

SOCIAL STATUS MOBILITY AND MEDIEVAL WOMEN IN LATE MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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## **Introduction:**

### **The Mobility of Social Status in the 14th through 16th Centuries**

The social status of women in the late medieval and early modern period varied depending upon achievements and birthright. With each paper in this portfolio, I examine the significance of social status for women from the 14th through 16th centuries. From peasant to aristocrat, I provide examples of how women in each socio-economic class acted within their social status and how women were capable of influencing their social status through their actions.

Case studies such as this are important for understanding not only the social constructs of the middle ages, but also understanding the active roles women played in society. Although we have a plethora of secondary sources on the topic of women during the middle ages, there is a limited supply of primary sources that dig deep into the social status of women in general. Through interpretation and the dedicated research of other historians and researchers, we are able to see a glimpse into the lives of peasant women, women who were deemed witches and upper-class women. This paper attempts to increase the significance of medieval women by recognizing their contributions to their social status. It also examines their behaviors within that social status to better understand the lives of medieval women. This paper explains how women expressed themselves and exerted power in time before feminism.

By definition, social status is the position or rank of a person or group. Social status can be achieved in one of two ways: one can earn it through achievements or be placed in it by inheritance. Achieved status means that the individual gained status through actions, knowledge, monetary gains, or a skill set. Ascribed status is assigned at birth and is neither achieved nor

earned (a wealthy social status or aristocratic title).<sup>1</sup> A person can have ascribed status because of their family's wealth or position in society. As scholars Sei Jin Ko, Melody Sadler and Adam Galinsky describe, "Status refers to the relative rank that an individual holds; this includes attendant rights, duties, and lifestyle, in a social hierarchy based upon honor or prestige. Status has two different types that come along with it: achieved, and ascribed. The word status refers to social stratification on a vertical scale."<sup>2</sup> Status can be changed through a process referred to as "social mobility."<sup>3</sup> A person's status can move up or down, depending upon their actions. Status can be influenced by monetary gains or success, criminal activity, and behavior. Social status, itself, is created in each societal context. The women presented in each of the following papers change their social position through their achievements and behaviors.

During the late medieval and early modern period in England, there was a hierarchy of social classes, statuses, and gender positions to which women belonged. According to scholars Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, "Any one individual thus had a variety of social identities, including those of class, status group and gender."<sup>4</sup> For this portfolio, I concentrated on the social status of women rather than the dichotomy between class and gender as social status was mobile, and the latter were not. The highest social class was the monarchy. The monarch was the head of the social system and wielded judicial power over England.<sup>5</sup> The second class was that of the gentleman/gentlelady. These individuals were born wealthy, owned land and held titles such as Dukes, Earls, or Ladies.<sup>6</sup> Beneath the gentlemen were the citizens

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<sup>1</sup> Sei Jin Ko, Melody Sadler and Adam Galinsky "The Sound of Power: Conveying and Detecting Hierarchical Rank Through Voice" (Sei Jin Ko, Department of Psychology, San Diego State University, 2015) 3-14

<sup>2</sup> Ko, Sadler and Galinsky "The Sound of Power: 6-10

<sup>3</sup> Ko, Sadler and Galinsky "The Sound of Power: 10-14

<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3

<sup>5</sup> Simon Jenkins, *A Short History of England* (London: Profile Books, LTD, 2011), 120

<sup>6</sup> Jenkins, *A Short History of England*, 125

and yeomen. This was comprised of the merchant class, successful farmers, and wealthier peasants.<sup>7</sup> The lower classes were the laborers and vagabonds. Destitute peasants and beggars made up this social class.<sup>8</sup>

As discussed previously, social status was obtained in one of the two ways. The initial social status of any woman during this time period would have been determined by the social class she was born into. The movement between social status strata is known as "social mobility."<sup>9</sup> To move between each social strata, a woman had to actively seek means to achieve this goal. The social perception of a woman determined her social interdependence. This fluctuated based on her ability to influence that perception.<sup>10</sup> The state of social mobility was determined by whether a woman could adequately give service to the prosperity of society. So as scholars Horrox and Ormrod assert, "Society was therefore thought of in terms of a body, with the orders as the limbs or organs whose specialist tasks were necessary for the wellbeing of the whole."<sup>11</sup> A woman's role was to contribute to society's functions. To gain a better social standing; she needed to excel in her role. Each of the following papers describe the means by which women used wealth, religious ideologies and or their behavior to influence their social status.

In the first paper, "Social Status and Late Medieval Peasant Women," I explored how peasant women achieved a higher social status through achievement rather than inheritance. Peasant women gained social status by capitalizing on domestic skills and agricultural ventures. Women contributed to the household as economic equals to their husbands. This is important in

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins, *A Short History of England*, 102

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, *A Short History of England*, 105

<sup>9</sup> Jenkins, *A Short History of England*, 102-106

<sup>10</sup> Horrox and Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*, 3

<sup>11</sup> Horrox and Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*, 5

understanding the complexities of the peasant woman. To have a better lifestyle and social standing in her village, she worked alongside her male counterpart to achieve a better social status.

To better understand a late medieval peasant woman's life, I researched primary sources from the late medieval, early Tudor period and primarily the 15th century. I used Emilie Amt, ed. *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*. (2nd edition) and P.J.P. Goldberg, ed, *Women in England c. 1275-1525*.<sup>12</sup> These sourcebooks provided me with first-hand accounts of women and their daily activities. Both sourcebooks gave examples of the duties of peasant women, their domestic chores and overall household contributions, which added validity to my social status theme. I concentrated on secondary sources that detailed the lives of peasant women drawing heavily from Barbara Hanawalt *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*.<sup>13</sup> Historian Barbara Hanawalt's book concentrates heavily on the peasant family unit and how it served the economy and society. This was important for understanding how peasants were integral in the social constructs and how women were able to maneuver within their social standings as peasants. I heavily relied on Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*.<sup>14</sup> Historian Margaret Wade Labarge's textbook describes, in detail, the daily life of peasant women and their contributions to society. I also used Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*.<sup>15</sup> Shulamith Shahar's work concentrates on women's attitudes towards their own social standings. Shahar also gives a comprehensive insight into the daily lives of peasant and townswomen. All three books provided me with a better understanding

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<sup>12</sup> P.J.P. Goldberg, ed, *Women in England c. 1275-1525* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995)

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987)

<sup>15</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1984)

of the daily lives of these women and of the social influence they had on their families and their surrounding village.

