

*Women's Lives in Medieval Europe. A Sourcebook.* Ed. by Emilie Amt (New York-London: Routledge, 1993), 1-7.  
and: Introduction – edited, revised, and expanded for students by Albrecht Classen

This book is a collection of primary sources for the study of women's lives in Europe during the Middle Ages, from about **500 to about 1500 A.D.** Its purpose is to present firsthand information about women's everyday lives and activities and the conditions in which they lived, and to show the reader on what sorts of evidence historians base their conclusions about these aspects of history. For readers who have little background in medieval history, some general information about medieval Europe may be helpful.

Until the fifth century A.D., much of **western Europe** lay within the **Roman Empire**, a vast collection of territories including parts of the Middle East and North Africa. In Europe itself during the centuries of Roman rule, much of the native Celtic population had become highly Romanized in its culture, political allegiance and legal practices. In the last few centuries of the Roman Empire, the Germanic tribes which had long lived on the eastern fringes of the European provinces moved into the Romanized lands in large numbers. This wave of "**barbarian**" **invasions**, along with severe political and economic problems, gradually killed off the Roman Empire, which was replaced by a number of **Germanic successor kingdoms**, including those of the Franks in Gaul (modern France), the Visigoths in Spain, the Ostrogoths in Italy, the Burgundians in and around what is now Switzerland, and the Anglo-Saxons in England.

The Germanic tribes brought with them a very different society from that of Rome. Whereas Roman civilization was highly **urbanized**, for example, the Germans had until then seldom settled even in **villages**. The Romans had a long history of **written legislation**; the Germans used a system of **customary law** which had not yet been written down. Different practices regarding marriage and family can be seen in the extracts from Roman and Germanic law in this book. Centuries of contact between the Germans and the empire, however, had wrought changes on both sides, and now, as the Germans settled in what had long been Roman territory, further mingling of the two cultures occurred. The Germanic kingdoms which were established inside the old boundaries of the now defunct empire were by no means entirely Germanic in their ethnic makeup or their culture.

Even more influential than Roman tradition in this process of change was

the religion of the late Roman Empire. Christianity had originated in Palestine, where a small group of **Jews** believed that the Jewish carpenter Jesus, who had been executed by the Roman authorities early in the first century A.D., was the "Christ," the son of God and savior of humanity. Although Christians were persecuted at first by both the Jewish religious authorities and the Roman government, their religion survived and spread. In the year 313 it achieved official sanction from the Roman emperor Constantine, and in the late fourth century it became the official religion of the empire. The cultural initiative of the late Roman Empire passed from pagan writers to Christian theologians such as **St. Jerome** (4) and **St. Augustine of Hippo** (5), who explored the details of Christian belief and laid the foundation for church law. It was the Christian church, too, which filled the vacuum in leadership during the fifth century, as the Roman world faced widespread military, political and economic crises and the Roman government crumbled. Bishops began to provide the services for which the government had once been responsible; in particular, the bishop of Rome came to assume a prominent role in Italy, so much so that as the "**pope**" he was eventually recognized as the leader of the church throughout the western Mediterranean regions. Clergymen and monks also preserved what ancient learning survived the fall of the Roman Empire in the west, and throughout most of the Middle Ages the church maintained a near monopoly on literacy and education.

The church was eager to **convert** the **pagan** Germans to Christianity. It accomplished this through intensive mission work and through alliances with Germanic kings, queens and nobles, who saw advantages to themselves in allying with the existing authority in their new territories. Christian beliefs, including ideas about women, marriage and family, had already mingled with Roman traditions. Now Christian views were adopted by the Germanic settlers as well. Thus the three main ingredients of medieval European civilization had come together: **the Roman, the Germanic and the Christian.**

The period from the fifth century to the eleventh is often designated the "**Early Middle Ages.**" This is the time sometimes known as the "**Dark Ages**" in part because of the collapse of Roman civilization, with the loss of much classical knowledge, but also because relatively few historical sources remain to tell us of the events of these years. The documents which do survive include the laws which the Germanic kings were now having written down and the works of historians such as **Gregory of Tours**. Much of the essential character of medieval Europe was already apparent in this early period, especially in religious matters. **Monasteries** and **convents**, for example, came to play a key role in economic and

cultural life, and many noble families dedicated sons and daughters to the religious life, in which they lived according to a monastic "rule" such as that of **Benedict of Nursia** and **Caesarius of Arles**. Women were encouraged to be nuns, but their other options in the church- serving as deaconesses or in partnership with husbands who were priests - were closed off by the decisions of church councils. These councils established "canon law" or church law, which regulated the lives of members of the clergy and many aspects of private life for lay people. For most of the laity, canon law was enforced by the local priest, who heard one's confession regularly and assigned penance for one's sins. Thus the church gradually succeeded in imposing on secular society its standards of behavior in areas such as marriage.

