

Women's writing through the ages

# In Their Own Name



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Prof. Jerzy Strzelczyk, a historian and medievalist specializing in the early days of the Polish state and barbarian countries, was awarded the "Polish Nobel Prize" for his work on the writing of women over the centuries

**Although women have traditionally been assigned strictly defined and limited roles, some managed to break out from the silent majority to create their own written works**

*In Medieval Europe - apart from some as-yet-unlocated land of the Amazons - what we are discovering in the valleys of the Oder, Warta, and Vistula rivers is a land of Polish men: very chivalrous, yet existing largely without any women. We do not know how these Poles actually managed to reproduce - apart from the royal family, of course.*

This quote by the Poznań-based medievalist Jacek Wiesiołowski is, naturally, intended as a joke and an thought-provoking metaphor. Even back then, in those difficult, severe, "masculine" days, women were an essential part and - as ever - the better part of society; however, our understanding of their social roles and individual fates is embarrassingly sparse. This is largely because women feature in historical sources only sporadically. This is at once a primary and secondary reason, since the fact that sources (in the Middle Ages including chronicles, annals, hagiographies, registers, etc.) focus on discussing men and their concerns is the result of their dominance in social spheres and their monopoly in some of their key areas. As far back as we can look in history, women were assigned rigorously defined

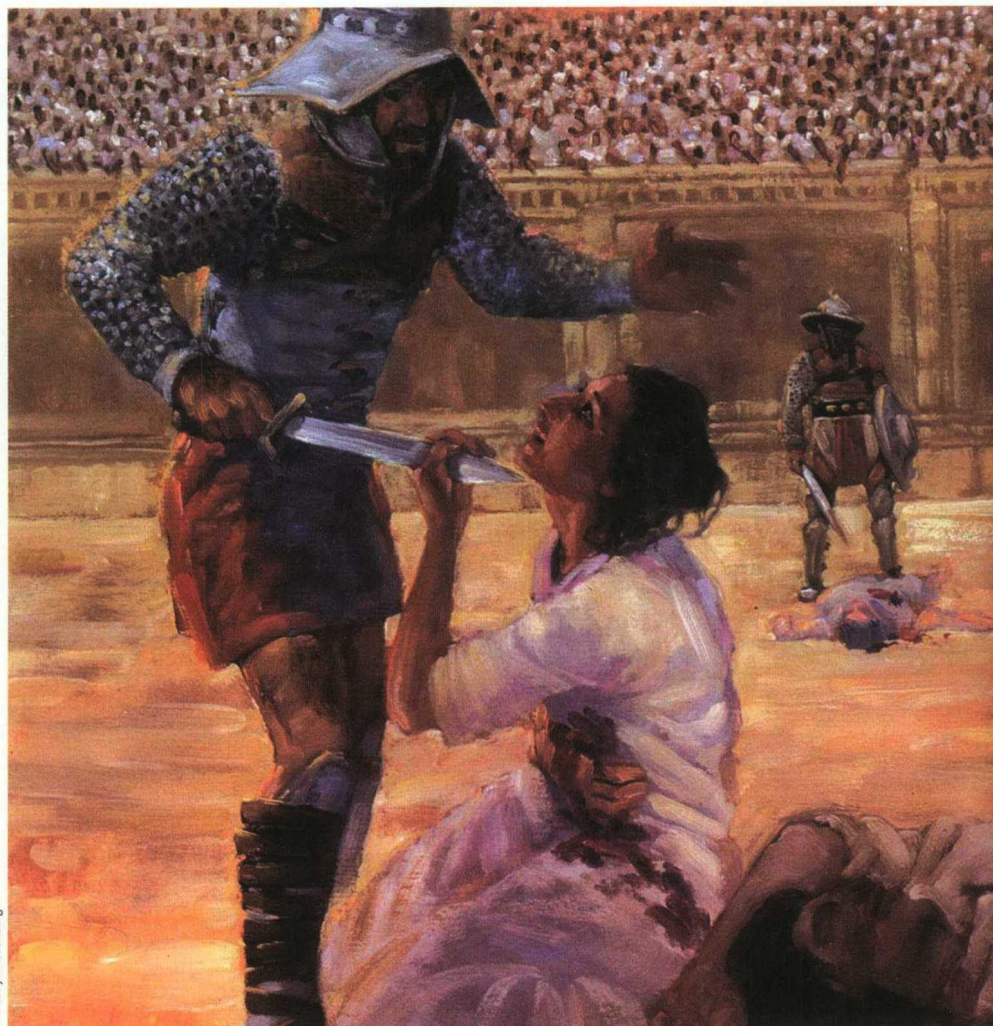
and restricted roles, which were nevertheless essential for the existence and elementary functioning of society as a whole.