For this paper, I concentrated on the late medieval and Tudor period. I used source books from this time period that focused on the lives of peasants and separate sourcebooks that studied the lives of women. By studying both, I was able to compare information to come up with an overall female history of peasants from the 14th to 16th centuries. I found that James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England 1150-1350*<sup>16</sup> is an excellent source for explaining the economic influences of the peasant class. For a detailed analysis of the life of a medieval woman, I found Judith M Bennett's, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344*.<sup>17</sup> This source detailed the life of a medieval woman, Cecilia Penifader. I found this source helpful as it listed the various chores and actions a woman completed daily in order to assist her family. Both of these books were helpful in giving a historical analysis of women, their goals and their contributions to society.

The second paper, "Social Status and Tudor Witch Hunts," describes the Tudor witchcraft ideologies and how the social status of women accused of witchcraft changed with each new phase of reform. In this unique situation, the social position of a woman could be affected greatly, either positively or negatively, depending upon her charge(s) and when she lived. In this paper, I explain how women accused of witchcraft could either use that to their advantage to gain social status or have their social status ruined by witchcraft accusations. By presenting the adverse and advantageous outcomes to being deemed a witch, I show how important social status was to women in the Tudor time period.

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<sup>16</sup> James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England 1150-1350* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997)

<sup>17</sup> Judith M Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999)



For research on the second paper, I focused on court cases from the Tudor period, which I found in George Lincoln Burr, *The Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*<sup>18</sup> and Anne Reiber DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community."<sup>19</sup> These sources provided examples in which families used witchcraft ordinances to their benefit, in order to bolster their own social status. For scholarly analysis, I used Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*<sup>20</sup> and Christina Hole, *Witchcraft in England*.<sup>21</sup> Both books gave great detail about the history of witchcraft in England as well as evidence that showed people's strong religious convictions against witches. These resources were beneficial in listing the ordinances and laws that were put into place during the reign of each king or queen during the time period. They also explained the historical context for each of these laws and why they were put into place. For additional research, I used Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*.<sup>22</sup> I found this resource to be particularly helpful for historical references of people accused of witchcraft and for the fundamental ideologies of witchcraft. Although this source is older, the fundamental beliefs by the common people and religious leaders of this time remain the same in every other sourcebook researched for this paper. This book also described the history of witchcraft and, most importantly, the church's views. I also found Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*,<sup>23</sup> helpful for laying out a descriptive history and explanation of witchcraft. Lerner explains the role witchcraft played in society in terms of how it affected women. It is important to note that witchcraft is entrenched in Christian ideologies. In a period where religion was especially

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<sup>18</sup> George Lincoln Burr, *The Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914)

<sup>19</sup> Anne Reiber DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community." *Journal of British Studies* 34 (Oct 1995)

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987)

<sup>21</sup> Christina Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1947)

<sup>22</sup> Jules Michelet. *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition* (New York: Citadel Press, 1939)

<sup>23</sup> Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987)

important for establishing laws and social structures, it is important to chronicle these religious beliefs as they influenced history. Each of my sources were ideal for helping me understand the time period, the fear of witches, and societal norms of the Tudor period.

For this paper, I concentrated on the Tudor and early modern period. I researched witchcraft in this period and more specifically women who were accused and why. This was a fascinating time period as there were so many religious changes due to the rulers in England. As with the previous paper, I also concentrated on finding more recent research. I found Neville Drury's *Magic and Witchcraft*<sup>24</sup> was useful as it was recent, and I was able to draw on several laws and cases that were specific to my time period. I found that this source was helpful for giving details on how witchcraft was perceived by Tudor period people.

The third paper is "Kate's Aversion of Social Status in Taming of the Shrew." In this paper, I concentrate on the lead role, Katherine, and her rejection of societal norms. She disregards her high position in social status, as she is an upper-class woman during the 16th century. In doing so, she is happily shirking her responsibilities as an aristocratic woman. Her goal is not to marry and conform, but instead to secretly undermine her husband so that she can have the upper hand. Katherine is a strong female lead who contradicts the norm and refuses to conform to societal constructs. She is able to get what she wants from life, instead of what others want for her, by behaving in an inappropriate manner. By obtaining this goal, Katherine, herself, changes and gains social status for changing her shrewish ways.

The most important source used in this paper is *The Taming of the Shrew* by William Shakespeare. All of the quotes from the characters are direct quotes taken from scenes in the play. For the best version of this play, I relied on the complete and annotated works. I used

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<sup>24</sup> Neville Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003)

various sources to research this third paper, concentrating on secondary sources, as the primary source is the play. Marianne Novy, "Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*,"<sup>25</sup> was a useful source for insight into Katherine's character dimension. This source explains Katherine's monologues, the historical context of women during the time of the play, and perceptions of Katherine. To help explain and expand on social themes in this play, I incorporated ideas and quotes from Coppelia Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage,"<sup>26</sup> and John C Bean's "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*."<sup>27</sup> These authors explained Katherine's actions and speeches to show how female independence was woven into various aspects of the play. These two authors explained nuances in the play for modern readers to consider. Although this play initially could seem misogynistic, Shakespeare ingeniously wove Tudor feminism into his play. I incorporated the following primary resources to add historical validity to the aristocratic social construct explanation: Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*<sup>28</sup> and Barbara J Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*.<sup>29</sup> Both sourcebooks explained and gave specific examples of the duties, chores, and lifestyle of aristocratic women. Using this historical information, I was able to encapsulate the social life and constructs of this class of women. I wanted to show that the most important aspect of every aristocratic woman's life was gaining more social status through marriage and her duties as a wife. This is important because it explains how most aristocratic

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<sup>25</sup> Marianne Novy, "Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*," in Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984)

<sup>26</sup> Coppelia Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edward (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1977)

<sup>27</sup> John C. Bean, "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: University of Illinois 1980)

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

<sup>29</sup> Barbara J Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550* (Oxford: University Press, 2002)

women fought to gain a higher social status. Katherine, on the other hand, was disinterested in this endeavor.

