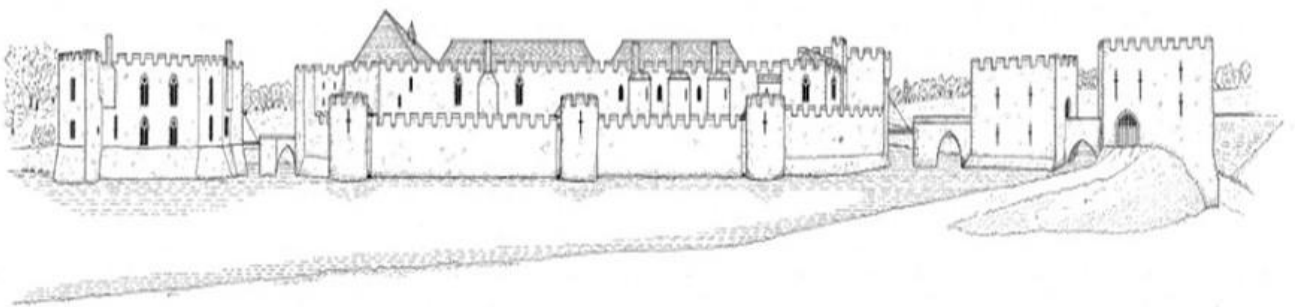


THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN



Leeds Castle in the 21st Century.



An Artist's Impression of the castle in the 13th century

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

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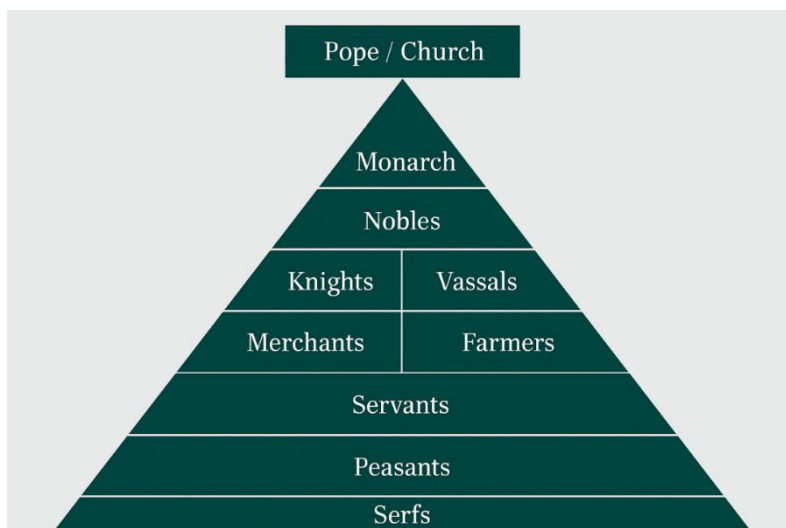
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Introduction

The medieval period, or Middle Ages, is the name we give to the time from around the year 500 to about the year 1500. Life during this time was very different from today, especially for girls and women.

In medieval times, society had a clear structure. Everyone had their place within this structure, and it was uncommon for someone's position to change much. We can use the pyramid below to see clearly how it worked. The lower down the pyramid you were, the poorer you were likely to be, and the harder your life would become. Around 90% of people living in Britain at this time were peasants or serfs.



THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Introduction

The lives of men and women were also very different, regardless of whether they were rich or poor. Many men worked as farmers, craftsmen, soldiers or merchants, while noblemen managed estates or fought in wars.

Women usually had little freedom over their own lives regardless of class. Decisions were often made for them by their fathers or husbands, and women were expected to obey! Women did not even have their own surnames, but instead were known by their father's name, husband's job or place they lived, for example "Joan the Miller's Wife".



Education and employment opportunities did not exist for girls in many cases.

Women were either single, wives or widows. Whether wealthy or poor, a woman's life depended on which of these she was. A maiden or damsel lived at home or worked in service for someone else, but she was under the care and responsibility of her father. Wives were handed over from father to husband. Widows might revert to the care of a brother or back to her father in some cases. If she was lucky She might become a ward of the king and find herself nice and rich! She might also, be able to live and work by herself if her husband had trained her in his trade.

