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In the Shadow of Man: Questioning the Absence of Muslim and Christian Women's voices in Medieval Polemic Writings

Kim Wortmann
Macalester College

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In the Shadow of Man: Questioning the Absence of Muslim and
Christian Women's Voices in Medieval Polemical Writings

Kim Wortmann '08

The purpose of this paper is to show how the rigid social structures in which both Muslim and Christian women found themselves in the middle ages prevented them from influencing the Christian-Muslim polemics of the time. The absence of women's voices has left modern scholars unsure of their sentiments regarding their encounters with one another and with one another's culture. In order to get an accurate account of such cross-cultural perceptions as those which may have formed between Muslims and Christians, it is necessary to hear the arguments and observations from all sides, including women and others who may have been socially oppressed.

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For the modern researcher the task of understanding the
medieval woman can be both intriguing and frustrating. This
person may begin with romantic images of such a woman,
picturing her role in the battles of the crusades or among the
wave of Christian martyrs, who under the rule of Muslim caliphs
refused to compromise their faith for better financial and social
statuses. However, and this is the frustrating part, resources on
these subjects are scarce and those one finds generally provide
only second-hand information. This is probably because most of
these texts were written by influential males of the period who
were decidedly, disinterested and unsympathetic of the situation
of women in their societies. Consequently, relying on such texts
risks the possibility of encountering much bias and of ultimately
missing woman's history as she would have told it, had she been
allowed the voice and pen to do so. Thus, it is with concern that
women of the Medieval era have become inaccessible and largely
forgotten that I begin this paper.

I argue that the reason we do not find women's voices
alongside those of male writers such as John de Mandeville, is not
because these women were free of comment but rather that their
disadvantaged social situation did not allow for such discourse.
In this paper I focus on the absence of women's voices as I have
noted it in the polemical texts of the Christians and Muslims of
the Middle-Ages. I believe that because this period (specifically
between the 11th and 13th centuries) and the polemics emerging
from it exemplify cross-cultural conflict and interaction, they
merit special attention. Women's lives were greatly affected by
these cultural encounters and the absence of their voices from
the era creates a void in its history. It is a void that can only be
filled with the discovery of women's stories, assuming of course,
that they were ever recorded.

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I will not assert that there are no surviving texts from women of the Middle-Ages. Medieval writer Christine de Pizan[1] and others would prove otherwise. Still, I have been unable in my current studies surrounding Christian-Muslim polemics, to find any indication of women's participation in these specific discourses. Furthermore, whenever mention is made of women by male polemics I have found it to be both passive and somewhat degrading. David R. Blanks in his article *Gendering History: Europe and the Middle East* cites the following sentiment, similar to my own, as was made by Virginia Wolf in *A Room of One's Own,* as a representation of the general sentiment of the woman Pre-Modern Europe:

> Do you really believe that everything historians tell us about men – or about women – is actually true? You ought to consider the fact that these histories have been written by men, who never tell the truth about anything except by accident. And if you consider, in addition, the envy and ill will they bear us women, it is hardly surprising that they rarely have a good word for us, and concentrate instead on praising their own sex in general and particular members of it, as a way of praising themselves (Qtd. in Blanks 44).

Keeping this concern that women's history is being dictated by men in mind, I suggest that the absence of women's voices in these texts implies two things: First that the structure of Christian and Muslim societies was such that women were secluded and discouraged from interaction with peoples outside of their own faith. Second that women were given little opportunity for intellectual advancement in these societies and were, therefore, poorly equipped to produce their own literature which would describe their lives and relationships with members of other communities as *they* had experienced them.

My task in this paper calls for a review of the type of social situation in which women of each community (Christian and Muslim) found themselves, as well as an analysis of how this situation affected women's ability to actively participate in cross-

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[1] Pizan was said to be "one of the greatest moralists of Christian literature, [who] approached with courageous frankness the problem of woman's place in society" (Gabriel 3).

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cultural discourse. I begin my analysis with a glimpse into both cultures and then proceed to show how women were perceived by men in these cultures. I then analyze how these perceptions influenced societal institutions such as marriage and education, restraining women from intellectual and personal development.

Before I begin I would like to raise a point made by Eleanor A. Doumato concerning the different types of women that made up Near Eastern societies during the Middle-Ages. In her article *Hearing Other Voices: Christian Women and the Coming Of Islam,* Doumato expresses doubt at establishing a clear "normative category" (Doumato 178) under which to place women. How does one define "woman" in such a way as to begin a discourse about her situation? She asks, "Could the condition of female slaves, concubines, the free-born, the rich, the poor, natives and immigrants, nomads, ecclesiastics, Christians, Jews, pagans, agricultural workers, and the unmarried all be definable as 'woman?' (Doumato178). I would like to answer this question in the affirmative, suggesting that all these women should be put under the same category of "woman."