The political face of early medieval Europe was dominated by the **Franks**, and in the eighth century the Frankish kingdom under **Charlemagne** (768-814 A.D.) and his descendants conquered and ruled many neighboring kingdoms. The resulting "**Carolingian Empire**" included much of what is now France, Germany and Italy. Among their other activities, the emperors promulgated new rules for the administration of the empire and their own estates, some of which survive to inform us about everyday life in Carolingian Europe. In this new realm cultural energy reached a height unknown since the days of Roman power. The rich intellectual life of the royal court produced many of the written works of the period, but relatively isolated individuals such as the noblewoman **Dhuoda** could also be well educated. (she lived in the time of the Merovingians, who preceded the Carolingians).

While the Carolingian Empire flourished, however, the west was beginning to suffer **invasions** by three new groups: the Scandinavian **Vikings**, the Muslim "**Saracens**" from North Africa, and the Asian **Magyars**. Under these onslaughts and other stresses in the ninth and tenth centuries, imperial government once again collapsed, and Europe entered another period of political fragmentation. This time, the surviving political units were small kingdoms, duchies and counties, ruled by local nobles who could offer some degree of protection to their followers. The bond between a lord and each his followers, or vassals, became an important one in many parts of western Europe in these years. Noblemen put themselves under the lordship of more powerful men who could grant them estates called "**fiefs**" (from the Latin feudum) in return for loyalty and military service. Such "**feudal**" relationships dominated many aspects of life for the ruling classes in the centuries to follow.

The period from the eleventh century through the thirteenth is often called the "**High Middle Ages**." Underlying much of the history of these years was a widespread **economic revival** in Europe which had begun long before the eleventh

century in some parts of the continent and continued throughout the High Middle Ages in others. New **technology** (new plow, field rotation, water mill, etc.), a slightly improved **climate** and expanding **frontiers** gradually raised the standard of living and produced surpluses which formed the basis for a commercial boom. **Towns** flourished as centers of trade, and the town-dwelling population, which made its living in trade and industry, grew. The use of **money** as a medium of exchange increased, along with **banking** and written record-keeping. Townspeople organized themselves into guilds: the merchant **guild**, which often served as a sort of town government, included only the wealthiest citizens, while each industry had its own craft guild, which set standards and regulated the industry, and to which all practitioners of that trade belonged. Towns were often able to use their wealth to buy a certain amount of independence from their lords.

**Christianity** in the High Middle Ages was characterized by an increasing variety of activities and outlooks. In the eleventh century the church struggled overtly with **secular authorities for ecclesiastical power** and independence, and in the twelfth century **canon lawyers** like **Gratian** codified church policy and reasserted its pre-eminence in many areas of life. In 1095, the increasingly militant church launched the first of the **Crusades**, papally **sanctioned holy wars** against the Muslims of the **Holy Land** and Spain and against **heretics** in Europe. The **Crusades** would last through the thirteenth century (1291), and one of their unintended effects was the widespread persecution of the **Jewish minority** in Europe. Another characteristic of high medieval religion was dissatisfaction with the wealth, worldliness and soft living that critics perceived in many monasteries and convents. New "reform" orders of monks - and less often of nuns - were founded in the late eleventh century, only to become so worldly themselves that a new wave of reform was called for in the early thirteenth century. From this second wave came the **Dominican and Franciscan** orders, including the Poor Clares. Large numbers of Christians also turned to less formal religious movements, such as that of the **Beguines** and their male counterparts, the **Beghards**. **Mysticism**, the direct communication of the soul with God, was practiced by such-respected individuals as **Hildegard of Bingen** and **St. Bernard of Clairvaux**. Some groups, such as the **Waldensians**, found that their spiritual enthusiasm led them into beliefs and practices condemned by the church; and this upsurge in heresy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries caused the church to found the Inquisition to deal with Christians who had strayed from the fold.

