages to women because few women were prominent in those male-dominated activities. The handful who were received patronizing credit for behaving like men—a woman led an army with "a man's courage," an able queen ruled "as if she were a man."
>
> —Frances & Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition*

As modern chocolatiers decided upon a name for their sumptuous treats to cater to the palettes of women, they named their temptations for Lady Godiva, whose mythical, naked ride poses more questions than answers about the perception of women in twelfth century England. Legends professed Lady Godiva (also called Godgifu) performed this naked stunt as a challenge to her husband Leofric's relentless taxation. In fact, as legend tells it, he baited her into it with a challenge such as this, "Mount your horse and ride naked, before all the people, through the market of this town from one end to the other, and on your return you shall have your request."[1] Parading through town completely naked, except for her long tresses, she demanded that the townsfolk stay indoors thus releasing the burden of taxation from her husband's subjects. As with all good myths, only one could not resist the urge to view her. Legend tells that during her infamous ride, her horse momentarily stopped. Lady Godiva turned to discover a tailor "whose curiosity exceeded his gratitude"[2] peeping at her through a window. Peeping Tom was born of this myth. Although it is now widely accepted that Lady Godiva never mounted her horse "bareback," the infamous Domesday Book documented she was indeed a landowner in Coventry.[3] In isolation, this tale is a pleasurable story of risk-taking. However, when viewed beneath the broader lens of gender roles and sexual mores of the Middle Ages, it leads to questions regarding English women of the twelfth century. Although fantastical, this myth hints at undercurrents of power, femininity, and sexual boundaries that defined the lives of women in this time and place. Additionally, the expectations of women were quite duplicitous with images of the chaste virgin at church and folktales such as this in the homes of both the wealthy and the peasantry. The myth of Lady Godiva provides insight into the perceptions

of femininity, sex, and power in twelfth century England from a variety of perspectives.

Femininity

What is it to be a woman? This is a question that women grapple with even today as roles change over time with the celebrated sweet virgin as opposed to the confident career woman. Although the Middle Ages much more rigidly defined these roles, the myth of Lady Godiva hints at changing perceptions of femininity during this period. Godiva presented an image of a powerful woman who worked from within the system for positive, philanthropic gains. While still tied to her husband, this legend suggests that the roles of women were turning towards more enlightened thinking. This was the story of a woman who could choose and use gender to her advantage, instead of as a vestige to a powerful man.

One of the most rigid views of femininity came from the church. With images of the virgin queen, mother of the Savior clearly prevalent and celebrated, this no doubt left a persuasive impression on its female attendees. This was the ideal woman; the woman who embraced her own femininity and saw escalation to a position of enormous power for her sacrifices. Of course, her prime value existed in her chastity and then in her motherhood which was characterized by enormous suffering and the untimely loss of her perfect son. Perfection is an important part of this message. Christ was a sinner; yet, his mother remained sinless throughout her life. This message of unattainable perfection defined womanhood during this period.

Even in the midst of this perfection message, the Middle Ages represented something of an intricacy surrounding sin itself, and by extension, femininity. In his research of femininity during the Middle Ages, Thomas Cahill noted that this time characterized "an age of unabashed public confession, not of shamed defensiveness"[4] because it preceded the Calvinism that would follow centuries later. The writings of Hildegard von Bingen provide sincerity and insight into the female as expressed by the church during this period. Despite such a horrendous childhood experience, she was able to use her femininity within the church to grow to a position of enormous power. When chastised for adorning her virgin nuns in jewelry and thin, white veils, she proclaimed that married women should not vainly adorn themselves, yet virgins were exempt from such regulations.[5] She wrote, "the virgin stands in the unsullied purity of paradise, lovely and unwithering, and she always remains the full vitality of the budding rod."[6]

With such narrow and juxtaposed positions regarding femininity, it is a

small wonder that women embraced their femininity at all. To embrace the sacred feminine required virginity, yet this same virginity would prevent the continuation of the species at a time when women rarely lived past thirty and needed to birth at least five children to be valuable on earth.[7] The fruits of their womb were far more important than virginity, yet an alternate message came from their churches. Cahill referred to this as the "medieval cult of virginity."[8] Additionally, even the church was quick to note the inherent differences between women of privilege and those less fortunate. "The chief barrier in admission to a nunnery was money rather than class."[9]

Wealthy women, no doubt, lived the best of lives during this period, although the same is true of women today. Wealth gave women choices and opportunities unavailable to the peasantry. These were the women of Eve: the women who actually brandished the apple . . . because they could. Nobility gave them a taste of freedom unknown to most other women. Femininity within this sphere was a sense of enormous power.

