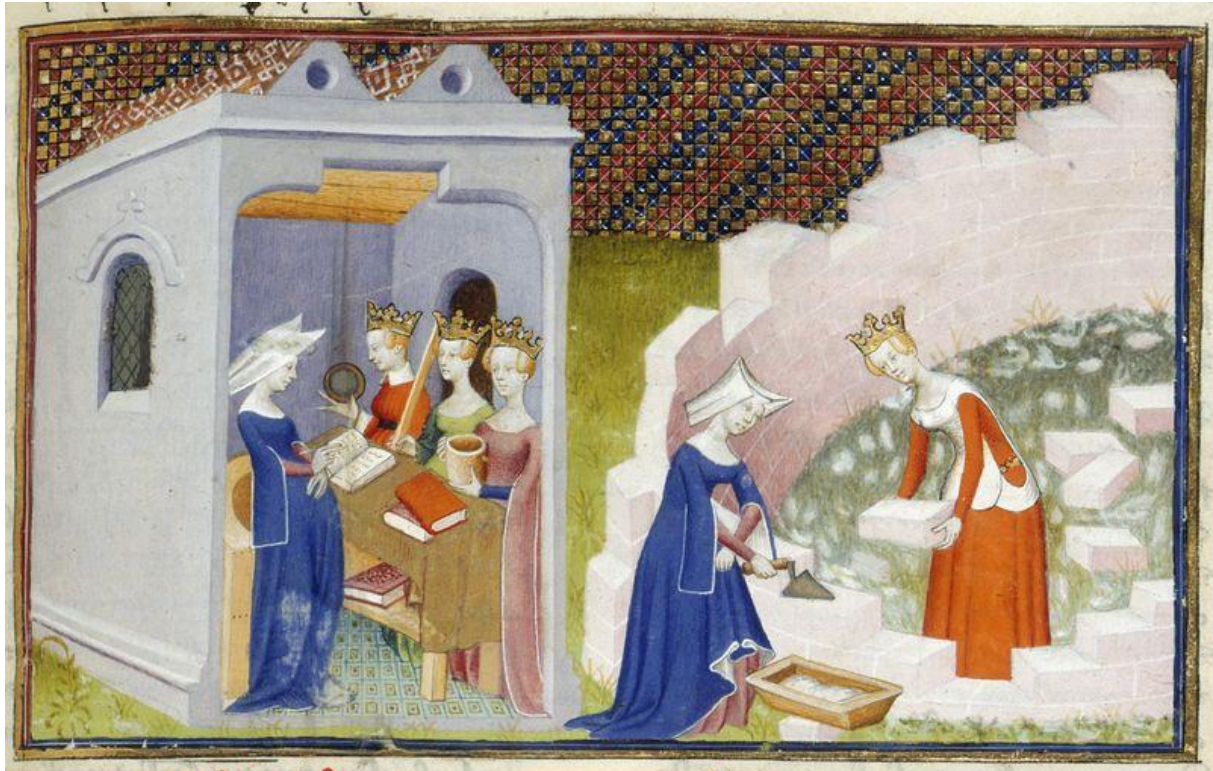**Knights, Rulers, Pilgrims and Writers: Female Characters in Medieval Children's Books**

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Contents

Introduction

Fiction is of vital importance in helping to create a greater understanding of history by making it accessible for young readers. This is particularly true of the obscure Middle Ages and the role occupied by women during this period. School history lessons tend to portray the Middle Ages from a male perspective. Women were daughters, wives and mothers, and they remained on the side-line. However, historical fiction has the power to create a past that focusses more attention on women. It can give these women on the side-lines of history a voice. Historical fiction can teach readers what life could be like for women in this period and help create a greater understanding of the medieval period.

In 1971, Alleen Pace Nilsen wrote about female characters in children's picture books. She noticed that female characters were a minority and that both girls and boys were often depicted stereotypically: boys were adventurous, curious and active, while the girls were silent onlookers and doting mothers and housewives (919-920). According to Nilsen, children under the age of eight are easily influenced by these pictures books, because they are in a phase in which they are "developing their own sexual identity", leading her to plea for a more accurate representation of both girls and boys in picture books (919-920). Forty years later in 2011, research by Janice McCabe et al. on gender representation in the twentieth century showed that female characters still occur less frequently than male characters in children's books (207). Nilsen and McCabe et al. all emphasise the influence that books can have on children. McCabe et al. explain that books teach children how society works, especially when it comes to the role division between men and women (199). In short, books can influence the readers' perceptions of gender and history and in turn reinforce or dismantle stereotypes.

Female characters in modern children's literature have been shown to be represented in a stereotypical manner (Nilsen 918-920), but gender in historical fiction for children has received little scholarly attention. The main characters in the novels under scrutiny in this study all appear to be strong-willed, intelligent women who fight against the status quo of their day, which goes against the modern image of medieval women as obedient, docile, caring wives and mothers, but adheres instead to what are perceived as modern ideals. Scholars note that books on the Middle Ages can and might be used as a vehicle through which modern values, such as equality and self-development, can be explored (Cooper and Short 8-9, Butler 75). Catherine Cooper and Emma Short note that historical fiction for adults often reflects modern values and agendas whereas historical accuracy is less important (8). This results in a different depiction of women regarding sexuality, marriage and romance than

what is generally believed to have been common at that time (9). Catherine Butler states that this depiction shows that modern values are held in higher regard than medieval ones (81, 75). The novels under scrutiny in this thesis do not idealise the position of women during the Middle Ages, as they clearly reflect the limiting surroundings for women, but the protagonists often resemble a more modern ideal of women: one of independence, self-development, freedom of choice and equal opportunities. Rebecca Barnhouse argues that the heroines commonly found in modern historical novels are anachronistic and unhistorical, while scholars like Catherine Butler, Tison Pugh and Jane Weisl argue that such a statement cannot be made, because it can never be stated for certain that these spirited women did not exist (Barnhouse 2000 ix-x, Butler 73, Pugh and Weisl 54).

As a result, the question arises as to whether the depiction of female characters is historically accurate. It is generally assumed that the Middle Ages only allowed women to be obedient docile females. However, historical and literary records show that there are many examples of independent, spirited, educated women in the Middle Ages. The protagonists are therefore not merely an anachronistic projection of modern values. This thesis will look at the female characters in five modern historical novels for children. It argues that these female protagonists mix values that are perceived as modern with values that are perceived as medieval, and thus they create a more nuanced image of medieval women and help break female stereotypes.

There is a growing corpus of literature dealing with the position of women in the Middle Ages and on gender in children's novels. However, there is currently no research that explores the depiction of female characters in children's historical novels set in the Middle Ages. This study explores the portrayal of female characters in five historical children's novels set in the Middle Ages. The depiction of the female characters in the novels will be compared to the views on women in the Middle Ages and the position they occupied in society. The selected books all contain young female protagonists from different social classes and all seem to yearn for a better life. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine all children's novels about the Middle Ages. I have therefore limited this study to the following five English children's books: *Catherine, Called Birdy* by Karen Cushman, about a young girl living on a manor who resists being wedded to a man she dislikes; *Anna of Byzantium* by Tracy Barrett, which relates the tale of an emperor's daughter and her desire for power; *Alanna: The First Adventure* by Tamora Pierce, set in a fantasy world that mimics the Middle Ages; Alanna wants to become a knight, and thus switches places with her brother and

dresses as a boy to achieve this. *Peregrine* by Joan E. Goodman is about a young widow who leaves on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem after her husband's death, and finally *The Minstrel's Tale* by Berit Haahr, which is also about a girl who disguises herself as a boy to achieve her dream of becoming a minstrel.

These selected books all have female main characters and they are set in the Middle Ages except for *Alanna: The First Adventure*, which is set in a fantasy world, but resembles the Middle Ages with its social structure and habits. The female characters are from different backgrounds. Catherine is the daughter of a minor lord in Lincolnshire, while Anna is the daughter of a Byzantine emperor. Alanna is the daughter of a lord. It is striking that all the authors are female. These books were chosen because they contain a female protagonist, and these girls all come from different backgrounds, which will hopefully help achieve a more nuanced analysis. Nonetheless, most of the characters come from a privileged background, as it was difficult to find books with lower class main characters. Of all the selected books, only *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *Minstrel's Tale* have received some scholarly attention. *Catherine, Called Birdy* is often credited as a historically accurate depiction of medieval life, while *Minstrel's Tale* is criticised by Rebecca Barnhouse for being too modern in its representation of the Middle Ages (Pugh and Weisl 51, 53-54, Butler 76, Barnhouse 2000 7-10).

This thesis has been divided in two parts. The first part of this thesis will establish a theoretical framework in which the characteristics of historical literature for children and the depiction of female characters in these books will be discussed. It will then move on to describe the position of women in the Middle Ages. The second part of this thesis will analyse the novels in detail, and compare the female protagonists in these novels to other medieval women in order to explore to what extent the characters from the novels are nuanced representations of medieval women.

Part I: Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1
Historical Fiction

Historical fiction for children combines learning with pleasure. Children's literature has been considered to have an educational value for children since the 1880s (Simons 144). Children learn how the world works through books (McCabe et al 199, Worland 42, Nilsen 919). Historical fiction can therefore teach children about the past in an engaging way. In popular culture, the Middle Ages continue to fascinate a large audience. The period's ideals of chivalry, romance, heroes, and legends continue to be adapted for books and film (Ashton and Kline 4). Modern stereotypes of the Middle Ages actually stem from the Victorian period (Barnhouse 2000 x). However, adapting the past for a young audience raises many questions about how the past is seen through modern eyes, and what the past can contribute to modern society. The Middle Ages can be seen as part of our identity, but they can also be used to establish a break between the past and present to highlight the differences between then and now. The author has to decide whether to present a realistic picture of the Middle Ages, or to adapt the period to suit modern tastes, but also to convey a nuanced and not stereotypical vision of the Middle Ages (Butler 1). Pugh and Weisl state that the Middle Ages are adapted to suit the purpose of the writer. The period could be turned into a romantic, innocent place, a paradise, or a fantasy world (3, 47). Other writers portray the Middle Ages as a dirty, violent, barbaric age (Pugh and Weisl 56).

When it comes to historical fiction, the author must create a balance between accuracy and realism on the one hand, and engagement with the younger reader on the other. Danielle Thaler states that "the historical novel [for children] is based on an illusion": history can be rewritten by employing young characters to appeal to the reader, despite the fact that children never played a large role in history. Historical fiction puts young people forward as heroes in an adult world (3). Cooper, Short, Pugh and Weisl note that history, in essence, is already fictional: there are no authentic Middle Ages in popular culture (Cooper and Short 5, Pugh and Weisl 52). The true spirit of the period can never be recreated from a modern perspective, and consequently every attempt at a reconstruction of history is prejudiced (Cooper and Short 5). The relationship between historical accuracy and fiction is difficult, and critics tend to disagree on how the past should be treated (Butler 73). Cooper, Short and Butler all state that historical fiction, for adults and children, often projects modern ideas and values onto the

Middle Ages (Cooper and Short 6, 9, Butler 80).

Rebecca Barnhouse on the other hand strongly disagrees with anachronistic writing. She quotes Celia Keenan, who states that "being true to the past means being true to a time when moral and social sensibilities were different from today's" (qtd. in Barnhouse 2000 ix). Barnhouse believes that authors criticise the Middle Ages when their characters adhere to modern values, and uphold inaccurate ideas on the medieval period (2000 ix, 1). While Barnhouse admits that the anachronisms in historical novels might serve an educational purpose, in her view, adapting the past to suit modern ideas shows a disregard for the readers who she believes are unlikely to be influenced by medieval ideas. Children are capable of distinguishing differences and similarities between then and now (Barnhouse 1998 373, 2000 10).