Many of these religious developments centered on towns and cities, and so too did the new forms of higher education. The **cathedral schools** of the twelfth century and the **universities** of the thirteenth century were urban institutions.

While **women** participated fully in the religious revival of these years, they were excluded from formal higher education once the university became the standard seat of learning. The **universities** also guarded their monopoly on certain fields like medicine carefully. In other spheres of culture, however, noblewomen played a prominent role, serving as patrons and producers of music and poetry and shaping the codes of chivalry and courtly love, which softened the hard-working and unromantic lives of the nobility.

Medieval writers commonly divided the members of society into **three "estates"** or "orders": those who **fought**, those who **prayed**, and those who **worked**. While the estates were often described in terms of men only, in reality women belonged to or were attached to each of them. The "fighters" were the knights or noblemen, whose wealth, power and status derived from their lands; for this reason they were willing to swear allegiance to the lords who gave them fiefs and let their heirs inherit them. The women of this estate did not normally fight, but they shared in the other jobs of the nobility, running households and estates; and the concern with land shaped every noblewoman's life in fundamental ways, such as the choice of a husband. The praying estate consisted of the clergy and the monastic community, and while women were excluded from the former, they made up a sizeable and often active portion of the latter. The third estate, the workers, did not mean everyone who worked for virtually everyone, including nobles, monks and nuns, did work in medieval society; but those whose position in society was defined by their **manual labor: artisans, servants and the peasantry**. Artisans might work for themselves or as employees; servants worked for employers or their lords. **Peasants** worked the land, raising their own food and supporting their lords. There were many degrees of social status within the working estate, even among the peasantry. Some peasants were free, but most were serfs or villeins, who were not slaves but were legally bound to the land and required to perform certain work for their lords. Serfs might hope to achieve freedom through manumission or by running away to a town, where the law often granted them freedom if they remained for a set length of time, often a year and a day. Women participated fully in the working life in industry, domestic service and agriculture.

Many aspects of life, culture and institutions were similar across medieval Europe, but there were also important differences from region to region, in agricultural and industrial products, in political and social organization, and in the ethnic and religious makeup of the population. The **towns of Italy**, for example, tended to be freer of outside control than were most European towns, and some of them specialized in Mediterranean trade, which brought eastern luxury goods to

the west. The **Iberian Peninsula** comprised Muslim territories in the south along with a number of small Christian principalities in the north, and the warfare between them was a major factor in shaping Spanish society. At the same time, Germans were pushing eastward into the lands of the pagan Slavs, bringing new lands into cultivation, on which grain was grown for much of Europe, and which drew surplus peasants eastward as settlers. The German king also claimed the prestigious title of "**Holy Roman Emperor**" and lands stretching as far south as central Italy; yet the real power in Germany usually lay with the territorial princes and the bishops, and few emperors were able to assert control in Italy. The **kings of France**, on the other hand, steadily enlarged their territories and their control over their vassals, forming alliances with rich towns and with the church. **Wine** was already one of the major products of the thriving French economy, and a new market for French wine was one of the results when a Norman French duke (**William the Conqueror**) conquered the **Anglo-Saxon** kingdom of England in **1066** and replaced the old Anglo-Saxon nobility there with French noble families. England's greatest export was raw wool, large amounts of which were sold to the towns of **Flanders**, a particularly important center for cloth making on the northern French coast. Medieval merchants visited **fairs** across the continent, and while the vast majority of Europeans probably never traveled far from the place of their birth, pilgrims, scholars and soldiers also helped to spread goods, news and ideas.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, known as the "**Later Middle Ages**," are best known for the **traumas** they brought. Population growth had already begun to slow in the early fourteenth century, before the **Black Death**, or bubonic plague, killed between a quarter and a third of the entire population of Europe in 1347-49 or even 1351. For the next few centuries, this terrifying disease would continue to break out periodically. The initial plague left behind a land surplus and a severe labor shortage, which enabled peasants and workers to win improved legal status, pay and conditions; their lords and employers then attempted to limit such gains through laws controlling wages and prices. Meanwhile, England and France engaged in a long series of wars known collectively as the **Hundred Years' War** (1337-1453), which battered the French countryside and left England in political disarray. Yet this period of upheaval was also the backdrop to a great deal of cultural activity, such as that in which **Christine de Pizan** participated at the French royal court, and the literary and artistic developments in fourteenth and fifteenth-century Italy which are known today as the Renaissance (**Petrarch** and **Boccaccio**).