The wealthy woman could celebrate her femininity to a far greater degree than the peasantry. In short, she had the time on her hands to devote to the pleasures of life that peasants did not even have time to dream. Thus, they were far more likely to be well read and to have an appreciation for art, architecture, and even their own bodies, which were truly their personal vessels. One excellent and well-documented example of such women was Eleanor of Aquitaine. Born in the early twelfth century, she had a deep appreciation for the finer things including literature and music. An heiress at eight, Eleanor's appreciation of music that "encouraged the delightfully novel practice of mixed dancing"[10] was nearly scandalous. Cahill referred to this changed practice as having similar effects as Elvis Presley-style dance moves in the twentieth century. Eleanor, like other wealthy women, also enjoyed an acute sense of fashion that included "lined silk, the flowing sleeves, the bright colors, the fur, the bracelets, the earrings, the headdress"[11] There were those who both loved and hated Eleanor for her meddling and bucking of tradition. However, it is impossible to judge her by today's ethical standards. This woman lived far before her time.

Of course, the nobility only represented a tiny sliver of Europe's population in the twelfth century. The peasantry represented an overwhelming majority, and thus a more realistic image of women during this period. Although Eleanor and Lady Godiva were clearly the ideal women and lusted after by peasant women and men

alike, their lives merely cast long shadows on the daily lives of their peasantry. These women were virtual baby factories whose lives were often excruciatingly short and painful. Lacking the privilege of wealthy aesthetic pleasures, they frequently became ill and died for no apparent reason and regularly died during childbirth. The pressures on these women to procreate were enormous and dangerous.

In addition to their role as mothers, some peasant women functioned as near partners to their husbands, although without the equality governing most partnerships. Although the domestic sphere closely related their lives, they often toiled alongside their husbands in the fields.[12] A peasant woman's "wardrobe was limited, the garments bequeathed from one generation to the next. Her everyday garb was a long dress of coarse wool—russet or burel—perhaps with a linen undergarment; in cold weather she wore a woolen mantle."[13] Femininity was nearly non-existent.

The myth of Lady Godiva confirms this scholarship and historiography of women in the High Middle Ages. Unlike her peasant counterparts, Lady Godiva was able to embrace her femininity, her long tresses, and even a degree of freedom outside the domestic sphere. This was not a woman hardened by the toils of agricultural life, as Collier so eloquently illustrated in his infamous painting. Additionally, the myth supports the church's profession of the sacred feminine. Although not a virgin, her demand that the townsfolk all turn their heads away as she passed is an interesting depiction of both Eve, the temptress, and Mary, the noble virgin.

Sexuality

The twelfth century signified a turning point in sexual relationships. Cahill remarked that "romance as a sexual attitude was, in fact, almost unknown before the age of Hildegard."[14] This "flowering" of romanticism is yet more evidence of the enlightened thinking that slowly and pervasively began to dominate society throughout the Middle Ages. Unfortunately, scientific achievements were slow to follow and until "the nineteenth century, childbirth was a mortal hazard. Rich or poor, women suffered and were injured in labor; often they died."[15] It is important to consider women both as sexual and mothering beings during this period to develop a greater understanding of the challenges they faced. Marriage or, at the

very least, betrothal were undoubtedly viewed as pre-requisites to childbirth. Yet, these marriages arose most frequently from arrangements of the father for all women regardless of wealth. "The modern system of courtship based on free choice and personal attraction could hardly develop in an age when the social institutions and customs that provide environment for such courtship did not yet exist."[16] Any modern ideas of dating were as of yet non-existent. Although, at the very least, romance in sexual relationships began during this time —at least for some.

The church was abundantly clear on this issue and "the chastity of women was eternally suspect in the eyes of the canonists, who perceived them as ever eager for sexual gratification."[17] In this area, women clearly represented the temptress, Eve, who brandished sex like the apple. To counter this image, they presented the image of the perfect virgin mother—impossibility for all women. The ideal, religious woman was either a virgin or a mother. There was no middle ground, regardless of class. Marriage vows included the expectation that both husband and wife would "be sexually available to their partners."[18] Additionally, the act of sex, as the church defined it, reinforced women's inferiority to men and the goal of procreation as its intended result.