## A silent half of humanity

Much has changed over the centuries, although it was not until the second half of the 20th century that historical sciences came to realize the abnormality of the situation manifested by a tacit agreement to allow the female half of humanity to remain "mute" and anonymous, almost outside the realm of its interests. The sciences - including history - remained solidly in the domain of men. It should be remembered that women only really became able to enter scientific and academic professions in the 20th century, and their paths have often been difficult.

Considering that until the 19th century the vast majority of Europeans were unable to read or write (although literacy levels varied), making it virtually impossible for them to record and transmit their own thoughts, ideas, and feelings, it is all the more impressive that any women at all managed to overcome the hostility - a lack of understanding at best, and a hatred difficult to comprehend today at worst - and break away from the silent ranks and create their own written works. Not all have been preserved until today; additionally, many were created anonymously - a common practice in medieval times - and as such it may be impossible to recognize them as having been created by women.

What were the prospects of intellectual development for medieval women? They were unable to enjoy opportunities equal to those granted to men, and so they could not match their achievements. However, there were domains where women did play a greater role. They included home medicine (an essential activity, albeit at times viewed as suspicious and downright dangerous), as well as crafts and sacral art, in particular embroidery. And yet the names of the artists whose hands created many magnificent



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The history of female Christian authors opens with a young Carthaginian, Perpetua, accused and condemned as a Christian for disobedience against state order

vestments and tapestries remain largely unknown. In a few cases it can be demonstrated, and in many more it can be surmised, that women were also engaged in copying medieval manuscripts and adorning them with dazzling miniatures.

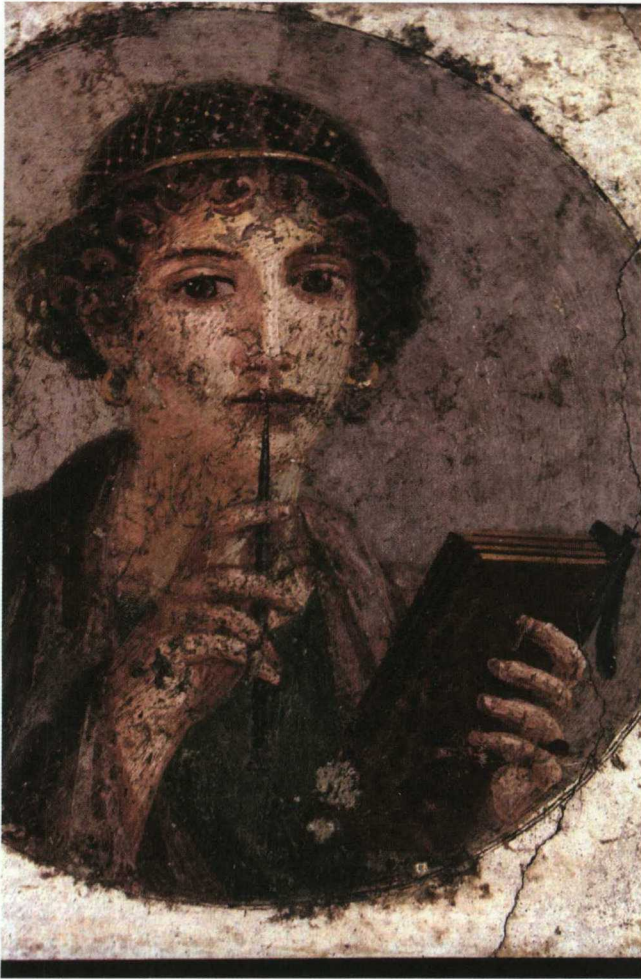
When investigating the place of women in the history of medieval literature, it is important to remember their role in inspiring and frequently backing the works of others. Many poets, writers, and chroniclers created and dedicated their works to numerous female rulers and aristocrats. Female motifs were used even more frequently regardless of a specific commission or expectation, both in a positive, affirmative and at times enthusiastic sense (for example in the works of Celtic bards, Provençal and Italian troubadours, and German minnesingers) as well as in a negative, frequently hateful and misogynistic sense (in many theological and moralizing treatises by outstanding fathers of the Church and Christian thinkers, and in fashionable anti-female satirical pieces). It seems that as the misogyny grew stron-

