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# *The new Beguine.* A Return to the Middle Ages in search of the sociocultural roots of women's independence[*]

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**Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to examine whether the autonomy and freedom of thought, writing, and action of medieval Beguines are traits and behaviors that reflect certain cultural roots of female independence. Using a critical-comprehensive methodology, we observe the social context in which these medieval women lived and their social identity. Considering the beguinages as movements of female emancipation leads us to hypothesize that in the Late Middle Ages and following centuries many women had ways of life that resembled those of the ancient Beguines, and therefore many more women in history could be called *new Beguines.*

**Keywords:** *New Beguines*; Women's emancipation, *Espíritus Libres*, Feminism, Women writers

Introduction

I began my research on the Beguines as part of a broader study that took a sociological approach to medieval representations of women.[1] Approaching the Middle Ages from a sociological perspective leads us to seek relationships between context, history, and literature and gender roles. Beguines had a special development in Europe between the 12th and 15th centuries, a time of transition towards modernity in which various structural elements were being defined and shaped, notably traditional Western views of masculinity and femininity.

The effort to understand a historical period in which society was patriarchal at both the institutional and family levels, and observing that various misogynistic attitudes were diffused at that time, can help us gain perspective on the new social constraints on women in the twenty-first century and understand various stereotypical and discriminatory behaviors based on gender. To do so, it is useful to understand how gender socialization took place in the Middle Ages, as written accounts by Beguines and other women writers of that period provide insight into the cultural heritage of European society and women's views of their social behavior, traditions, and cultural mentalities. Thus, as in earlier periods of classical antiquity or the Roman Empire, women in the Middle Ages were marked by stereotypical and hierarchical roles, with rules governing their proper behavior (Butler, 2007) and gender-based moral orientations (Gilligan, 2013). The objective is to observe to what extent this external control of female behavior and identities, which already governed medieval social relations, is still valid today, and to what extent women in other eras have been able to use various tools to avoid or escape its constraints.

In the document selection process, search tools such as Scopus, Dialnet Plus, and WOS were used. In addition, virtual access was used to consult social science and humanities databases in Spanish from specialized publishers. An effort was made to combine the search for direct sources written by the Beguines with studies on women's history and literature, without losing sight of different theories and approaches to gender perspective (see Table 1). In this interdisciplinary approach, special attention has been paid to research on these medieval women carried out in recent decades.

Table 1: Searches carried out in Scopus and Google Scholar (First Semester 2023)

| Search terms | In Scopus in 2023 | With reference to the subject of study | In Google Scholar in 2023 | With reference to the subject of study | Search results that may be of interest |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| History+ women | 5 results | 0 results. All refer to contemporary women | 4,230 results | In the first 40 results, there are only two references to medieval women. | Sobre *la Querella de las Mujeres como recurso para abordar las desigualdades de género* (Casado et al., 2023), one of the articles most closely related to our study. There is another by Alicia Relinque (2023) on women writers in pre-modern China, which takes us to a very different social context, although in a similar era. |

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[1]  A thesis on this subject was defended by the author of this article in 2019.

| History + Medieval | 26 results | Only 7% make explicit reference to women or show a gender perspective. Of these, only the article on "gender in Alfonso's codes" published in Revista de Estudos Feministas could be of secondary interest to our study. | 1,650 results | In the first 40, only three make explicit reference to women or indicate a gender perspective. | One by Lara Arribas (2023) deals with how to approach medieval female religiosity from a historiographical perspective. Another by Miguel Ángel García (2023) examines how Queen Consort Maria of Portugal exercised power and the symbolism she possessed. Another by Pedro Sánchez-Migallón deals with thirteenth-century nun Sancha Alfonso. These are very specific studies that are of secondary importance to our study. |

Source: Own work, 2023.