Catherine Butler does not agree with Barnhouse's view on anachronisms. While she agrees that accuracy in historical fiction is important, she believes that it is difficult to establish which ideas are unlikely to have been around during the Middle Ages. It can never be stated with certainty that a poor goatherd learning how to read, such as Perkin in *Catherine, Called Birdy*, is abnormal for that time (Butler 77-78, Barnhouse 2000 9). Historical novels portray individuals, not generalisations about medieval society: we can never know how individuals during the Middle Ages thought about matters such as gender equality and education (Butler 76, 80). Butler believes anachronisms can be used to make a text easier to understand and more compelling or to play down out-of-date views (81). She also believes anachronisms are necessary to make history interesting and accessible for a modern audience because young readers do not always have sufficient background knowledge on the period (Butler 73, 81). The reader experiences history through the eyes of the characters, so identification is key (Thaler 10). Butler, Pugh and Weisl note that Shakespeare and Chaucer also used anachronisms in order to convey their message. For instance, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is set in Troy, but the setting of the poem resembles a medieval society more closely than an ancient Greek society (Butler 85, Pugh and Weisl 56). Pugh and Weisl conclude that medieval fiction does not create an accurate insight into a different period, "but a medievalised mode of reading": the medieval and the modern are brought together, enabling the reader to re-evaluate modern issues, rather than learn about the differences between then and now (Pugh and Weisl 61).

The appeal of the Middle Ages is often thought to be its foreignness (Pugh and Weisl 52). In children's literature, the Middle Ages often function as an "era of innocence", an

idealised fantasy world (Pugh and Weisl 47). Pugh and Weisl find it striking that the Middle Ages, which are remarkably different from the modern period and are often seen as a harsh, barbaric period, are easily adapted for children and are regarded as a suitable setting for "moral lessons" (Pugh and Weisl 47). The Middle Ages have become a world that is foreign and other and it is juxtaposed with modern times to raise questions about the reader's own identity (Pugh and Weisl 52). The differences and similarities between the Middle Ages and the present highlight and encourage modern ideals on, for instance, education, the position of women and individualism, to be projected on to a society that is generally thought to be misogynist, uneducated and homogenous (Pugh and Weisl 47, 55). A girl like Judith from *Minstrel's Tale*, who decides to take matters into her own hands to escape marriage, becomes much more courageous and admirable when placed in a society that holds women in low esteem.

Historical fiction often has teenagers as the main characters. Thaler explains that this is because teenagers develop a sense of history, but also because they are at a key stage in their lives wherein they start to develop into adults and become more independent and individual (4). Historical fiction therefore often deals with characters who rebel against society's values and authority. These characters seek to find their true identity and calling in life, making this genre related to the *bildungsroman* (Pugh and Weisl 52). Historical fiction deals with themes that appeal to every generation: themes like searching for one's identity or overcoming fears are universal, and the medieval setting helps to shine a new light on these themes (Pugh and Weisl 56).

The depiction of the Middle Ages in historical novels, including children's historical writing, has certainly attracted academic interest, yet gender representation in historical novels for children has received little scholarly attention, despite the fact that such writing is heavily gendered. Originally, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, historical literature about the Middle Ages was focused on boys, as chivalry was a masculine ideal (Pugh and Weisl 59). The nineteenth-century writer Sidney Lanier hoped his boy readers would learn from and live up to the chivalric ideals displayed in his modern retellings of the Arthurian legends and *The Mabinogion*: he hoped chivalry would create fine men (Pugh and Weisl 49). Nowadays, historical fiction no longer overlooks girls, which can be seen by the many books available that feature female characters. Since this genre can be a way of conveying modern values in an historical environment, gender and feminism occupy an interesting position in historical fiction especially as it is a common misconception that

women in the Middle Ages had no legal rights, and that they were under man's authority (Gies and Gies 4). The following chapter will explain their position in medieval society in more detail.

Cooper and Short write in their book on women in historical fiction that history has always been viewed from a male perspective, thus a biased view on women has been created (3). Historical fiction becomes a way of providing women with a voice and a way of giving them a place in history (Cooper and Short 3). They also state that, because of the lack of attention women have received in the past, women are more suitable candidates for becoming fictional characters. This lack of information on historical women allows a great deal of freedom for the writer to create a character that is true to the period she lives in, but is also adapted to suit the needs of modern readers (Cooper and Short 8). They even state that a female historical character says more about modern values than of those of the time she lives in, especially when dealing with themes such as marriage, sexuality and romance (Cooper and Short 9). Women in historical fiction can thus be moulded to suit the needs of a modern audience, and at the same time be used as a way to raise questions about the position of females in both the past and present (Cooper and Short 13). This becomes clear in the novels used for this thesis, which often deal with main characters that go against the common values of female submissiveness, but also relate to modern values. Cooper and Short's book focuses on adult historical fiction, and deals with adult female characters, but it is likely these principles can be applied to children's fiction too. For instance, Judith and Alanna from *Minstrel's Tale* and *Alanna: The First Adventure* want to pursue a career in a male profession, something girls nowadays might still relate to. A girl who dreams of becoming a car mechanic might experience similar opposition. By placing the story in the ostensibly misogynist Middle Ages, the readers can admire the main characters for her courage and despair, but they can also relate to feelings of rebellion against parents and society.

Chapter 2
Women in the Middle Ages

The position of women in the Middle Ages has received considerable critical attention. From a modern perspective the medieval woman might come across as invisible, voiceless and ill-treated property. The misogynist image of the medieval woman is partly true, but it is also a sweeping generalisation. There is little denying that medieval society was indeed centred around men, and woman had little power over their own lives. The inferior position of women was rarely questioned (Labarge xiii). Aristotle, whose philosophy remained influential in the Middle Ages, even believed that a baby girl was a failed attempt to create a boy (Kline 14). Yet, the Middle Ages were full of strong, influential ladies: Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, led an army, while Christine the Pisan was one of the first female writers who was able to live off her written work. Gies and Gies explain that the idea that women had no legal rights at all was accepted by many scholars for a long period, but they explain that this is not entirely true (4). Many medieval Church writings display a misogynist nature, while medieval literature often shows a stereotypical view, without giving any information about real life and contemporary reception (Gies and Gies 3-4). Those sources tell us nothing about what people really thought of women in daily life. Furthermore, the Middle Ages lasted around 1000 years in which a great deal changed in society: it is impossible to talk about the typical medieval woman, as life in England before the Norman Conquest was significantly different from life after the conquest (Gies and Gies 4, Fell 14).

A medieval woman's position was defined by several factors. The two most influential bodies on the position of women were the Church and the aristocracy (Power 9). Many clergymen were celibate and felt that women were a threat to their vows (Fell 161, Labarge xii). Their view was that women should be subordinate to men, and this view on women lasted for many centuries (Power 16). Power argues that these ideas came from the top of society: if opinions and theories on women were formed at the bottom layers of society, a different view would have circulated (10). It is remarkable that the Church created two conflicting images of women: Eve, the sinner, and Mary, the mother of Christ. Eve's sin, as well as the classical writings were the excuses used to justify women's inferior status (Gies and Gies 37, Labarge 29). However, Saint Paul stated in the New Testament that all souls were created equal: "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Church tried hard to balance these two views. Both male and female virgins were often regarded as the

greatest good, whose life was dedicated to Christ rather than earthly pleasures (Labarge 29-30). The ideas of the Church were spread by the clergy, who were often among the few educated people in society, which made it easy for their views to be accepted in society (Power 16).

Despite preaching equality in Galatians 3:28, it was Saint Paul who partly created the negative image of women (Power 16). In the book of Timothy, he writes: "let the women learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (Timothy 12:11-14), and "wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them" (Colossians 3:18-19 and Ephesians 5:22). Saint Paul preferred celibacy over marriage (I Corinthians 7:1, 7:7- 9). Saint Paul's writings were used by the Church to support its views on women, although he himself had to acknowledge the importance of women. He frequently mentions women in a positive light in his writings: Junia, Phebe, Priscilla and Mary are praised and saluted in Romans 16 for their hard work and assistance as missionaries. Junia was an apostle in her own right (16:1-3, 16:6-7). The Christian writer Tertullian also spoke harshly of woman as "the traitor of the tree, the first deserter of divine law" while calling his wife his "beloved companion" (Gies and Gies 38).

Christine Fell explains that before the Norman Conquest, Christianity and Canon Law had not gained as much control over society, so the position of Anglo-Saxon women was different, and more equal to men than they were in the later Middle Ages (13-14). Fell quotes Lina Eckenstein, who noted that all female saints in England stem from the Anglo-Saxon age (Fell 11). Fell also mentions Doris Stenton's influential research in which she concluded that women were nearly equal in status to men in Anglo-Saxon times (13). In the later Middle Ages, women outnumbered men, but in the Anglo-Saxon age, they were a minority. Women often died young, as they were under great physical strain from childbirth and labour: this made them more valuable to society, as they were scarce (Labarge 1-2). A man paid a heavy dowry to the woman he married, providing a woman with financial independence (Fell 16, 57). Gies and Gies also write that Anglo-Saxon women could make independent decisions about their property: they could buy and sell land, and bequeath it to other people as they wished (20). A woman was the head of the household in the widest sense: she was responsible for the exploitation of land, finances and domestic chores (Fell 60, 100). Women had legal rights, and were protected from violence. However, a woman's class was important: it was a

more serious offence to rape a high class woman than a slave (Fell 62). Christianity did not have the control over women it would later have after the Norman Conquest. When Christianity arrived in Britain in the sixth century, men and women were of equal importance in the new religion (Fell 13).

Anglo-Saxon women occupied powerful positions in Christianity. It was common for them to be abbesses, for example, who were in charge of mixed monastic communities of men and women residing at the monastery, and they were responsible for both religious and intellectual activities (Fell 109). Both men and women from the monastery of Barking were able to read and write complex Latin (Fell 110). The women were respected by the men. Abbot Aldhelm of Malmesbury describes the scholarly activities of nuns at Barking, and nothing suggests their activities differed from male activities (Fell 110-111). Fell states that the relationship between monks and nuns was that of brother and sister, not instructor and pupil. (111). The first woman to become a nun in Northumbria, according to Bede, was Saint Heiu, who founded monasteries in Hartlepool and Whitby (Fell 109, Bede Ch. XXIII). A much admired female saint was Saint Æthelthryth of Ely who negotiated a chaste marriage with her first husband and fled to Ely when her second husband wanted to consummate their marriage (Gulley). According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, she founded a double monastery at Ely in 673, where she became an abbess (Carruthers 71, Bede Ch. XIX).

Another famous example of a powerful Anglo-Saxon woman was Æthelflæd, daughter of King Alfred, Lady of the Mercians, and one of the most powerful people of her time. When her husband was ill, she took over power. She built several fortresses, collaborated with her brother King Edward the Elder, fought against the Welsh and the Vikings, and made alliances with the Britons, Scots and Picts (Fell 91-92). Ironically, she was much admired by post-Conquest historians, like William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntingdon, but also by the Welsh and Irish, who reported her death in the annals, but not the deaths of her father and brother (Fell 92).

This stands in sharp contrast with the period after the Norman Conquest: a married woman had no legal rights, and was under her husband's submission and authority (Labarge 34). The medieval diet became more varied which improved health, women were under less physical strain and the rise of better living conditions in towns lead to an increase in female population, while men often died young. At this time, women had to provide the dowry to her husband, which shows that because women were now the majority, they became less valuable for men (Labarge 22). Even the poorest woman had to bring something into a marriage and

often needed to resort to charity to gain a dowry (Power 41). A woman's lower position was a fact that was almost never questioned by the Church: it was considered natural (Labarge xiii).