The modern reader may encounter certain difficulties in reading medieval texts. For example, there are strong religious elements and ecclesiastical biases in

many of the documents here, which may be alien or frustrating to the reader familiar with a more secular society. This is in part because medieval Europe was indeed a **highly religious civilization**, and the modern reader must therefore resist the urge to dismiss the true religious feelings and important religious motivations of the men and women who appear in these sources. **Miracles and religious visions** were accepted as real by many or most people. The church itself was an integral part of the power structure, controlling vast wealth and wielding great political influence and judicial power. Religious differences even defined marginal and persecuted groups within society (Jews, Muslims and heretics). The church's views played a large part in shaping secular laws and social norms, and sex roles and gender constructs are perhaps the areas in which this is most obvious. On the other hand, the religious viewpoint of the sources can sometimes distort our view of even religious subjects. Much of the written material that survives from the Middle Ages was written by churchmen, but this does not mean that churchmen spoke for everyone.

Similarly, the reader should be aware that medieval standards of truth, originality and accuracy were not the same as ours. Supernatural explanations of events were more widely accepted than they are today. Authors of literature and history borrowed freely from other works, and the boundaries between myth, story and history were not clear ones. They did not, however, plagiarize; instead they worked with older materials and constantly reworked it for their own purposes. But medievals were also keenly aware of **mathematical precision, arithmetic, medical research, geometry, philosophical logic**, etc. They were different from us, but still the same. We encounter the phenomenon of **alterity** – difference within the framework of similarity.

At medieval **universities**, students first studied the **trivium**, then they turned to the **quadrivium**. The first entailed: **logic, grammar, and rhetoric**; the second included: **arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music**.

#### A. Classen:

Considering the **end of the Middle Ages**, we face similarly difficult issues with identifying a clear historical limit since the transition from one period to another cannot be easily determined. Whereas older research tended to conceive of a sharp divide between the Middle Ages and the (Italian) Renaissance, most modern scholars assume that we are dealing with a long transitional period which ultimately led to the establishment of the early modern world. There are many ways to identify the **Renaissance**, whether with the discovery of the individual (Jules **Michelet**, *Renaissance*, 1855; Jacob **Burckhardt**, *The Civilization of the*

*Renaissance in Italy*, 1860), or with the emergence of a new style of painting, based on the principle of the central perspective and realism, or with the rediscovery of the classical world of antiquity, or with the development of Neoplatonism. Our critical examination of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century arts, literature, philosophy, music, religion, and architecture has, however, shattered this conviction of an absolutely innovative paradigm shift. Certainly, the **Gothic** style was replaced by the **Renaissance** style, and scholars and poets such as **Petrarch**, **Boccaccio**, and **Poggio Bracciolini** rediscovered the language and literature of ancient Rome once again, but they were not the first ones to do so, and they were also not necessarily embracing an entirely different intellectual approach. In fact, both in the eighth and in the twelfth century a renewed interest in the philosophers and poets from antiquity had already triggered strong revivalism in the schools, the administrations, at the courts, and within the Church. In other words, Petrarch and Boccaccio had significant forerunners such as Alcuin at the court of Charlemagne (8th century), and, about three hundred fifty years later, Peter Abelard, John of Salisbury, and Bernard of Clairvaux (12th century). It makes perfect sense to talk about the “**Eighth-Century Renaissance**” and the “**Twelfth-Century Renaissance**” as equally powerful periods of innovation and invigoration compared with the “**Italian Renaissance**.”