The most important resources for researching the lives of women in history are books about women in historical context. I searched for books that were not only historically pertinent but those that concentrated on all the aspects of women's daily lives since most books do not concentrate on just the social status of women. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's *Women in Early Modern England*<sup>30</sup> was the best at describing all the classes of women I was researching. The authors did an excellent job at outlining the lifestyles, goals, and various attributes of each social class in the later Middle Ages, Tudor, and Renaissance periods in England. For more detail on the daily aspects of a late medieval woman's life, I used Margaret Wade Labarge's *Women in Medieval Life*.<sup>31</sup> I used this book in all three of my papers. Labarge also discusses women's contribution to medieval culture and society.

In researching for these papers, I found that women were always classified as wives, witches or maids. They had certain social constructs, an idea or lifestyle that society has created and accepted by people in a particular social class. These social constructs determined how women behaved, worked or lived their lives. This was dependent on which social class they were associated with. In each social class, women were given roles in the home, with children and activities that they must do in their homes or behaviors they should abide by. What impacted me the most during my research, was the notion that all the woman from the social classes I researched were striving for the same goal. For each paper, I describe different classes of women and different lifestyles, but the common theme in all the research was that women were constantly striving for more. In some cases, it was for more money, other cases it was to benefit

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<sup>30</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987)

themselves or their religious convictions, but in each case, women were actively working towards achieving something they did not currently have. I believe that money and personal gain were only the first step in achieving their goal. The culmination of behavior, increasing funds and completing personal goals, was to achieve a higher social status. Women were limited in their personal social constructs and held lower statuses against their male counterparts; however, with the roles women were given, they fiercely sought to achieve what they could. In doing this, they were providing for themselves, their families and the next generation a better opportunity to gain an even higher status. As the monarchy was the pinnacle of the social hierarchy, the ideal social achievement was to gain access to or get closer to this apex of English civilization. Social mobility was not as easily achieved as it is now, but what little personal and household power these women held, they used it to benefit socially.

The endeavor for women to fulfil this social conquest is important for the history of women. The fundamentals behind this female agenda gives rise to proto-feminism, i.e. “a philosophical tradition anticipating modern feminist concepts.”<sup>32</sup> Strong women like Christine de Pizan, Queen Elizabeth and Katherine from *Taming of the Shrew* were exercising their own agendas to increase their social positions. Although these papers do not concentrate on pre-feminist ideologies or the selected strong female figures above, it is important to note that women such as the aforementioned were acting in their perspective era and doing what they believed was natural. What came naturally to them in the late middle ages and the modern period is also what comes naturally to women now. The drive for women to achieve more is not just a modern concept, but we can see that throughout this selected time period, women were actively driving towards raising their existence through social status.

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 54-57

By contributing to their surrounding village, town, or homestead, women could achieve better social status. Those contributions were achieved through economics, marriage, fulfillment of personal goals, and through their achievements and endeavors, women gained social status.

## Social Status and Late Medieval Peasant Women

Late medieval and Tudor peasant women held significant social status during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Rich and poor peasants were instrumental in making a household function. A medieval peasant woman's goal was to increase her profits to supplement the household income, which improved the family's social status. In this section, I will explore the economic and behavioral methods by which the medieval and early modern English peasant woman garnered and maintained her social status.

The working life of a peasant woman started as soon as she was able to walk and talk. Children began to work alongside their parents at seven or eight years of age. Typically, female children helped in the fields, in the home, or in the production of ale or cloth.<sup>33</sup> By helping around the house, children were taught how to work and adequately care for the house at an early age. They were taught that finances were a critical facet for making their future more comfortable and economically stable. They were taught that this was the key to acquiring a higher social status. Wealthier peasants tended to have more children than poor peasants and, therefore, had more free labor from their children.<sup>34</sup> For more impoverished families, the children were a financial burden.<sup>35</sup> Peasant women held jobs, earned money, owned land, and made their own profits before they were married. Daughters of these women could inherit land and had to work on it until married. Self-sufficient peasant women were important because they

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Wade Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 157-163

<sup>34</sup> Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1984), 203-235

<sup>35</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 261

contributed financially to society. Women also worked as servants in a manor house or in workshops after marriage, contributing to the family's comfortable lifestyle and social status.<sup>36</sup>

According to historian Margaret Wade Labarge, the married life of a peasant woman may have started early as well, depending on the peasant's family financial and social status.<sup>37</sup>

Around puberty, young richer peasant women were married to older men, who were chosen by the girl's family. Husbands were older because it was believed that a man should only have a wife when he had enough money and social standing to make a suitable living for himself, his wife, and his future family. Historian Judith Bennett contests this idea, she believes that peasant women married at various ages, only when the bride's family had sufficient dowry to complete a marriage contract.<sup>38</sup> Both historians believe that families chose husbands based on their social status and economic stability. According to historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, the socio-economic situation of women hinged on either her father or her husband.<sup>39</sup> Historian Shulamith Shahar recounts, in *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, "Among prosperous families, in particular, economic calculations and considerations of prestige prevailed in the selection of a partner for a son or daughter, and people aspired to marry members of their own, if not a higher class."<sup>40</sup>

Wealthier peasant girls brought dowries into their marriages, which set the stage for the couple's socioeconomic status. A daughter's inheritance was added to their dowries.<sup>41</sup> One of the most critical aspects of the marriage was the woman's dowry and as Barbara Hanawalt confirms

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<sup>36</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 161

<sup>37</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 161-163

<sup>38</sup> Judith M Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 14-16

<sup>39</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 124-125

<sup>40</sup> Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 223

<sup>41</sup> Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 220-225



in *The Ties that Bond: Peasant Families in Medieval England*, "...women brought money, animals, land or goods into the marriage with the dowry."<sup>42</sup> These items built the financial foundation for the marriage. Although the husband presumably worked and had money of his own, the woman's contribution through her dowry was essential for allowing the house to prosper. The more money a household had, the more food, supplies, and servants they could buy or hire.