I am well aware that under the religious laws and structures of Muslim communities as well as under those of Christian communities, some women were attributed more value than others. However, for the purposes of this paper I consider their common silence and oppression by men as a unifying factor and do not wish to focus so much on their social differences.

Norms of Muslim Communities

Due to the lack of information (a recurring theme) on women in pre-Islamic society, it is difficult to say how the lives of women changed with the rise of Islam. However, there have been some suggestions that when compared with Medieval Muslim communities, pre-Islamic society was somewhat more conscious and respectful of women's presence in society. Doumato tells that admirers of pre-Islamic Arabia have tended to argue that "women were more highly respected, had greater physical freedom and access to divorce, and even some suggest, polyandry" (Doumato 178). They assert that the rigid patriarchal structures brought into society by Islam such as veiling, seclusion, and the marital practices of polygamy and inheritance, were largely limiting to women (Doumato 178).

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Though it is hard to ascertain whether women were content under pre-Islamic societies as opposed to Islamic ones, one cannot ignore the fact that the advent of Islam probably changed women's situation. This change is seen particularly in Islamic practices of marriage which brought with them many stipulations on what women could and could not do. Leila Ahmed highlights two aspects of these practices which were seemingly disadvantageous to women. These are: the requirement that women were to be married by the age of 17 and as early as the age of 12 (Ahmed 107) and the practice of polygamy and concubinage. Apparently, this second practice of having multiple wives and "girlfriends" was not necessarily well received by Medieval Muslim women. Ahmed gives examples of possible dissent:

> When contemporary authors reported of a particular woman that she was in a monogamous marriage, they regularly went on to note how fortunate she was in this. Similarly, when [medieval Muslim] families were in a position to stipulate monogamy for their daughters, they often did so (Ahmed 107).

These examples suggest that despite the fact that practices of polygamy were permitted by Islamic law and tradition, they were not necessarily subscribed to by all women. This shows that women may have been uncomfortable in the social situations in which they were placed but because of the institutions that bound them to these practices, they were forced to comply with such norms. Ahmed also suggests that the strains placed on wives in polygamous marriages were generally emotional and psychological as opposed to economic (Ahmed 104).

Still, economics had a role to play in these marriages and unlike the other marital practices such as the above-mentioned age requirement for girls, polygamy and concubinage were not necessarily common to all classes. Due to their better financial situations, men of the ruling class were better able to provide for multiple wives and accommodated them by building elaborate

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homes or *harams*[2] in which the women were not only secluded from other wives but also from the rest of the community (Ahmed 117). These apartments, in short, were built so as to provide women with whatever they needed in order to prevent them from emerging beyond the "palace walls" where they may have been, heaven forbid, immersed in the quotidian life outside (Ahmed 117).

Finally, I would like to mention the Muslim cultural practices concerning divorce. Unlike in the Christian faith, divorce and remarriage for men and women was both accepted and common in Muslim societies. Women, however, unless they had sufficient independent wealth or if they were well supported by their families, found difficulties obtaining divorce (Ahmed 107).   This idea that women were economically dependent on their families and/or their husbands becomes important in the later stages of this paper. I present the idea that many women's lack of independent financial resources hindered their ability to produce written works.

Norms of Christian Communities

Medieval European society did not have strong gender divisions in its domestic arrangements such as that found in the harems of Islamic society, yet the social assumptions that underlay gendered divisions of space had implications for where women could be and what could happen to them if they moved outside that space (Hanawalt 19).

Though they were perhaps afforded a little more freedom in social interaction and exploration outside the home, the lives of Christian women during the middle-ages were faced with similar social constraints as did those of Muslim women. Like the stipulations placed on Muslim women which limited their social activities to visiting only each other on formal occasions such as weddings, births and funerals (Ahmed 118), Christian women were also confined to the company of other women and [to a lesser extent] the walls of their homes.

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[2] *Haram* – literally meaning "sacred" or "forbidden", this refers to a complex of apartments that were forbidden to other men, in which a man's women resided (Ahmed 117).

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Barbara A. Hanawalt cites an interesting distinction made by Martine Segalen, which defines the space of man and that of woman, these are: "a female *house*" and "a male *outside*" (Hanawalt 19). This suggests that the place of the female is in the house, occupied with domestic chores, whereas that of her husband is outdoors doing field work and other such "manly" tasks. Because marriage was such a big cause of this division of roles and the constraints such roles placed on women, it is upon this societal institution that I again focus my attention.

Irven M. Resnick tells that most Christian marital practices beginning around the late eleventh century were generally political and economic affairs (Resnick 350). Unions were arranged by the parents of either party and were a means of keeping both wealth and patrimonial structures in place (Resnick 352). Resnick further suggests that "marriage is, characteristically, one of the avenues by which a society - especially a religious or holy community - attempts to define its boundaries" (Resnick 350). Unfortunately, the boundaries spoken of here tended often to be harsher on the woman than on the man in contract.