England's common law was particularly restrictive to women, especially married women. Her role was "to marry and to serve" (Fell 148). All her possessions belonged to her husband, but rules were made to ensure she was not completely stripped of her entire dowry without her agreement (Labarge 34). She could not make a will without her husband's consent, because in theory she owned nothing, but thankfully husbands usually agreed. Later when towns started to emerge, the law became more lenient on women. Women could conduct a profession on her own, and act in her husband's name when he was away (Labarge 34-35). Widowhood could change a woman's life for the better, often for the first time allowing her to become independent and being able to make her own decisions. She now had a legal status and thus could make decisions for herself, and she could inherit some of her husband's money (Labarge 28).

The Norman Conquest introduced the Gregorian reform which then led to the introduction of strict Canon Law. England came increasingly under the influence of Roman Christianity, and Canon Law was heavily influenced by Roman law (Fell 152). According to Fell, it was the combination of Canon Law and feudalism that settled the inferior position of women (13-14). Canon Law was highly influential on woman's position, especially on marriage. This law system was based on Church doctrine and mimics Saint Paul's statements (Labarge 30, Fell 152-153). While maintaining a tight grip on women, the Church was responsible for one major improvement: a marriage was only legal when both parties consented to the marriage, which made marriage less financial in nature (Labarge 30). However, according to Canon Law, the husband was his wife's superior. Under Canon Law, wife beating was allowed, as long as the women were not killed or hurt (Power 16, Labarge 25).

Gies and Gies argue that feudalism was mostly responsible for the declining position of women, rather than the Church (27). Feudal society was essentially military, and therefore the domain of men. Land was given by a lord in return for military services, which automatically eliminated women from owning land (Gies and Gies 27). Women could inherit land when there was no male heir, but these heiresses were desirable marriage material and never stayed unmarried long (Gies and Gies 27, 29). Gies and Gies state that even though women had no legal rights, this was often different in daily life (29). They note that married heiresses could make legal decisions, like making wills, own chattel, sue people, and

husbands could not sell their land without their consent (29). Power explains that unmarried women and widows were practically equal to men under the law, but marriage stripped her of those rights (38). However, in daily life, women were important figures: wives were the head of the household, and took over their husbands' tasks while he was away. She would be in charge of all financial issues, the staff and tenants, the domestic tasks and the estate. She had to be clever and competent and would have needed excellent organising skills (Power 42-43).

Due to the focus on children's literature in this research, it is important to look at girlhood in the Middle Ages. A girl's options in life were limited: she could marry, go to a convent or work in a household, but marriage was the preferred option. Childhood was divided into three parts: infantia, pueritia and adolescentia. Adolescentia started with the first menstruation, and meant that girls could marry or decline the marriage arranged for them during childhood against a fee (Kline 13). The medieval woman was almost always under the authority of a man: first as a daughter by her father or male guardian, then by her husband when she married (Gies and Gies 27). Girls were seen as emotionally unstable and physically weak, while boys were defined by their male characteristics (Klein 14). The problem with daughters was that they cost the family money, while sons brought in money. They had to raise the girl and then provide a dowry, while a son could work and marry (Klein 15). Usually the father or guardian chose the husband (Gies and Gies 27). Marriage was more a financial and economic affair (Fell 150, Labarge 5). It is likely that women and girls saw marriage as a job or a necessary part of life, as a "social promotion" that made her head of a household (Fell 154). Girls were often married young, sometimes to men much older, so widows were often young too (Labarge 28). Sometimes children were betrothed to each other in their infancy and grew up together, which could help build a happy marriage. Furthermore, Power states that fathers often did their best to find the best match for their daughters, so it is wrong to assume that marriages were often unhappy (41). However, the king could arrange a marriage for a widow in the absence of a male heir (Fell 149, Gies and Gies 28). This is clear in *Peregrine*: Lady Edith flees the country in fear of being married off by the King to a man who is only interested in her fortune (Goodman 3).

Young girls usually did receive some education, but this was mostly reserved for the higher classes. They would learn sufficient Latin for reading religious works, French and English, skills required for managing a household, and learn how to conduct business and how to behave in company (Kline 16). Girls of higher classes could be sent to nunneries or other households and lower class girls could take on an apprenticeship, while it is difficult to

say whether poor girls received any education (Power 80, 86). Around the age of eight, noble girls would be sent away to another household or nunnery, where they would learn about reading, writing, weaving, embroidering, music, cooking, sewing, medicine and other tasks that would prepare them for their role as mistress of the household (Bishop 134). They would also learn social skills, to make them successful members of society (Power 76). Their education was meant to develop feminine skills and activities rather than intellectual knowledge. Obedience and submission to her parents and future husband was key (Labarge 27).

Male education was remarkably different from female education. It was feared that boys would become too soft if they remained under female influence too long. Aristocratic boys were therefore often sent away to other castles of a higher lord or family member where they served as pages and received military training. Their training consisted, among others, of hunting, hawking, fencing, carving meat and dancing (Bishop 134). This is clearly present in *Alanna: The First Adventure*. Alanna and her brother are to be sent away to a nunnery and castle respectively. Alanna's brother will become a page, while Alanna will learn about magic, which they both resent (Pierce 1-4). Catherine is also clearly being prepared to become mistress of a household: she must embroider, and she helps many sick residents with her ointments and potions (Cushman 4, 10). Kline writes that noble boys and girls would sometimes be educated together because of the marriage prospective it created (18).

An option for middle class girls was to learn a craft or trade at another household or they could take an apprenticeship (Power 57). This supplied her with a means of earning money, while it also increased her chances of a good marriage (Kline 18). The rise of towns supplied women with more options in life: she could work, and continue to do so independently after her marriage (Fell 158). She did not have to take on her husband's trade after marriage, but could continue with her own (Power 53, 57). This provided a family with two incomes, and unmarried women with financial independence (Power 53). However, they were refused entry into the gilds and their income was generally lower than that of men (Labarge 160). Town's women had more rights than feudal ladies (Gies and Gies 29). Marriage was an almost inevitable future for women, especially in a feudal society, where unmarried women had no place (Power 40). A woman's true purpose was to be an obedient wife and a dutiful mother. Kline notes that even nuns were "brides of Christ" (19). Women were always defined by their relationship to men.

Becoming a nun seemed to be the only alternative to marriage for a girl of a higher

class, but an interesting one for women with intellectual aspirations (Power 89, Labarge 100). Poorer peasant women could not afford the required dowry to enter, but because they often worked on land they would be useful there (Power 89-90). Some parents would send their daughter to a monastery, because marriage would be too costly, and some would enter because they could not find a man (Labarge 29, Power 90). Not all women entered the monastery because of religious ambitions, but because monastic life provided women with a career and respect from society (Power 90). In the early Middle Ages, monasteries were centres of learning and knowledge of a very high standard. However, their standard declined in the later Middle Ages (Power 96). In the Anglo-Saxon period, an abbess was usually in charge of both male and female nunneries, but later this was believed to be against "the natural order", so they were gradually replaced with men (Fell 13, Labarge 33). Unfortunately, even nunneries had an inferior status: there was not always enough place for women in monasteries because the wealthy were less willing to support nunneries financially (Fell 160). Late medieval nuns were not allowed to perform certain religious duties, and thus they relied on men. In turn, male clerks feared the presence of women would be a threat to their vows of chastity, and refused to admit women into their order (Fell 161).

This chapter has tried to show what life was like for women in the Middle Ages. The modern view that medieval women lacked independence and were voiceless is not entirely true. A woman's life was marked by limitations, and she was almost always under the authority of men. A woman's main purpose in life was to marry. If she did not, she could retire to a convent, and find intellectual and religious fulfilment as well as respect from society there. Middle class women could learn a trade and make a living of their own. Despite these limitations, there are plenty of strong, intelligent and conspicuous medieval women who have left their mark on history. In the words of medieval writer Christine de Pisan: "every reasonable man must prize, cherish, love woman. […] She is his mother, his sister, his friend. He must not treat her as an enemy" (qtd. in Gies and Gies 12).

Part II: Analysis of the Novels

The following section of this thesis will look at the selected novels in detail and focus on the modern novels to see how they each contribute to a realistic impression of the Middle Ages by comparing them to medieval examples of historical and literary women. All analysed books contain female teenage protagonists, and all books are set in a medieval or pseudo-medieval world. A close look at the novels used for this study reveals that most of these young women are strong and independent, but they also suffer from limitations imposed on them by society. Most of the books are about their quests for freedom and their desire to follow their dreams. The characters present a medieval period that is made up of individuals, who each had their own opinions. Some girls in the novels are obedient and content with their lives, whereas others need more fulfilment in their lives. There are traditional characters who do not question their position, but also rebellious characters who defy the standards of their time. Each character has her own ideas and plans, which shows that medieval society is not a homogenous one. The treatment of the Middle Ages and its patriarchal society is different in each book, but most of them contain some sort of critique on the position of women. This section investigates the modern and medieval values used in the novels to see how a nuanced, realistic and diverse picture of medieval women is created by comparing the characters to medieval women who resemble them in several aspects. In the following chapters women who cross-dress, women who go on pilgrimage or travels, women who resist marriage, women who fight, women who rule, and women who write will be discussed.

Because the books deal with women who are suppressed, the feminist agenda is clearly present. The medieval surroundings highlight the women's inferior position, especially when compared to the modern western world where women generally have the same chances as men. The women are aware of their low status, and they believe it is unfair. Alanna, Catherine and Edith, the heroines of *Alanna: The First Adventure, Catherine Called Birdy* and *Peregrine,* often complain about what is expected of them as a woman: they have to stand up straight, be quiet, be patient, contain their emotions and be obedient (Pierce 1, Cushman 66, 54, Goodman 4). Catherine makes a list of activities she cannot do, for instance go on a crusade, laugh out loud, drink in ale houses, piss in the fire, be alone and marry who she wants (Cushman 66). Alanna exclaims during battle that "I may be a girl, but I can defend –or attack! - as well as any boy!", while Judith believes girls and boys deserve the same chances (Pierce 254, Haahr 220). When her friend Aelis is married off to a young duke, Catherine, realising that they are sold like cattle, says that "Aelis was sold at auction to the highest

bidder like a horse at a horse fair" (Cushman 67). Judith would rather kill herself than marry Lord Norbert (Haahr 36). The girls are aware of their unequal position in society and so were medieval authors. Christine de Pisan wrote about gender inequality in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, and the author of *Roman de Silence* writes extensively about men and women's position in society. In the introduction of *Catherine, Called Birdy*, Cushman and Linda Sue Park assume that Catherine's rebelliousness is a modern trait, and Park explains that modern readers will be able to relate to Catherine's feelings, despite the differences of the period (vi, 168). Catherine creates a link between the past and the present, making the Middle Ages more accessible for the modern reader. Indeed, on the one hand, she is just like a modern teenager: she dreams about boys, complains about chores and prefers to spend her time with her friends. On the other hand, her character explores the possibility that during medieval times, rebellious girls existed too.

Chapter 3
Women Who Cross-Dress

Cross-dress up is a common theme in modern novels on the Middle Ages. Both Judith and Alanna dress as a boy to be able to follow their dream, and Catherine briefly dresses up as a boy in order not to attract attention to herself when she goes out. Cross-dressing helps the women to participate in society and do as they please without the cultural restraints of their sex. It enables them to be treated on an equal footing with men. Cross-dressing was a popular theme in the Middle Ages too, both in historical accounts and in fiction (Hotchkiss 3). It is therefore no surprise that it is incorporated into these modern stories.