The diagram presents two searches, one in Scopus and the other in Google Scholar, both conducted in the first half of 2023. It is particularly noteworthy that when restricting the subject matter in Scopus, no documents are found, highlighting the need to fill this gap in the more specialized scientific literature. In contrast, the generic Google Scholar search engine returns a large number of results, but after reviewing them, especially the first 40, it is also clear that there is a scarcity of studies on medieval women compared to the growing trend of studying contemporary women.

**Methodology and sources chosen**

The methodology used involved the selection and analysis of bibliographic sources, from which a comprehensive and critical analysis was made to delve deeper into the subject of study: the social role of medieval Beguines and their historical projection. This analytical-comprehensive methodology required an interdisciplinary approach that combines social history, gender perspective, and women's literature. It is therefore appropriate to refer here to the main bibliographic sources that allowed this research to be addressed and their contributions to be interrelated.

Various historians specializing in the Middle Ages have examined the profile of women, considering their social, economic, and cultural contributions, including Rivera-Garretas (2000), Segura (2013), Wade-Labarge (1988), and Martínez *et al.* (2000). Also worth mentioning are the researchers Duby and Perrot (2000), who provide an insight into private life in the Middle Ages as well as work, roles, and the ethos of women. Maravall (2013) and Elias (2012) examine the historical dynamic while Simmel (1999), Beauvoir (2013), Gilligan (2016) and Butler (2007) pay attention to gender to contrast the social roles assigned to men and women in different works and contexts. Beauvoir (2013) highlights the importance of paying attention to women by linking them to socio-cultural history, recalling that the inclusion of women in history would prevent distorted views. Tilly (1994) also refers to the need to study women's lives not in isolation but in relation to historical issues and by trying to explain more general problems.

As a methodology for social analysis, and following the steps that structure the parts of this article, the study proposes to first observe when and how the Beguines emerged in medieval society to then show the main centers of activity of **the Espíritus Libres [Free Spirits]** and add contemporary women writers who did not belong to these circles but had many affinities with them. The study also observes possible causes for the triumph and decline of these women's movements, finally examining the possibility that the characteristics of the Beguines may be present in women today and that there may still be **new Beguines.**

**Foci of Espíritus Libres  and other influential women contemporary to the Beguines**

In the midst of the turbulent Middle Ages, the Beguines took advantage of their religious ties and cultural education to participate more actively in social life and find spaces where they could express themselves and act more freely:

> However, the Late Middle Ages were a time of upheaval and modernization (...) despite being a period of many catastrophes and conflicts (...) women benefited from opportunities offered by greater social mobility (...) and took part in cultural and religious changes (Optiz, 2000:342).

Despite being women who expressed a new spirituality and rebelled against the ecclesiastical power that was moving away from the evangelical ideal, the Beguines were well regarded by different sectors of the population. In particular, according to Margaret W. Labarge (1988), certain wealthy social groups chose Beguines as educators and teachers, entrusting them with the education and socialization of their daughters:

> They are so circumspect in their customs and so knowledgeable in domestic matters that great and honorable people send their daughters to them to be educated, in the hope that whatever path they take in life, they will be better prepared than others (*Memorial de Gante,* 1328, in Labarge, 1988).

To understand the scope and evolution of the beguinages, we summarize here the context in which they emerged and how and to what extent these medieval women's movements spread throughout most of Western Europe, and we also mention the most well-known Beguines.

The **Espíritus Libres** movement of Beguine women is a "multiform and diverse" phenomenon (Pérez-Martín, 2013) that seems to have begun in the late twelfth century in northwestern Europe and spread towards the center and south. They grouped together in *beguinages, begaterios*, or *beaterios*, and these spaces shared by women outside of kinship relationships became small religious towns where they led autonomous lives and, at the same time, were able to fulfill their more communal aspirations of prayer and helping those in need.