This booklet will look at the life of a girl, into womanhood depending on her status. It will also look at women in the medieval period who did 'make it' on their own and become the celebrities of their day!

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Children & Girlhood

A girl was an infant until 7 years of age, a child until 14, a youth until 28 and then an adult. Generally, a girl stayed with her mother until 7 years of age unless she was an heiress, where she may have been removed from her mother and put into 'suitable' care, although in many cases, mothers were able to apply for guardianship of their own child. Such an appeal may or may not have been successful depending on the enormity of the child's holdings.




Peasants	Nobles	Princess or Queen
<p>A peasant girls' life revolved around her mother. From around the age of 5 she would begin helping with chores such as fetching water from a well, feeding animals, cooking and cleaning. She was not taught to read or write and had no toys or books.</p> <p>Simple games were played alongside other local children using natural things such as sticks and stones.</p>	<p>As the daughter of a nobleman, a girl's life was much easier! She learnt how to behave properly, speak politely and follow court manners.</p> <p>Her days were spent learning sewing, weaving, music and dancing. Sometimes she was taught to read and write.</p> <p>She also learnt how to run a household. She did not have much free time, but did have toys like wooden dolls and was allowed to play in the garden with a ball or hoop.</p>	<p>From birth, a princess was seen as very special. Everyone knew her life would be very different from ordinary people. She was treated with respect and was expected to behave politely at all times.</p> <p>Tutors taught her reading, writing, music, dancing and good manners. She also learned how to run a large household so she would be ready to manage her own royal court one day.</p> <p>Even when playing, a princess was watched closely to make sure she behaved properly. She might read, dance, sew or play gentle games in the garden. Many princesses also had pets, such as a small dog or bird.</p>

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Family & Marriage

A marriage was usually arranged for a girl, by her parents, no matter what her status. She would be promised to a young man of equal standing to her and a dowry hopefully given. This would range from possibly a sheep for a peasant girl to jewels and lands for a princess.

Peasants	Nobles	Princess or Queen
<p>Usually, a peasant girl's father would arrange her marriage to another peasant from the same village or a nearby one, perhaps a farmer, shepherd, or craftsman. If her family could afford it, they might give a small dowry, such as a sheep or some blankets, to help the new couple start their life together.</p> <p>A peasant woman would usually have several children, although sadly, without the medical care we have today, not all of them would survive. Her role was to look after everyone in the family, from babies to grandparents, and to make sure there was enough food, clothing, firewood, and water for them all.</p> 	<p>A noble girl might be promised in marriage at a young age, although she usually wouldn't marry until she was older. Just like peasant girls, she didn't have much choice in who she married, because marriage was not about love or romance. Her family would arrange a marriage for her, usually to someone with a lot of land, money, or a high social status, such as a lord.</p> <p>A noble girl's dowry would be much larger than that of a peasant girl and might include money, jewels, or even land. In medieval times, the main role of a married woman was to have children, especially sons, to continue the family line.</p> <p>Like mothers today, a noblewoman would love and care for her children, but she wouldn't raise them on her own. Instead, she had a team of servants, such as nannies and tutors, to help look after them. Sometimes, her children would even be sent to live in another noble household, to learn how to become a proper lady or gentleman when they grew up.</p>	<p>A royal marriage was not about love or romance, but about creating peace and friendship between countries to make both stronger. A princess could be betrothed from a very young age. She had no choice in who she married, as this decision was made by the king, noblemen, and church leaders. Often, her husband would be a prince or king from another country.</p> <p>When she married, the princess had to leave her home and travel to live with her new husband. If her husband became king, she would become a queen. A royal marriage came with a very large dowry, showing the princess's wealth and importance.</p> <p>As queen, a woman's main duty was to have children, especially sons, who would become the king's heirs. A queen certainly loved her children but she did not care for them herself. Nurses and governesses would look after them although the queen would still make important decisions about their education, marriages, and futures.</p>