Though neither man nor woman had much choice in the matter, it can be implied through an analysis of these customs that the woman was placed in a more restricted position. For example, though marriage was technically based on consent, a woman's consent could either come from herself, her father (who was likely unsympathetic to her desires) or her appearance (whether or not she was forced to be there) at the wedding day (Resnick 252).

Unlike in Muslim traditions, marriage was not necessarily advocated by those living in Christian communities. In fact, some texts suggest that in marrying a woman, a man acquired for himself an unnecessary burden. In his mutli-volume text *Life in the Middle Ages,* G.G. Coulton states that "some men say":

> What need have I to take a wife? I have no labour; I have no children to break my sleep at night; I have the less expense by far. Why should I undertake this travail? If I fall ill, my servants will care for me better than she would (Coulton 225).

This passage is suggestive of the type of role a woman acquired during marriage, that of child-bearer, house-keeper

and nurturer. Having a wife essentially meant having a permanent servant who would do all the things expected of a servant as well as be a mother to her children and lover to her husband. In assuming all these roles, it is unlikely that the woman had time for social interaction or intellectual exploration.

Now after having considered these two groups and their cultural norms as concerns women, I would like to suggest two major ways in which their rigid religious structures prevented women from participating in the Christian-Muslim polemics of the Middle-Ages. These limiting factors are, 1.) the institution of marriage and 2.) the lack of a formal education given to women.

I perceive the institution of marriage as a way of silencing women for two reasons. First, there is the issue of seclusion which in itself is a multi-pronged problem that can be attributed many blames. However, I am most interested in the way the norm of women's seclusion, primarily in Muslim communities, may have hindered interaction between Christian and Muslim women. For example, in being confined to harems in which one's only interaction was limited to one's slaves or husband, is to be in a situation both uninspiring and devoid of intellectual motivation. Though it is possible that these women acquired information about each others' cultures through conversations with their slaves[3] or in descriptions from their husbands, it is possible that this information arrived at their ears in an obscured and exaggerated form. The problem posed by such dependent acquisition of knowledge of the outside world can be seen in the works produced by Christian polemics who sought to convince the masses of the evils of the Saracens.[4]

These polemical works which were largely biased and misinformed were produced by such medieval Christian polemics as the already mentioned Jacob Van Maerlant. Maerlant's project was to present Islam "as a fictitious counterpart to Christianity"

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[3] I assume here that most slaves of these Muslim women were of different backgrounds as the common practice for obtaining slaves came through wars with other groups such as the Christians. Therefore, it is unlikely that these slave women were Muslim themselves which in a way may have allowed them more freedom to engage in community cross-cultural environments.

[4] Name used by medieval Christian polemicists to describe the Muslims they encountered (Tolan xi).

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(Tolan 212), stressing that the Saracen religion was based on false prophecy and its leader Muhammad, was a magician (Tolan 219). Maerlant, like many other polemics of his time, intentionally wrote and spoke these polemics in a vernacular understood by all members of his community so as to make clear to everyone the threat of the Saracens. These works are problematic because the vast influence they had on the members of their communities, intellectuals and laypeople alike, caused a recycling of the same unfounded criticisms from generation to generation.

Admittedly, I would be glad to discover any discourse whether direct or indirect from women of this period and under the rule of Muslim and Christian authorities. However, ill-informed criticisms such as those of Maerlant are inutile and it is not likely that women of the Middle Ages would have benefited from them nor would we today (i.e., those who wish to study the history of their history.)

The second problem posed by marriage to women having an opportunity to voice themselves is that of *socialization.* Here I am referring to the way in which women's lives in both Christian and Muslim societies were largely predetermined by family members and others in their communities. Each culture has suggested that planning for marriage is a great part of what consumes a girl's young life as well as that of her parents. She must enter into a good union which would provide her family with good fortune and herself financial or social security. The issue here is not that the girls are getting married but that the marriage "process" appears to have consumed their lives, probably exhausting much of their intellectual energies!   In addition, this socialization likely trained these women to accept these marriage customs without question and thus, to silence any real discontent they have in regards to them.

Thus, socialization into marriage prevented women from entertaining other "career paths" or intellectual pursuits, which in turn prevented them from examining their social situations and writing about them.

Even though marriage was viewed by churchmen as a sacrament (Resnik 353) and women in Christian cultures were also often coerced into unions at young ages, they did, unlike Muslims, have some opportunities for celibacy. In becoming a nun, a woman could avoid an undesired marriage and in making

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such a religious commitment she would perhaps have gained a certain degree of respect over other women in her society. Actually, several of such women's works have been recovered including those of Teresa de Cartegena[5] and Maria de Ajofrin[6], who each in their own right had considerable influence on the late medieval woman writers of Spain.