Cross-dressing is also a common theme in medieval saint's lives and romances and reveals much about gender perceptions in the Middle Ages. Martha Easton writes that there are over forty examples of female cross-dressing saints, from the beginning of Christianity till the sixteenth century (334). Women would cross-dress to avoid marriages, protect their virginity or to live pious lives. They would cut their hair and abandon their female sexuality (Easton 341). That is not to say that cross-dressing was officially accepted by the Church. Deuteronomy 22:5 is clear on the subject: "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God". However, in the Middle Ages, women cross-dressing as men were tolerated to some extent and rarely punished (Easton 341). It was seen as a way for women to improve themselves and make themselves "more rational and holy" (Bullough 225, 227). When men cross-dressed, it was assumed they wanted easier access to women. Their motifs for cross-dressing were not noble, as they did not need to improve themselves (Easton 346). Silence, the cross-dressing girl from the thirteenth-century Old French *Roman de Silence*, experiences this too. Being a man is better than being a woman, she says: "'indeed', […] 'it would be too bad to step down when I'm on top. If I'm on top, why should I step down?'" (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2639-2641).

Roman de Silence is a good example of medieval cross-dressing that provides a model for the many motifs found in the novels under scrutiny in this thesis. In this romance, Silence, a girl, is raised as a boy to protect the inheritance of her family, because women cannot inherit (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2033-2058). She outshines the men during male activities such as wrestling and jousting (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2494-2496). King Evan's Queen Eupheme falls in love with Silence but is rejected by her (Roche-Mahdi ll. 3716-3894). The Queen decides to punish Silence by setting the impossible task of bringing Merlin to court (Roche-Mahdi ll. 5779-

5855). Silence succeeds (Roche-Mahdi ll. 5915-6160). At court, Merlin explains that no man can capture him, and thus he reveals Silence's gender. He also reveals one of the nuns at court is actually a man and the Queen's lover (Roche-Mahdi ll. 6525-6552). The Queen and her lover are executed, while Silence is dressed in women's clothing and marries King Evan (Roche-Mahdi ll. 6650-6680). This clearly shows that men who dressed as women were not tolerated, while Silence is rewarded for her loyalty to her father.

This pattern is present in the modern novels as well. Alanna excels during her training at the palace and even manages to beat her bully who is older and of a higher rank (Pierce 97). When her identity is revealed to Prince Jonathan, he does not punish her, but he rewards her by promoting her from page to squire (Pierce 273). We have seen that Barnhouse finds stories with a modern message unhistorical, in particular *Minstrel's Tale* (Pugh and Weisl 54). For Barnhouse, Judith's concern with gender equality and social engagement is too modern (Pugh and Weisl 54). However, comparison with the medieval *Roman de Silence* shows that Judith's story mimics a great deal of medieval stories that deal with cross-dressing, female musicians, and concerns about female education, found in other medieval works such as *Yde et Olive*, *Roman de Silence*, Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, *The Squire's Tale* and *Aucassin et Nicolette* (Pugh and Weisl 54). Judith resembles Silence in many ways too. They both attract the love of other women, and both women are talented musicians.

Examples of female saints who dressed as men are Saint Euphrosyne and Saint Eugenia, who both dressed as men and lived among men in monasteries. Saint Euphrosyne lived as a man in a monastery for thirty-eight years, because she preferred a monastic life over marriage (Szarmach 356, Skeat Vol. II 343-355). Christina of Markyate ran away from home in the disguise of a man into hermitage, to protect her vow of chastity, and later she founded a priory (Fell 150, 161-162, Talbot 91-93). Saint Eugenia of Rome fled from her father dressed as a man to ensure her safety, and later became an abbot on request by her fellow brethren (Skeat Vol. I 27-33).

Medieval women often dressed as men to protect their virginity, devote themselves to God and to evade marriage, which is mostly not the case in the modern novels. The protagonists of both the modern novels and the medieval romances use their new identity to achieve their plans, which are not acceptable for girls to participate in. In order to achieve their dreams, these women must go through a ritual of "unwomaning": they must cut their hair and put on men's clothes (Szarmach 357). This shows that medieval authors were aware of gender differences (Pugh and Weisl 54). The women's only chance of achieving their goals

and being acknowledged for their intelligence is to become a man: as a woman, they will not receive the same respect, which highlights the social injustice. Furthermore, cross-dressing can protect the women from harm when they are away from home. Judith's cross-dressing ensures her safety during her journey, as women did not travel on their own (Haahr 37-38). When Christina of Markyate flees her house, she dresses as a boy and leaves unseen (Talbot 91-93).

Valerie R. Hotchkiss writes extensively about medieval female cross-dressing. She argues that by means of cross-dressing, a new kind of heroine is created: one that "combines traditional feminine virtues with stereotypical male qualities of daring, strength and perseverance" (4). This is particularly true for Judith and Alanna, who show themselves to be brave and persevering, but they also maintain their intelligence, gentleness and benevolence: Judith often helps other people when she can, and as her journey progresses she learns how to outsmart people (Haahr 188-90). Alanna quickly becomes one of the best pages at court and singlehandedly fights off her male bully (Pierce 95-97). She resists her femininity at first, but later on she accepts it, stating that it does not matter what gender she is, because she is just as good as everyone else (Pierce 135, 273). However, the girls' success is still attributed to their male traits, thus highlighting the patriarchal society that has no place for femininity (Hotchkiss 4). The girls, in their male disguise, prove to be just as good and worthy as other men, but in their female appearance they would have been denied the same opportunity. On the other hand, cross-dressing can be seen as female empowerment, and as a reaction against the male dominated society that denies them any participation (Hotchkiss 4). Female cross-dressing subsequently becomes a way to rebel against the patriarchal society, and it helps to create female heroes, by putting them on par with men (Hotchkiss 9). Women tend to be outsiders because of their gender, but cross-dressing allows them to participate equally in society (Hotchkiss 8). Hotchkiss believes that the popularity of the cross-dressing motif likely shows a tolerant view on transvestites: the cross-dressing women are usually depicted in a positive way, and they subtly bring up the issue of gender inequality: women dressed as men can do the same as men (Hotchkiss 12). Cross-dressing therefore helps to create layered characters: the boundaries between men and women are diminished by the protagonists, because they maintain their femininity, whilst portraying male traits at the same time. The message to the reader is clear: they can become anything they like, regardless of their gender. On the other hand, it also highlights the restrictions of being a woman.

Paul E. Szarmach explains the literary motif of cross-dressing further in his account of

Saint Euphrosyne. When the female protagonist has difficulties to achieve her goal, "the solution lies in disguise, stratagem, subterfuge, willing servants and intermediaries. […] Like many an active heroine, Euphrosyne takes charge of her own situation, helped by secondary characters" (356). This description of the life of Saint Euphrosyne can be applied to the modern novels as well. Judith flees from an arranged marriage with a man she finds repulsive, and Alanna dresses as a boy to become a knight while her father has other plans for her. Nonetheless, they would be nowhere without their helpers. The modern authors used the elements found in medieval stories, and used them to build bridges between modern and medieval values. The stories about female empowerment and self-development have a modern feel to them, but they derive ultimately from medieval sources and tradition. The novels are therefore not as anachronistic as they seem.

Chapter 4
Women on Pilgrimage

Peregrine, by Joan Goodman, deals with the young widow Edith, who goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to escape her marriage and to find her old self again. The journey is long and arduous for her and her companions, both physically and emotionally. During her journey, Edith becomes a strong, confident woman who learns to make her own decisions. Edith was certainly not the only medieval woman who undertook such a journey to Rome or Jerusalem. Margery Kempe is well known for her account of her pilgrimage in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Christine de Pisan wrote about women on pilgrimage in her *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, and Chaucer's Wife of Bath from the *Canterbury Tales* is a well-known literary example of a female pilgrim. This shows that medieval women were able to go on pilgrimage, and that Edith is not a modern projection on the Middle Ages.

During the fourteenth century, pilgrimage was a popular form of devotion for people, but these journeys were difficult to undertake. The journey to Jerusalem was long, difficult and dangerous (Craig 2003 154). Theoretically, a pilgrimage was possible for women. Men and women pilgrims had the same rights to devotional practices under Canon Law, as God did not distinguish between male and female souls. Men and women would wear the same uniform, and they were both protected by law during their journey (Craig 2003 157-158). In practice, however, it was difficult for women to undertake a pilgrimage, especially when their pilgrimage went to Rome or Jerusalem, due to the length, costs and risks of this journey (Craig 2003 154). Nevertheless, they still went. Craig estimates that a third of all pilgrims in the late Middle Ages were women (Craig 2009 9). There were certainly enough women to create separate dormitories for women in Jerusalem (Craig 2003 155).

If a woman wanted to go on pilgrimage, she would need to overcome financial and social barriers. First of all, she needed permission from a superior, for instance her husband, father, priests or bishop. We have seen in Chapter 2 that women had few opportunities to make their own decisions. Widows had more freedom, but still needed permission from the clergy (Craig 2003 159). It is worth noting that men needed permission of their superiors too (Craig 2003 158). Secondly, she needed money. A journey to Jerusalem was long and expensive, and as a result most pilgrims were wealthy (Craig 2003 158). The reason for travelling to Jerusalem was generally not for healing, but to strengthen devotion, or to secure a place in heaven. A pilgrimage to Jerusalem was for the benefit of the pilgrim alone; no one but themselves would benefit from it. They would be away from home for months or even

years, which conflicted with their primary function as caregivers and heads of the household (Craig 2003 154). They would have to abandon their duties as wives and mothers, but women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere (Craig 2009 4, Craig 2003 154, 159).

After the women gained permission and money, they needed protection. They would travel with other women, for propriety, or with their husband, but they would also form groups with other pilgrims for safety (Craig 2003 162, 171). The position of women in these groups was difficult for both men and women. Craig argues that this was caused by the fact that women had no social purpose during their journey. They were not someone's wife, mother, sister, daughter, maid or sexual partner: "they were not caregivers or providers" (Craig 2003 162). She claims that women were only tolerated during pilgrimages when they were silent and invisible, and that they were often regarded as out of place and aggravating (Craig 2003 162-163). It was therefore difficult for them to find a group to join (Craig 2003 163). Some women would offer services to men, such as washing shirts or even sex (Craig 2003 172). Sometimes women were barred from visiting shrines. The reasons for this varied. Sometimes it was for their own protection from the large crowds, but at other times it was because of their innate sinfulness (Craig 2003 165-166). So women were able to go on pilgrimage, but they were not readily tolerated.

Margery Kempe, an English mystic, is a famous example of a woman who went on several pilgrimages. Her experience is recorded in *The Book of Margery Kempe,* which she dictated in the fifteenth century. Margery was extremely religious and believed she received visions of Jesus Christ after the difficult birth of her first child (Staley ll. 130-188). After having had fourteen children, she negotiates a chaste marriage with her husband and goes on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (Staley l. 2717, ll. 519-581, ll. 1382-2388). Margery writes in her book that she wants to go on pilgrimage for "ghostly helth" (Staley l. 506). Her husband consents and they visit several shrines together (Staley ll. 512-518). When she arrives at Jerusalem, the Lord says to her "Thu comyst not hedyr, dowtyr, for no nede but for meryte and for mede, for thy synnes wer forgovyn the er thow come her, and therfor thu comyst hedyr for incresyng of thi mede and of thi meryte" (Staley ll. 1679-1682). The Lord is pleased with her obedience and devotion to Him.