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Home Life

Peasants	Nobles	Princess or Queen
<p>A peasant's home was a simple, small cottage with only one or two rooms, a dirt floor, a small fire, and very little furniture. There was no bathroom, so people used a chamber pot or an outdoor privy instead.</p> <p>A peasant woman was responsible for taking care of the home and family. She did almost all the housework herself, including cooking over an open fire, baking bread, fetching water, and washing clothes by hand. During busy farming seasons, she also helped in the fields by planting, weeding, harvesting, and tending to the animals. She might make or repair clothing and trade goods such as eggs, butter, or cloth at the local market to earn a little extra money. There were no servants or extra help, so daughters in the family were expected to help too. The family's main aim was to work together to survive. A peasant woman often had many children, but sadly, not all survived because life was very hard. She cared for the children, the elderly, and anyone who was sick.</p>	<p>A noblewoman was lucky enough to live in a manor house, or even a castle. Her home might have a great hall, private bedrooms, a chapel, kitchens, and servants' quarters. However, even though it was larger than a peasant's cottage, it was not always comfortable. There was no running water, the fireplaces made the rooms smoky, and many windows had no glass to keep out the cold. The number of servants a noblewoman had showed how wealthy she was. She might have maids, cooks, and stable hands, and if she was rich and important enough, even ladies-in-waiting.</p> <p>The job of a noblewoman was to manage her household. She made sure guests were well looked after, servants were organised, and sometimes she even looked after the household accounts when her husband was away. A noblewoman had a lot of responsibilities, almost like the manager of a busy company today.</p>	<p>A princess or queen lived in a grand and magnificent home, such as a castle or palace. These huge stone buildings had many rooms, courtyards, gardens, and servants. A queen's private rooms might include her chambers, where she slept and met guests, a solar (a warm sitting room), a chapel, a wardrobe room, and a garderobe, which was the toilet.</p> <p>A queen's daily life was filled with duties and ceremonies. Many servants worked to keep her household running smoothly so she could focus on her royal responsibilities. Her carefully planned day might include attending Mass in the chapel, meeting with important guests, hosting feasts or banquets, supervising her ladies-in-waiting, and carrying out acts of charity such as giving food or money to the poor.</p> <div data-bbox="1050 1485 1362 1944" data-label="Image"> </div>

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Fashion and Beauty

Peasants	Nobles	Princess or Queen
<p>For a peasant woman, clothing was about practicality rather than beauty or fashion. She would wear simple tunics and skirts that were easy to work in, usually in plain colours such as brown, green, grey, or beige. Even if she wanted brighter colours, the law said peasants could not wear them, as their clothes had to show their low status. Dyes were also very expensive.</p> <p>When working, a peasant woman might wear an apron over her dress, and she would tie back or braid her hair to keep it out of the way. It was common for peasant women to wear a simple linen headscarf. Life was about survival, so make-up and beauty were less important. Instead, women focused on health and cleanliness, sometimes washing their faces with sweet-smelling herbs as well as water. They often only bathed a couple of times a year, usually around a celebration such as Christmas. Bathing was not very private and might even be done in a local river, with family members nearby.</p>	<p>Noblewomen had the money to enjoy wearing fine clothes, jewellery, and even a little make-up. Their dresses were made from soft wool, silk, or linen, and because they could afford dyes, they often wore bright colours such as red, blue, green, and gold. They also wore belts and jewellery, although the best and most expensive jewels were saved for royalty.</p> <p>Their hair was often braided or styled in buns and covered by a wimple or hood. At that time, pale skin was seen as a sign of beauty and wealth, because noblewomen did not work outside in the sun. Some women used powders to lighten their skin and added a touch of red make-up, called rouge, to their cheeks.</p> <p>Bathing was more common for noblewomen than for peasants, but still not very frequent. Most would bathe at most once a week, but often only a few times a year. Perfume was very popular, as it helped people smell pleasant between baths. When they did bathe, they would use a wooden tub filled with warm water, sometimes scented with oils or flower petals, and enjoy more privacy than peasant women.</p>	<p>As the highest-ranking woman in the country, a queen was a fashion leader. It was almost like the influencers of today! Her dresses were made from the finest silk, velvet, and brocade, in rich colours such as blue, green, purple, red, and gold. Laws said that only royalty could wear purple and gold. Her clothes were often decorated with embroidery, jewels, and fur trims.</p> <p>A queen's dress usually had a fitted bodice, flowing skirts, and wide sleeves, often with a belt made from gold or silver thread, with a surcoat (a sleeveless coat) or cloak lined with fur. She would wear her hair braided and covered with a veil or an elaborate headdress decorated with pearls or gems. Like noblewomen, she might use powder to make her skin pale and add a touch of rouge to her cheeks.</p> <p>Queens could bathe far more often than anyone else, sometimes weekly or even daily. Servants would bring warmed water mixed with herbs or flower petals to make it smell pleasant. A queen was far too important to wash herself, so her attendants would wash her hair, help her bathe, dry her, and then assist her with dressing, hairstyling, and make-up.</p>

