

Women In The Medieval And Renaissance Period:
Spectators Only*

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The particular concern in this paper is the involvement of women in sport during the Middle Ages and Renaissance period and, indeed, the analysis will examine this involvement as to woman's role as spectator or participant. Sport is used as an all-encompassing term and will embrace play, games, dance and field sports, as well as recreational activities, pastimes and amusements. Sport, in the modern sense, involving competition, in a highly-skilled and organized activity, did not exist even for males in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The closest would be the tournament, where there were specific rules, knights were highly trained, and there was competition for a specific goal. Indeed, the tournament was occasionally referred to as being a sport. However, the modern concept of sport has its genesis in field sports such as hunting and fishing, and such activities were accepted for centuries to be the sports of the gentlemen and, to a lesser degree, ladies. The word sport has its root meaning in "disport", which means "to divert oneself", to amuse oneself¹. It is in this context that this analysis will be basically concerned.

It is very difficult to generalize about the position of women during the Medieval period due partially to the contradictory theories expounded in the literature and occasionally portrayed in the art. The Church, and the aristocracy, the two main forces in this time period, simultaneously exalted and condemned the woman, and women found themselves oscillating between "a pit and a pedestal"². The Church elevated Mary, the mother of God, to a position of sharing with the masculine trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. One result was the emergence of the Virgin cult³; however, at the same time, women were seen by the church as an evil temptress and as the incarnation of the Devil, for it was Eve who beguiled Adam⁴. In the lay world, the cult of the Lady emerged, parallel to the development of chivalry among the aristocracy. The virtues of the Lady were extolled by the troubadours, who emphasized beauty and gentleness. This idealization and glorification actually was a detriment to women, as it was a superficial reverence and accentuated their inequality. Furthermore, the real world of feudalism demonstrated their subjection, as a woman spent all her life under the guardianship of a male, that is her father, her husband or her lord, and this woman was "a complete slave to a system of militarism and land tenure".⁵ The medieval ambivalence of, on the one hand glorification, and on the other

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debasement and subjection, did not continue into the Renaissance, and indeed, into the sixteenth century. An Englishwoman was, to her menfolk, "a companion...(and)...co-partner in the revival of learning of the art of living"⁶.

Medieval art and literature has indeed represented a picture of lovely ladies and glorious festivities, beautiful virgins and knights in shining armour. Recent scholars are beginning to question whether these portrayed ideals were not simply ideals, and whether they were, in reality, the norms actually practised by society.⁷ For example, there appears to be a contradiction with respect to adultery and lovers. In the twelfth century there emerged Courts of Love and subsequently a Code of Love. The first code stated: "Marriage is no good excuse against loving"⁸ and the thirty-first code stated that: "Nothing prevents one woman from being loved by two men, or one man by two women"⁹. Countess Dia, one of the very few women poets in the twelfth century, wrote a Love Song:

Fair lover, full of grace and goodness, when shall I have you in my power? When, in bed with you one night, can I give you a kiss of love? Believe me, I should be greatly glad to see you in place of my husband, on only one condition: that you had promised me to do all that I would have you do.¹⁰

Andreas Capellanus went further in his twelfth century treatise *De Amore* (On Love), in which he stated that "love could not exist 'between' two people who are married to each other; 'but only' outside the bonds of wedlock".¹¹ However, it is known that adultery was condemned and "was counted among the punishable crimes, as both Church and state thought themselves called upon to safeguard the matrimonial bonds".¹² There was, however, in general, a double standard as women committing adultery were more commonly and more severely punished than were men, particularly among the upper classes. Men, again those of the upper class, quite commonly had mistresses and illegitimate children.¹³ Wife-beating was quite acceptable and common and, indeed, in thirteenth century France, men were permitted by law to beat their wives: "Provided he neither kills nor maims her".¹⁴ Also, in England, laws in the fourteenth century allowed husbands "lawful and reasonable correction".¹⁵ However, the reversal of this custom was in evidence, particularly among the middle and lower classes. A favorite theme was that of the "henpecked husband",¹⁶ and men who were beaten in public were ridiculed.¹⁷ Also, in two fifteenth century drawings, women are depicted attacking monks and a clergyman who have molested them.¹⁸

Throughout the Middle Ages there was a very definite social structure, and the lifestyle, customs and mannerisms were distinctive to the social class. Chivalry and the code of chivalry were ways of life, reserved for the aristocracy, and were definitely not part of the life of the peasants. The working class maintained and contributed to the existence of the Church and the aristocracy, but they did not imitate them in their lifestyles nor practise their values and norms. The peasants were simply too

busy toiling and surviving, and "men and women worked together...(as)...there was no sharp division of labour."¹⁹ Women worked at physically demanding jobs, and there was no glorification of the fragile, gentle sex. And, as guilds developed, Beard (1962) noted that in England, of some 85 guilds, 72 at least allowed women as full and equal partners. Occasionally there were times when men were subordinated to women, as can be seen in the Smithfield Decretals of Gregory IX.²⁰ The husband is shown doing the traditional women's tasks such as bringing water, washing the dishes and laundry, spinning, and then, being beaten by the woman. Writers and artists of the Middle Ages devoted only cursory attention to the peasants. Occasionally they would appear in the margins of books and in the backgrounds of the paintings and illustrations. Such has been the case in most societies, as artists and writers were in the main commissioned by the wealthy to produce or create works about them, and also it has been the wealthy who have provided the living for the artists. With the gradual rise of the middle class in this time period, and the very gradual improvement in the life of the peasant, the art and literature started to slowly reflect these classes. In the sixteenth century several Flemish painters emerged, and the main subjects for their paintings were peasant men and women, and their life and customs. Of these, Pieter Brueghel the Elder, is perhaps the most famous, particularly with regard to sports and games.