Her religious devotion and desire to go on pilgrimage gave her a position as an outsider, since she did not conform to the "social and religious patterns" available at the time (Atkinson 13). After gaining permission from her husband to go on pilgrimage, Margery went to Jerusalem, and later she went to Spain, Germany and shrines in England (Staley Book I ll.

505-581, ll. 1530-1808, ll. 2544-2605, book II ll. 259-509). During her pilgrimages, she vexed her fellow travellers by weeping hysterically and loudly, which is called by some "the gyft of the Holy Ghost" (Staley l. 1475). Margery was not quiet and invisible during her pilgrimage, as was expected of a woman, and her company would try to punish her for this behaviour (Staley ll. 1417-1422, ll. 1543-1548).

The Wife of Bath is a famous literary pilgrim. She has travelled to Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago de Compostela, Boulogne and Cologne (Chaucer ll. 463-466). She has been widowed five times and has become wealthy, making it easier for her to travel. Like Margery, she annoys her fellow pilgrims, in her case, by talking incessantly and she even scares the Pardoner, who is about to marry, but wants to reconsider his marriage after her words (ll. 163-168). The Wife of Bath has strong opinions on marriage and she admits to being abusive to her husbands and lecherous (ll. 43-168). As Craig explained, female pilgrims were expected to remain silent during their travels, so as not to offend the male pilgrims (2003 162-163). She comes across as vain and hot-tempered, so her motifs for going on pilgrimage may not be entirely religious. Despite her flaws, Chaucer is not necessarily portraying her negatively. He treats her with sympathy when she discusses her fifth husband, who treats her violently (ll. 503-828). Moreover, of the three female pilgrims, the Wife of Bath gets to speak the longest, making her one of the better-developed characters of Chaucer's work.

Another valuable source on pilgrimages is Christine de Pisan's work *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. Her book is a guide for all ranks of women and teaches them honourable behaviour for their own benefit, rather than their husbands' benefit (Craig 2009 72). Her writing provides an interesting insight into medieval women's lives from all backgrounds. Christine warns women of the dangers of leaving their normal surroundings and going on a pilgrimage (Pisan 1985 152). A pilgrimage would be sinful if it was initiated for the wrong reasons, for instance when she uses "pilgrimages as an excuse to get away from the town in order to go somewhere to play about or kick up her heels in some merry company" (1985 152). By condemning this behaviour, she shows that spirited women who went out did exist. When she discusses the conduct of artisans' wives, she tells them specifically not to go on a pilgrimage or any other journey without good reason. They should stay at home: roaming the streets and gossiping with other women was done by "slovenly housewives" (1985 168). It was often believed that pilgrims, women as well as men, would go on pilgrimage for fun, which undermines the true goal of devotion (Craig 2009 74). However, earlier in her work, Christine explains that no woman is of a high enough rank to avoid pilgrimage, to visit

churches and shrines, "for if she is ashamed of doing good, she is ashamed of saving her soul" (1985 54). Christine discourages pilgrimages, because she assumes they are carried out for the wrong reasons, but perhaps to protect the women from danger as well.

Edith, the heroine of *Peregrine*, is able to go on a pilgrimage: she is rich, recently widowed and relatively free to make her own decisions, in which she draws parallels with the Wife of Bath. Her decision is supported, reluctantly, by her father and the abbot (Goodman 2). Edith's journey however is not about religion, but about escaping a forced marriage and finding her true self again. Edith is afraid of being married off by the King to a man she dislikes. In order to maintain her freedom, but also to grieve, she needs to flee the country (Goodman 2-3). During her journey, Edith meets several women, who all teach her about life. She meets queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, the queen of France, who despite her status is not free to do as she wishes (Goodman 76-77). She meets the Trobairitz, female poets from the south of France, who encourage Edith to express herself through music and poetry (Goodman 89-95). In our modern society, religion is becoming less important. Young adults, the book's target group, are in a phase in which they are trying to find their own identity. In this, they resemble Edith, who has to find her place in the world, now that she can finally make her own decisions. By making her journey less religiously motivated and more personally motivated, modern teenagers can relate to her better.

Joan Goodman, the author of *Peregrine*, writes that she purposely made Edith a widow, in order to give her freedom. Widowhood gave women more independence and a better legal status during the Middle Ages, which we see in Edith (Labarge 28). Goodman did not want her character, who also appeared in an earlier novel, to give up her spirit (221-222). Her husband and child had to die, so Edith could explore the world and follow her heart. Being a widow gives Edith the freedom to make her own decisions. During her journey, she gradually becomes stronger and more confident and she finally is able to mourn the deaths of her husband and child and look towards the future (Goodman 211-220).

The idea of an independent woman going on a pilgrimage is not a modern projection. While women are actively discouraged from going on pilgrimages by Christine de Pisan, Craig estimates a third of all pilgrims in Jerusalem were women (2009 9). Female pilgrims were not at all rare, but not much is documented about them. However, the depictions of the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe provide us with more information on the type of woman who would take part in pilgrimages. Edith, though imaginary, shines a light on a much under-documented aspect of medieval life, but also on the lives of noble women.

Chapter 5
Women Who Resist Marriage

The novels often deal with main characters who run away from marriage. Catherine tries to avoid marriage at all costs. Judith and Edith run away from home to avoid their impending marriages. The girls are all young, still in their teens. During the Middle Ages, women were legally allowed to marry at the age of twelve. If an engagement was settled in childhood, the woman could disband it against a fee (Klein 13). The protagonists cannot decide their own fate, and they depend on a male figure. Their purpose in life is to marry, and every part of their life prepares them for that. Despite having no say over their own life, their spirit cannot be controlled. The girls in these novels take action to achieve their dreams. Judith leaves her home dressed as a boy, and Edith goes on pilgrimage to avoid her marriage. Catherine spends most of the novel trying to repel her suitors and resisting marriage. Her nurse, after witnessing another fight between Catherine and her father, sighs: "Child, a dog is wiser than you. He does not bark at his own master" (Cushman 118). Her behaviour is frowned upon by those that surround her.

Chapter 2 has shown that most women were brought up to become good wives. Marriage was their ultimate goal. Even nuns were seen as "brides of Christ", so in a way, marriage was unavoidable for women in the Middle Ages (Klein 19). Women were always under the authority of men. The men made decisions for them or the women needed permission from them. Fell argues that women grew up knowing what was expected of them, and most likely abided by their fate (Fell 154). In that respect, the girls in the novels could be seen as anachronistic, because they wilfully differ from their time's norms.

However, medieval literature contains many examples of women who refused marriage, in particular for reasons of piety. Some of these women were canonised as saints. Ælfric wrote about many women who remained a virgin, resisted marriage and devoted their life to God. His *Saints' Lives* contains eight of these women who devoted their life to Christendom, such as Saint Euphrosyne, Saint Æthelthryth and Saint Cecilia. These women preserve their virginity and they are praised for it. Avoiding marriage for God was commended. For instance, Euphrosyne dresses as a man to escape the marriage her father has arranged for her and lives as a man in a monastery (Skeat Vol II 343).

Saint Agnes, Saint Agatha and Saint Lucy all refused marriage as well, in favour of virginity. All were martyred due to their faith in Christ, during a time when Romans prosecuted Christians. Their refusal to marry angers their suitors. Saint Agnes passionately

talks about her lover, Jesus Christ: "when I love Him, I am wholly pure; when I touch Him, I am unstained, when I receive Him, I am still a virgin" (Skeat Vol I 173). The women are submitted to torture and public shaming, but they remain faithful. When Saint Agatha refuses to worship the pagan gods of governor Quintianus after he threats her with torture, he says to her: "thou sayest that thou hast chosen to suffer the tortures, since thou repeatest insults against me" (Skeat Vol I 201). What angers the suitors most, is the disobedience of the women. Saint Lucy's suitor, Paschasius, tells her he will beat her if she will not be silent about God (Skeat Vol I 215). Nonetheless, the women are admired by Ælfric. The women are described as "noble" and "blessed" (Skeat Vol I 195, 211).

Anglo-Saxon literature also speaks of the maiden and martyr Julianna, who refused to marry a pagan and whose life resembles that of Saint Euphrosyne. A poem, written by Cynewulf, relates the story of Juliana who lived during the time of Emperor Maximian, in the fourth century. A rich official of a higher rank than Juliana, Hiliseus, asks her to marry him. She refuses, stating that she has taken a vow of maidenhood and only loves Christ (Nelson 55-61). Her refusal causes her much hardship, but her faith never wanes. When her father wants her to convert to his pagan God, she says about God: "I know he is my help, and He will keep me safe from harm and from the fiends of hell" (Nelson 63). Juliana's strong faith makes her a praiseworthy woman. She is hailed as a courageous woman for putting her faith before marriage (Nelson 56).

Another famous example of a woman resisting marriage is the English Saint Christina of Markyate. At a young age, she took a vow of chastity (Talbot 39, 45). She is plagued by suitors, such as the bishop of Durham and Burthred, her higher born betrothed. She manages to escape marriage by fleeing dressed as a boy, and then becomes a successful abbess and hermit. When she refuses her marriage to Burthred, her family forces her physically to marry, but she still refuses to consummate the marriage (Talbot 47). They forbid her to carry out any religious activity (Talbot 47). She is accused by Reverend Fredebert of disobeying her parents and denying the sacred bond of marriage (Talbot 61). She eventually escapes, dressed as a boy, to fulfil her vow as bride of Christ (Talbot 89-91). Her position is difficult, because she lives in a world that valued parental authority as well as virginity (Labarge 106).

These examples show how much virginity was valued during the Middle Ages. If marriage was refused because of religious reasons, in order for the woman to devote herself to Christianity, this was an admirable deed. The women suffered much hardship due to their decision to ignore their parents' wishes, and some of them, such as Saint Euphrosyne and

Saint Agatha were martyred.

These medieval women seem to be a far cry from the heroines in the modern novels. The main difference between the medieval examples of women evading marriage and the characters from the novels is their motif: the Anglo-Saxon women avoid marriage for reasons of chastity and piety. Medieval women could also choose monastic life for intellectual reasons: the religious life was an interesting alternative for women with intellectual ambitions. Their reasons are entirely selfless, while the modern characters avoid it for themselves. They choose to follow their passions, or they refuse to give up their freedom. However, much like the Anglo-Saxon saints, the girls ignore their parents' wishes to follow a more fulfilling life, be it a religious life, or a secular life in which they follow their passions.

Broadly speaking, most main characters suffer under the patriarchal society. As established in the framework, life for women was hard. Their chances in life were limited, and they were seen as second rate. Marriage was the only way for them to get on in society; the only attractive alternative was the nunnery, which provided them with intellectual fulfilment and respect, as the Anglo-Saxon women discussed earlier show (Fell 150, 154, Labarge 100).

A theme that is often explored in the books is female submission and gender equality. The girls are clearly inferior, because they do not get the same chances as boys. The main characters in these novels are aware of their lower position. Catherine, Alanna and Edith often complain about what is expected of them as a woman. Catherine actively rebels against her father, who tries to find a good husband for her (Cushman 3). Judith and Edith escape their marriages (Haahr 36-37, Goodman 3). Still, the girls dream of a better, usually more adventurous life.