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Community, Celebrations & Religion



Women were very important in their communities, helping neighbours, sharing food, and supporting one another. Most people in England at this time were Christian and went to church every Sunday whatever their status.

Peasants	Nobles	Princess or Queen
<p>As poorer women could not read, they learned about religion through stories told by priests and through the beautiful pictures and stained-glass windows in the church.</p> <p>Church holidays, known as Holy Days, were the only times peasants had a break from work. These included joyful celebrations such as Christmas, Easter, and Harvest, when the whole community came together for music, dancing, and feasting. Local lords might even give the peasants living on their land small gifts, like meat or coins.</p> <p>As peasant women could not afford to donate money to the church, they showed their support in other ways, such as helping to clean the church or preparing food for a festival.</p>	<p>A noblewoman was just as religious as a peasant, but her worship was often more private, especially if she had her own chapel at home. Some noblewomen could read Latin and owned their own prayer books, called 'Books of Hours'. They often gave money to charity to help the poor or to build churches and monasteries, which was seen as a way to do good deeds for God.</p> <p>During Christian festivals, noble families held grand celebrations in their great halls, with feasts, music, and dancing. There would be fine food, drink, and colourful decorations to mark the occasion</p>	<p>A queen was expected to be a good Christian role model for her people, so religion and worship were important parts of her daily life. She attended Mass every day and often gave money or gifts to the church and to poorer people in her community.</p> <p>During times of celebration, such as Easter or Christmas, the queen helped host magnificent festivals filled with feasts, music, dancing, and tournaments. She made sure everything was well organised and would greet guests in the great hall. Nobles from across the country were invited to these events, which gave them the chance to show loyalty to their king and queen while enjoying the celebrations.</p>

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

Women at Work

The vast majority of people in the Middle Ages worked the land, and women were just as active as men in agricultural activities. But there were women who were also writers, artists, and active as tradespeople in a family business.

There is evidence of women undertaking a wide variety of roles across all levels of society during the Middle Ages. While many women had to do unpaid household chores, they also engaged in paid employment in agriculture, trade, domestic service and textile production. They acted as notaries and financiers, contributed to their family businesses or ran businesses of their own. Some even became professional authors, medical practitioners, tutors, musicians, artists, printers and bookmakers.

Women also worked alongside men on construction sites as far back at the 13th century. Most of these women were employed as day labourers, carrying out tasks such as moving water and building supplies around the sites, digging ditches and serving as assistants to bricklayers and stonemasons.



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Women in Farriery and Blacksmithing

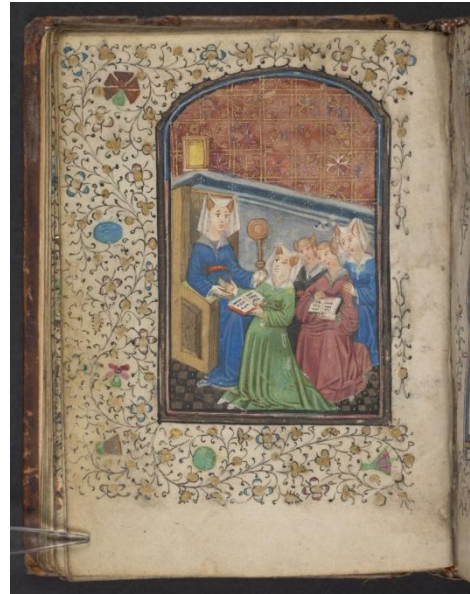
The art of shoeing horses and working metal was an essential trade in medieval society, and while most farriers were men, some women defied convention. Poll tax records from 1380 in West Yorkshire list at least one woman whose profession was explicitly recorded as a farrier.