The difficulty of ascertaining the actual lifestyles and mannerisms of the time period has been compounded by the traditional conceptions of the epoch and by the character of the sources. Due to the art and literature, which has emphasized the cult of the Lady and the code of chivalry, the traditional conceptions are of a romantic era, gallant knights, lovely ladies and beautiful castles. The feudal system is so different from ancient and modern conceptions of social, political and economic order that an unreal, fairly-tale conception clouds our visions. Also, the stories of the knights of the round table, and romances such as Tristan and Isolde add to the painting of such a picture. Moreover, a majority of the medieval manuscripts are those by Church fathers, as they were, in the main, the most educated, but their concerns were primarily ecclesiastical. Other literary works that have been preserved are those of the troubadours' songs, moral essays and tales, as well as law books. Generalizations from such sources cannot be accepted unreservedly. There is obviously no single formula, or definitive opinion, covering the status and role of women in this time period, for all women simply did not conform to the laws, or practices described and decreed. However, in general terms the functions, attitudes and practices of women were sharply defined and conformed to class lines.

However widespread or narrow the actual practise of the cult of the Lady and the code of chivalry, the existence of these was a reality. They were perhaps, simply "ideals" that the ladies and the knights aimed for, and as such these ideals played a considerable role in determining the values and the norms of the aristocracy. In the tenth and eleventh centuries the status of women was low and they had few rights. The knights in this period whether as husbands or lovers, were inconsiderate, unfaithful, and uncultivated, thinking only of themselves and their physical exploits, usually in warfare. Early epics such as Raul of Cambrai and The Song of Roland depicted knights

pillaging, murdering and raping. As the political stability increased and thereby wealth and living standards, at least for the aristocracy, increased, the accepted societal expectations of knightly behavior changed. From the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards, there was a new attitude towards women, and they were placed on a pedestal, to be courted, admired, respected, adored and worshipped. Also a new type of knight emerged: a gentle knight, full of honour, faithful, true, considerate and ready to defend his God, his noble and his lady. The behavior of the knight was described in such books as The Book of the Order of Chivalry, written about 1280 by the Catalan Raymond Lull translated at the end of the fifteenth century into English by William Caxton. The knight's Seven Arts were elaborated on by Johannes Rohe in Der Ritterspiegel "(Knight's Mirror)", written at the end of the fifteenth century²¹; and Sir William Segar, at the turn of the seventeenth century, wrote in Books of Honor and Armes of the duties of the knight and gentleman:

First it behooveth him to feare God, and with all his power
to maintaine and defend the Christian faith.

To be charitable, and comfort those that are afflicted.

To serve faithfully, and defende his Prince and countrey
courageiously

To forgive the follies and offences of other men, and
sincerely embrace the love of frineds.

To esteeme trueth, and without respect maintaine it.

To avoide slouth and superfluous ease.

To spend the time in honest and vertuous actions.

To reverence Magistrates and converse with persons of
honour.

To eschew not and detest intemperancies.

To frequent the warre, and use militarie exercises.

To eschew dishonest pleasures, and endeavour to doe good
unto others.

To accomodate himselfe to the honour of honest company,
and be no wrangler.

To shunne the conversation of perverse persons and behave
himselfe modestly.

To be sober and discreet, no boaster of his owne actes, nor
speaker of himselfe.

To desire no excessive riches, and patiently endure worldly calamities.

To undertake enterprises just, and defend the right of others.

To support the oppressed, and helpe widowes and Orphans.

To love God, and be loyall to his Prince.

To preferre honour before worldly wealth, and be both in worde and deed just and faithfull.²²

And Castiglione, in 1528, wrote in The Book of the Courtier:

...if he (the courtier) happens to engage in arms in some public spectacle such as jousting, tourneying or volleying, or other kind of physical recreation, mindful of where and in whose presence he is, he will make sure that he is as elegant and attractive in the exercise of arms as he is competent, and that he feeds the eyes of these who are looking on everything that can give him added grace. He will ensure that the horse he has is beautifully comparisoned, that he himself is suitably attired, with appropriate mottoes and ingenious devices to attract the eyes of the onlookers in his direction as surely as the loadstone attracts iron.²³

It was not sufficient simply to be proficient in the knight's Seven Arts, as these accomplishments had to be observed, and acknowledged, by others. The tournament provided precisely this possibility. The knight could parade in his finery in front of the audience consisting of ladies and nobles, display his martial abilities in the joust or tourney, and then exhibit his courtly manners and dancing skills in the festivities that followed or preceded the contest. Thus, the prescribed social roles could be enacted and the appropriate social approval accorded.

This development in society, namely the evolution of the warrior knight to the gentleman knight, was a significant factor in the diffusion, aggrandisement and societal acceptance of the tournament. The tournament became a means of the expression and enactment of chivalry. Indeed, tournaments "qui ne devraient être que des écoles de guerre, deviennent vraiment des écoles d'impudeur poétique et d'adultère élégant."²⁴ Thus, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, tournaments were regular occurrences for the nobility on the continent and in England and, indeed, they became an essential aspect of the knight's, the noble's and the lady's life. During the fourteenth and most of the fifteenth centuries the importance of the tournament actually increased, even though the importance of the knight in warfare declined and his battlefield exploits diminished with developments in

archery and finally the hand gun. Thus,

...it was only in tournaments and pageantry and in the world of fantasy that a knight could find perfection and reassure himself that he was, indeed, a superior being living in a universe which revolved exclusively around himself and his kind.²⁵

The tournaments became more stylized and formalized and served primarily a decorative function, as a form of courtly entertainment. As a popular social institution the tournament existed until the end of the sixteenth century.