As seen before it is difficult to establish when a character is anachronistic, but while the Middle Ages did bring forth spirited women, it is likely that most girls accepted their situation without a fight. They grew up knowing that becoming a wife and mother was their fate (Fell 154). In this respect, Catherine's behaviour is unusual. She refuses to marry, and does her best to scare off her suitors. Her betrothed is an ugly, brawly, unintelligent man, and the thought of marriage repulses her. She is afraid that by marrying, she loses her identity (Cushman 162). The people in her surroundings try to convince her that marriage is not as bad as Catherine thinks it is, and that it does not mean she will lose her identity. Madame Joanna, cousin to the king, explains to her that no one can do as they please, not even she, but she tries to live her life to the fullest. She compares her life to a bird: "just because she doesn't flap her wings all the time, doesn't mean she can't fly" (Cushman 83). Catherine's mother and nurse

keep reminding her that marriage is woman's duty, which means marrying her father's choice (98). Catherine remains stubborn, and a large part of the novel comprises Catherine's effort to get rid of her suitors and the trouble it causes with her surroundings, her father in particular.

Cushman notes at the end of the novel that "most girls would have consented, knowing no alternative", which also emphasises Catherine's unusual character (Cushman 168). One of the nuns in Anna's convent in *Anna of Byzantium* was sent there by her parents, and she was content there, because she knew about her parents plans from birth and never knew an alternative (Barrett 195). Catherine's resistance to marriage can be seen as an anomaly from a modern perspective, but the previous discussion has shown that spirited girls like Catherine did exist. Avoiding marriage for religious reasons was not uncommon. Catherine's spirit and her interests seem modern. She dreams about her future husband, she becomes jealous when her uncle marries her friend; she hates doing chores and does not like doing as she is told (Cushman 52, 67). In the introduction, Cushman and Park assume that Catherine's rebelliousness is a modern trait, and Park explains that modern readers will be able to relate to Catherine's feelings, despite the differences of the period (vi, 165). It shows that people in the Middle Ages are not entirely different from modern people. Her acceptance of her marriage at the end of the novel is perhaps from a medieval perspective more likely, and this makes Catherine a hybrid between medieval and modern values. Judith and Edith's decision to flee their homes was unusual in the Middle Ages, but it was not unheard of that women avoided marriage for a life in a convent, as it was an attractive option for women who had intellectual ambitions or who sought a religious life (Power 89, Labarge 100).

Chapter 6
Women Who Fight

Women warriors were in an unusual position during the Middle Ages. Women had to defend their castles and homes while their husbands were away, but they were expected to continue their domestic duties when their husband returned (McLaughlin 196-197). Women therefore had opportunities to engage in warfare, but only when necessary. Nonetheless, warfare has always been seen as a male activity. Megan McLaughlin explains that manhood was expressed through these activities, as it showed strength and fighting prowess. If a man was incompetent at warfare activities, he was regarded as "effeminate" (McLaughlin 194). While female warriors were more common in the early Middle Ages, during the later Middle Ages, from the thirteenth till the fifteenth century, they became rarer and they attracted more negative comments (McLaughlin 199-201). Women who took up armour were defying gender roles by entering a male sphere and this was generally not accepted by other men. McLaughlin argues that these warrior women have been largely overlooked in scholarly research (196). Indeed, not much scholarly literature is to be found on this subject.

McLaughlin explains that in accounts on female warriors from the eleventh century, the phenomenon was described neutrally, suggesting it did not surprise the writers (194). A later account by the writer Saxo Grammaticus in his *Gesta Danorum* from 1200, reveals more wonder: Saxo focuses on the way these women differ from normal women, thus highlighting their peculiarity:

> There were once women among the Danes who dressed themselves to look like men, and spent almost every minute cultivating soldier's skills; they did not want the sinews of their valour to lose tautness and be infected by self-indulgence. Loathing a dainty style of living, they would harden body and mind with toil and endurance, rejecting the fickle pliancy of girls and compelling their womanish spirits to act with a virile ruthlessness. They courted military celebrity so earnestly that you would have guessed they had unsexed themselves. Those especially who had forceful personalities or were tall and elegant embarked on this way of life. As if they were forgetful of their true selves they put toughness before allure, aimed at conflicts instead of kisses, tasted blood, not lips, sought the clash of arms rather than the arm's embrace, fitted to weapons hands which should have been weaving, desired not the couch but the kill, and those they could have appeased with looks they attacked with lances. (Saxo Grammaticus 212)

This highlights the strict division between genders in the Middle Ages: men did the fighting while women worked in the domestic sphere. Warrior women deviated from normal gender behaviour, and this was frowned upon by men and seen as unnatural. Saxo claims these warrior women have forgotten their true selves, and that they have "unsexed themselves", and thus expressing his disproval (McLaughlin 195, Saxo Grammaticus 212). Other writers from the thirteenth century attributed dark powers and witchcraft to these women (McLaughlin 200). This stands in sharp contrast with the subject of cross-dressing. Cross-dressing was seen as a way for women to better themselves, especially when done for religious reasons. When a woman took up arms, however, it was seen as unnatural.

Christine de Pisan wrote about warfare in her manual for women, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*. She believes knowledge of warfare is important for women to protect their homes, but only to be used when necessary:

> We have also said that she ought to have the heart of a man, that is, she ought to know how to use weapons and be familiar with everything that pertains to them, so that she may be ready to command her men if the need arises. She should know how to launch an attack or to defend against one, if the situation calls for it. She should take care that her fortresses are well garrisoned. If she is in any doubt about undertaking any course of action, she should sound out her people and find out what they think, rather than do too much on her own initiative. (1985 129)

Women are expected to be just as knowledgeable as men on warfare, but when it comes to important decisions, she should look for advice. This shows that the gender gap in warfare was not as wide as it seems, as women were expected to participate when the need arose and deemed fit to do so. Christine does highlight that knowledge on war is unnatural: a woman needs "the heart of a man" on these matters (1985 129).

Despite this resistance, there are plenty of examples of female warrior women from the Middle Ages. Some of these women can be seen as generals, rather than warriors. In medieval French literature we find, as previously mentioned, Silence, a girl raised as a boy, who struggles with her female and male identity. The French peasant's daughter Jeanne d'Arc is a famous example, and lesser known are Richilde de Hainaut, the Lombard princess Sichelgaita, Blanche of Champagne and Therasia of Portugal (McLaughlin 198-200). Æthelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, is a famous Anglo-Saxon example. The daughter of Alfred the Great, she styled herself as the Lady of the Mercians after her husband Æthelred died and

she continued to rule by herself, but she took over power when her husband was ill (Fell 91). She led an army against the Vikings alongside her brother King Edward, and the Mercian register even claims she actually took part in these battles (McLaughlin 198). She built fortresses all over Mercia (Fell 91). She made alliances with Britons, Picts and Scots to fight against the Vikings and the Welsh (Fell 91-92). In her own time, she was much admired by the Irish and even by the Welsh, and later on the Normans. The Irish referred to her as "famosissima regina Saxonum, 'most famous queen of the English'" in the *Anals of Ulster* (Fell 92).

Another example of a strong, Anglo-Saxon fighting woman is the biblical Judith. While not literally a fighting woman, Judith saves her people by committing murder. This incomplete Anglo-Saxon poem, tells the story of the biblical Judith, a beautiful widow who seduces Holofernes and cuts off his head to save her village from Holofernes' rule (Nelson 11-17). She is admired for this by the poet: he calls her a wise woman (Nelson 17). Holofernes' death allows the Jews to rise and fight: they are called Judith's warriors (Nelson 27). Assuming the role of a general, Judith inspires her people to fight against the Assyrians (Nelson 21).

Saint Helene, or Elene, is also an example of a strong, uncompromising woman. She is the mother of Emperor Constantine, who sends his mother to the Holy Land, "to take charge of a strong troop of men" with an army to find out where the true cross of Christ is buried (Nelson 127). She does not hesitate, and eagerly takes charge of her troop (Nelson 127). After some hardship she succeeds and finds the cross and the nails (Nelson 127-181). Elene is a strong woman who commands men to do her will and succeeds in doing this. While both Judith and Elene are not fighting women in the literal sense, their powerful personas and resourcefulness can be classified as fighting as they take the position of men, as they both lead armies. Moreover, these women are also examples of ruling women, which will be discussed in a later chapter.

The fighting heroine from *Alanna: The First Adventure* dresses as a boy to become a knight. She is the only character of the five books used for this thesis who wants to become a knight. In the pseudo-medieval world Alanna lives in, fighting is associated with men. Her twin brother is supposed to become a knight, while Alanna must learn the art of magic. The children switch places: Alanna dresses up as a boy and becomes a page, while her brother learns about magic, but he does not have to dress as a girl (Pierce 1-4).

In many ways, Alanna resembles Silence. Silence was raised as a boy, but she knows

she is a girl. Silence is not necessarily a warrior woman, but she shows many similarities with Alanna. Silence is a convincing boy and outshines all boys when it comes to male activities such as wrestling and jousting, much like Alanna (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2491-2496, Pierce 93-97). However, her secret identity confuses Silence and she struggles with keeping her identity secret, which she finds deceptive (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2497-2499). The narrative is often interrupted by debates between Nature, Nurture and Reason. These dialogues mark the strict gender division that was common in the Middle Ages: according to Nature, women were expected to be soft and beautiful while men were physically active and strong. Nature urges Silence to give up her façade, for it is not what nature intended for her: "go to a chamber and learn to sew! That's what nature's usage wants of you" (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2527-2529). Silence admits that she would like to learn how to sew, and she describes her cross-dressing as "savage ways" (Roche-Mahdi l. 2545). Reason believes going back to her female identity "would be almost as bad as killing herself": she was raised as a boy and her identity is mostly based on her upbringing, according to Nurture and Reason. Moreover, if she went back to being female, she would lose her privileges she enjoys as a man (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2613-2614). Silence does not know what her true identity is, but decides that it is better to be a boy, because she does not want to lose her status (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2637-2640, l. 2651).

In the same way Alanna struggles with her façade. She is worried about having to lie, worried about being found out, and worried she cannot keep up with the rest of the boys. Her female identity bothers her deeply, and she hates her female features and the changes her body is going through: she blames it for making her weak (Pierce 135). Alanna works hard, and she can keep up with the boys of her group and actually outshines them, similar to Silence (Pierce 93-97). She remains insecure because of her sex, but men like Coram, her assistant, and Prince Jonathan encourage her to continue and to accept herself. When Alanna becomes angry because of her growing chest, Coram gives her advice: "lass, ye've got to accept who ye are. […] Ye can be a woman and still be a warrior" (Pierce 135). Her rebellion against her body reveals how Alanna thinks of women: "people will think I'm soft and silly" (Pierce 135). Femininity is associated with softness and weakness. Like Silence, she is aware that womanhood is considered weak in their worlds. Alanna actively rebels against her femininity and even rejects it. She dislikes the limited duties of a woman: "'sit still, Alanna. Shoulders back, Alanna'. As if that's all I can do with myself" (Pierce 1).

It is striking that when Silence's and Alanna's sex is revealed, their surroundings respond surprised, but not discouraging. Silence is applauded for her loyalty to her father and

to her Queen and for her virtue. She is rewarded too: women can inherit again, so there is no need for her to cross-dress any longer. The King even takes her for a wife (Roche-Mahdi ll. 6629-6676). Her cross-dressing is not regarded negatively. When Alanna's sex is revealed to Jonathan, he is surprised as well and confused, but not angry (Pierce 264). He makes Alanna his squire, despite finding out she is a woman. He maintains she is still the best page of the entire group, and that he would be honoured to have her (Pierce 273). The fact that she is a woman surprises him, but it does not change his opinion about her. Her friend George is surprised too, but he encourages her to continue and to have faith in her abilities (Pierce 177).