Peasant families usually lived in a manorial system based on a rural economy in a village. Some manors were owned by lords with well-off peasants owning land on the manor.<sup>43</sup> When land was owned by a lord, the peasants paid rent in cash or crops. As the manorial system was both an economic system and a legal system, court was held for criminals and disputes amongst the villagers.<sup>44</sup> These poorer peasants only were allowed to farm and hunt on lands that were allotted to them. They could be punished for gathering in the forest or trimming fur from sheep on lands that were not allotted to their family. Punishments included fines and the decrease in social status.<sup>45</sup> This did not deter poorer women from breaking laws in order to make economic gains for their families. In one case, an older woman was caught letting her animals graze on land which was not hers.<sup>46</sup> Women committed crimes to help provide for their families. During a period of famine in the late 14th century, the female crime rates raised 12 percent and significantly dropped after the famine had ended.<sup>47</sup> In this case, the woman was willing to risk punishment and her social status in order to provide for her family.

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<sup>42</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University, 1986), 142

<sup>43</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 109-111

<sup>44</sup> Emilie Amt, ed *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Routledge, 2010) 152

<sup>45</sup> Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 115-120

<sup>46</sup> James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England 1150-1350* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), 150

<sup>47</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 152

Peasant women toiled alongside their husbands in the fields, in workshops, and in the home. A peasant woman woke up early to feed and tend the animals, do house chores, make food, tend to the smaller children, and do fieldwork with her husband. In some households, women produced crafts and employed unpaid female apprentices, increasing the number of products she had to sell.<sup>48</sup> However, unlike women in the other classes, peasant women mostly were employed in agricultural chores alongside their older children, servants, if they could afford them, and their husbands.<sup>49</sup> As Labarge asserts, “Peasant women were full-time workers whose tasks were essential to their household subsistence and comfort.”<sup>50</sup> These tasks enabled the family to earn as much money as they could produce. The more money the family could gain, the better their social status would become.

Many households practiced trades inside the home, including brewing ale, growing crops, or making cloth. The poorer peasant women usually tended to crops on the land with their husbands and sold surplus crops or goods (e.g., cloth, wool) at fairs or markets for additional income.<sup>51</sup> Trades and production of goods allowed women to further contribute to the household finances and to participate in public life. Further, these women contributed to the economics of the village, meeting demands with the surplus goods they produced. A peasant’s social status within the village could improve as a result of this economic contribution. Families with a higher socioeconomic status ran inns in which tenants and travelers paid for room and board. This was a reasonably lucrative practice, and income could be used to purchase additional land. Additional land allowed for increased yield of crops and livestock increased production of goods

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<sup>48</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 166-170

<sup>49</sup> Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 239

<sup>50</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 161

<sup>51</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 146

or a larger number of boarders and tenants. The more money and land a family could accumulate, the more prestige they garnered, and the higher their social status.

Ale was one of the most lucrative and essential goods a peasant woman could produce. It was consumed as part of every villager's diet, regardless of age, resulting in consistently high demand.<sup>52</sup> Ale also had nutritional value because of its caloric content.<sup>53</sup> When there were extra funds, a woman could buy malt with the intention of brewing a small batch of alcohol to sell to the local town or village.<sup>54</sup> As Judith M. Bennett points out, "... women dominated brewing and if men did brew, it was usually beside women."<sup>55</sup> If a woman desired to make a business of selling ale, it required ongoing production, as ale did not keep long and did not travel well.<sup>56</sup> There were many laws regulating the production and sale of alcohol, which made mass production difficult.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the consistently high demand resulted in elevated social status for women who produced ale.

Children were the most important assets a woman provided for her family. As Barbara Hanawalt writes, "Children were a huge resource in the peasant economy; by the age of seven, they could already be a help to the housewife in her daily round of chores."<sup>58</sup> The woman's most important role was bearing and training the new generation of workers. Children constituted free labor helping the household produce more goods to be later consumed or sold. Depending on a woman's economic status, the children helped the family financially or were a burden.

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<sup>52</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 29

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 28

<sup>54</sup> Judith M Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World 1300-1600* (New York: Oxford Press, Inc), 19

<sup>55</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 24

<sup>56</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 30-35

<sup>57</sup> Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England*, 112

<sup>58</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 148

In England during the late Middle Ages and early modern period, women were allowed to practice a craft until their husband's death, at which point they were expected to remarry or manage the house by other means.<sup>59</sup> This could have been because it was believed women should stay at home and care for the house, rather than keep an occupation or own a business outside of the household.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, if a woman was widowed and not the recipient of a large inheritance, she had to rely on profits from producing excess goods or crops, working the land, or completing an apprenticeship in order to support her family. Fortunately, many widows were "entrusted" with large sums of money as recognition of their contributions to the household.<sup>61</sup> In the late 15th century in Bedfordshire England, historian Hanawalt notes that "Of the 319 married men leaving wills, 74 percent were survived by a widow."<sup>62</sup> Common English law also stated that women could receive a third of her deceased husband's property and bring it into her new marriage.<sup>63</sup> Around sixty-five percent of men made their wives executors of their will, and others have praise to their hard-working wives; this showed their reliance on their wives.<sup>64</sup> Hanawalt also notes that "[w]ills showed that the men entrusted their wives with considerable responsibility and rewarded them generously for their contributions during their lifetime."<sup>65</sup> This shows that men knew women were important assets in society and supported their wives' social status in society, even after death.