Scholars have often referred to the emergence of the early-modern **city life** with its money-based economy as a significant indication of the end of the Middle Age, but the ancient Roman cities had never fully ceased to exist throughout the centuries, and many of the major urban centers that dominated the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been founded between the tenth and the twelfth century by the Vikings in the West, by French, Dutch, German, and Italian lords in the Western and Southern parts of the Continent, and by the Slavic lords in the Eastern parts. The rise of the class of burghers throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries did not necessarily imply a decline of the aristocracy, rather required them to adapt to a new way of life for their own survival. By the same token, we know of many wealthy **bankers** who quickly tried to imitate aristocracy, purchasing castles and adopting courtly manners. Many late-medieval cities organized knightly tournaments for their own entertainment, and the early-modern book market saw a strong interest in chapbooks with chivalric themes and heroes. Inversely, the development of a strongly capitalistic society can be traced back at least to the twelfth and thirteenth century when the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France and the German poets Walther von der Vogelweide and Boppe clearly addressed the relevance of money as the foundation of a comfortable lifestyle irrespective of the



personal standing within one specific class.

We ought not to forget that even in military, or technological, terms, knighthood increasingly faced severe challenges, first by the establishment of English and Swiss armies of foot soldiers equipped with the **longbow**, the Swiss pike, the **crossbow**, and eventually, by the end of the fourteenth century, with early types of **firearms**. Gunpowder, allegedly invented around 1300 by the German monk Berthold Schwarz of Freiberg, or by the English scholar and scientist Francis Bacon (1214-1292)—if it was not imported by traders from China or Persia—ultimately doomed medieval knighthood, though the ideals of chivalry and the strict separation of estates—clergy, aristocracy and common people—did not disappear until the nineteenth century.

Several other monumental events lend themselves for the identification of the end of the Middle Ages. In 1453 the ancient city **Constantinople** was conquered by the **Ottoman Turks**, and with the fall of this city the end of the Eastern Roman Empire had arrived. Large numbers of Greek scholars, poets, and other intellectuals sought refuge in the West, primarily in Italy, where they introduced the knowledge of Greek. At first, the fall of Constantinople did not effect a tremendous change, but militarily the Turks had breached the final defense barrier against Europe and soon after began their constant onslaught against the Balkans, Hungary, and eventually Austria. This was to put the European powers, including Venice and Genoa, under tremendous pressure until they finally gained the upper hand in the early seventeenth century. On a different level, the introduction of Greek in Europe made it possible for many intellectuals to gain personal knowledge of the ancient sources of philosophy and religion in their original language. The refugees from Constantinople, however, were not the first Greek teachers in Europe. The conquest of Constantinople in 1204 in the course of the Fourth Crusade had destroyed the old power structures there and opened, despite the cruel destruction of the city, the contacts between the Latin West and the Greek East. Many Greek manuscripts arrived in the West since that date, along with such magnificent teachers as Manuel Chrysoloras, who assumed his assignment in Florence in 1397, and George of Trebizond, who began teaching Greek in Mantua in 1420. The development of **humanism**, supported by intellectuals such as **Erasmus of Rotterdam** (1465-1536), made available the world of ancient Greek antiquity and slowly transformed the entire medieval world view. **Martin Luther**, for example, learned Greek and was thus able to translate the New Testament from the sources (*ad fontes*) in 1522, laying the textual foundation for the Protestant Reformation. Nevertheless, we should not forget that during the early twelfth

century many texts by ancient Greek philosophers, medical experts, and scientists, which had been only preserved in Arabic translations, became known in Europe first through Hebrew, then through Latin translations, most of them produced at the universities of Salerno (near Naples) and Toledo (Spain).

When **Johann Gutenberg** discovered the **printing press** (movable type) in Mainz, Germany, ca. 1450, this did not immediately lead to a profound paradigm shift. In fact, for decades the traditional manuscript culture continued to dominate the book markets, whereas the early prints—incunabula (until ca. 1500)—remained very expensive and were used to reproduce the biblical texts. Beginning with the early sixteenth century, however, the print media gained the upper hand and ushered in a revolution in public communication, information transfer, data storage, and intellectual discourse. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to identify this transformation as a quick and absolute victory. On the contrary, the manuscript remained a strong element far into the sixteenth century, whereas the print culture did not replace the medieval tradition until the 1520s and 1530s.