The competition was restricted to the upper class, as chivalry and knighthood did not involve the lower class. Thereby the tournament was a symbol of social class. Even if there had been no social restrictions to the competitions, the necessity of owning a horse and all the associated armour and weapons was sufficient to ensure the exclusiveness of the event. And, if a knight lost he could lose his horse, saddles and weapons, all of which would be very costly to replace. However, a very proficient and successful knight could become very wealthy in this "sport lucratif"²⁶. The hosting and participating even as spectators in the tournaments, was also very costly. And many nobles were ruined by the associated expenses which included the costs of the women's dresses.²⁷

Tournaments were held on festive occasions such as bestowing knighthood, weddings and christenings, as well as at any time deemed justified by the king, or a noble. They often lasted for several days and were associated with pomp, pageantry and ceremony. Initially they were held in open fields, but as their importance and pageantry increased special areas were set aside and stands were constructed for the seating of the onlookers, without whom the tournament virtually could not take place, or if it did, its significance would be diminished. "La premiere place"²⁸ at these stands, or scaffolds as they were sometimes called was reserved for the judges of the tournament, who sometimes were women while the remainder of the stands was for the ladies. In order to ensure the comfort of the spectators, particularly that of women, the stands were covered and enclosed. Tapestries, shields and banners vividly decorated those structures, which were built at the end of the lists. The lists were the enclosures in which the tourney would take place. These were originally round, "like the amphitheatres of antiquity"²⁸ but later they were squared and eventually oblong in shape. The sides of these lists were often adorned with tapestries, banners and hangings.

In the early years women spectators were not present at the tournaments but their presence increased with the evolution of the tournament from athletic contests related to preparation for war to public spectacles for courtly entertainment. Even in 1177 female spectators were considered a rarity.³⁰ Gradually, the knights realized that "they were able to satisfy their egos more pleasantly, and gain even greater standing in the eyes of their fellow knights",³¹ if women were admitted into the world of the tournament.

Behold him, all clad in white, his face hidden under his helmet, galloping on his caparisoned charger towards the tournament at which his bravery was to enable him to challenge and fell, before the admiring gaze of his beauty, the rival who had bid against him for the heart of Isolde the Fair...³²

Women added dignity, refinement and "class"³³ to these occasions, to which they came dressed in their finest. At a tournament at Montigny near Villeneuve, the ladies are eloquently described as wearing satin dresses which sparkled with precious stones, coats of silk with ermine, and on their blond hair they wore crowns.³⁴

The selection of combatants for the tourney was, at times, influenced by the ladies. For example, at the marriage of Margaret of York, in 1468, Jean de Chassa, a knight from Burgundy, requested consent from the ladies to joust.³⁵ Also, prior to the commencement of the tourney, the ladies and the nobles would inspect the banners of the knights. If any lady identified any knight "against whom she had any ground of complaint,"³⁶ that knight could be banished from the tournament if found guilty.

As the tournaments evolved the ceremony associated with it became more elaborate. A lavish procession would proceed to the fanfare of clarions and the display of banners and shields. The knights would be fully armoured, accompanied by their squires and carefully groomed horses. The ladies, elegantly dressed would enter, and oftentimes lead "in by golden or silver chains the knights, their slaves whom they only set at liberty when the signal was given for the combat to commence."³⁷

From the beginning of the thirteenth century, female spectators were clearly evident, as "the official aim of every contestant was to shine by his deeds in the eyes of the ladies."³⁸ Numerous artifacts attest to the presence of women on these occasions. A 1330-50 work, for example, shows people of the court, including women, observing the parade of the helmets of the combatants.³⁹ The woodcut "Tournament with Lances" by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1509 shows a mêlée with women spectators, many of whom appear disinterested.⁴⁰ A painting of Henry VIII in 1510 shows him at the list with his wife Catherine the Great and other ladies of the court. A woodcut by Jost Ammon, in approximately 1565, shows a tournament conducted by Kaiser Maximilian I, in which a great number of knights are engaged while women are observing the proceedings in the preferential seating.⁴¹

...She Isolde even persuaded him Dinadon to take part, in her name, in a forthcoming tournament, wearing a helmet chosen by her.⁴²

Not only did the knights battle in front of the ladies, they battled for a particular lady whose ensign they carried and for whose honour they fought. Ladies would bestow, on their favorite, or chosen knight, a token

such as a handkerchief, a veil, a ribbon, a head dress or any other distinguishing mark. The knight would display this symbol on his helmet, shield or lance, so that his lady could distinguish him during the contest and the other spectators could see in whose honour he fought. Gautier (1895) describes how, at a tournament at Montigny, the ladies threw additional tokens of love such as gloves, ribbons or small cards throughout the entire tournament. Indeed, he noted that some of them would leave with nothing else but their hair and dress.

Les hommes donnaient leur sang et les femmes, plus bêtement, leur cœur. Reste heureusement l'école de guerre, et c'est la seule utilité de ces folies.⁴³

After the contest was over, the winner was declared and "the prize was given away with all proper solemnity by the elder knights and sometimes by the ladies."⁴⁴ The ladies would then lead the victor into the banquet hall for the final festivities and entertainment. At the banquet, the knight was extolled in songs and poems, and "he had the privilege of giving the most beautiful ladies"⁴⁵ a kiss.

Thus, women played a very important role in the tournament although they were not in the role of active participants. However, there is one reference to women actually being in the tournament.

In those days, 1348, there arose a huge rumour and outcry among the people, because when tournaments were held, a band of women would come as if to share the sport, dressed in divers and marvellous dresses of men, - sometimes to the number of 40 or 50 ladies, of the fairest and comeliest (though I say not, of the best) among the whole kingdom. Thither they came in party-coloured tunics, one colour or pattern on the right side and another on the left, with short hoods that had pendants like ropes wound around their necks and belts thickly studded with gold and silver - nay, they even wore, in pouches slung across their bodies, those vulgar tongue; and thus they rode on choice war-horses or other splendid steeds to the places of tournament. There and thus they spent and lavished their possessions, and wearied their bodies with fooleries and wanton buffoonery, if popular report lie not.⁴⁶

The above description is contrary to the accepted behavior of women of the time period. If such activities occurred they were obviously so condemned that they were never written about or portrayed in art, or this was simply a singular incident.