Three main centers emerged in the formation of the Beguine communities: one in the north, in the Netherlands and Germany; another in the south, in Italy and southern France, which also reached Spain; and a third further northwest, outside continental Europe, in England. In the northern center, in the Cistercian monastery of Helfta, characterized by great intellectual and spiritual vitality, lived three mystics: the sisters Gertrud of Hackeborn and Matilde of Hackerborn, and later Gertrud the Great. At the end of her life, the Beguine Matilde of Magdeburg (1207-1282) also resided there. Linked to this area was a grouping that included the Rhine region, Hainaut, and Flanders, with an influential male figure, Meister Eckhart, a theologian of speculative mysticism[2] who was also an admirer of the writings of the Beguines and certainly drew on some of their sources, sharing their desire to bring the word of the Gospel to the common people. In this regard, his numerous sermons delivered in vernacular German stand out, and his ideas were also considered heretical on more than one occasion.

From 1250 to 1310, Margaret of Porete, a Beguine writer and Christian mystic, lived in the Hainaut region on the border between the Netherlands and France. She was condemned as a heretic and burned at the stake without recanting her ideas despite the trial she underwent by the Inquisition. Porete's work, written in Old French, survived the fire and was soon translated into Latin and, in the fourteenth century, into Italian and English. Among the first Beguines, the poet Hadewijch of Antwerp, who probably lived between 1200 and 1248, stands out. Although she was fluent in Latin, she preferred to write in Middle Dutch, the vernacular of her region. The mother of the Beguine movement is considered to be Marie d'Agnies, born in Belgium in 1177. Inspired by her ideal of apostolic poverty, she served the marginalized of a leper colony and explained the basic dogmas and part of *the Song of Songs* in the vernacular.

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[2] The speculative mysticism of Meister Eckhart initiated a movement that would give rise to Rhineland mysticism. A member of the Dominican Order, he was greatly influenced by Thomas Aquinas, as well as various Neoplatonic elements. Eckhart sought to unite theology, philosophy, and mysticism in a single reflection.

The epicenter of the southern focus of **Espíritus Libres** would be located between Umbria and Tuscany, from which came Clara of Assisi (although she belonged to the Damianites, she had a spirituality similar to that of the Beguines and was a writer), Margaret of Cortona, and Angela of Foligno, among others. In this southernmost area, Franciscan and Dominican communities developed, influenced by two thirteenth-century works attributed to Bonaventure: *Meditations and Stimulus Amoris*.[3] The case of Angela of Foligno is surprising because she could not write and dictated her mystical experiences to Friar Arnaldo. Guillermo de Bohemia lived in Milan in the thirteenth century, and although no writings by her are known, she led a movement of women called the Guillelmitas, which went so far as to create a church with a female hierarchy to replace that of Rome. A case of a Beguine with little intellectual training was the prophetess and visionary of Montpellier, Na Proues Boneta, who maintained a house of poverty in her city and declared herself a defender of freedom of worship. She considered herself the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, the living word of God in a woman's body, and was condemned as a heresiarch. André Luis Pereira (2023), who studies the Beguines of Marseille, highlights their alternative culture, which was critical and confronted the emerging capitalism.

Later, there were also *beaterios* (women who lived in convents) and Beguines on the Iberian Peninsula, and the Caminho de Santiago may have been a route along which this movement spread, gaining influence in southern Europe. Various Spanish Beguines and mystics lived between the fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries, including Isabel de la Cruz, known as the blessed woman of Guadalajara, who promoted the Dexados Enlightenment movement in sixteenth-century Castile; and the visionary and mystic Magdalena de la Cruz, who belonged to the Franciscan order but was later condemned to life imprisonment in a convent in Andújar (Jaén) by the Inquisition for her prophecies and visions, which were considered false. There were also Antonia de Jesús, an Augustinian nun from Granada and seventeenth century writer, who is associated with the foundation and consolidation of a *beaterio* (a community of nuns) in the Albaycín; and Luisa de Ascensión from Palencia, known as the nun of Carrión, who was a composer and abbess and imposed equality for nuns regardless of their lineage (Martínez *et al.*, 2000). The sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Teresa de Jesús has much in common with them. Although her position in the Church was not as independent or at odds with the hierarchy as that of the Beguines, she did not leave the ecclesiastical powers indifferent, having had various discussions and confrontations with them. Her works express her particular spiritual and mystical discourse, which sought to create and encourage the spread of faith communities and prayer spaces among Christian women who wished to take religious vows.