For the poorest of women, occupations directly supporting the families of higher-class women (e.g., midwifery, education of the children, and wet-nursing) were sources of revenue,

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<sup>59</sup> Frances and Joseph Gies, *Life of a Medieval*, 145

<sup>60</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 142-144

<sup>61</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 143

<sup>62</sup> Hanawalt, *The ties that Bound*, 143

<sup>63</sup> Hanawalt, *The ties that Bound*, 143

<sup>64</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 143

<sup>65</sup> Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, 143

though these occupations rarely resulted in social mobility.<sup>66</sup> In both late medieval and modern period, destitute women were given jobs in local women's hospitals and parishes to help the infirm or sick. Many poorer women also assisted and provided care for elderly poor or widowed women.<sup>67</sup> In the later medieval and early modern periods, there were more opportunities for women to generate revenue for their families. This allowed a family to maintain social status and to make enough revenue to improve status.

Peasant women were expected to be positive household representatives, as was reflected in many books written during the period, extolling the virtues of good peasant women and how they conducted themselves. For instance, Anthony Fitzherbert's *Book of Husbandry* written in 1524, contains a chapter aptly named "What tasks a wife should do in general," which is a guide for how to behave as a married woman.<sup>68</sup> It begins, "[n]ow thou wife, I trust to shew to thee divers occupations, works, and labours, that thou shalt not need to be idle no time of the yere."<sup>69</sup> The book explains how a wife should socially and economically manage the house, through chores, social interactions, and financial assistance.<sup>70</sup> Christine de Pizan, the late medieval author, was very interested in the daily lives of peasant women. In her book, *Treasure of the City of Ladies*, Christine idealizes the lives of peasant women and defends their value and worth. She believes that peasant women have the easiest life of all medieval women because they have more social and economic freedoms than other women in different social statuses.<sup>71</sup> Christine gives advice to all women, but especially the peasant class. She urges them to find God through grace and to contribute positively to society. These primary sources detail the importance of women

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<sup>66</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 286

<sup>67</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 287

<sup>68</sup> Fitzherbert and Skeat, *The Book of Husbandry* 36

<sup>69</sup> Fitzherbert and Skeat, *The Book of Husbandry*, 36

<sup>70</sup> P.J.P. Goldberg, ed, *Women in England c. 1275-1525* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 167-168

<sup>71</sup> Labarge, *Women in Medieval Life*, 143-150

living a virtuous and well-behaved life. A woman easily could positively or negatively impact the social status of the household depending on her behavior. Further, these sources curbed negative behavior and promoted positive behaviors, therefore giving a positive representation of the household.

Medieval peasant women were a significant component in making a peasant household survive and flourish. Whether the family was wealthy or poor, every woman contributed by completing chores, rearing children, presenting themselves well in public, and living a virtuous life. By economically flourishing, a peasant woman could improve her social status for her family.

## Social Status and Tudor Witch Hunts

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in England were engulfed by religious reformations and socio-economic progression. During this time, the rulers of England significantly affected the culture of witches in English society. In the following paper, I will explore the evolution of Tudor era witchcraft reform and how this impacted the social status of women.

The notion of witchcraft was not an invention of the Tudor period. Witches and the idea that people can exhibit magical abilities to manipulate their surroundings have been a belief since ancient times. Warnings and sanctions against witches can be found in Pre-Christian civilizations, such as ancient Rome, Greece, and the Middle East. As the times changed, witchcraft became more widely acknowledged and accepted through early to late Middle Ages. The Bible served inspired law codes for Christians during the Middle Ages. The Bible states “[t]hou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” (Exodus 22:18)<sup>72</sup> and “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them.” (Leviticus 20:27)<sup>73</sup>. These particular lines served to promulgate the hatred and fear of witches and their potential magic. While interpreting this source into law, during the early Middle Ages, Charlemagne and the Council of Paderborn in 785 officially outlawed witchcraft. The death penalty was ordered for those who practiced witchcraft and/or who were presumed to be witches.<sup>74</sup> In mid-10th century in England, King Athlestan, also set forth laws to punish witches. His punishment was a fine and jail sentence but spared the accused

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<sup>72</sup> *King James Bible* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1991) Ex 22:18

<sup>73</sup> *King James Bible*, Lev 20:27

<sup>74</sup> Neville Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003) 21-25

from death.<sup>75</sup> Throughout the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Church sponsored the first true witch hunts on groups that were deemed anti-Christian heretics<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, Pope John XXII authorized persecutions of witches by the Spanish Inquisition throughout Spain. In 1484, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull, *Summis desiderantes affectibus* (Desiring the Supreme Ardor), to persecute witches throughout the rest of Europe. This bull recognized the existence of witches and allowed the Inquisition Order to correct, stop, and punish accused witches.<sup>77</sup> In 1563, James VI of Scotland and England passed the Witchcraft Act of 1563, which was passed because of the direct pressures to reform the church.<sup>78</sup> These edicts, sources, and bulls helped to promulgate witch hunts throughout Europe into the Tudor period.

Communities blamed unexplainable events, weather patterns and sicknesses on the work of witches.<sup>79</sup> The fear of witches thrived following epidemics of plague, during eras of war, in periods of religious upheaval, and during intellectual renaissances; it intensified during periods in which life was disrupted or unstable. These were times when people struggled to survive. It was easier to blame witches for misfortunes and harder for the starving or uneducated masses to seek the truth, as they had no means to do so. The Catholic Church also had instituted considerable dogma surrounding the “witch” cult, reinforcing the idea of the existence of evil close to home.<sup>80</sup> This reinforced a perceived threat that was immediate and real for common people.