"Guerre, chasse et tournoi c'est en trois mots, toute la vie d'un baron."⁴⁷ Ladies were not actively involved in fighting wars, although most, particularly the ladies of the manor, possessed some military skills⁴⁸

as their men often left them alone while on long crusades or at wars. However, in the other two pastimes, that of the tournament and hunting women were both participants and spectators.

The art and the literature are replete with depictions and references to women in and around the hunt. Even in the very early Middle Ages, it has been noted that women accompanied the hunt, as did, for example, Charlemagne's "wife and daughters, mounted on magnificent coursers."⁴⁹ Two Flemish tapestries of 1440, now in the South Kensington Museum, show women as spectators at a hunt. In Emperor Maximilian's Fishing Book (his Hunting Book was primarily involved with alpine pastimes), there are numerous references to women as spectators. In the Devonshire Hunting Tapestry from Tournai a woman is shown watching the hounds eating the entrails of the freshly killed stag. In some instances, a hunt scene is portrayed while, in the background, other activities, such as love-making, are shown, and thus Baillie-Grohman is led to state that "hunting in the Low Lands included, if we can believe the artists, the pursuit of the fair sex."⁵⁰ An engraving designed by Stradanus, 1523-1605, pictures a beautiful Diana surrounded by various hunting and fishing implements such as the fishing net and so on.⁵¹

Women were actively and directly involved in hunting, and this was not just in the festivities which accompanied the hunts. An illustration in Queen Mary's Psalter of 1308 shows what has been taken to be a female shooting at a stag.⁵² Isabella, Edward II's queen, owned her own pack of hounds, as she was such an avid hunter.⁵³ In the 1470's, King Louis XI's wife Anne was described as being "unusually bold and experienced huntress, and could undo a stag as deftly as the most practised veneur: as we know from the testimony of Jacques de Brézé, who was her grand veneur."⁵⁴ In a painting done by Lucas Cranach the Elder in 1545 a Stag Hunt is depicted, and among the figures are Sybilla of Cleves and the Electress of Saxony, who are armed with cross-bows and are shooting at stags. Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria kept a shooting diary from 1555 to 1579, and in it we learn that his Duchess was "passionately fond of stalking"⁵⁵ and often used rifles for this pastime. Catherine de Medicis was considered a "through sportswoman"⁵⁶ as she avidly shared with Francis I of France the thrills and dangers of hunting. Queen Mary and her husband, Francis II of France, as depicted on a tapestry riding after the stag.⁵⁷ She and Francis often hunted at Blois and Chenonceaux where, in 1559, while hunting, she was knocked off her horse by an overhanging tree branch.⁵⁸

The Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian (1459-1519)) was an avid participant of outdoor sports and wrote two manuscripts, the Fishing Book and the Hunting Book, and in both he depicts the women's involvement in these activities. His wives, Mary and Biana, of Milan, were also avid participants, although both died during the pursuit of their sport. The family was obviously committed irrevocably to hunting, for the Archduchess Margaret, Maximilian's daughter, "could undo a boar or buttle a stag with her own fair hands, and whose ladies-in-waiting before entering her services, had to testify their skills as horsewomen by being able to mount their steeds without any aid whatever."⁵⁹ Also Margaret, as Regent of the Netherlands, commissioned twelve panels, which were cartoons, of tapestry, called "Les belles Chasses de l'Empereur Maximilian," and these were completed by Margaret's niece and successor, Mary, Dowager Queen of Hungary.⁶⁰

Perhaps the most avid sportswoman, or huntress of the time period was Queen Elizabeth I. And, Trevelyan, the great English historian, maintained that her "love of hunting and dancing, masque, pagentry, and display, was used to strengthen the wider popularity which was her ultimate strength."⁶¹ In 1600, when she was seventy-six years of age, Roland White wrote to Sir Robert Sidney and described the Queen as "exceedingly disposed to hunting, for every second day she is on horseback, and continues the sport long."⁶² During her reign, grand hunts were often arranged at her request, and one such at Entefield is described by Wymer. Elizabeth was accompanied

...by twelve ladies, somewhat unsuitably arrayed in white satin, on ambling palfreys, and 120 mounted yeomen in green. On arriving at the chase she was met by 50 archers in scarlet, with gilded bows, each of whom presented her with a silver-headed arrow, winged with peacock feathers...⁶³

Indeed, Elizabeth was actively involved in all aspects of the hunt, and this included herself shooting the stags as well as performing the "taking assay."⁶⁴ This ceremony of "taking assay," performed by the chief personage at the end of the hunt, involved the slitting of the dead deer's belly. In the French hunting book *La Vénerie*, 1575-76, there is an illustration from a woodcut showing Elizabeth being presented with a knife, and a Baille-Grohman (1969) states: "Queen Bess was too true a sportswoman to forego this 'taking of the assay'."⁶⁵ Turberville, who describes this event in *La Vénerie*, does not mention whether Queen Elizabeth proceeded to cut off the deer's head, which was the English custom at the time, as it was a "somewhat unfeminine function, being one which required a good deal of physical strength."⁶⁶

Although deer hunting was the most common, and perhaps the most popular aspect of the hunt, other animals such as rabbits and hare were hunted by women.