Of course even though they were allowed the space and time to *have thoughts* other than marriage or the family, these women were in many ways still much protected from the "outside". This was a result of a different yet, equally limiting form of socialization. That is, a *religious* socialization which would have obscured their perceptions of those outside their religious beliefs, suggesting that any perceptions they had of the Saracens would have been as biased as their male counterparts'.

As I appreciated Virginia Wolf's (abovementioned) quote regarding the problem of men writing women's history, I would again like to employ her thoughts as she expresses them in the same novel *A Room of One's Own*. In this text, Wolf suggests that to write fiction a woman must have both money and a room of her own (Sparksnotes). Considering this, I propose that in order to write her *history*, the medieval woman needed money and an *education*. I hold that even if women had been inspired to write about themselves or one another, this would have been exceedingly difficult for them to do so without sufficient formal education. I say this because without an education these women could not have connected with the written and "academic" languages of their communities during the medieval period, those of Latin and Arabic. These were the languages in which most polemics were written and were the languages of the period that have survived the trials of history to be read still today.

I begin my discussion on the importance education plays in a woman's ability to produce polemics, with a thought from

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[5] Notoriously known for being deaf and for considering this deafness as something of a gift, "Teresa considers her deafness as a blessing because it prevented her from hearing worldly noises, which were drowning out the healthy doctrines of the Lord (40)." (Surtz 23).

[6] A holy woman associated with the Hieronymite order whose revelations are said to have "provided the inhabitants of Toledo with a more personal experience of God and a more direct way of contacting the supernatural." (Surtz 68).

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Astrik L. Gabriel's article *The Educational Ideas of Christine De Pisan.* Gabriel cites a conclusion made by Pizan that: "if a woman has the same qualities, talent, and aptitude as man, she has the right to the same education too" (Gabriel 13). Pizan, who advocated women's education in the Middle Ages and disagreed with the notion that "purely domestic education is sufficient for a girl" (Gabriel 13), was still in many respects a conservative. However, she was said to have recommended for women the learning of Latin, mathematics and other significant subjects (Gabriel 12).

       The extent of the lack of women's education in the Middle Ages can be derived by looking at the figures given from a slightly later date, those of 1600. Richard Tuck puts male illiteracy in Europe at 60 or 70 percent whereas female illiteracy lay at 90 percent or more during this time (*Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, Vol. I, 11). These figures suggest that women and girls were either not receiving any formal education or that the education that they did receive was both inadequate and of a significantly lower quality than that received by the males of the time. Ahmed tells that girls of the Middle Ages were educated in the areas such as home economics and were taught such skills as "sewing, embroidery, and cloth making." Though skills in creating luxury items such as jackets and scarves, provided them with a source of income (they sold them to the wealthy), they were never afforded the opportunity to acquire a *real* education (Ahmed 112).

       Most Muslim women did not receive formal education until around the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where some girls were allowed to learn to read at schools called *kuttab.* However, whether the girl was to be educated past the age of nine depended primarily on her financial situation and the consent of her parents. Some girls were fortunate enough to have had private tutors come into their homes to teach them, whereas others received much of their education from fathers or other men in the family (Ahmed 113).

       Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker challenges the perception that women needed to be formally educated, or educated in the same way as men were, in order to produce influential works. She suggests in her work *Seeing and Knowing: Women and Learning in Medieval Europe 1200–1550* that because most women "lived in a

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different world from that of the textually learned, they used different ways of acquiring and transmitting knowledge" (Mulder-Bakker 11). This point is significant because it raises the idea of women's education, in which she acquires all the necessary information she needs to advance intellectually but does so without being hindered by the biases placed on her by men.

Though the late middle-ages saw a rise in women's attendance in public educational systems such as universities and other institutes of higher learning in Medieval Europe, they were still not afforded the opportunity of full participation in academic debates and discussion. Mulder-Bakker states:

> Helen Solterer has argued that participation in such literary debates, both by actual and fictional women, was a way for women to talk back and speak out. The woman, however, is always positioned as respondent, leaving the man as initiator of arguments" (Mulder-Bakker 25).

So even when she was given the opportunity to participate in the same discourse and dialogue as men, women were attributed a subordinate position. By being an apologist as opposed to a polemicist, she was disallowed from having her voice heard and her issues addressed.

The purpose of this paper was to show how the rigid social structures in which both Muslim and Christian women found themselves in the middle ages prevented them from influencing the Christian-Muslim polemics of the time. The absence of their voices has left modern scholars unsure of their sentiments regarding their encounters with one another and with one another's culture. In order to get an accurate account of such cross-cultural perceptions as those which may have formed between Muslims and Christians, it is necessary to hear the arguments and observations from all sides, including women and others who may have been socially oppressed.

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