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<sup>75</sup> Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft*, 26

<sup>76</sup> Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* (London: Macmillan Education, 1987), 14-20

<sup>77</sup> Christina Hole, *Witchcraft in England* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1947) 26-31

<sup>78</sup> Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987), 4-6

<sup>79</sup> Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition* (New York: Citadel Press, 1939), 14-15

<sup>80</sup> Michelet. *Satanism and Witchcraft*, 16



During the reign of King Henry VIII of England, the first English anti-witch and witchcraft law was passed. In 1541, Henry VIII passed the Witchcraft Act, which made witchcraft a felony punishable by death.<sup>81</sup> It was henceforth forbidden to:

... use devise practise or exercise, or cause to be devysed practised or exercised, any Invoacons or cojuracons of Sprites witchcraftes enchauntementes or sorceries to thentent to fynde money or treasure or to waste consume or destroy any persone in his bodie membres, or to pvoke [provoke] any persone to unlawfull love, or for any other unlawfull intente or purpose ...<sup>82</sup>

It also removed the act that allowed a person accused to face a lesser charge if they could recite biblical passages.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the institution of this act considerably changed the experience and perception of those who were accused of witchcraft. One example of this is Anne Boleyn. She was accused of witchcraft by people of the court, disgraced, imprisoned, and beheaded. Although witchcraft was never proven and the King's true reason to remove Ann was to remarry, her family's name was tarnished, and her reputation ruined by this accusation.<sup>84</sup> As she was a queen, and before this a woman of noble birth, her social class had no bearings on the accusation, nor did it reduce her punishment.<sup>85</sup> Her social status meant nothing when it came to being deemed a witch. If a queen from the highest social class could be accused and executed for witchcraft, then anyone from any social class could be as well.

After the death of Henry VIII in 1547, Mary Tudor ascended the English throne and returned England to a Catholic state. Mary continued to add to the witchcraft laws, expanding the

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<sup>81</sup> Gibson Marion, *Witchcraft And Society in England And America, 1550–1750* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6-7

<sup>82</sup> Marion, *Witchcraft And Society*, 7

<sup>83</sup> Marion, *Witchcraft And Society*, 9

<sup>84</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 24

<sup>85</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 52-53

statutes to include heretics as witches; they too would be executed by the throne.<sup>86</sup> Witches were tried in ecclesiastical courts, where they were assumed to be guilty before evidence was presented, and nearly always sentenced to death.<sup>87</sup> The Catholic Church had stringent laws against witches. In *The Malleus Maleficarum* (“The Hammer of Witches”), written in 1486, Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer asserted that witchcraft was real and being practiced by more women than men.<sup>88</sup> He detailed the best ways to eradicate witchcraft, and the book later became a resource for those seeking to catch, stop, and punish witchcraft.<sup>89</sup> Kramer asserted that “witchcraft is high treason against God’s Majesty.”<sup>90</sup> Witches were women who consorted with the Devil and “...the work of God can be destroyed by it...”<sup>91</sup> Believing fully in these ideologies, Mary introduced and firmly enforced laws against witches and heretics.<sup>92</sup> Regardless of social status, anyone who was accused of or believed to be a witch or heretic was committing treason against the throne of England and God. Peasants, the merchant class, and the rich were all subject to accusations; no status was safe.<sup>93</sup>

After the death of Mary Tudor in 1558, Elizabeth Tudor ascended the throne.<sup>94</sup> In 1562, Queen Elizabeth changed witchcraft laws to be more merciful, resulting in fewer total accusations and more frequent cases resulting in imprisonment.<sup>95</sup> People could not be accused of

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<sup>86</sup> Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft*, 34-35

<sup>87</sup> Alana Kors and Edward Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 110-1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 115-118

<sup>88</sup> Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) 1-6

<sup>89</sup> Christina Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 54-55

<sup>90</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 6

<sup>91</sup> Kramer and Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, 11

<sup>92</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 79-82

<sup>93</sup> Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 171*, (Washington: The American Historical Assoc, 1911), 35-36

<sup>94</sup> Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 171*, 38

<sup>95</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 140-141

witchcraft without indication or proof.<sup>96</sup> Judges could no longer prosecute anyone in society without good cause in the courts, regardless of their social status. The death penalty for witchcraft was rarely given, though a witch who killed someone using a spell still would be sentenced to death.<sup>97</sup> During Mary's reign, the ecclesiastical courts handled witchcraft cases, but during Elizabeth's reign she deemed that county courts would handle these cases.<sup>98</sup> This allowed for trials with jurors rather than laymen and priests.<sup>99</sup> There were no religious or policing organizations following up on witchcraft cases or hunting down witches to execute them, as had occurred previously with the Inquisition.<sup>100</sup> This changed the culture of witch accusations in England. The social stigmas and moral panic that had been instilled into English people began to dissipate. Many historians argue that Elizabeth made these changes because she had been called a witch and heretic before she ascended to the throne. Her mother also had been called a witch and executed by her father for that reason.<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth's actions quelled the mass hysteria and uproar that surrounded witches and heretics after her sister's reign.<sup>102</sup> This resulted a more stable period for women, especially since they were not being falsely or inaccurately accused of witchcraft.

Despite the legal and cultural changes, witches during the Elizabethan period were classified in two main ways: white witches and black witches. White witches were "wise women" and "cunning folk,"<sup>103</sup> who were seen as invaluable to society. White whites were socially accepted because they offered society useful services like midwifery, fortune-telling, or

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<sup>96</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 141

<sup>97</sup> Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, 37-39

<sup>98</sup> Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft*, 33-35

<sup>99</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 141

<sup>100</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 37-39

<sup>101</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 140-142

<sup>102</sup> Drury, *Magic and Witchcraft*, 35-36

<sup>103</sup> Michelete, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, 15-17

healing.<sup>104</sup> White witches tended to be older women or came from families known for practicing white magic through generations. These women and men always had a presence in society, dating back to the classical era. They were invaluable because of their skill set and were highly prized by the royal court and rich families. Many rulers had their own personal witches who would provide advice, herbal remedies, fertility treatments, and astrological forecasts. Queen Elizabeth was known for having her own white witch who gave her advice and checked the stars to help her make legal and wartime decisions.<sup>105</sup> Regardless of what social class a white witch was born into, he or she could achieve higher social status through his or her abilities. Even though these individuals were classified as witches, their social status was fairly high, either due to their birth status or personal achievements.<sup>106</sup>

