

**Women and the Good Life in the Middle Ages**  
**Shinhee Kang, 2018**

Last fall, I took a course in the History Department titled, “The Good Life: from Plato to Oprah.” Throughout the semester, I consulted thinkers such as Aristotle, Martin Luther and Rene Descartes in order to interrogate the perennial question: *What does it mean to lead a good and happy life?* I was intrigued by Professor Denery’s novel inclusion of women writers into the otherwise male-centered historical narratives. I learned that although women had made impressive interventions in textual culture during the medieval ages, they were denied historical remembrance because their works did not adhere to conventional subject matter and methodology reserved for the *male* craft of historical writing. When proposing this project, I hoped to address the following research question: *What conceptions of “the good life” did women writers of medieval Europe propound?* I would investigate the intellectual history of “the good life” while taking into consideration the overlooked but critical truth in the field: a practice of gendered erasure and rewriting.

First, I surveyed how scholars have previously framed questions regarding “the good life.” McMahon attributes the changing conceptions of happiness to a revolution in human expectations throughout four major stages, namely the Greco-Roman world, Judeo-Christian tradition, Age of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era. Depending on the distinct conditions of each epoch, happiness was located in the span of a lifetime as an objective end, or postmortem, in the hereafter, etc. Additionally, the source from which happiness was derived oscillated between human will or agency and the external forces of fortune or divine favor. According to Hardot, classical antiquity famously fostered the ideal way of life of “philosophy itself” grounded on reason. However, the middle ages portended a major change wherein Christianity presented itself as the ideal founded solely on a rule of faith. Over the course of my research, I developed a greater understanding of the preponderance of religiosity during the medieval ages.

Primary and secondary sources by both men and women on religious women of the middle ages revealed that spiritual life could be at once heroic and accessible a space for women. Religious women tactically rendered modes of spirituality, such as sacramental confession, as efficacious sources of self-empowerment. Women saints of a Venetian convent, for example, led lives characterized by devotion, mysticism, penitential asceticism, etc. As a result, women defied medieval women’s quintessential careers as wife or mother and were elevated to imitable figures able to approach the humanity of God. However, Bynum argues that these cadaverous women engaged in self-immolation, recounted numinous visions and “struggled to win their voices” not because of their dedication to “feminism, self-empowerment, subversion, sexuality, or ‘the body’” but ultimately because of their “commitment to God.”<sup>1</sup>

Alternatively, analyses of Christine de Pizan’s works evinced her espousal of a life of appearances befitting women who operated within the calcified confines of court life. In response to blistering attacks against her sex and other untruths, Christine argues that God ordained men and women to serve Him in different positions of society. While Christine upholds the divine hierarchies in society, she acknowledges that extraordinary circumstances may warrant extraordinary actions. Given the social and political exigencies, Christine even permits religious violations such as lying and hypocrisy. A disjuncture between her beliefs and actions—be it dissimulation or histrionics—is seen as necessary for women to maintain honor and dignity in the medieval court. It is worth noting de Charny’s manual on the conduct of aspiring knights, which I parsed as a means of comparison. At first glance, de Charny espouses prowess as a chivalric trait that leads to honor, which is the highest human good in medieval lay society. Closer examination reveals that de Charny construes the attainment of prowess as a gift from God. In this way, such an ideal—albeit violent—manner of life for knights is devised to fit into the framework of Christian teaching.

As my research progressed, I was increasingly aware of the misogynistic tradition characteristic of the time that greatly circumscribed women’s socio-political power, economic roles and historical experience. The monolithic and homogenizing accounts of women presented them as deceitful, prurient and imperfect versions of men who were bereft of virtue and intellect. Precluded from recognition, women led tenuous existences amidst these tensions; for them, both the departure from and the reinvention of preexisting conceptions of human excellence were a practical imperative.

I hope to use the findings from my summer fellowship to inform a year-long Honors Project in the History Department. I hope that my ongoing work will contribute to the nascent effort toward an intellectual history involving women, and thereby fill a lacuna in contemporary historical scholarship that still privileges the masculine.

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 246.

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