Hunting of the hare with grehounds is a righte good solace for men that be studiouse of them to whom nature hath nat gyven personage of courage apte for the warres. And also for gentilwomen, which fere neither sonne nor wynde for appairing their beautie. And peradventure they shal be thereat lasse idell than they shulde be at home in their chambres⁶⁷

Archery was associated with hunting, as the bow and arrow was one of the main hunting implements utilized, and this has already been seen in the various tapestries and illustrations of women hunting. Diana, the goddess of hunting, and who in Greek and Roman times was the protectress of the hunters, was often pictured in Medieval art, and her symbols were the bow and arrow. In the fourteenth century, although the longbow was common, the weapons used in the main, by the ladies were shorter and were specially made "little crossbows, often highly decorated with inlaid wood, metal and

mother-of-pearl."⁶⁸ However, in a French medieval book, a woman archer wearing a crown is depicted with a long bow in her right hand, while her left hand is on a small harp.⁶⁹ In an English illustration, women are shown in the stands waving garlands and scarves, and smiling admirably as Henry VIII pulls a long bow at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 1520. One of his wives, Anne Boleyn, was also an avid archer, and she "often whiled away summer hours shooting with Henry."⁷⁰ After she was beheaded Henry had her buried "in a box of elm made for storing arrows."⁷¹

Elizabeth was not only a keen huntress, she was also "a skilful archer."⁷² In a painting, attributed to Cornelius Vroom, she is depicted as Diana, with a bow and arrow, a hound at her side, and a crescent-shaped moon on her head.⁷³

For women, hunting with the hawk, was one of the most popular forms of hunting, and this sport, falconry was a characteristic diversion of upper class ladies. Indeed, the bird was considered such a symbol of class that Lacroix stated that a lady and nobleman "never appeared in public without a hawk on the wrist as a mark of dignity."⁷⁴ The *Ménagier de Paris* wrote an expensive treatise on the art of hawking in his book on the life of upper class ladies.⁷⁵

Mary, the consort of Maximilian, was "passionately fond of hawking."⁷⁶ and she died in an accident while hunting with her falcon in the woods. A Flemish tapestry entitled "The Falconiers," 1445, shows three women assisting in the hunt with one woman attaching a leash to the "jesse" of the falcon. Ladies hunting with "merlins on their wrists"⁷⁷ are described in the French sporting book *Roy Modus* of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. Women are also observed in an illustration by David Vincboons, 1572-1629, entitled "Dutch Hawking." Another Flemish knitted tapestry of the sixteenth century shows a "Lady Hunting with a Falcon." Beatrice d'Este even "surpassed her husband in the pursuit of falconry."⁷⁸ Elzéar Blaze, in the fourteenth century, expresses the superiority of ladies as they know

...how to fly a bird, how to call him back, and how to encourage him with their voice, being familiar with him having continually carried him on their wrists, and often even from having broken him in themselves, the honour of hunting belongs to them by right. Besides, it brings out to advantage their grace and dexterity as they gallop amongst the sportsmen, followed by their pages and valets and a whole herd of horses and dogs."⁷⁹

Fishing, although not as popular as hunting and hawking, was one of the quiet pleasure sports practised by the medieval aristocracy. Maximilian, in his *Fishing Book*⁸⁰, makes occasional references to women, and women appear in some of his illustrations, however they appear primarily in the role of spectators. Putman, nevertheless, maintains that the lady of the Middle Ages loved the outdoors, hunted and "angled in the streams."⁸¹

Animals were held in low esteem in Medieval times and people had little concern about using animals for entertainment or of killing them. Baiting of bears, dogs, bulls and horses, and cockfighting, were common spectacles. Such animal-related activities were not restricted to the lower classes, as has basically been the case in modern time, but rather they were popular amusements countenanced by all classes and for both sexes. Indeed Strutt, in his book Sports and Pastimes of the People of England, describes how ladies of the aristocracy enjoyed and patronized these barbarous recreations.⁸² Of course, the ladies were simply observers at these events, as indeed so were the nobles, as the only real participants were the animals. Numerous references can be found of Queen Elizabeth's interest in bull and bear baiting. In the Life of Sir Thomas Pope it was noted how amused the then Princess Elizabeth and Queen Mary were by an exhibition of bear-baiting.⁸³ And in later years, Queen Elizabeth included bull and bear baiting in her entertainment of foreign diplomats, such as that of the French Ambassador, in 1559, and the Danish Ambassador, in 1586.⁸⁴

The course of the royalty and the castles of the nobility were constantly afforded a variety of different forms of entertainment, particularly when guests arrived, and on special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, births, and other designated days. Companies of minstrels, mimics, jugglers, tumblers, rope-walkers and dancers provided lively amusement, and sometimes a few of these performers would be females. These were generally from the lower strata, and were usually in the dance and tumbling exhibitions. Strutt maintained that females were better performers in tumbling and vaulting than men, and thus they most commonly performed these acts.⁸⁵ Such women were called by a variety of names, such as gleemaidens, tumblesters, after the Saxon word tomban, referring to dancing, vaulting or tumbling, saylours, after the Latin word salio, and sauters, after the French word saut, meaning to leap. Of course ladies of the upper class were avid spectators at such delightful amusements. Jugglers, however, were frowned upon, and in France the nobles were so adamant in their disgust that they forbade the jugglers "from the presence of ladies and girls in the châteaux and houses of the bourgeoisie."⁸⁷

Ladies outdoor pursuits were not restricted to field, or blood sports, but included various forms of ball games, such as jeu de paume, hand-ball, club ball, stool-ball, shuttle cock, golf and bowls. These games were all in their formative stages, and varied in name and method from area to area and country to country. Women are depicted both as observers and as players, for ball games, as allowable activities for women, are mentioned by writers of the Renaissance. In a 1344 French illustration three women are seen playing a ball-game,⁸⁸ which could possibly have been an early form of bowls. In two other illustrations of the same year women are shown partaking in the game of La soule and stoolball,⁸⁹ and club-ball.⁹⁰ Stoolball, or stool-ball, was also popular in England, where it was considered more of a ladies' game, although occasionally both sexes played the game together.⁹¹ Hand-ball was popular among young people of both sexes, and a young lady is pictured in a fourteenth century illustration playing with a young noble.⁹² In the Essai Historiques sur Paris there is a description of a female tennis player by the name of Margot who, in 1427, "played vigorously, dishonestly,

and ably, exactly like a man."⁹³ Indeed at the age of about thirty she was able to beat most men at the game, which at that time was played with a palm, and the back of the hand.⁹⁴ There are no references to Queen Elizabeth palyng tennis, or any other form of ball game; however, in The Progresses of Queen Elizabeth it is noted that, in 1591, while entertaining the Earl of Hertford, she observed a game of hand-tennis, which she greatly enjoyed.⁹⁵ There is a most beautiful painting done in the first half of the fifteenth century by a follower of Pisanello,⁹⁶ a Lombard artist, which shows a lovely young lady dressed in a long flowing gown with a rounded, polished bat in her right hand. The game that she is possibly playing is that of giuoco della palla, which was a popular ball game of upper class Italian ladies.⁹⁷