The difference between Alanna and the other medieval fighting women is their motivation for fighting. Alanna fights out of choice, not duty. It is her passion and she is good at it. The medieval women generally fight because it is their duty. Silence obeys her father (Roche-Mahdi ll. 2035-2080). Æthelflæd fights because her husband died without an heir and Elene follows her son's orders. Alanna fights because she wants to, and because it suits her better than the magic girls are expected to learn. Her motivation is personal. Alanna defies her duty in order to pursue a more fulfilling life, which can be seen as a modern idea. Nonetheless, it is clear that women, both historically and literary, could take active part in battle and other masculine activities.

Chapter 7
Women Who Rule

Anna, the Byzantine princess and heir to the throne from *Anna of Byzantium*, is in a special position. Female rulers in medieval Europe were relatively scarce. Few women ruled in their own right. The Byzantine Empire had only three female rulers in an 1100 year history (Monter 9). As seen in chapter 2, women were often defined by their relationship to men: they were either daughter, wife, widow or nun. Similarly, the word queen, derived from the Old English "cwen" literally means "wife of a king" (Monter xvi). Women were often crowned to highlight their importance, but their duties remained in the domestic sphere (McNamara and Wemple 91). A woman's power and voice was limited during the Middle Ages, but nonetheless noble women could be a powerful influence on their families and societies (McNamara and Wemple 94). Furthermore, marriages were often made for political reasons, and the women brought land and property with them, which increased their power. Women often served as "peace-weavers" (Parsons 69).

Gender would always be a problem for queens, female regents and female kings. Most monarchies in Europe stated that the succession of the throne should pass via the male line (Parsons 3). Women therefore had few opportunities to rule in their own right (Stafford 2001 398-399). Women more often served as regent while their own son and heir was still underage, or when their husbands were away (Stafford 2001 399). If there was no male heir, women could inherit, but this was rare (Monter 21). When a woman was appointed heir, she would experience much resistance (Monter 21). Queens were always depicted in images as motherly heads of their households, and as examples of dignity and Christian values (Stafford 1993, 144). They were presented as counsellors to their husbands and sons, and protectors of their families' reputation (Stafford 1993 144). Their job was to support and serve their husbands and raise their children. Her role was heavily influenced by her gender, making it difficult for women to become a reigning monarch and establish authority (Stafford 2001 410).

There are plenty of examples of influential medieval women. For example, Eleanor of Aquitaine was duchess of Aquitaine in her own right, Queen of France, then Queen of England and regent of England while her son Richard was on crusade (Morton). She was one of the wealthiest and most powerful women of her time. In southern Europe, Queen Urraca of Léon and Castille was highly successful in ruling and almost tyrannical (Monter 18). In England we find Matilda, appointed heir to the English throne by her father Henry I. This

decision was not supported by his nobles, and her cousin Stephen also tried to claim the throne, resulting in a civil war (Monter 20). A famous example of an English queen is the previously mentioned Æthelflæd, who became Lady of the Mercians and ruled steadfastly together with her husband and continued alone after his death.

In Anglo-Saxon England, a way for women to become powerful and assert authority was to become an abbess. These abbesses were often the daughters of nobles or widows, who founded a monastery on their own land for protection and security (Schulenburg 109). According to Pauline Stafford, their role was heavily gendered too: they were seen as the "mother" of their monastery and its community and they were considered the heads of their households (2001 411). However, an abbess was removed from family life by following a religious and chaste life, which gave them more freedom to pursue other activities, such as teaching (Stafford 2001 411). In Anglo-Saxon England, abbess Hild hosted the Synod of Whitby in 644, which defined the direction of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England. Æthelthryth, Ælfled and Sexburg were much admired abbesses as well (Stafford 2001 399).

Anna of Byzantium focuses on the Byzantine Empire of the eleventh century and the female heir to the throne, Anna Comnene. Female participation in Byzantine politics was not common (Hill 49). Yet, Anna is the heir to the throne, even after her brother is born. She is betrothed to a cousin of the rival Ducas family, and their marriage will unite the two families and strengthen the claim of the reigning Comnenus family (Barrett 18). However, after rumours spread that she wants to kill her brother, she is stripped of her title, and her brother becomes heir. This patriarchal environment is toned down in *Anna of Byzantium*. The novel creates a more nuanced picture of the medieval Byzantine women. It focusses on Anna, heir to the throne, her power-hungry grandmother, her kind mother and her maid, and contains references to earlier Byzantine empresses and strong, educated figures such as Empress Zoë, Empress Irene and the nun Kassia, a writer (Barrett 123, 151). Tracy Barrett writes in her afterword that her book is dedicated to forgotten medieval women writers. Anna lived in a time called the Dark Ages, and the name suggests that people were uneducated. Barrett's novel is an attempt to portray this period from a woman's perspective, and to show that religious women actively participated in written culture (207-208).

In many ways, *Anna of Byzantium* shines a light on an often forgotten side of history. The novel depicts many kinds of women, each with their own ideas, helping to defy the notion that women had no say in politics and whose only tasks were in the domestic sphere. While the novel is fiction, it is based on real events and follows the facts closely. The book is

based on the historical Anna Comnene. She was the only female secular historian in a time where women were more often valued for their domestic role, and her work, *The Alexiad*, is an important document of Byzantine History (Gouma-Peterson ix-x, Laiou 5). This work is a showcase of her father's imperial reign, but also Anna's own biography in which she portrays herself as a "good daughter" and scholar (Gouma-Peterson 107).

The novel depicts women who are intelligent and who enjoyed an excellent education. Anna and her sister receive the best education possible, while grandmother Anna Dalassena is an expert on politics and state affairs. She is her son's most trusted advisor and she is regent when her son is away (39). In *The Alexiad*, Anna describes her grandmother in positive terms:

> For my grandmother was so clever in business and so skilful in guiding a State, and setting it in order, that she was capable of not only administering the Roman Empire, but any other of all the countries the sun shines upon. She was a woman of wide experience and knew the nature of many things, how each thing began and to what issue it would come, and which things were destructive of certain others, and which again would strengthen others; she was very keen in noting what should be done and clever in carrying it out to a sure end. (Dawes 61)

In the novel, Anna's grandmother is portrayed less positively: she is a power-hungry, arrogant woman who uses people as puppets and rules for her own benefit and glory. Her son owes the throne to her and she is very proud of this fact (Barrett 39). When Anna becomes increasingly rebellious against her grandmother, Anna Dalassena makes Anna's brother John heir by framing Anna. John, younger than Anna, is still easily influenced by his grandmother and a better puppet for her (Barrett 116-117). John cannot read and he is not as intelligent as Anna (Barrett 46). He is deceitful and selfish, which mirrors his grandmother's behaviour (Barrett 117). Both Anna's grandmother and her mother try to educate Anna on state affairs and they both use different methods. Her grandmother teaches Anna on statecraft and politics. Anna Dalassena comes across as a harsh ruler, who only thinks about her own power (Barrett 41). Empress Irene, on the other hand, tries to teach Anna compassion and justice (Barrett 50-54). She gives Anna the servant girl Sophia, so that she will learn about other people outside the palace (Barrett 60-61). Anna Dalassena and Irene represent two different sides of power and rule, and Anna learns from both of them, rather than from her father and her tutor Simon. However, their power at court was established due to their relation with the emperor. They did not gain their own power (Gouma-Peterson 119). When Anna's little brother John

becomes emperor, he sends his grandmother away, because he no longer needs her counsel (Barrett 190). Their power is transient.

Despite being a woman, Anna's gender never seems to be an issue for her or her grandmother. In the novel, the emperor explains to his subjects that despite having had a son, Anna remains the heir. He wants to choose the most suitable heir. His mother, Anna Dalassena, explains that making the first-born the heir is risky, because they may not be suitable for the job, leading to the downfall of the Empire. This shocks his ambassadors, as they are used to male inheritance (Barrett 18-19). For her parents, Anna is the best choice to rule. By marrying her to her cousin, she can unite the two imperial families and strengthen the Comnenus claim to the throne. Her status as heir is therefore politically motivated and not necessarily motivated by capability. Nonetheless, Anna herself never questions her status and authority as heir to the throne in a male dominated world (Barrett 65, 42-43). She is raised with her future in mind, and both her mother and her grandmother try to teach Anna different facets about state craft. Still, her role as empress is somewhat gendered. As a woman, she will still be the head of the household and cannot escape these feminine duties. Besides politics, she must learn how to train maids, and learn about medicine and home economics (Barrett 56-57). Anna accepts these duties without question. She believes that when she marries her cousin Constantine, she will still be in charge: they will rule together, but she will be superior to her husband (Barrett 65, 42).

Anna's mother, Irene, is the opposite of her daughter. She has no interest in politics, which, according to Anna Dalassena, makes her weak (Barrett 48, 50). She occupies herself with her children's education and the household of the palace (Barrett 45-47, 52-53). Nonetheless, she does involve herself with politics occasionally. As empress, she is of a higher rank than her mother-in-law, which frequently leads to confrontations between the two women (Barrett 52-53). Irene disagrees with the lessons Anna Dalassena teaches her daughter. She believes they are harsh and dishonourable. As the daughter of an imperial family, she says she also knows what it takes to rule, and she believes in compassion, justice and mercy (Barrett 53). She also tries to convince her husband several times to limit the influence of Anna Dalassena (Barrett 67-69, 118). However, she too tries to influence politics. She tries to teach Anna compassion by giving her a servant. Together with Anna she tries to usurp her son John, so that Anna can still become empress (Barrett 178-179). Anna and Irene's attempt at usurping the throne, however, is led by personal motifs. They believe the throne belongs to Anna and it needs to be reclaimed. Anna has been prepared for her task, so

she believes she is the best person to succeed her father (Barrett 118).

Anna's education also contributes to her unusual position. Anna and her cousins are some of the most highly educated children of the country (Barrett 24). Anna is educated in a time where women were not expected to be educated, but it was not uncommon to find educated Byzantine women (Laiou 5). Anna is proud of this, and in the novel she frequently brags about her intellect (Barrett 9, 44). In *The Alexiad*, Anna herself states her unusual position. She highlights her excellent education and her own interest in learning. She opens *The Alexiad* with:

> I was not ignorant of letters, for I carried my study of Greek to the highest pitch, and was also not unpractised in rhetoric; I perused the works of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato carefully, and enriched my mind by the "quaternion" of learning. (I must let this out and it is not bragging to state what nature and my zeal for learning have given me, and the gifts which God apportioned to me at birth and time has contributed). (Comnena 2)

This shows that her education is something she is proud of, which again proves that her good education was not usual.

In conclusion, *Anna of Byzantium* shows three diverse and strong women who all play an important part in Byzantine politics. While it is likely that a female heir would face much resistance from opponents, Anna hardly experiences this. She believes in her capabilities and intelligence, and she believes that this makes her the most suitable person to rule. Her gender plays no role when she assesses her capabilities, but clearly plays a part in her parents' decision to make her heir. Women in power were rare during the Middle Ages, but there are still examples of influential, educated women, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Æthelflæd and abbess Hild.

Chapter 8
Women Who Write

It is often assumed that medieval women were less educated and literate and therefore less able to participate in literary culture. However, there is increasingly growing evidence that women were more literate than initially presumed (Summit 93). This could mean women played a larger part in medieval written culture than previously assumed. The modern meaning of an author, however, does not apply to the Middle Ages. Creativity and individuality were not as important as they are today (Summit 91). God was seen as the one true author, as author of the Bible, so to write under a name took a great deal of confidence (McAvoy 1-2). Writers as creators and owners of a new text in a modern sense did not yet exist (McAvoy 3). People from the Middle Ages did not call themselves writers, and anonymity was not seen as negative in the Middle Ages (McAvoy 1). Works of literature and other texts were often a collaboration and mix between earlier texts, scribes and scholars (Lees and Overing 31). The use of scribes was seen as a status symbol (Summit 93). Many texts were therefore anonymous. In England, there are only two texts that are definitely written by a woman: *The Book of Margery Kempe* and *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich. Because many medieval texts are anonymous, women could have a far greater part in medieval literary culture than initially thought (McAvoy 2, Summit 95).