Between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, mysticism developed in England, the area where we find the third center of the Beguine movement, in the context of which Margery Kemple and Juliana of Norwich (Delgado, 2023) lived. The latter was a recluse who lived in a cell attached to the walls of a church in Norwich and is recognized as a great theologian and mystic of Love and Nothingness. The echoes of the scholar Porete and the Meister Eckhart were present in these English authors, in the sense of detachment from the mundane on the path to nothingness that leads to God and love.

In our study, other women are added to the group of women considered Beguines because of their literary contributions that reveal their thinking and Christian socialization. Among them are the so-called "Sibyl of the Rhine", Hildegard of Bingen (Pernoud, 2012), and the woman known as the first professional writer, Christine de Pizan. Thus, an outline is drawn of some twenty prominent women between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, most of them Beguines, through which we also attempt to reflect on the spatial and temporal evolution of these spiritual movements that spread throughout Europe from north to south and were led by prominent mystical women, most of them Beguines and writers (Table 2).

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[3] *Meditations* appears to have been written by a friar from Tuscany to a Poor Clare nun, while *Stimulus Amoris*, composed of an amalgam of mystical and ascetic teachings, exists in several versions.

Table 2: More than five centuries of women writers: Beguines, mystical women, authors

| From Northern and Central Europe (12th and 13th Centuries) | From Southern Europe (13th and 14th Centuries) | England and Spain (14th to 17th Centuries) |
|---|---|---|
| | | |
| The Netherlands and Belgium<br>- Mary of Oignies (Beguine)<br>- Hadewichj of Antwerp (Beguine)<br>- Beatrice of Nazareth (Beguine) | Italy<br>- Clare of Assisi (founder of the Poor Clares)<br>- Margaret of Cortrona (Beguine)<br>- Angela of Foligno (*Franciscan*)<br>*2 dissident religious women of the Order of Saint William:*<br>- Guillermo of Bohemia<br>- Manfreda of Pirovano | England<br>- Margery Kemple (Beguine)<br>- Julian of Norwich (Beguine) |
| French-Belgian Border Region<br>-Margaret Porete (Beguine) | Southern France<br>- Prous Boneta (Beguine) | Italian-French<br>- Christine De Pizan (*Professional Writer*) |
| Germany<br>- Hildegard of Bingen *(Benedictine nun, known as the "Sibyl of the Rhine")*<br>- Matilda of Magdeburg (Beguine)<br>*Three mystics from the Hefta monastery:*<br>- Gertrude of Hackeborn<br>- Gertrude the Great<br>- Matilda of Hackerborn | | Spain<br>- Isabel de Villena (*writer and nun, Poor Clare*)<br>- Isabel de la Cruz (Franciscan nun and beata)<br>- Magdalena de la Cruz (*Franciscan*)<br>- Antonia of Jesus (*Augustinian and beata*)<br>- Luisa de la Ascensión *(from the Monastery of Santa Clara de Carrión)*<br>- Teresa of Jesus (*mystic and writer, founder of the Order of Discalced Carmelites*) |

Source: Prepared by the author 2023.

Table 2 on Beguine women writers and mystics lists in three columns the names of 24 important women who lived in Europe between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries: one column lists writers from northern and central Europe (authors from the Netherlands and Germany, mainly from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), another column lists writers from the southern European " " (Italy and southern France, from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), and the third column lists other mystics and authors from later periods in England, Italy, France (fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) and Spain (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries). To identify those named, it is indicated whether history has expressly classified them as Beguines or, if not, whether they have another reference to their identity by which they have passed into posterity - in italics and/or parentheses. However, there are mutual influences and chance confluences between them, with some women being precursors of Beguine thought, including Clara of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen. Christine de Pizan also received and knew the legacy of many Beguines and took feminism a step further. Isabel de Villena stood out in religious writing and Teresa de Jesús reached the pinnacle of Spanish

mystical literature alongside Juan de la Cruz. The mysticism of some earlier Beguines is also reflected in her writing. Bringing together all these **female references** allows us to understand the extent to which a small but significant group of women played a very active sociocultural role for several centuries and were scattered across many European countries. These women were almost always close to religion (but often critical of it), which, curiously, gave wings to their autonomy.