Golf was not as acceptable a ball game as the various other forms of hand-ball were, primarily perhaps because numerous laws were passed in England banning the game in order to encourage the practice of archery. The first lady golfer mentioned was Mary, Queen of Scots, who was an avid supporter of the game. Indeed, she was criticized for playing golf and pall-mall a few days after her husband's murder.⁹⁸

An outdoor sport which had only limited acceptance and participation was that of rowing. Indeed, women's crew competitions are basically of the twentieth century, and it was only in 1976 that women's crew was accepted into the modern Olympic Games. However, in the fifteenth century boat races were popular in Italy, and some regattas were exclusive to women. One such race is depicted on the "Habiti d'Huomini e Donne Venetiane", by Giacomo Franco. Apparently the majority of the women came from the sea town of Pellestrina. In all probability these women were not of the upper class.

Ladies had numerous fashionable diversions, such as chess, board games, cards, dice, billiards and other types of parlour games to amuse themselves indoors during inclement weather, or when vigorous outdoor pursuits were not suitable. Chess for example, was considered an aristocratic game, and it was popular among both the ladies and the gentlemen. As it was frequently mentioned in historical romances, it could have been "a frequent manoeuvre for lovers."¹⁰⁰ Indeed, chess games figured prominently in the love makings of Tristan and Lancelot. King Yvorin insisted that Huon of Bordeaux, a medieval hero who had boasted of his chess playing ability, should play against his daughter. She was also an expert at the game and the king wagered that

...if she win thou shalt loose thy head, and if thou canst mate her thou shalt have her one night in thy bed to do with her at thy pleasure. Huon wins, but only because the lady has fallen in love with him in the course of the game.¹⁰¹

During the Middle Ages, the Europeans made several changes in the game, which they had originally learned from the Muslims.¹⁰² One of the main changes was in the rules governing the moves of the Queen on the checkerboard. The nature of the Queen piece was described by Nicholas Breton

in The Chesse Play writing in 1593

The queene is quaint, and quicke conceit,
Which makes hit walke which way she list,
And rootes them up, that lie in wait
To worke hir treason, ere she wist:
His force is such, against hir foes,
That whom she meetes, she ouerthrowes.¹⁰³

The reason for the increase in the power of the Queen piece was that it was "necessary to open up the game, to introduce a force capable of counteracting and enhancing the power of the forces already invented."¹⁰⁴ However Saidy and Lessing, in The World of Chess, also theorize that this change was associated with the increased status of women in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.¹⁰⁵ It is also interesting to note that a female by the name of Caissa was the goddess of chess.¹⁰⁶

There are numerous literary references to women playing chess. Marie de France, considered France's first woman poet, wrote a romance in 1300:

The King, arising from high table
Went to his daughter's chambers
To play at his beloved chess
With an invited foreign guest
His daughter sitting next to him
Was eager to learn chess, t'would seem.
Eliduc came, the King stopped play.¹⁰⁷

In the Arthurian Romances Chretien de Troyes, in 1300, wrote:

But the greatest joy of all was the third-that his
sweetheart was queen of the chess board where he was
king.¹⁰⁸

Rickert, in Chaucer's World, writes of Edward III playing a game of chess in 1341:

So he called for chess, and the lady had it brought in.
Then the King asked the lady to play with him, and she
consented gladly.¹⁰⁹

Catherine De Medici and Queen Isabella of Spain, in
Addition, were known for their prowess at the
chessboard.¹¹⁰

In the various artifacts researched women are seen both as spectators and as players of the game of chess. In a miniature from the Manesse

Manuscript from Zurich, about 1330-1340, we see "Margrave Otto of Brandenburg Playing Chess with a Lady." In the "A Garden of Love" Tapestry, 1460-80, a woman wearing a crown is shown playing against a nobleman, and her right hand is moving a chess piece. "The Chess Players", a tempera on wood, by the artist Paduan Girolamo de Cromona (1467-73), pictures a woman playing against a man, and behind her, standing, are four ladies, and behind him three men. An oil painting by Sofonisba Anguisciola, 1555, entitled "The Artist's Three Sisters Playing Chess", shows three young ladies playing chess in the garden. This painting shows that women played this royal game among themselves, as well as with, or rather against, men. A king and queen are shown playing chess in a meadow in a Dutch manuscript of the fifteenth century, while others chat or play a hand-game nearby. A German manuscript, dated 1552, shows Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria and Anna of Austria, his duchess, playing a game of chess with gold and silver chessmen. Another version of the game, called "the courier game"¹¹¹ is shown in "The Chess Players" by Lucas Van Leyden in 1510. In the painting we see a woman lifting a game piece, and she is being advised by a man at her side.