In 1346, Katherine le Fevre was temporarily appointed as a royal smith, responsible for crafting hinges, locks, crossbow quarrels (a heavy bolt fired from crossbows), armour, and horseshoes. At the Tower of London. This was no small honour—smithing was a skilled and vital profession. Katherine took on this role because her son, Andrew, who had inherited the position after the death of her husband, Master Walter le Fevre, had been called away by King Edward III for a military expedition to France. This appointment suggests she had been actively involved in the family trade for many years. However, despite her skill and experience, she was paid only 8 pence a day—less than the standard 12 pence, perhaps reflecting the gender bias of the time or recognition that she was overseeing, rather than physically performing, the labour.



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Women
Workers



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Celebrities

Eleanor of Castile

Eleanor was born in 1241 in Castile, in northern Spain. Her father was King Ferdinand III, and her mother was Queen Joan. Eleanor grew up in a royal family and learned how to be a queen from an early age.

When Eleanor was only 12 years old she married the English Prince, Edward (who later became King Edward I).



Statues of King Edward I and Queen Eleanor of Castile at Lincoln Cathedral.

Queen Eleanor at Leeds Castle

Eleanor became Queen of England in 1272, when Edward became king. She was very powerful in her own right. She owned lots of land and helped to build and improve castles, gardens, and houses. Leeds Castle was one of her favourites, and together she and Edward built a strong, well-defended castle that was also incredibly beautiful. Eleanor introduced new styles of decoration at Leeds Castle, such as tapestries and stained glass windows. She asked for the moat to be made much bigger so that the castle appeared to be floating on a lake!

Eleanor also loved beautiful gardens, and her garden design ideas have had a lasting impact. She introduced water features into her designs and helped to make some flowers popular that we still enjoy in our gardens today, such as hollyhocks and lavender.

For more information on Eleanor of Castile, please see our booklet and activity book entitled *Castles & Crowns*

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Empress Matilda

Empress Matilda, also known as Empress Maud. She was born in 1102, ruled England for only a few months in 1141, and even then she wasn't officially crowned. She died in 1167.

Her father, King Henry 1 had named her his heir, when her brother William Adelin drowned in 1120 aboard the royal boat, The White Ship, which sank in the English Channel. Henry promised to give Matilda the throne, but the English lords and nobles weren't so keen. England had never been ruled by a woman, and no one liked the bad tempered Matilda!



When Matilda's husband, the Holy Roman Emperor, died in 1125, her father arranged for her to marry Geoffrey of Anjou. It was a difficult marriage (she was 11 years older than him) but they had three sons together - Henry, Geoffrey and William.

When Henry I died in 1135, Matilda's first cousin Stephen seized the crown while she was still in France. Although the lords and nobles had promised Henry they would support Matilda as queen, they went back on their agreement. Matilda was a strong and brave character, but they thought girls were too weak to rule.

In 1139 Matilda invaded Britain, supported by her half-brother Robert of Gloucester and her uncle King David I of Scotland. Meanwhile Geoffrey of Anjou attacked Normandy. Two years later, Matilda's army captured Stephen at the Battle of Lincoln and Matilda went to London to be crowned. She didn't count on the crowds - who were fiercely opposed! She retreated and never actually became Queen of England. **Stalemate**

After years of fighting, there was stalemate. The country was divided. Neither Matilda nor Stephen were in control. Eventually Matilda gave in and she returned to Normandy, and her husband.