Although, the church knew then, as it does now, that it could only reach so far into the bedrooms of believers. "Officially the Church maintained that marital intercourse was permissible only for the purpose of procreation. The sin involved in sex for pleasure was not, however, a large one, as long as procreation was not prevented."[19] Those that strayed from a righteous sexual path through enjoyment, positions other than missionary or worse . . . faced the consequences meted out at confession.

As today, the church condemned contraception and viewed it as "homicide, sometimes as interference with nature, sometimes as a denial of the purpose of marital intercourse."[20] What is perhaps most notable about this period is that the church accepted that beyond their inherent physical and moral inferiorities, women "were personalities, separate from their husbands… with their own souls, their own rights, and obligations."[21] This was a significant departure from women as property. Although not liberal by today's standards, this allowed women the right to grace, and divinity previously not enjoyed without the power of a man. Women in dire circumstances, out of necessity, became prostitutes, although not respected, and, to some degree, received protection from the church which "disapproved of prostitution in principle (yet) tolerated it in practice. (The church even protected) the

prostitute's right to collect her fee…. heavier penalties were imposed on customers, pimps, and brothel keepers."[22]

The church also viewed divorce and infidelity far more leniently due to the difficulty of life, communication, and travel during this period. Marriages often experienced increased levels of anxiety due to long absences as the husband travelled. These concerns "often centered on conjugal faithfulness. A beautiful, younger wife was perceived as being particularly vulnerable. During a prolonged separation, however, a wife might not wait for her husband to return before remarrying."[23] Although the church did not condone such activities, they no doubt supported abandoned women by annulling their previous marriages and allowing for a new one.

Wealth often afforded women far more privileges over their own bodies. Although they spent more of their lives in a state of pregnancy, noblewomen enjoyed a far healthier, protein-filled diet. Thus, they lived longer than peasant women did. Beyond the obvious enhanced diet of more than potatoes and bread, noblewomen could often exercise choice over their extramarital suitors, often leaving their arranged husband either unaware or furious. These women wielded sex as a weapon in male-dominated nobility circles.

As married women, they often had access to "obscure chambers at her personal disposal and guarded at evening only by her female confidantes (and) could manage an adulterous pregnancy rather nicely."[24] Knights were a frequent target and Cahill asserted that, "It seems most likely that women set the rules of this new game."[25] Common images of the knight pursuing the noble woman are romantic but certainly impossible for this time. The knight supplied the poems and gifts; however, "it was the lady, smarter and more strategic than he… who secretly controls the pace of the chase."[26]

This pre-Calvinist time saw nobility engaging in near sexual debauchery as can be seen in the verses of the troubadour Countess of Dia who wrote such lurid lyrics as,

I should like to hold my knight
Naked in my arms at eve,
That he might be in ecstasy
As I cushioned his head against my breast,
For I am happier far with him
Than Floris with Blancheflor (her husband)[27]

An interesting curiosity in this period is how differently the wealthy and

the peasantry viewed adultery. Secularized literature "romanticized adultery by aristocratic ladies (yet) mocked the sexual appetites of peasant or middle-class wives and girls."[28] Although with significantly less fanfare, "ordinary people doubtless committed many sexual sins, both venial and mortal."[29] Common peasantry likely had a far more limited sexual life because of harsh living conditions and shortened life spans. This pleasure of the flesh was far less pleasurable after a physically demanding workday and in such dire conditions with poor nutrition. However, that is not to say that they also did not face their priests in confessional booths for their sexual sins. Additionally, unmarried peasant women could even use sex as a means of income. Prostitution flourished during this period. "By the high Middle Ages it was widely regulated by law, especially in the cities and at markets and fairs, which offered serving girls, tradeswomen, and peasants' daughters an opportunity to earn extra cash."[30]