Women of all classes indulged in card playing. Playing cards was first popularized in France and Italy in the 1300's, but by the 1400's the game had spread throughout the rest of Europe, including England. Although the cards were still being hand-painted, the fifty-two pack of cards was standardized at the end of the fourteenth century.¹¹² The queen of the four-card monarchies were given various personalities, such as Helen of Troy, Queen Elizabeth, Joan of Arc and Judith from the Bible for the queen of hearts, Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of war, Bathsheba and Joan of Arc for the queen of spades, Rachel from the Bible and Penthisilea, queen of the Amazons, for the queen of diamonds, and Lucretia, Hecuba, Queen of Troy, and Florimel and Argine, from the word Regina for the Queen of Clubs.¹¹³ A fresco by a Lombard artist, from the first half of the fifteenth century, shows "The Card Game", in which there is a group of five noblewomen playing cards. The ladies are fashionably dressed and are wearing balloon-shaped hats and elaborate hair styles. Two Dutch women are shown in "The Game of Cards", by Lucas Van Leyden, 1494-1533, playing and gambling with men. In the painting by Georges de la Tour (1593-1652), entitled "Le Tricheur à l'as de carreau" (The Cheater with an Ace of Diamonds), a young lady, possibly a courtesan, and a cardsharp, are tricking an elegantly dressed young gentleman in a game of cards.¹¹⁴ Henry VII's daughter, Margaret, was also described as being proficient in cards, as was Catherine of Spain, Henry VIII's wife, who played at "tables, tick-tack or gleeke, with cardis and dyce."¹¹⁵

Ladies did not only play such games as chess and tables, but also simple amusements such as hot cockles, frog-in-the-middle, blind man's bluff, and others of which the *Ménagier de Paris* noted "we have long since relegated to the nursery."¹¹⁶ Ladies indulged in these minor games with other ladies of their age and rank.

Throughout the Middle Ages dance was an extremely popular pastime; it played moreover an important role in social life. References both in the literature and art are in abundance, and there is no question that women, as well as men, were active participatns in this activity. Dances were connected

to specific festivals, were performed as entertainment for the aristocracy, and were practised by people of all ages, sexes and classes. There were single, couple and mass dances, ecstatic and solemn dances and, all male, all female and mixed dances. It is not feasible within the framework of this paper to develop fully and relate all the involvement in dancing during this period. Dance, its involvement and evolution, in the Middle Ages is worthy of a study in itself, and thus only selected references will be presented.

During the Early Middle Ages dancing for and by males was frowned upon. However, as the code of chivalry developed, ideas changed and dancing gained acceptance and, indeed, dancing became one of the essential accomplishments of the knight. Chaucer in The Prologue of the Canterbury Tales discussed the accomplishment of a young knight and states

He coude songes make and will indite, Joust and eke dance
and well portray and write.¹¹⁷

Music was so important in the world of chivalry, that the troubadours formed a separate class and dancing for both sexes was "the art, par excellence, of courtesy."¹¹⁸ Elyot, in The Governour, praised dancing, for it helped develop manly and womanly qualities.¹¹⁹ Also, Jean Tabourot wrote in the Orchésographie, published in 1588:

Dancing is practised in order to see whether lovers are healthy and suitable for one another: at the end of a dance the gentlemen are permitted to kiss their mistresses, in order that they may ascertain if they have an agreeable breath. In this matter, besides many other good results which follow from dancing, it becomes necessary for the good governing of society."¹²⁰

Dances accompanies the tournament, as well as other important occasions and festivities. The minnesingers and troubadours often mentioned dancing, but rarely did they mention any details about them. In all probability, people were so familiar with dancers and dancing in this time period that specifics were not considered necessary. The most common dance was the round dance, dance au virlet, which was often accompanied by singing. A wall painting detail from "The Effect of Good Government", by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, 1335-1340, shows ladies, dressed in the conservative style of medieval Italy, dancing the round dance, to the accompaniment of a lady singing and playing the tamborine. The Manesse Manuscript, from approximately 1300, depicts a knight being led to a round dance by two women. A northern French manuscript of 1420-30, "Roman de la Rose", likewise depicts a round dance being danced by nobles and ladies, dressed in fine Burgundian attire. In the "Arresta Amorum", decrees of the Courts of Love, other dances such as the pas de Brabant, in which the nobleman bends his knee before his lady, and the dance au chapelet in which the lady was kissed at the end of the dance, were described.¹²¹

During the fifteenth century as the masquerade became popular, dances of the aristocracy lost their simplicity and became more elaborate and precise. The court dances, danses par haut, became slow, grave and stately, with extensive, accompanying gestures. The gaillard was one of the most popular danses par haut, particularly among the French, and it consisted basically of the lady and gentleman advancing and retreating from one another, and bowing. Such dances were particularly enjoyed by the ladies, who felt that the exercise contributed "to their health as well as their amusement."¹²²

In general, the Church condemned dancing because of its tendency to corrupt morals, however the clergy condoned it when it was performed in honour of God. As such it was part of Church-related activities, such as weddings and funerals.¹²³ During the Early Middle Ages, processions to ward off distress or to bring relief from epidemics were common, particularly in Germany and France. The worshippers, who included women, marched rhythmically, clapping their hands and singing.¹²⁴ About the middle of the fourteenth century, dancing mania, or dance madness, was born, perhaps as an outlet for the emotional strain resulting from the plague and other hardships.¹²⁵ People of all ages and sexes jumped, gyrated and danced vigorously in the streets, until they collapsed from exhaustion. In Italy, a reverse type of dance, the tarantella, evolved for girls of the lower or middle class. It was a slow, melancholic dance, which went on for hours, with very few movements, and was done on the shaking of the tambourine and castanets.¹²⁶

The discussion in this paper until this point has referred to only one segment of society, the aristocracy. Very little evidence is available on the life of the common person, and much less on the common woman. One artist, Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525-1569), a Flemish painter of the sixteenth century, has become famous for his paintings of the common person. In many of his paintings sports and games are depicted, and women, as well as men, are portrayed; Brueghel, indeed, portrays the life of the peasants in a rare manner. All of his artifacts which show women in any type of sporting activity will be presented together.