The second type of witch was known as a black witch. As Christina Larner explains, “Black witchcraft or *maleficium* consisted of causing deliberate harm through the conjuring up of evil powers by a curse of the manipulation of objects (sorcery).”<sup>107</sup> Black witches were people who practiced the dark arts, and gained powers through dealings with demons and the Devil.<sup>108</sup> In many cases, people claimed their neighbors and family members were dancing naked in the forest with demons or carrying on sexual relationships with devils.<sup>109</sup> Through historical studies of accused witches, it has been noted that most of the accused were well acquainted with their accusers.<sup>110</sup> These witches also were believed to have familiars, or demon spirits who represented themselves in the shapes of animals and helped their witch masters perform evil on

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<sup>104</sup> Larner, Christina. *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief* (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1987) 37-38

<sup>105</sup> Michelete, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, 145

<sup>106</sup> Michelete, *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*, 147-148

<sup>107</sup> Larner. *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 37

<sup>108</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 80

<sup>109</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 55

<sup>110</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 50-51

others.<sup>111</sup> Familiars included cats, goats, hares, crows, spiders, or toads. As stated in Jeffrey Russell's *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, "the most important function of the lesser demons in witchcraft was as familiars. Many was the person who, in the old folk tradition, believed that he had commerce with the little folk..."<sup>112</sup> There are documented court cases where townspeople were put on trial for bewitching and killing people by using familiars. In one case, in Chelmsford Essex in 1579, multiple women were accused of witchcraft for using a white spotted cat to do evil deeds. This cat was passed to other witches, who changed it into a toad.<sup>113</sup> The most intriguing part of this story is that all the women accused of witchcraft admitted to using the cat to murder and sicken people.<sup>114</sup> These black witches performed spells to torture or kill people, devastate crops, kill farm animals, and diminish the businesses of others. It was believed that they did this for personal gain or out of jealousy or malice.<sup>115</sup> Edicts, laws, and canon laws were created in order to stop the activities, the spread, and the creation of black witches. A black witch could come from any social status; she could be a spinster or a merchant's wife. These individuals were classified as witches by their actions, rather than their stations in life.<sup>116</sup> Ironically, being a black witch would not change the social status of the individual, but rather intensify the belief or fear of witches.

Witches could come from any social status whether it be higher or lower on the social scale.<sup>117</sup> This can be seen in cases such as those depicted in Anne DeWindt's article, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community". As DeWindts describes one particular

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<sup>111</sup> Hole, *Witchcraft in England*, 55

<sup>112</sup> Jeffery Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1972), 111

<sup>113</sup> Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, 35-36

<sup>114</sup> Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718*, 35-36

<sup>115</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 3-7

<sup>116</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 3-7

<sup>117</sup> Anne Reiber DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community." *Journal of British Studies* 34 (Oct 1995): 427

case, including the Throckmorton and Samuel families of Huntingdonshire, England during the fall of 1589, of falsely accused witches. She details the social status of the two women and man who were hanged as witches.<sup>118</sup> As DeWindt writes, “Modern historians of the witchcraft persecutions have been struck by the relatively high status of the victim’s family as well as the witches themselves...”<sup>119</sup> This indicates that, at least in this particular case, those accused of witchcraft were not social outcasts nor were they low in social status. On the contrary, these individuals, according to the article, were in fact, wealthier families, whose matriarchs were dueling for even higher social status.<sup>120</sup>

In another documented case, a family used the persecution of witches to actually gain social status. In Lancaster, England, in 1612, several women were hanged after having been found guilty of witchcraft. These women were accused of killing ten people in the Forest of Pendle. They were also accused of gaining the power to kill by selling their souls to “familiars.”<sup>121</sup> They were accused of killing their victims by making effigies known as “pictures of days” which held the likeness of the victim and crumbling or burning these images over a fire.<sup>122</sup> This particular case was unusual because of the number of people executed and the fact that the events were recorded by the town clerk. It was later found out that these events occurred because of two feuding families. Both of these families, the Demlikes and Chattoxos, lived as neighbors in Lancaster; they were also known for their herbal remedies and white witchcraft. They competed against each other for money and power in Lancaster as healers and beggars.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> DeWindt, “Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community”: 427

<sup>119</sup> DeWindt, “Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community”: 429

<sup>120</sup> DeWindt, “Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community”: 427

<sup>121</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 6-7

<sup>122</sup> DeWindt, “Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community”: 420-429

<sup>123</sup> George Lincoln Burr, *The Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1914) 204-210

In this case, one family had taken advantage of the witch craze and accused the other family of dark witchcraft in order to gain social prominence in Lancaster. This case is famous because of the number of people executed and the crimes of which the witches were accused. There are numerous occasions where families and people were lied in order to gain a higher social status.