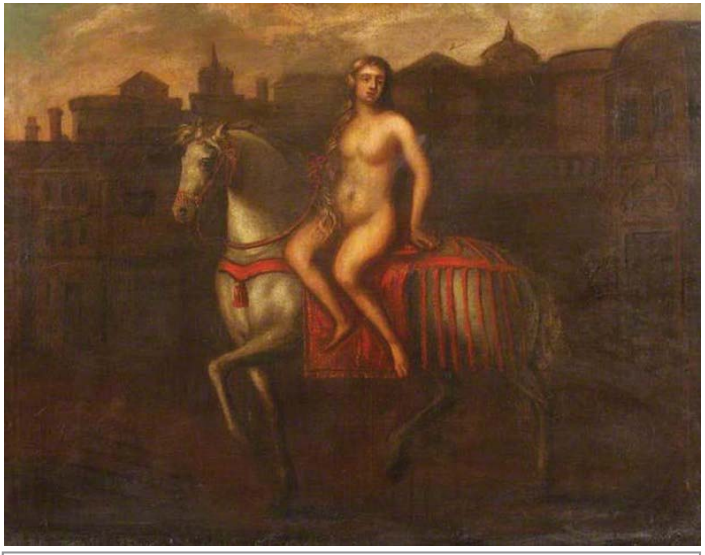

Figure 1 *Lady Godiva.* Oil on canvas by Adam Van Noort, St. Mary's Guildhall.

The myth of Lady Godiva provides insight into how women used their sensuality to attain desired results. Van Noort's painting of the sixteenth century offers insight into this undercurrent of feminine sexuality. The tempting, beautiful, sexualized woman was an important image of a time that many have deemed "dark." How could this be when considering the strides made by women as individuals and even sexual beings? This was no small achievement of this time, which saw a tremendous papal influence. The church viewed women as subservient and merely instruments of childbirth. As the myth of Lady Godiva suggests, there were contrary views within societal undercurrents, and especially in the wealthiest circles.

Power

Women during the High Middle Ages experienced varying degrees of power. Regardless of wealth, a woman under feudalism spent most of her life under the guardianship of a man—of her father until she married, of her father's lord if her father died, and of her husband until she was widowed.[31] "Women nearly always, if not always, stayed 'inside,' and men went 'outside.'"[32] The domestic sphere was their realm. There are some notable exceptions, however. Joan of Arc is perhaps the most famous of these. "Joan of Arc is no prototype, and whatever her male comrades-in-arms and male enemies thought of her, her image remained unique."[33] Although there were these notable exceptions, "all women shared certain public disabilities; excluded from politics, they were treated legally as second-rank constituents of their courts, disadvantaged economically as both landholders and workers, and less active socially than men."[34]

The church, which held power as central to chastity and grace, certainly feared women like Joan who asserted their power so aggressively and against all notions of grace. In a time that still commonly accepted far more monks than nuns, the church worked hard to keep women within their realm as mothers and subservient wives. "Wife-beating was common in the Middle Ages"[35] and although not professed, the church certainly tolerated it. In short, the church did not believe that women should occupy positions of authority—anywhere. Hildegard von Bingen is a notable example of this resistance by the church. Although her male superiors constantly hounded her decisions, she became exceptionally powerful.

Wealthy women, by virtue of land ownership and titles, had a great deal of power in the Middle Ages. In fact, many "women derived power from families intent on deploying all their human resources . . . for the immediate acquisition of wealth and status."[36] The law permitted women to own property, even after marriage. It was not beyond men of this period "who married an heiress (to take) her family's name, so that it remained attached to the holding."[37] This clearly presented the importance that people of this period placed on bloodlines over marital ties. Of course, it was the wealthiest women who fared the best in arrangements like this. They were far more likely to own land and rely on family bloodlines as a source of power. The real Lady Godiva is an excellent example of this. During her husband's lifetime and after, "she moved in the highest social and

political circles of the kingdom"[38] and ended up owning all of his property upon his death.

Peasant women experienced similar rights regarding marriage and property. Unlike their noble counterparts who often married in adolescence, peasant women traditionally married in their twenties, if they married at all. Unlike wealthy women, they were also far more likely to know their suitor.[39] Marriages and inheritances became virtually synonymous. Thus, daughters who stood to inherit property "became a matrimonial prize." Law dictated that women could not claim their own inheritance without a male guardian. A woman could face a fine or forced marriage if she refused to marry.

Those that did not marry, usually due to a shortage of available men, often went to work, although at a lower wage than men. "They did much the same work as the men: haymaking, weeding, thatching, mowing, reaping, and binding. Sometimes they lived in the village, in cottages, or as lodgers in other people's houses. Sometimes they formed part of the floating population that roamed the country at harvest time."[40] Life was exceptionally harsh for unmarried women who did not own property.