### The Beguines of the Middle Ages: autonomous and socially involved

The Beguines emerged in an era of social estates governed by a feudal system in which male authority had unparalleled visibility and socioeconomic power. They were female figures who were characterized above all by their search for autonomy, which they sought through access to knowledge and culture, something that was only possible at that time by being close to the Church (Von Martin, 1970; Elias, 2012)[4], which allowed them to achieve greater independence (by freeing themselves from the subjugation that being a woman entailed at that time) not only in their lives but sometimes also in their thinking, as they were able to express their ideas in writing.

Although they were associated for religious reasons, the Beguines were an alternative group that distanced themselves from ecclesiastical powers. They were women of faith and a high intellectual level, which is reflected in their literary works. They questioned strict norms and chose not to be bound by the hierarchical structures of the Church or existing religious orders, forming part of tertiary communities that were both outside the Church (Espinar, 2023) and outside patriarchal structures (Otero, 2016; Lartategi, 2023). The Beguines created small, informal, and participatory groups among themselves and, from their **position of autonomy and critical vision,** collaborated socially in essential tasks such as caring for the sick and educating children and young people. As María del Mar Graña (2018) points out, these women stood out for carrying out tasks related to charity and social action. In this way, the Beguines had intellectual interests and, of their own accord, specialized in an educational or health-related profession (Régnier-Bohler, 1991), which demonstrated their social prestige as caregivers or educators for many decades. However, this opportunity to act freely was obstructed because their social activities and influence on the transmission of faith through their unique interpretation of the Bible led to them being judged, punished, or condemned. Certainly, their position as women was too revolutionary and deviated from the female stereotype of the time (Bandura, 1995).

Based on this direct social commitment, their rejection of hypocrisy in the pursuit of economic gain or status is evident; they were aware of their limited power and decided to put it into practice and act on the margins, from a different position, in which they had the opportunity to form beguinages, and above all preserve their freedom. From this 'conquered' space , many of them also chose to convey their religious experiences and knowledge of the Bible through writing, in a language understandable to the common people. Although they knew they were being persecuted, they continued to write and gave priority to spreading their mystical experiences. And through unusual ways of living and writing they shaped their own identity, based on their unique intellectual capacity and spirituality. Thus, according to the terminology of Michael Tomasella and Vaish Amrisha (2011), the Beguines broke with the passive and submissive roles that medieval society assigned to them as women. Moreover, in a certain way, through their life experience, they dismantled the pre-established hierarchical structure, since the Beguines did not aspire to positions of status, as the hierarchical levels were horizontally equalized in the beguinages. However, we must not forget the status they came from, as a good number of Beguines were of noble social origin, especially, according to Simons (2003) in his analysis of the social composition of Beguine communities, in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, most Beguine women came from wealthy families, either from the nobility or from bourgeois families that were part of what could be called

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[4]  Alfred Von Martin (1970) reflects on how the Church in the Middle Ages was a catalyst for social and cultural changes, and Norbert Elias (2012) agrees with Von Martin's about the enormous influence of religion on cultural values. Von Martin understands that we must not lose sight of the fact that all medieval culture was affected by the unifying force of the Church. In contrast to modern societies, whose fundamental bond is the division of labor, the Middle Ages are identified with a society in which religion played a unifying role in all social aspects. Therefore, community and religion shaped the socio-spiritual identity of people in medieval times.

the urban patriarchy or aristocracy. However, from the fourteenth century onwards, there was a significant number of Beguines who came from a more popular social stratum (Simons, 2003).

