The Middle Ages

Teachers’ Notes

Curriculum subject
History

Key Stage
3

Theme
Medieval women

Rationale

Women’s lives are often absent from the historical record – from which we might assume that women’s roles have been insignificant, or at least, less significant that men’s. But how fair is this assumption? What was life like for women in the Middle Ages? Were there any female influencers or leaders? Could women hold positions of power? This activity will investigate this through the use of primary sources in the British Library collection.

Content

Primary sources from the website

- Miniature of the temptation of Adam and Eve, from John Lydgate’s The Fall of the Princes
- The Golf Book
- Translation of Magna Carta
Recommended reading from the website

- **Women in medieval society** by Alixe Bovey

Key questions

- How easy is it to find out about the lives of women during the Middle Ages?
- How powerful could women be?
- To what extent are the sources representative of the lives of women?
- How far do the sources support the stereotypical view that women in the medieval period were subservient?

Activities

1. As a class, create a list of all of the women that students have learned about in history lessons (this may also provide a useful opportunity to audit your history curriculum coverage of women too). How long is the list? How might it compare to a list of men? What kinds of women are on the list? Are they typical?

2. Introduce or recap the medieval period and place on a timeline. Introduce Magna Carta as a source of information from this period. Ask the class to look at the translation. What does it say about women? Feedback and allow the class to pinpoint the clauses of Magna Carta that relate to women. Tease out that whilst there is recognition of the rights of widows, the clauses are protective.

3. Show students the image of the *Temptation of Eve image*. What do they think is going on in this image? What is the story of Adam and Eve? You could use a video prompt if you wish – there are many Youtube videos to choose from. Based upon the story of Adam and Eve, and the significance of the church in the Middle Ages, how might we expect this to impact on the women’s lives in the medieval period?

4. Do the sources shown in the medieval realms resource on women support this? Ask students to complete a short research exercise that uses a chart to record the following information (‘Source’, ‘Area of life shown’, ‘Powerful or not?’ and ‘Reason’) and feed back to look at whether the evidence supports the stereotypical view. Which areas of life are women seen to be powerful in?
How do the sources students have just investigated compare to the images of women in the Golf Book, such as ‘Chopping Wood in January’ or ‘Gathering the Harvest’? Is it possible to generalise about the lives of women in medieval times? How representative are the sources about the lives of women? Why do students think it is difficult to find out about the lives of ordinary women?

5. Use the sources, information and further research to produce a diary from the perspective of a medieval wealthy woman, a nun/abbess, a queen such as Isabella, or a peasant woman.

6. Extension activity: How have the lives of women changed?