Painted in 1566, "The Wedding Dance" depicts the frivolity of a peasant celebration, and men and women are seen dancing joyously. The lively, vigorous dancing that is evident contrasts with the contrastingly subdued dances of the upper classes, previously described peasant celebration, and men and women are seen dancing joyously. The lively, vigorous dancing that is evident contrasts with the contrastingly subdued dances of the upper classes, previously described and depicted. "The Peasant's Dance" further shows the freedom of spirit of the lower classes, as we see a rollicking peasant crowd of men and women dancing. Men and women dancing are also seen on a lesser known Brueghel, "The Magic on the Gallows", in which two men and a woman are dancing. "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent" shows peasant women actively participating in the Netherlandish Shrovetide customs of dancing, comedies, lovemaking, gambling and parading.

Simple amusements and minor games are common themes in Brueghel's

paintings. Perhaps his most famous painting of all is the one entitled "Children's Games", painted in 1560. The people playing are not all children, but are adults, male and female. Some 84 different types of games are shown, and women are seen spinning tops, throwing knucklebones, rolling hoops, and bowling and playing such games as Guess Who I Shall Choose, Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush and Milling Around. Women are also seen spinning tops in "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent." Gambling is pointed as one of the follies of people that leads to death in "The Triumph of death" and women are shown near the gambling table.

The Brueghel painting "Hunters in the Snow" shows the hunters returning from the hunt, but in the background we clearly see a woman skating with a man, and in the foreground a woman pulling another woman along the ice with a rope. "Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird-Trap" also shows at least one woman on the ice, leading a child. Two girls, pushing themselves along the ice on a kind of toboggan, and a woman pulling a boy on a contraption over the ice, are seen in "The Numbering at Bethlehem". Moreover, girls playing with tops are in evidence. "The Adoration of the Kings in the Snow" likewise shows two girls pushing themselves along the ice.

Other Flemish painters should also be mentioned. Martin Van Cleef (1507-1537), also painted the common people, and one of his paintings is very similar to Brueghel's "Children's Games", and it shows many of the same activities. In Jan van Goyen's (1596-1656) painting "Winter" skating, kolven and other winter pastimes are seen and a woman in skating. Avercamp, another Flemish painter of the time period, became famous for his winter landscape paintings, and in one of his work in the early 1600's a man and a woman are seen skating by the game of kolven. One of the first records of skating is wood cut from the Netherlands made in 1498, and it shows a girl named Liedwi.¹²⁷ The story behind the woodcut is that Liedwi was knocked down on the ice by a friend, broke a rib, but never recovered, and 'she spent the rest of her life in contemplation in a religious house and is considered the skaters' patron saint."¹²⁸ The style of skating of the other figures on the woodcut "suggests that skating proper by both young girls and men was already in vogue in Holland in the fourteenth century."¹²⁹

The humanistic environment of the Renaissance nourished the development of writers and teachers who helped transform the morals, values and educational theories of the medieval world. Castiglione (1478-1529) in Il Coretegiario (The Book of the Courtier) described the ideal gentlemen and cultured lady of society. At the court school La Casa Giocosa Vittorino da Feltre put humanistic education into practice.¹³⁰ Da Feltre, as well as Alberti and Piccolomini supported female participation in exercises such as swimming, hiking, ball playing and dancing. Games, however, did not hold a high place in the minds of some writers such as Sir Thomas Elyot who maintained

...for they be weaker than men, and have their flesh softer, less hair on their visages, and their voice sharper, and as I have read, they have in some parts of their bodies, their bones fewer. And as concerning the soul, they lack hardiness, and in perils are timorous, more

delicate then men, unapt to painfulness...But their worst imperfection is their inconstancy, which proceedeth of their said natural debility...stability lacketh, and with little prevailett.¹³¹

The Spaniard Juan Luis Vives had a big influence on the education of the upper class, both men and women, in the sixteenth century. The Instruction of a Christiana Women by Vives was the leading sixteenth century manual on women's education, not only in England, but in the "whole of Europe."¹³² Vives had some very specific views on what activities and pastimes women should participate in. He felt that a young woman should learn to read, to cook and to keep house and that "it is more shame to be seen in a dance than in the kitchen, and to handle well tables and cards than meat."¹³³ Indeed he went on

...what should we think by them that play at Cards or Dice, which manner of pastime, when it is foul in a man, in a woman it is to be abhorred...

What a foul thing it is, to see a woman instead of her wool basket, to handle the table-board; for her spindle, the Dice for her clue or prayer book, to turn the cards¹³⁴

Dancing and the tournament which were popular and socially acceptable pastimes he spoke against

...It cannot lightly be a chaste maid, that is occupied with thinking of armour, and tourney and man's valiance...A woman that useth (i.e. enjoyeth) those feats drinketh poison in her heart...

...What good doth all that dancing of young women, holden up on men's arms, that they may hop the higher? What meaneth that shaking unto midnight, and never weary...Who would not think them out of their wits?...What holy woman did we ever read of that was a dancer?¹³⁵

As for a young girl's play, the attitude of Vives was perhaps the norm

Let all her play and pastime be with maids of her own age, and within the presence rather of her mother or her nurse, or some other honest woman of said age.¹³⁶

In conclusion, then, from the literature and art of the Middle Ages, it can be seen that women were participants and spectators in the sports, games and amusements of this time period. The ladies of the upper class were actively involved in the hunt and in such as falconry, chess and dancing.

Peasant women enjoyed dancing, skating, tobogganing and minor games of all types.

It can be argued that women were only spectators, and simply decorative ornaments at the tournament, however, as the tournament evolved, women actually became participants in the sense that they played a significant role in the staging, execution and termination of this Medieval spectacle. Perhaps they should be called 'passive' participants rather than 'active' participants but, indeed, the woman's presence and participation were most vital ingredients in the tournament. Thus, in summary, the variety of activities that women were involved in the Middle Ages and Renaissance were the tournament, hunting, falconry, archery, fishing, animal-baiting, ball games, rowing, chess, cards, dice, minor games, dancing and skating. If a generalization could be offered it is that the limits and extent of participation were defined by the social constraints, values and expectations of the particular class of the time period.

Footnotes

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