Even the **Protestant Reformation** was not the absolute death knell to the Middle Ages. Martin Luther did not intend at all to destroy the Catholic Church when he allegedly nailed his ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. On the contrary, the Church had been severely criticized by clerics such as the British John **Wyclif** (1328-1384) and the Czech John Hus (1369-1415), not to mention scores of other theologians throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Before that, the **Albigensians**, or **Cathars**, in Southern France and elsewhere, who were crushed in two crusades in 1209 and 1213, and the **Waldensians** in Eastern France, Southern Germany, and Western Switzerland, who were excommunicated in 1184 but later readmitted into the Church under strict regulations, had radically criticized the Catholic theology and church practice. Luther in turn attempted to introduce reforms of a church that suffered from serious moral and ethical decline. Anti-clericalism had been rampant throughout the late Middle Ages, especially since the French Pope Clement V (1305-1314) had established himself in **Avignon** in 1309, the beginning of the so-called “**Babylonian Captivity**.” The subsequent six popes also stayed there because of political unrest in Italy and because they yielded to the pressure of the French kings. The time of Avignon came to an end in **1377** when Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) finally returned the Holy See to Rome. **Simony**, a common practice in the late-medieval church to sell offices to the highest bidder, was furiously criticized, but mostly without any effect. Moreover, by the end of the Middle Ages the strict rule of **celibacy** for clerics, enforced since the early Middle Ages (11<sup>th</sup>

century, above all, as part of the **Gregorian Reform**), was often broken and disregarded. Not surprisingly, **late-medieval** and early **Renaissance** literature is filled with satires and bitter attacks against lecherous priests and other clerics. Between 1387 and 1415, several popes competed against each other, each of them claiming to be the only representative of Saint Peter here on earth, until finally the German Emperor Sigismund dethroned all three and nominated Pope Martin V (1417-1431) as the true successor, thus ending the highly destructive **schism** within the Catholic Church. Finally, throughout the fifteenth century the common practice of selling indulgence letters all over Europe for the redemption of one's sins and even those of deceased family members led to excessive abuse and strongly contributed to the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation. The latter seems to have been revolutionary because of its sudden and forceful development, but the general decline of the Catholic Church throughout the entire late Middle Ages led to this final point which then rang in a new era in which at first two, but soon many other Christian churches emerged, all competing against each other for recognition, power, and influence. This eventually led to disastrous religious wars throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## THE LITERARY HISTORY

The literary history of medieval Europe can be generally divided into three major period, the **early Middle Ages**, the **high Middle Ages**, and the **late Middle Ages** (the same applies to the history of arts and philosophy). Before courtly culture emerged in western and central Europe, Old English, Old High German, Old French, and Old Spanish poets produced predominantly **heroic epics** such as *Beowulf* (OE), the "Hildebrandslied" (OHG), the "Waltharilied" (medieval Latin), *El poema di mio Cid* (OS), the *Chanson de Roland* (OF), and, as a very late representative, the *Nibelungenlied* (Middle High German), which was followed by many Old Norse and Icelandic sagas and epics collected in the *Edda*. The common elements to them all are the heroic ideal, the fatalistic approach to life, the existential experience of the protagonists, and almost always the absence of religious concerns. **Beowulf**, for instance, confronts the monster Grendel and kills it. Subsequently, Grendel's mother attacks Beowulf, but he manages to overcome her as well and kills her. At the end, probably in his old age, Beowulf fights against a dragon and slays it, but he as well succumbs in this struggle. In the "**Hildebrandslied**," the old but war-experienced father Hildebrand is challenged by his son Hadubrand who does not want to believe that he is his father and assumes that he is a Hun because of his appearance. The ensuing battle dooms them to their heroic destiny, though we are missing the conclusion because of text

loss. Tragedy strikes them at any case, whether the father kills his son, or the son his father, or whether both die. Both in the *Poema de Mio Cid* and in the *Chanson de Roland*—the German poet, Pfaffe Konrad (Cleric Konrad) translated this as *Rolandslied*—the protagonists struggle primarily against Muslims (medieval sources: Saracens) and also traitors within the Christian camp. In the *Njal's Saga*, the hero faces many opponents within his own community and eventually succumbs to their evil mind-set, though he dies a heroic death and is glorified by the survivors. Remarkably, he struggles for a long time to avoid bloody conflicts and resorts to legal means, and yet his enemies eventually overpower him and burn him and his wife to death, along with other mighty family members. Heroic poetry, however, does not simply glorify the gory details and the existential struggle. In fact, most of the poems offer powerful messages about the consequences of failed human communication, the breakdown of a community, the loss of justice, ethical principles, and individual honor.