The legend of Lady Godiva is an excellent example of this gendered power imbalance in the Middle Ages. Unable to convince her husband of the errors of his ways through discourse, she claims power from within the feminine sphere of influence – her own sexuality. This naked, grand display of feminine power and achievement lends itself well to the prevailing ideals of powerful women that characterized this period. The myth suggests that women did what was necessary to achieve power. When considering the work of peasant women and the intricate relations of noble women seeking husbands, it is no doubt, accurate.

Conclusion

Although mythical, the tale of Lady Godiva presents an interesting and accurate portrayal of the struggles of women in the twelfth century as they navigated issues of femininity, sexuality, and power. Three distinct perspectives emerge from within this framework, which include the church, the nobility, and the peasantry. Femininity was far less rigidly defined than modern perceptions would suggest and this period saw an increased tolerance of women as individuals, even within the church. Society defined sexuality less rigidly than the church, just as

today. Yet the dangers of childbirth were a risk to all women of this period, regardless of their wealth or poverty. Unsurprisingly, women of this period who owned property were in far better circumstances than those that did not. However, what is interesting is that society afforded women property rights at all considering this occurred long before the Renaissance or even the Enlightenment. Although often termed the "Dark Ages," these surprises yield an entirely new image of the Middle Ages, especially for women. It was a time which actually offered some autonomy and hope for women, albeit far less than today. However, to view the rights and privileges of a people nearly a millennium ago beneath the same moral compass as today's society is unfair and irrelevant. It is also a disservice to the gains made by women during this time. Perhaps, modern scholarship should focus on the integration of female history into the "traditional accounts" of the Middle Ages to offer a more complete truth of the lives of both women and men. Women were more than counterparts to male leaders and workers.

Notes

1. Roger de Wendover, "Chronica, Flores Historiarum," ed. Henricus O. Coxe, trans. J. A. Giles. *Bohn's Antiquarian Library*, 1849, http://openlibrary.org/books/OL16759124M/Rogeri_de_Wendover_Chronica (accessed March 25, 2012).

2. J. Tomkinson, *The History of Lady Godiva and Peeping Tom of Coventry* (Google Books: City of Coventry, 1868), 6, http://books.google.com/books/about/The_history_of_lady_Godiva_and_Peeping_T.html?id=tMoHAAAAQAAJ (accessed March 15, 2012).

3. *Domesday Book,* England, c. 1100-1200, http://www.domesdaybook.co.uk/life.html (accessed March 2, 2012).

4. Thomas Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginnings of the Modern World* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2006), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 1715.

5. Hildegard von Bingen in *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginnings of the Modern World* by Thomas Cahill (New York: First Anchor Books, 2006), Kindle Electronic Edition, Location 1730.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginnings of the Modern World*, Location 409.

8. Ibid., Location 1767.

9. Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition,* Location 808.

10. Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginnings of the Modern World*, Location 2191.

11. Ibid., Location 2239.

12. Ibid., Location 1920.

13. Ibid., Location 2019.

14. *Ibid.,* Location 1991.

15. Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition*, Location 63.

16. Ibid., Location 452.

17. Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition,* Location 675.

18. Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Kindle Electronic Edition, 118.

19. Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition*, Location 698.

20. Ibid., Location 730.

21. Ibid., Location 542.

22. Ibid., Location 759.

23. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London,* Location 125.

24. Cahill, *Mysteries of the Middle Ages and the Beginnings of the Modern World,* Location 2076.

25. Ibid., Location 2083.

26. Ibid., Location 2193.

27. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love (1180)*, trans. J. J. Parry (New York: Google Books, 1941), 106-107, http://books.google.com/books/about/The_art_of_courtly_love.html?id=KHsGAQAAIAAJ (accessed March 10, 2012).

28. Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 151.

29. Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition,* Location 748.

30. Ibid., Location 748.

31. Ibid., Location 365.

32. Ibid., Location 3003.

33. Ibid.

34. Judith Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock Before the Plague* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 179.

35. Gies, *Women in the Middle Ages: The Lives of Real Women in a Vibrant Age of Transition,* Location 632.

36. Mary Erler & Maryanne Kowaleski, *Gendering the Master Narrative: Women and Power in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 19.

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