However, these women quietly rejected their prestigious social status and chose to break with their family ties (or in some cases adapted them to the new reality of sisterhood, as was the case when several blood sisters or mother and daughter became Beguines, leaving behind the privileges of their former lives but continued to have family connections within the beguinage) and opt for a **more egalitarian social model** (Simons, 2003). It is clear that their autonomy and social involvement were not aimed at economic gain, and there was even a clear rejection of greed among the Beguine communities, which at the time was considered the most serious sin because it encourages hoarding rather than sharing. They were part of the lay movements that, from the twelfth century onwards, took center stage in a Europe that was still pre-industrial but was beginning to encourage trade and opportunities for wealth were multiplying. Both Maravall (1983) and Von Martín (1946) express the contradictions that were debated at this time, between static scholastic philosophy and new science, between stagnation and economic dynamism. Throughout the Middle Ages, there was a shift from ascetic Christianity to lucrative Christianity. Panciera (2020) calls the beguinages "islands of rest in the turbulent world of business." There were also various monastic movements that had poverty as one of their main values, including the Franciscans. Furthermore, for the Beguines, their choice of poverty was a way of ensuring consistency between their lives and their commitment to the poor and the sick.

### Discussion: between emancipation and marginalization

As early as the thirteenth century, women began to be expelled from the theological order for rejecting ecclesiastical power, which led to them being stigmatized as heretics, along with other groups such as philosophers and reformists.[5] In addition, one of the concepts that began to take shape in this period was the antithesis between Christianity and paganism or heresy, whose establishment led to a fairly widespread view in the West that justified the Crusades and wars in the name of faith. The image of women who did not obey the system was associated with evil, and fighting against women who strayed from what was considered true Christianity was part of that war or crusade; that is, those women who did not follow the canons of proper female behavior, who formed their own groups and even their own institutions, who made a different interpretation of the sacred texts not validated by male authorities, etc., were despised and identified with corruption, perversion, or evil. Na Proues Boneta, Guillerma de Bohemia, Juliana de Norwich, and Margarita Porete are some of the Beguines who were vilified on various occasions for having behavior or conveying messages considered close to heresy. In the case of Juliana of Norwich, she dared to propose that God the Savior be considered "our true mother" (Tabuyo, 2002:134). Her reflection attributed feminine traits to the divinity and, in a way, changed the identity of God that had been disseminated by the Church until then. Although the texts written by the Beguines were influential in both the Middle Ages and the following centuries, the established powers and most influential intellectual groups wanted them to be considered a subculture, as opposed to the official androcentric culture. This was especially the case as their influence grew and the works of some Beguines were disseminated with great success and published in several languages, as in the case of Porete's work, which caused a stir and admiration among more people. These efforts to marginalize female culture were not exceptional in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In this regard, researcher Opitz (2000) warns that when examining the role of women in the Middle Ages, one must not lose sight of the supremacy and prevalence of male points of view, and how men set the rules for female subjects.

> Testimonies about their (women's) everyday experiences must still be interpreted (...) in the light of male idealizations and contempt; often, their desires and ideals can only be guessed at, hidden behind the veil of guardianship and regulation imposed by fathers, husbands, and

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[5] Among these groups, such as philosophers at the University of Paris or wandering bards, were also the Beguines.

confessors. Their behavior continues to be subject to the limits of social norms and controls (Opitz, 2000:342).

While the Renaissance was illuminating areas of society and dismantling social stratification with its humanist tendencies, women's voices were paradoxically obscured and marginalized; thus, female discourse ceased to be valuable, enlightening, prophetic, or charismatic and became suspicious, dangerous, or sinful.

> It was the inquisitors, jurists, and politicians of the 15th century and the Modern Age who, having lost the sense of allegory, believed—thus testifying to a fatal change in the symbolic order—that night flight, for example, was literal, so that in order to explain it rationally, they imagined the existence of the famous "pact with the Devil" (Rivera-Garretas, 2006:195).