ger, more persistent and more radical, it increasingly became an expression of men's disquiet and actual helplessness; it indirectly became a testament to the significant role played by at least those women who refused to meekly fulfill the roles assigned to them and who successfully challenged stereotypes.

### Female writers in antiquity

Women have long been creating written works in all literary genres and at all levels. Ancient Rome and Greece had higher education and literacy levels than the early Middle Ages; this allowed outstandingly talented women, in particular poets, to make a historical mark at times, in spite of the fact that their social role was extremely limited in Greece and to a lesser degree in Rome. The most outstanding and famous poetess of ancient Greece was Sappho from Lesbos (late 7th/early 6th century BCE); some of her works have been preserved until the present day, allowing contemporary scholars to admire the depth

## Women's writing through the ages



Archivum PPWetate

martyr's death in 202 or 203), accused and convicted as a Christian for defying state order: she refused to deify the Emperor. This well-educated young noblewoman, nursing her first child, used her time in prison to record the terms of her incarceration.

The anonymous author of one of the earliest ever hagiographies "Passio SS. Perpetuae et Felicitatis" ("The Passion of St. Perpetua and St. Felicitas") included Perpetua's notes in the text, making this moving work a partially autobiographical account. The extensive correspondence of St. Jerome, a Doctor of the Church in the 4th century, includes several epistles he exchanged with noble Roman ladies. They include a letter, more akin in style and length to a treatise, which is an account of a journey to the Holy Land taken by his friends Paula and her daughter Eustochium. At a similar time, an extensive and precise - although sadly incomplete - itinerary of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land was created by Egeria, a largely unknown nun likely of Spanish origins. The Roman Empire reached a nadir soon after, bringing the antique order to an end. Soon after 600, Baudonivia, a humble nun of Poitiers, wrote a hagiography of Radegund, founder of Baudonivia's monastery and wife of Clotaire I, King of the Franks. And so the names of Perpetua, Egeria, and Baudonivia have become a noble representation of literary works created by women during early Christianity.

Female writers continued to appear over the centuries, albeit infrequently. During the first half of the 9th century, Dhuoda, a Frankish noblewoman, wrote an extensive manual (*Liber Manualis*) for her son. In the 10th century, the gifted poetess Hrosvitha of Gandersheim created a collection of writings unrivalled at the time; albeit now incomplete, it included hagiographies, dramas (she was the first writer in the medieval period to successfully imitate the antique poet Terence) and two historical poems.

Around the turn of the 11th century, intellectual life in Europe ran almost dry, taking literary writings with it; however, in faraway Japan this coincided with the Heian period, which saw the blossoming of exquisite literature penned by women. The most outstanding were a trio of contemporaries and rivals: Izumi Shikibu, Sei

**The most outstanding and famous poetess of Ancient Greece was Sappho of Lesbos; some of her works have been preserved until the present day (fresco from Pompeii, Sicily)**

of feeling and poetic skill therein, although the life of this extraordinary lady quickly become shrouded in legend. Although only fragments of works by other female poets remain - such as Corinna, Telesilla of Argos, Praxilla of Sicyon, Erinna, Anyte of Tegea, and Nossis of Locri - they generally suggest that the authors were of uncommon talent. Other learned women included Hipparchia of Maroneia, wife of the Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes, and of course Hypatia of Alexandria (late 4th/early 5th century). The latter, a renowned mathematician, was a tragic figure: she suffered a violent death at the hands of a Christian mob, the moral responsibility for which has generally been regarded to lie with the Patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril.

