
Medieval Echoes: The Enduring Influence of Gender Constructs in Eleanor Janega's Recent Study on Women's Role in Medieval Society

Janega, Eleanor. *The Once and Future Sex. Going Medieval on Women's Role in Society*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023. Ebook

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Eleanor Janega's *The Once and Future Sex: Going Medieval on Women's Role in Society* offers a meticulous and thought-provoking exploration of the medieval roots of contemporary gender norms. By examining how medieval conceptions of gender, labor, and sexuality continue to influence modern societal structures, Janega provides a critical historical framework that situates gender inequality within a continuum extending from the Middle Ages to the present day. Her interdisciplinary approach, drawing on philosophy, theology, medicine, and economics, reflects a sophisticated understanding of the interplay between historical ideologies and their enduring societal impact.

Janega organizes her study thematically, with each chapter addressing a distinct facet of medieval life and thought. This structure allows her to provide a comprehensive examination of medieval ideologies while maintaining clarity and accessibility. The book begins with an overview of how medieval thought, shaped by classical philosophers like Aristotle, Hippocrates, and Galen, constructed women as biologically inferior to men. Subsequent chapters explore the practical realities of women's labor, the influence of religion on gender norms, and the pervasive regulation of women's sexuality. The study culminates in an analysis of how these medieval ideologies resonate in contemporary gender constructs, making the book particularly relevant for understanding present-day inequalities.

Janega's thematic organization is highly effective, as it enables her to address the historical foundations of various aspects of women's lives in a manner that is both nuanced and cohesive. Her integration of well-chosen examples—ranging from the philosophical musings of

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medieval intellectuals to the labor practices of peasant women—enriches the analysis and underscores the diversity of women’s experiences in medieval society.

A key strength of Janega’s work lies in her ability to contextualize medieval attitudes toward women within a broader intellectual tradition. She highlights the enduring influence of classical thought, noting that the writings of Aristotle and Galen framed women as biologically and morally deficient. Aristotle’s description of women as “inside-out men,” and Galen’s assertion that women were governed by their “cold and wet” humors, are presented as pivotal to the medieval understanding of gender. These ideas were further reinforced by theological interpretations that positioned women as spiritually inferior, with Augustine famously declaring that “a woman is merely man’s helpmate.”

Janega situates her study within the broader historiography of medieval gender studies, building on foundational works such as Joan Cadden’s *Meanings of Sex Differences in the Middle Ages* (1993) and Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1988). While these earlier studies focused on the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of gender, Janega expands the scope by emphasizing the practical implications of these ideologies in women’s daily lives. Her discussion of how medieval thinkers reconciled classical medical theories with Christian theology highlights the interplay between intellectual and societal structures.

Janega’s analysis of women’s labor is particularly illuminating, as it challenges the notion that medieval women were confined to the domestic sphere. She demonstrates that women across all social classes were integral to the economy, whether as peasants performing agricultural labor, artisans engaged in trades such as weaving and brewing, or noblewomen managing estates and participating in diplomacy. “To be a medieval woman was to be a worker,” she writes, “even if that work was not necessarily valued in the same way that men’s labor was.”

This emphasis on women’s economic contributions aligns with the scholarship of Judith M. Bennett (*Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, published in 1989), who similarly highlighted the ubiquity of women’s labor in rural contexts. Janega, however, broadens this analysis to include urban and noblewomen, providing a more comprehensive picture of women’s roles in medieval society. Her discussion of the embroidery industry is particularly compelling, as it illustrates how profitable trades dominated by women were often co-opted by men, a dynamic that underscores the systemic devaluation of

women's labor.

Janega's examination of the intersection of religion and gender reveals the central role of the Church in shaping medieval conceptions of women. The theological framework that positioned Eve as the originator of sin and the Virgin Mary as the epitome of purity created a dichotomy that defined women's roles and behavior. Janega argues that these religious constructs were instrumental in reinforcing societal expectations of women's subservience and obedience. She notes, for instance, that Augustine's assertion that women were spiritually inferior justified their exclusion from ecclesiastical and educational institutions.

The regulation of women's sexuality is another significant theme in Janega's analysis. She highlights the pervasive fear of women's sexual agency, exemplified by the concept of the wandering uterus, which medieval thinkers believed could cause irrational behavior if not "pacified" through pregnancy. Janega observes that women were often described as insatiably lustful, with their desires framed as both dangerous and disruptive. These attitudes, she argues, were not only used to justify the subjugation of women but also to regulate their behavior through laws and societal norms.

Janega's inclusion of exceptional women, such as Hildegard von Bingen and Christine de Pizan, provides a counterpoint to the dominant narratives of male authority. Hildegard's reinterpretation of Eve's creation as a sign of intellectual superiority and Christine's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which celebrated women's virtues, are presented as examples of how women challenged the misogynistic ideologies of their time. However, Janega is careful to note that these figures were anomalies, operating within a broader system that severely restricted women's opportunities for agency and self-expression.

One of the most significant contributions of *The Once and Future Sex* is its emphasis on the continuity between medieval and modern gender constructs. Janega draws explicit connections between medieval attitudes toward women's labor, beauty, and sexuality and their modern manifestations. For example, her discussion of the undervaluation of women's work provides a historical context for understanding the gender pay gap, while her analysis of medieval beauty standards, with their emphasis on unattainable ideals, resonates with contemporary issues surrounding body image and societal expectations.

By highlighting these continuities, Janega positions her work as a critical intervention in both historical and contemporary gender

studies. Her assertion that “the past is always with us, whether we recognize it or not” serves as a reminder of the enduring impact of historical ideologies on present-day inequalities. This focus on relevance makes the book particularly valuable for readers seeking to understand the historical roots of contemporary gender issues.

While Janega’s work is a significant contribution to medieval studies, it is not without its limitations. Her reliance on well-documented figures and themes, such as Hildegard von Bingen and Christine de Pizan, risks overshadowing the experiences of less-documented women. Additionally, Janega’s focus on Western Europe leaves room for comparative studies with Byzantine, Islamic, or Eastern traditions. Such comparisons could have enriched her analysis by highlighting alternative frameworks for understanding gender and society in the medieval period. This omission, however, does not diminish the value of her study, which remains a compelling and insightful contribution to the field.

Eleanor Janega’s *The Once and Future Sex* is a masterful exploration of the medieval roots of modern gender norms. Through incisive analysis and engaging prose, Janega illuminates the historical origins of persistent inequalities, providing a critical framework for understanding how the past continues to shape the present. Her thematic structure, interdisciplinary approach, and focus on contemporary relevance make the book a significant contribution to both medieval studies and gender history. By uncovering the intellectual, economic, and theological foundations of medieval gender constructs, Janega not only enriches our understanding of the Middle Ages but also challenges readers to confront the enduring legacies of these constructs in modern society. As she eloquently concludes, “The past is always with us, whether we recognize it or not.” This work ensures that we do, offering a valuable lens through which to examine both history and its ongoing impact.

Works Cited:

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