## MYSTICAL LITERATURE

The high and late Middle Ages also witnessed the emergence of highly unusual but most powerful mystical literature in which religious visionaries related their spiritual experiences with the Godhead both in Latin and in the vernacular. Among the women mystics we find regular members of convents and abbesses, many beguines, and also religious individuals living in the world outside of the Church. The most important mystics were **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179), Elisabeth of Schönau (1129-1165), Marie d'Oignies (1177-1213), Hadewijch of Brabant (early thirteenth century), **Mechthild of Magdeburg** (1207-1282), St. Gertrude the Great (1241-1298), St. Clare of Assisi (1196-1253), Angela of Foligno (1248-1309), **St. Bridget of Sweden** (1302/03-1373), **St. Catherine of Siena** (1347-1380), **Marguerite Porete** (d. 1310), Julian of Norwich (1343-1413), and **Margery Kempe** (1373-1439). St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), Hugh (1096/1100-1141) and Richard of St. Victor (d. 1173), Meister Eckhart (1260-1328), Heinrich Seuse (Henry Suso) (1295-1366), and Johannes Tauler (1300-1361), not all of them having really mystical visions and working more as intellectuals/theologians, enjoyed the highest respect and influence among the male mystics, but they also deeply influenced some of the women mystics. In a way, we also would have to count **St. Francis of Assisi** (1182-1226), the founder of the Franciscans, who only wrote few texts (mostly rules for his order, *Opuscula*), but spurred a huge flood of Franciscan spiritual literature, and the Italian poet Jacopone da Todi (ca. 1236-1306) among the most significant mystical authors,

though this stretches the definition of mysticism. There were also many Muslim and Jewish mystics in the wider sense of the word.

Religious literature also enjoyed tremendous popularity, both in Latin and in the various vernaculars, such as **Iacobus de Voragine's** *Legenda Aurea*, or *Golden Legend* (1258-1270), consisting of 180 short lives of the saints. Many Latin authors wrote beast epics and bestiaries, hymns, biographies, hagiographies, pastoralia, debate poems, travel literature, dramas, exempla, proverbs and epigrams, and satires.

### Literature of the High Middle Ages

In the wake of the crusades, and also as a consequence of the cultural contacts with the Arabic world—highly refined and sophisticated in its living conditions, scholarship, architecture, and philosophy at that time—European knighthood was familiarized with a much more advanced culture and quickly copied many of its features. At the same time, originating in the Provence, the ideas of **courtly love** emerged, expressed in courtly love poetry by the *troubadours*, who soon inspired the *trouvères* in northern France, and the *minnesingers* in Germany, finally followed by the Italian (and Sicilian) poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*. From ca. 1165 onward the French poet **Chrétien de Troyes**, drawing from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Histories of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1137) and Robert Wace's *Roman de Brut* (ca. 1155), introduced the idea of King Arthur through his various courtly romances (*Erec et Enide*, *Cligès*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and *Les Contes de Graal ou Perceval li Galois*). The Swabian poet **Hartmann von Aue** translated the first two romances into Middle High German, along with love poetry, a religious tale, *Gregorius*, and a love tale, *Poor Henry*, and the Bavarian poet **Wolfram von Eschenbach** adapted Chrétien's *Perceval* as *Parzival*. The latter also composed the crusade epic *Willehalm*, beautiful dawn songs, and the fragmentary piece *Titirel*. **Gottfried von Strassburg** composed one of the most famous versions of the rich, European-wide tradition of the *Tristan* romance in ca. 1210, and this was followed by many other courtly romances and verse narratives written by other German, French, Italian, Spanish, and English poets. In England, **Marie de France**, apart from her *fables* and a visionary text (*Saint Patrick's Purgatory*) produced her famous amatory narratives, her *lais* (ca. 1170-1200). The French court chaplain **Andreas Capellanus**, on the basis of the classical source by Ovid, *Ars amatoria*, composed his highly influential treatise on love, *De amore* (ca. 1190). In France, at about the same time when Chrétien composed his earliest texts (ca. 1170), an anonymous poet wrote the highly influential romance *Partonopeus de Blois*, which