Despite their difficult position, women did contribute to medieval literature in various fields. Anglo-Saxon women are known to have written letters about religious matters to other monks (Fell 110-111, McAvoy 2). A later example is Margaret Paston, whose letters give a remarkable insight into fifteenth century lives (Thein). Marie de France is known for her lays, while Christine de Pisan wrote texts on proper behaviour and poetry (Busby, Briesemeister). Her work *The Book of the City of Ladies* provides a positive view on women, in response to misogynist writers of her time and advocates for a better education for women (Pisan 1982 3-5, 62-86, Kay). Hildegard von Bingen was also highly educated, composed music and wrote about theology, medicine and science (Gössmann). Anna Comnene was one of the first female historians of her time (Gouma-Peterson xi-x). Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich wrote religious works on their emotional experiences with God (Krug 220, Watson 210). Margery's book can be seen as one of the first autobiographies (Krug 217). Their books, however, were not widely read at the time (Krug 218-219, Watson 210).

The modern novels highlight creativity and individuality. Of the five books used for this thesis, four main characters engage in some form of creative activity to express

themselves. The best example is Catherine, who is encouraged by her brother to keep a diary, to help her "grow less childish and more learned" (Cushman 2). Anna becomes a historian and devotes her time to writing the history of her father's reign (Barrett 169, 206). Judith's true passion in life is making music, and she runs away from home to go to Eltham Palace, where the King's minstrels are trained (Haahr 4-5). Edith only engages in a creative activity shortly, but it gives her confidence and comfort. While in the south of France, she learns the art of poetry from the Trobairitz, female poets (Goodman 89-95). All characters create something new and use their creativity to express themselves and to highlight their individuality. It is not unthinkable that women sought for ways to express their dissatisfaction, their grief or their fears, or to challenge themselves in writing works of literature, letters or poetry.

It is difficult to establish whether medieval authors were wholly original or whether they based themselves largely on earlier work (Less and Overing 31). Margery Kempe's book, for instance, was dictated to a scribe twice, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the scribe made his mark on the text too. That is not to say that women did not express themselves in their work. *The Book of Margery Kempe* is one of the first autobiographies, and a detailed account of Margery's personal struggles with her devotion. She states the book is about God's "wonderful werkys, how mercyfully, how benyngly, and how charytefully he meved and stered a synful caytyf unto hys love" (Staley ll. 9-10). Her voice is very much present, and her book allows it to be heard.

The characters from the modern novels use their creativity as a way to express themselves. Catherine starts to write in her diary because her brother, a monk, believes it will help her become more mature and more educated (Cushman 2). Initially, her diary entries are short and they focus on her activities rather than her thoughts. She writes about her spinning, which keeps her trapped inside (Cushman 1). After a few days she makes a bargain with her mother: she can write in her book for her brother instead of spinning (Cushman 2). It is clear that the diary does not have any personal value for Catherine. She only writes in it because her brother sees use in it (Cushman 3). Because she can forsake her spinning, she starts writing with renewed enthusiasm on scraps of leftover parchment from her father (Cushman 2). "The writing I learned of my brother Edward, but the words are my own", she writes (Cushman 2). She claims her writing as truly unique and a reflection of herself. Her diary evolves from a daily account of her activities to a way of release in a world wherein Catherine comes to terms with her fate, being married to a man she dislikes. In her diary, Catherine can

express her opinions, ideas and thoughts that would not be tolerated by her surroundings. Her writing even helps her come to terms with her future as a married woman. She is more mature at the end of the novel, when she realises that marriage does not need to change her identity. She will still be herself, and she will still have her thoughts and feelings (Cushman 162). Her diary-writing becomes a way to cope with her dissatisfaction and a place where she can share her fantasies of a better life. Her diary is personal and a reflection of her personality. While Margery's writing has a religious starting point, her work too is deeply personal. Margery speaks of her fears, her relationship with God and her difficulties that arise from her devotion. The form of a diary in *Catherine, Called Birdy* is perhaps chosen by the author to appeal to a modern audience, but medieval texts with a personal point of view did exist.

Catherine's diary contributes to a nuanced picture of medieval women by representing women of different classes and backgrounds. The novel provides a vivid depiction of ladies of all classes. Catherine is the daughter of a minor lord and she moves freely between the different classes. Each woman teaches Catherine about life. Her mother and her nurse Morwenna try to teach her about her duties as a woman and marriage (Cushman 98, 139). She meets a Jewish woman, who teaches her to stay true to herself: "little Bird, in the world to come, you will not be asked 'why were you not George?' […] but 'why were you not Catherine?'" (Cushman 13). She even meets the cousin of the King, Madame Joanna, who teaches her that even she, despite her high status, has duties. She cannot do as she pleases, but finds ways to enjoy life within these restrictions (Cushman 82-84). The women know they have limited options in life, but they find ways to achieve happiness within these limits, something Catherine still needs to learn.

During her pilgrimage, Edith meets the French Trobairitz, female noble troubadours, who write about love (Goodman 90). Edith is not used to this form of poetry, but she finds it fascinating. Her nurse, Dame Joan, finds it "not proper for ladies" and "sinful" (Goodman 88, 89). In *Peregrine*, the women use their talent to express themselves and give themselves a sense of freedom, in a similar way to Catherine and her diary. Their poetry gives them a sense of freedom in their limited lives. They sing about love, "the worlds that women ruled", which gives them a feeling of empowerment (Goodman 90). The Trobairitz, despite their noble status, have to abide to rules and duties, just like Edith and Catherine. Their poetry gives them a sense of individuality and freedom. Edith remarks that "although they remained within the castle's walls their words made them free" (Goodman 90). Edith is encouraged to write her own song: "it wasn't very good, but it was mine", she says (Goodman 94). Her song is about

a falcon who is free to fly where he wants. The falcon represents her desire for freedom and helps her process her previous experiences during her journey: her "own flight from sir Runcival", the man who wants to marry her, and "the look [she had] seen in Queen Eleanor's eyes", who clearly desired a life of freedom (Goodman 94, 76). The Trobairitz' creative form of expression helps her create something that belongs to her and helps her find back parts of herself after the loss of her husband and child.

Anna's writing is different than Catherine's personal diary or Margery and Julian's religious writing. She becomes a historian and devotes her time to writing a history of her father's reign. As the daughter of an empress, she has received an excellent education (Barrett 24). In the novel, Anna enjoys history the most and her ambition, besides becoming an empress, is to become a historian. When she is sent to a convent as a punishment for her attempted usurpation, her history writing gives her a new purpose in life.

Tracy Barrett writes in her afterword of *Anna of Byzantium* that her novel is dedicated to the "forgotten women writers" (209). Barrett wants to refute the myth that women were less literate than men: a great deal of women's writings has been lost, and anonymous works are often automatically attributed to men (208-209). Karen Cushman also explains her motivation for writing about the daily life of a daughter of a minor lord: "I grew tired of hearing about kings, princes, generals, presidents. I wanted to know what life was like for ordinary young people in other times" (170). She explicitly does not romanticise the Middle Ages, but she does create a young heroine who challenges her parents, thus creating a realistic image that educates, but also appeals to her modern teenage readers.

These examples, both modern and historical, show the modern reader that women did play a part in medieval literature. Women like Margery Kempe, Margaret Paston, the Trobairitz and Christine de Pisan engaged in different literary genres, and their legacy is continued in the modern novels. The characters use their literary abilities to express themselves within their limited position.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that by writing about a variety of independent, spirited medieval women and their struggles, modern writers actually create a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the Middle Ages than is generally attributed to this period. The female characters' personalities and values are not a modern projection onto the Middle Ages. Far from being anachronistic or solely modern in perspective, these stories reflect medieval reality. These novels disprove the idea that the Middle Ages were a place and time without strong, spirited women, but a place that harboured many kinds of women, each with their own dreams and ambitions.

Some scholars, such as Rebecca Barnhouse, argue that historical novels set in the Middle Ages are not realistic enough: the books portray the Middle Ages as an idealised place on which modern ideas about equality, justice and education are being projected (Butler 73, Barnhouse 1998 373). The characters are often vehicles on which these ideals are projected, which, according to Barnhouse, make them unhistorical and anachronistic. However, scholars like Pugh and Butler disagree: it is impossible to state that these characters did not exist. The present thesis has shown that there are plenty of medieval examples, historical and fictional, of women and men who are aware of female subordination, and of women who defy the standards of their time. Although in the minority, the Middle Ages contain a great deal of examples of women who exerted influence, who wrote, travelled and fought. Furthermore, the novels often echo motifs of medieval literature, such as *Roman de Silence*, which contains a cross-dressing girl who can fight and make music, Christine de Pisan's *The Book of the City of Ladies,* in which Christine argues that women are valuable to society, and argues in favour of education for women (1982 16-20, 62-86, 254-257). It is therefore a sweeping generalisation to state that these main characters could not exist.

Hence, the novels are not as anachronistic as they first appear. Nonetheless, Butler adds that anachronisms are necessary to connect with the modern readers and to help them understand the differences between then and now. In a way, history is rewritten for modern readers. It was established in the theoretical framework that women usually played a small part in history because they were seen as inferior. By writing historical fiction about women, a different side of history is explored, and history can, in a way, be rewritten. Modern readers expect medieval women to be compliant and meek, but by focusing on women who defy the values of their time, the authors of the modern novels create a varied, lively and more accurate picture of medieval society, one that is made up of different people each with their

own ideas and dreams.

This thesis enhances our understanding of female characters in historical novels, and the current findings add to a growing body of literature on historical children's and young adult literature. Female characters in historical novels have received little scholarly attention in the past, but because of their obscurity in history, these characters are in a special position in literature: the characters can be rewritten and moulded in such a way that they appeal to modern readers, and they can portray history from a different perspective. The female characters indeed present a different side of the Middle Ages. The women show what life was like for them: some of them accept their position, while others, the main characters, try to defy it. The women, much like today's women, are in search of their true purpose, and each woman has her own way of finding hers.

Some authors, like Karen Cushman, Joan Goodman and Tracy Barrett commented on their decision to write about women, and they reveal they purposely chose to portray a woman, in order to depict an often forgotten side of the Middle Ages. These writers specifically focus on female characters, to create an image that steers away from the typical damsel in distress and chivalry so often associated with the Middle Ages. They use their fiction to give the forgotten people, like Anna, or the seemingly insignificant, like Catherine, a voice. By steering away from the modern stereotype of the period, by depicting women who are independent, they depict a more accurate picture of the Middle Ages.

A number of limitations need to be considered. The most important limitation lies in the fact that only five novels were analysed. The scope of this study was limited in terms of time and length, but for a more accurate and comprehensive result, more books need to be taken into account. Secondly, the current study has focused mainly on female characters, while male main characters can also reveal a great deal about the female characters and their position. It would be interesting to see if female characters in a novel with male main characters are depicted differently than they are in a novel with a female main character.

The women in the novels show great zeal and bravery in following their dreams at a time where their options in life were limited. They decide to take action and make their own future, and for this, they can be greatly admired, by both medieval and modern audiences.

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