### Perpetua, Egeria, Baudonivia

The history of female Christian writers starts with the young Carthaginian Perpetua (she was around 20 when she suffered a

Shōnagon, and Murasaki Shikibu. Their works remained largely unknown in Europe until the 19th century.

### Poets, biographers, visionaries

The great cultural revival in 12th century Europe (known as the Renaissance of the 12th century) also brought an awakening of women's literary activities. The traditional Latin (and Greek in the Eastern regions) was soon joined by local "vernacular" languages, such as Old French, Old Provençal, Old German, and Old English, which undoubtedly helped encourage the writing activity of women, generally deprived of regular education. The inspiring list of women who from this century onwards started making their mark in various literary genres includes poets, biographers, scholars and visionaries. They cannot all be recalled here, but some of the most important (from the historical, literary, intellectual or religious perspective) include Heloise (for her correspondence with Peter Abélard), Hildegard of Bingen, Herrad of Landsberg, Marie de France, Hadewijch of Antwerp, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Gertrude of Helfta, Clare of Assisi, and Angela of Foligno. On the margins of literary trends existing at the time, a beautiful genre of "troubairitz" (female troubadours) focusing on courtly love, arose in Southern France and Northern Italy. Although only fragments of these works remain, they include writings by Castelloza and the enigmatic Comtessa de Dia. Byzantine historiography produced just one – albeit outstanding – work in the 12th century: the *Alexiad* by Anna Comnena, describing the political and military history of the Byzantine Empire during the reign of her father, Emperor Alexius I, including the First Crusade. The 13th century also saw the rise of female mystics and visionaries, some creating their own writings, others dictating their mystical experiences to scribes. They continued being active into the 14th and even 15th century. In the late Middle Ages, the history of the Church and our civilization notes women with extraordinary personalities who were not just active writers, but who also at times played important public roles (not unlike Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century), such as Saint Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Poland's Dorothea of Montau.

### The original feminist?

Peter Dronke, author of one of the most important and pioneering Medieval monographs on women's works (1984), opens with Perpetua and closes with Marguerite Porete; the latter was a mystic and supporter of the "Heresy of the Free Spirit," burnt at the stake in Paris in 1310 for her views revealed in the treatise "The Mirror of Simple Souls," which she refused to renounce. This can be regarded as symbolic: both Perpetua and Porete died for remaining true to their convictions, which ran counter to the social order in place at the time. They both left behind them moving testaments to their personalities.

Christine de Pizan, who lived in France at the turn of the 15th century, is seen as the first professional female writer in that she was able to support herself through her diverse writings. Some scholars also regard her as the first "intentional" feminist. In the 15th century and later, into the modern day, growing numbers of women took up writing. Certainly world literature of the 19th, 20th, and early 21st centuries would have been far poorer without the female contribution. The same can be said of Poland, even though Polish women only started taking to the quill in the second half of the 17th century.

The extensive correspondence of St. Jerome, a Doctor of the Church (depicted here in Caravaggio's "Saint Jerome Writing"), includes several epistles he received from noble Roman ladies. They include a letter, more akin in style and length to a treatise, which is an account of a journey to the Holy Land taken by his friends Paula and her daughter Eustochium



Galleria Borghese

#### Further reading:

Jerzy Strzelczyk *Pióro w wątłych dłoniach. O twórczości kobiet w dawnych wiekach* [A Quill in Delicate Hands - The Writings of Women in Past Centuries]. Vol. 1 (2007) & vol. 2 (2009). Warsaw: DIG.