was subsequently translated into many European languages, such as by **Konrad von Würzburg** (*Partonopier und Meliur*, ca. 1280). Together, Latin and vernacular authors contributed to courtly literature all over Europe, perhaps best represented by the famous collection of religious and erotic love poems in the collections *Cambridge Songs* (eleventh century) and *Carmina Burana* (early thirteenth century). Concurrently, many poets explored the literary myth of King Alexander, and wrote monumental epics about the ancient conflict between the Saracens and Emperor Charlemagne and his Paladins, especially Roland (*Chansons de gestes*). Whole cycles of epic poetry were dedicated to Count William of Orange in his desperate struggles against the Saracens. Both an anonymous French author and the German poet **Heinrich von Veldeke** introduced the ancient topic of the Trojan Aeneas's foundation of Rome to their audiences (*Roman d'Eneas, Eneit*).

#### Literature of the Late Middle Ages

This cannot be covered here well because of the enormous spread of ever new writers from that period. But we need to keep in mind, above all, **Geoffrey Chaucer** (d. ca. 1400), in England, **Boccaccio** and **Petrarch** (d. 1374 and 1375 respectively) in Italy, **Christine de Pizan** (d. 1430) in France, **Juan Ruiz** (14<sup>th</sup> c.) in Spain), **Johannes von Tepl** (d. ca. 1430) in Bohemia/Germany, **Thüring von Ringoltingen** (fl. ca. 1450) in Switzerland, and finally **Sebastian Brant** with his *Ship of Fools* (1494).

#### JEWISH HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Whereas in the early Middle Ages Jews experienced a remarkable degree of tolerance in most parts of Europe, beginning with the crusades in 1096 they increasingly faced anti-Jewish hostility, eventually leading to horrible pogroms, which finally resulted in their expulsion from England in 1291, from France in 1306, from Spain in 1492, and from Portugal in 1497. A majority of the Jews who did not accept forced conversion moved to Poland, Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire, but numerous Jewish communities remained in Germany, Italy, and neighboring territories. **Anti-Judaism** grew significantly throughout the late Middle Ages because the Christians depended on Jewish financial loans and often accused their bankers of heavy usury. Religious-ideological aggression, strongly influenced by the fabricated accusations of ritual murder, provided additional ammunition against the Jews and inspired the mob. Despite this tremendous hostility and excessive pressure exerted against the Jews, many of their Rabbis, such as **Rashi** in Tours (1040-1105) and **Nahmanides** (1194-ca. 1270),

philosophers such as **Ibn Gabirol** (1021-1058) and **Maimonides** (1135-1204), exegetes, grammarians, translators, and teachers such as Joseph **Kimhi** (ca. 1105-ca. 1170), scholars and scientists such as Abraham bar Hija (1065-1135), travelers such as **Benjamin of Tudela**—who explored southern Europe, the Middle East, and China between 1153 and 1173—and lyric poets such as Jehuda Halevi (1086-1141) demonstrated that Jewish culture was a considerable force in medieval Europe. Joseph Ibn Zabara (ca. 1140-ca. 1200), for instance, composed a most remarkable collection of tales, fables, and proverbs in his *Sefer Shashuim* (*The Book of Delight*) which shares many elements with ancient Roman and Greek and also with medieval Latin and vernacular exempla, anecdotes, and moral tales. Although the heyday of medieval Jewish literature seems to have been the twelfth century, many other names of famous didactic, lyric, religious, and philosophical poets, and Kabbalists would have to be mentioned here, such as Shem Tob ben Joseph Ibn Falaquera (1225-1290), Yehiel of Eisenach (fl. 1235), Abraham Abulafia (1241-ca. 1292), Asher ben Yehiel (1250-1327), Immanuel ha-Romi (1265-1330), Solomon ben Meshul-Iam da Piera (1340-1417), and Solomon ben Reuben Bonfed (1380-1450). Surprisingly, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many Jewish authors, particularly in the German-speaking lands, recreated medieval courtly themes and retold or recreated Arthurian romances, such as *Gabain, Paris and Vienna, Tristan und Isolde*, and *Sigemunt und Magdalina*.