The Role of Young Noble Women

Abbess Hildegard was a 12th-century writer and nun. She was best known for her work entitled Know the Way, a collection of prose and poems. Originally in Latin, the text has been translated into English in The Medieval Reader edited by Norman F. Cantor.

Virgins who are waiting for the state of marriage ought to be in their countenances [appearances], conduct and speech moderate and chaste [pure], and, especially in church, quiet, looking at their books or with their eyes lowered. In the street and in public they should be mild and sedate, and at home not idle but always busy with some housework. Their clothing should be well made, tasteful, tidy and clean, with no indecency. Their hair should be tidy and not dirty or straggling. Their speech should be amiable [friendly] and courteous to all people; they should have a humble manner and not be too talkative. If they are at celebrations, dances or assemblies, they should be sure to have gracious manner and excellent conduct, because more people have their eyes on them there. They should dance demurely [modestly] and sing softly and not stare vacantly here and there. They should not join the men too much, but always seek the company of their mothers or the other women. These maidens ought to take care not to get into arguments or disputes with anyone, neither serving-man nor chambermaid. It is a very ugly thing in a girl to be argumentative and to answer back, and she could lose her good name because of it, thanks to the false and lying reports that household servants often make. A maiden must not be in any way forward, outspoken or loose, especially in the presence of men, whoever they may be, neither clerks in the household service, nor serving-men, nor other members of the household staff. She must not allow a man to touch her on whatever pretext, nor to touch her with his hands in a playful manner, nor to joke with her too much, for that would be very harmful to the respectability and good reputation that she ought to have.

...She ought to take good care that no one should ever see her affected by having drunk too much wine, for if she had such a fault, nothing good would be said of it. So all young girls ought to be in the habit of putting generous amounts of water in their wine, and they should habitually drink very little. Also besides the good qualities and manners appropriate to her, any young girl ought to be very humble and obedient to her mother and father. She should serve them diligently as well as she can, and rely on them to arrange her marriage. She should not make the match herself without their consent, nor should she say anything about it herself nor listen to anyone else talk about it. Young girls taught and brought up in this way are much sought after by men looking for wives.

continued
More Thoughts on Women

"A man may chastise [discipline] his wife and beat her for correction, for she is of his household, therefore the lord may chastise his own."
—Nicolas Byard, 13th century

"It is plain that wives should be subject to their husbands and should almost be servants."
—Canon Law, 13th century

"All inhabitants of Villefranche have the right to beat their wives, provided they do not kill them thereby."
—Gascony Customary Law and Practice, 13th century

One day in public, an aristocratic wife scolded her husband. This made him so angry that he "smote her with his fist down to the earth, then with his foot he kicked her face and broke her nose...so that ever after she was shamed to show her visage [face], it was so foul blemished."
—The Knight of La Tour-Landry, 13th century

"...Copy the behaviour of a dog who always has his heart and his eye upon his master; even if his master whip him and throw stones at him, the dog follows, wagging his tail...Wherefore for a better and stronger reason, women ought to have a perfect and solemn love for their husbands."
—Goodman of Paris, 14th century

Blond was the most sought-after hair color during the Renaissance. Women would sit outside with an herbal concoction similar to bleach on their hair. However, since fair skin was considered the most beautiful, women wore a crownless hat to protect their faces from the sun.

Appearance was everything during the Renaissance, so dressmaking was an important art. Popular fabrics for nobles included silk, velvet, and brocades. Commoners wore cotton and wool.

Women were not allowed to work outside of the home; however, at no point could they be idle. For that reason, spinning, carding, and weaving wool occupied much of the day.