Towards the fifteenth century, at the end of the Middle Ages, numerous religious, philosophical, and literary works began to disseminate more simplified and antagonistic models of women, some very virtuous and others very sinful. These models marked the Modern Age and continued to stereotype women for centuries, while reducing the possibilities for thought and action of female subjects. When a movement called **La Querella de las Mujeres (The Women's Dispute)** also emerged in the fifteenth century, this phenomenon gained a voice and was heard above all in educated social circles, with Christine de Pizan playing a prominent role in its participation and leadership. However, La Querella did not spread to the common people, who still lacked even minimal literacy. Indeed, La Querella also triggered fear of losing spheres of power among male groups with symbolic and factual supremacy. Segura (2011) considers **La Querella de las mujeres** to be a social phenomenon that, at the end of the Middle Ages, fostered a climate conducive to debate among educated women, *the puellae doctae.* This forum also highlighted the need for female history and for women to forge a common identity. This female awareness, seeking to find its place in society, which had the Beguines as its antecedent, is something that continues to occur at different stages of history, although these stages of **female empowerment** are often followed by various strategies of disempowerment and the triumph of misogynistic theories.

Today, we are also facing one of these paradoxical moments when a clash between opposing ideas frequently takes center stage in politics, the media, and social debate. On one hand, some discredit women's achievements (as occurred more than five centuries ago when advances that were made after La Querella de las mujeres were discredited) and seek to dismantle social policies that promote gender equality. On the other hand, new women's movements emerge, demanding women's rights and the maintenance of what has been achieved so far, and continue to advance in the achievement of rights linked to gender equality[6] . Given these parallels, it can be seen that the current and medieval and pre-modern contexts are not so different. The autonomy of women today faces new obstacles and various socio-cultural factors are intertwined: socialization is still differential, and social inertia persists in which men maintain their positions of power much more easily (Smith, 1974), as well as inequalities in the division of labor, lack of value placed on care work, etc.

In the evolution from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, we can see how the *eternal feminine* (Beauvoir, 2013; Friedan, 2009) began to take shape in the sense that a more fixed pattern of women emerged. Literature itself limited images of women and created a single, stereotypical model. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, women's features became increasingly simplified, promoting more fixed female models in which women were almost always hidden from the socio-political and cultural historical landscape. They were subordinated in a world that functioned with patriarchal structures and in which gender bipolarities predominated (Butler, 2007). If a woman was not a saint, then she was a witch; if she was not honest, then she was surely evil. This shows that the evolution towards the Modern Age was not favorable to women but, on the contrary, meant that they lost their place and representation in society and became increasingly

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[6] An example of this is the fact that Catholic feminists held a rally in Madrid for gender equality in the Church. See the bibliography for some news items on this subject published on March 5 by the newspaper *Público* (Collado, 2023) and by the Europa Press news agency.

**invisible and** removed from spaces of social, political, and cultural participation. Perhaps this produced the systemic, structural, and symbolic violence against women that persists to this day (Bourdieu, 2000; Álvarez, 2016; Butler, 2021).

The contribution of the Beguines was forgotten and hidden by a dual pejorative veil: one, the veil placed on women's literature throughout history, and the other, the veil that generalizes the medieval period as dark and uncivilized. This double veil still seems to be in place today. In fact, as Silvana Panciera (2021) points out, the negative connotation that the term Beguine has historically evolved into still prevails today. Its translation into Spanish would be *beata* or *santurrona* (pious woman or sanctimonious woman); and yet, as this Italian researcher also points out, the Beguine movement remains little known today, even though, as Panciera (2021) also warns, it has much to say to us as citizens of the twenty-first century.