Matilda spent the rest of her days in Normandy and died in Rouen in 1167. She was buried in Rouen Cathedral. When Stephen died in 1154, Matilda's son Henry took the throne ([Henry II](#)) and the crown moved to the House of Plantagenet

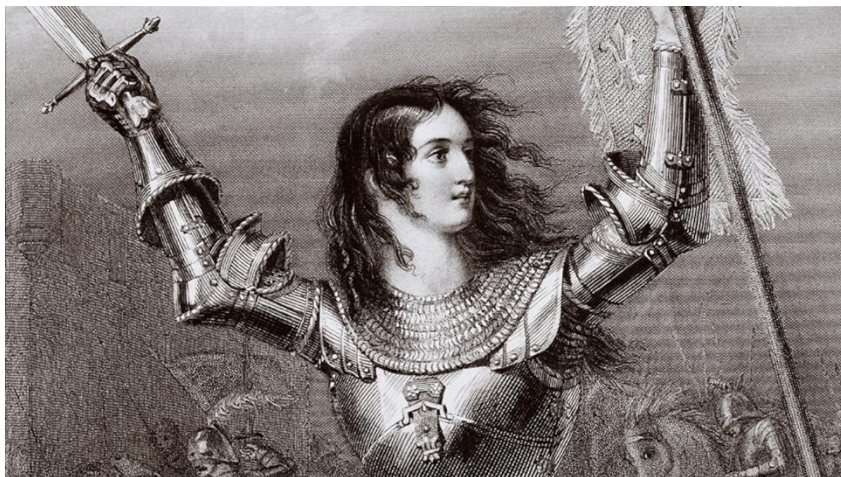
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Joan of Arc

Joan was born in France around 1412, at a time when England and France had been at war for 75 years. Growing up Joan knew only war! When she was 16, even though she was poor and living at a time when women did not fight in the military—and certainly did not lead men—Joan came to believe that God had chosen her to lead her country to victory during what's now known as the Hundred Years War.

By 1428, England controlled much of France, and the French king no longer ruled. Joan convinced King Charles VII to let her lead his armies and help him regain the throne.

King Charles VII provided Joan of Arc a suit of armour made just for her.



The king ordered the army to take back the city of Orléans, accompanied by 17-year-old Joan. She cropped her hair short like a man's, donned a suit of white armour, and successfully helped French troops to victory in March 1429, even after being wounded in battle. King Charles then took back his crown a few months later. Joan accompanied him to the ceremony.

A few months later, though, Joan was captured in battle and held captive for more than a year. She was accused of witchcraft and the crime of dressing as a man.

Not wanting to threaten his newly returned crown, the king didn't come to Joan's aid, and in 1431, when she was just 19, she was burned at the stake.

But loved by France, she was officially cleared of her crimes 20 years later and became a Catholic saint in 1920. Today Joan of Arc remains the patron saint of France and a symbol of national pride.

THE LIVES OF MEDIAEVAL WOMEN

If you have enjoyed learning about Eleanor of Castile, Empress Matilda and Joan of Arc – why not look up and read about some other famous women of the Mediaeval period.

Below are just a few examples of interesting people with one or two fun facts to get you started!

1. Eleanor of Aquitaine – she was a duchess, then became Queen of France AND Queen of England. She went on a Crusade and had famous sons like Richard the Lionheart. She was smart, powerful, and lived a long and exciting life,



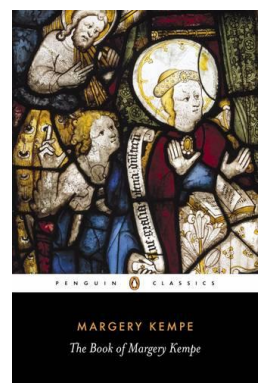
2. Christine de Pizan - worked as a court writer in medieval France after her husband passed away. Many people see her writings as some of the first ideas about women's rights. Her works include stories, poems, and biographies. She also wrote about history, philosophy, and politics. Her most famous books are *The Book of the City of Ladies* and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. These books gave advice to princesses, princes, and knights.



3. Julian of Norwich - a wise woman who lived alone in a tiny room next to a church, becoming famous for her visions of God's love. She gave a comforting message that "all shall be well," teaching children about big love in a small world.



4. Margery Kempe - A Normal Wife & Mum who had 14 children, and tried running businesses like a brewery, but they failed. After her first child, she had a mental health struggle, but believed God healed her, leading to a powerful spiritual calling. She left her family to travel to holy places like Jerusalem, Rome, and Canterbury, a huge deal for a medieval woman. She couldn't write, so she told her life story to scribes, creating what's considered the first autobiography in English.



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