

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE

A Unit of Study for Grades 10–12

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Approach and Rationale	
Content and Organization	1

Teacher Background Materials

Unit Overview	3
Unit Context	3
Unit Objectives	4
Correlation to National Standards for History	4
Introduction to <i>The Role of Women in Medieval Europe</i>	5
Lesson Plans	10

Dramatic Moment	11
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Lessons

Lesson One: Women in the Germanic Tribes of the Early Middle Ages	13
Lesson Two: The Property Rights of Women During the Feudal Period	20
Lesson Three: The Central Middle Ages: The Flowering of Medieval Culture and the Status of Women	25
Supplemental Activities	33

Annotated Bibliography	51
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DRAMATIC MOMENT

Women Take up Arms

During the Middle Ages women were frequently called upon to help defend their family's territory. There were some women whose actions had a major effect even on the history of their countries. The most famous, of course, is Joan of Arc and her role in the 100 Years War. A curious incident of this kind occurred in 14th-century France when three women were involved in a war with each other to secure lands claimed by their sons or husbands.

One of these women, Jeanne de Montfort, was particularly known for her wit and daring. We know some details of her abilities from the writings of the French historian Froissart who describes her military exploits. In order to maintain the loyalty of her vassals during her husband's imprisonment she spoke to them thus, "Ah, sirs, be not cast down because of my lord, whom we have lost: he was but one man. See here my little child, who shall be, by the grace of God, his restorer [avenger] and who shall do well for you. I have riches in abundance, and I will give you thereof and will provide you with such a captain that you shall all be comforted." Thus she exhorted her warriors to fight for the defense of her husband's fiefs.

When the forces of the French King laid siege to her castle, "The Countess herself, wearing armor, rode on a great war horse from street to street, desiring her people to make good defence, and she caused women to tear up the pavements of the streets and carry stones to the battlements to cast upon their enemies, and great pots full of quicklime.

"The Countess de Montfort did hear a hardy feat of arms, and one which should not be forgotten. She had mounted a tower to see how her people fought and how the Frenchmen were ordered without. She saw how that all the lords and all other people of the host were all gone out of their field to the assault. Then she . . . mounted once more her war horse, all armed as she was, and caused three hundred men a-horseback to be ready, and went with them to another gate where there was no assault. She and her company sallied out, and dashed into the camp of the French lords, and cut down tents and fired huts, the camp being guarded by none but varlets and boys, who ran away. When the Lords of France looked behind them and saw their lodgings afire and heard the cry and noise there, they returned to the camp crying 'Treason! treason!' so that all the assault was left."

Teacher Background

The account tells that Jeanne de Montfort could not re-enter her town and so continued on to the castle of Brest, three leagues away; but when one of the French commanders saw her flight, he “with a great force of men at arms” followed her. “He chased her so near that he slew and hurt divers of them that were behind. . . . ; but the Countess and the most part of her company rode so well that they came to Brest, where they were received with great joy by the townspeople.”

After a great naval battle this same Countess Jeanne de Montfort was described, “The Countess that day was worth a man; she had the heart of a lion, and in her hand she wielded a sharp glaive [sword] where with she fought fiercely.”

Adapted from Pierce Butler, *Women of Medieval France* (Philadelphia: Rittenhouse Press, 1907), pp. 293-295.

Teacher’s Note: This Dramatic Moment comes from the Late Middle Ages, so be sure to clarify this as you move to **Lesson One**, which begins over one thousand years *earlier* than the **Dramatic Moment**.

LESSON ONE

WOMEN IN THE GERMANIC TRIBES OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To examine the roles of women in the Germanic tribal structure as described by Tacitus in the *Germania*.
- ◆ To explore explanations for the roles that women played within the tribal framework of groups which resettled in the western portions of the the Roman Empire.
- ◆ To compare some aspects of feminine roles in the *Germania* with those of women in the Roman Empire.
- ◆ To use primary source materials to formulate cultural generalizations.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The tribes that penetrated the western Roman Empire formed the basis of a new civilization that we can directly trace as our own. Therefore it is useful to examine what these people were like. What were their basic life-style, customs, and attitudes? And what place did women occupy in the framework of the tribe? There are very few primary sources for the early Germanic tribes. They had no written language and few outsiders were able to observe their culture first hand. The most commonly used source is the *Germania* by the Roman historian Tacitus.

Publius Cornelius Tacitus was one of Rome's greatest historians. He was born in A.D. 55. In A.D. 77 he married into a politically influential family and rose as a prominent statesman, serving for one year as counsel. Very little is known about the details of his life. He died sometime after 116 but it is not known exactly when or where.

Tacitus' writings dealt with the history of Rome between A..D. 14 to his own time at the end of the second century A.D. The *Germania*, written in 98, was based primarily upon information by earlier writers, including Julius Caesar, and reports of soldiers and merchants who had returned from the Roman frontier. Tacitus probably never visited the region. Rome had entered its period of decline when Tacitus compiled his many writings. He lived through the period which witnessed the decline of moral standards in Rome. His focus on the customs of

Lesson One

non-Romans was intended to instruct his fellow citizens by emphasizing the strict moral standards, freedom and discipline of the German tribes. His *Germania* remains the best description we have of the “barbarians” north of the Roman Empire.

C. LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Present the **Historical Background Information (B)** to introduce the lesson material to the students.
2. Have students read **Document A**, the excerpts from the *Germania*. The suggested discussion questions may be used for each segment.
3. **Worksheet 1:** Instruct students to formulate three or four generalizations based upon the reading that define the role of women in the Germanic tribes. At least one supporting quote should be used for each generalization.

D. EVALUATING THE LESSON

1. Informal evaluation based upon classroom discussion.
2. Evaluation of **Worksheet 1**.
3. Inclusion of objective or essay questions related to the lesson in a test on the Early Middle Ages.

Excerpts From the *Germania*

by Tacitus
(Primary Source)

And what most stimulates their courage is, that their squadrons or battalions, instead of being formed by chance or by a fortuitous gathering, are composed of families and clans. Close by them, too, are those dearest to them, so that they hear the shrieks of women, the cries of infants. They are to every man the most sacred witnesses of his bravery – they are his most generous applauders. The soldier brings his wounds to mother and wife, who shrink not from counting or even demanding them and who administer both food and encouragement to the combatants.

Tradition says that armies already wavering and giving way have been rallied by women who, with earnest entreaties and bosoms laid bare, have vividly represented the horrors of captivity, which the Germans fear with such extreme dread on behalf of their women, that the strongest tie by which a state can be bound is the being required to give, among the number of hostages, maidens of noble birth. . . . They even believe that the sex has a certain sanctity and prescience, and they do not despise their counsels, or make light of their answers.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the roles of women in the military life of the Germans?
2. Why do entire families go along to the battles?
3. What statements reveal the value of women in the society?
4. Can you identify one or more implied criticisms of the Romans in this excerpt?