## Conclusions. *The new Beguines*

As a preamble to the conclusions, it should be noted that much research remains to be done on this intersection between sociology, literature, and history in relation to the social valuation of women. The fragmentation of knowledge at the beginning of scientific paradigms and the separation between disciplines that persists today are factors that may contribute to this field still being relatively unknown. Therefore, the social analysis of female dynamics in the transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age is also an area that has been little explored by sociological research, which tends to focus more on the centuries from the First Industrial Revolution onwards.

In conclusion, it should be noted that medieval Beguine women, compared to women from other periods, were in a somewhat favorable situation, as the changing social mindset between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries made it easier for them to be recognized and valued in the society of their time. Despite class divisions and religious theocentrism, among other socio-political features of the medieval period, this study shows that there were women wjp within the constraints and limitations imposed by the social system and heteropatriarchy (Irigaray, 1992; Butler, 2007; Gilligan, 2013) had access to culture and participated quite actively in social life, as evidenced by the Beguines and other female writers of the Middle Ages cited here. This finding leads us to highlight that at certain times in the Middle Ages there were more limitations between social classes than between sexes, in the sense that among the women who formed the beguinages , there were women of diverse social statuses (although those of medium or high social status predominated) who were able to play a prominent social role, and in general, they used writing as a vehicle to express their ideas, challenging the imposed order and leading very independent lifestyles.

The Beguines' thinking catalyzed the creation of channels through which they could express themselves and share their culture with their fellow Beguines - a different, less hierarchical way of relating to each other than that of the dominant society. At the same time, from this intellectual and spiritual foundation, they expanded avenues for action in public life, both socially and religiously. Status within their associative movements no longer had much reason to exist, as the aim was to create a community without losing freedom, and they were aware that any kind of power or stratified division was a constraint.

There were Beguines, mystics, and nuns linked to the Christian faith, but they led fairly autonomous lives and were scattered throughout almost all European regions and countries. The literary contribution of these women also needs to be assessed, as there are more than twenty female writers who are female role models with high-quality literary works. These women also had innovative ideas and key social roles that broke down hierarchical boundaries and spread literature in public spaces and among the population with less access to knowledge and erudite culture.

We contrast the hypothesis put forward at the beginning of this work and answer that yes, it is possible to broaden the concept of Beguine and speak of **new Beguines** today. These would be contemporary women who strive to be **Espíritus Libres, free spirits,** that is, who chart their own course in history, breaking away from gender stereotypes and social values (Bandura, 1995; Butler, 2007), and who leave behind a reflection of their social, cultural, spiritual, or literary work. We therefore invite a revival of this term, while avoiding anachronisms, to consider as new Beguines

those **independent women** who participate actively in society, with a cultural education and social involvement. For example, we propose as new Beguines various women from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries: writers, thinkers, and feminists who paved the way for the active participation of women, such as Christine de Pizan, Teresa of Ávila, Harriet Taylor Mill, Clara Campoamor, and Simone de Beauvoir, to name a few. Transcendent values are no longer prevalent and are being transformed by other sensibilities. Their discourses remain critical of hierarchical structures and established male power networks.

In general, thousands of self-employed professional women with independent lives today reflect those Beguines, who are now often grouped together in associations, groups, or professional associations that facilitate this relationship between equals and enable them to work together toward achieving their social, labor, and political rights. But as was the case in the past, female teachers, nurses, politicians, and writers of today, the new Beguines of the twenty-first century who have entered the workforce, sometimes find their professionalism questioned or not valued as equally as similar work done by male professionals.

These **new Beguines** persist in demonstrating that female spirituality and reflection are not incompatible with **feminist demands and committed social action**. Today's women's associations and their unity in demanding their rights also have many similarities with the mutual support and **sisterhood** that existed in the beguinages. Thus, in the roles and status of these new women, there are very relevant parallels with medieval women that allow us to reflect on the social changes women have undergone throughout history and to confirm the persistence of inequalities within the female collective. Learning how the Beguines resolved social and gender inequalities, or at least how they managed to distance themselves from them, is a reference point that women today would do well to keep in mind.

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