Families took advantage of the social climate concerning witches. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially under the rule of Mary Tudor, the difference between black and white witches was lost. This meant that, regardless of his or her intentions, a person accused of witchcraft was doomed as were their families. Women who were widows, spinsters, or elders were the most vulnerable to being called witches because they lived alone, were without men or close relatives, and were usually poor.<sup>124</sup> The fact that they were alone and without means gave rise to the idea that these women were secretive and had plenty of time and reasons to commune with the Devil. Women who were unattractive, crone-like, or who had warts also were potentially considered witches.<sup>125</sup> People also believed that women who had pets, especially cats, kept them because they were their familiars. These women lived at the bottom of society and were easily susceptible to claims of witchcraft because they had no power in society or people to defend them.<sup>126</sup> Their social status rarely changed, and they were always kept low on the socio-economic ladder.<sup>127</sup>

Based on Catholic ideologies, women were believed to be the weaker sex.<sup>128</sup> This idea grew out of the Old Testament's story: "The Fall of Man," in which Adam and Eve were sent from Paradise and made to live in a world with pain, disease, famine, and death. Specifically,

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<sup>124</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 31-33

<sup>125</sup> Evelyn Heinemann, *Witches: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Killings of Women* ( New York: Free Associated Books, 2000) 120-212

<sup>126</sup> Heinemann, *Witches: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Killings of Women*, 218

<sup>127</sup> Heinemann, *Witches: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Killings of Women*, 215-122

<sup>128</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 10-12

humans, were removed from Paradise because of the actions of Eve. Henceforth, the descendants of Eve were then considered the weaker of the two and not to be trusted. Women were given a lower social status than men and considered more likely to be sexually deviant, since women were already corrupted. Medieval women were required to be morally, socially, and religiously chaste; they needed to hide their sexuality in public and remain pure. Women were not to drink, dance, or wear revealing clothes because this could entice men into leaving their wives or commit acts that were of a sexual nature.<sup>129</sup> It was believed that women were enticed sexually by the Devil. He promised great powers to these women and, in return, these women would share in sexual acts with the devil to solidify their bond.<sup>130</sup> This also solidified women as socially and morally lower than men in society.

Women's positions in society included nuns, wives, mothers, peasants, or royalty. The expectations society placed on them were high. Women were subjugated by men and under restrictive social stereotypes. As it was patriarchal society, women who deviated too far from the "male delineated ideal"<sup>131</sup> were immediately identified as being witches.<sup>132</sup> According to historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, "Stereotypes of the disorderly woman abounded in early modern society."<sup>133</sup> These stereotypes included the scold, the whore, and the witch.<sup>134</sup> The scold was the written personification of a woman's mouth. It was envisioned as a woman who spoke out of turn and dominated over her husband. The whore represented female sexuality and used it to her advantage. The witch was the reversal of all things good in a

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<sup>129</sup> Evelyn Heinemann, *Witches: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Killings of Women*. (New York: Free Associated Books, 2000) 126-130

<sup>130</sup> Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Europe*, 10-12

<sup>131</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 62

<sup>132</sup> Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, 62

<sup>133</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 69

<sup>134</sup> Mendleson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 70



woman.<sup>135</sup> The fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were particularly dangerous for women. Women had to walk a fine line between order and disorder and between life or death. Female inferiority to men and social perceptions played a huge part in a woman's social status.

As times changed from the late middle ages to the early modern period, ideologies and beliefs also changed. Puritan beliefs were infiltrating rural communities across England, and with that there were changing notions about the social constructs of a community. As DeWindt points out, "witchcraft accusations were nurtured within an environment in which neighbors held incompatible expectations about how best to share their community."<sup>136</sup> The cultural focus shifted to the social context and to the relationships in village communities.<sup>137</sup> This shift, which provoked the fear and reputation for hostile magic, changed the views on those who practiced any magic art.<sup>138</sup> Accusation of witchcraft made a person a member of a transcendent subjugated social group.<sup>139</sup> Those were accused of witchcraft were not able to elevate their status by their achievements or status given at birth. People viewed witches as a dark mark on society and created a hostile environment, so that anyone accused of witchcraft was ostracized. Despite ongoing belief in the existence of witches, reforms that occurred during the English Tudor period lessened the persecution of these individuals. However, being identified as a witch continued to have a significant impact on the lives and social statuses of those accused.

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<sup>135</sup> Mendleson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 69-70

<sup>136</sup> DeWindt, "Witchcraft and Conflicting Visions of the Ideal Village Community": 430

<sup>137</sup> Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 325-327

<sup>138</sup> Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of Witchcraft*, 325-327

<sup>139</sup> Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of Witchcraft*, 328

### Kate's Aversion of Social Status in *Taming of the Shrew*

Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* has been criticized for being misogynistic and abusive behavior towards women<sup>140</sup>. However, by analyzing the play, I have found that it depicts a headstrong female lead who contradicts societal norms. In the following paper, I will concentrate on the play's lead character, Katherine, and her 'shrewish' exploits towards the institution of marriage. As the play is set during the sixteenth century, I will also focus on aristocratic women, like Kate, to illustrate how women behaved during this time. In doing, so I will prove that by her actions, Kate was originally eschewing the achievement of social status to retain her freedom.

At first glance, Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* is entirely misogynistic, but by concentrating on Kate's behavior and dialogue throughout the play, one can see that Kate was entirely in control of her surroundings. From the beginning of the play, the female lead, Kate, is depicted as a headstrong alpha female, who intentionally or unintentionally rubs most people in her household the wrong way. She also is aggressive and outspoken. She does not fit neatly into the social role prescribed for women of the upper class in the sixteenth century (i.e., silent, obedient, chaste, and virtuous).<sup>141</sup> She is often referred to as "Katherine the curst" (1.2.122) and as Vincento describes her, "That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward" (1.1.70). She speaks out against conventions such as marriage and the subjugation of women to men. Katherine states,

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<sup>140</sup> John C. Bean, "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *The Woman's Part; Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare* (Urbana: University of Illinois 1980) 69

<sup>141</sup> Barbara J Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550* (Oxford: University Press, 2002) 27

He'll woo a thousand, 'point the day of marriage,  
 Make feasts, invite friends, and proclaim the banns,  
 Yet never means to wed where he hath wooed.  
 Now, must the world point at poor Katharine  
 And say, 'Lo, there is mad Petruchio's wife,  
 If it would please him come and marry her" (2.1.15-20).

Here, we can see that Katherine fears that the institution of marriage will cause her embarrassment and subjugation.<sup>142</sup> The culmination of all of these behaviors makes finding a suitor difficult for her father, and Kate establishes herself as “the shrew.”

Interpreting Kate’s character may seem simplistic, but this character has layers and depth. Although she is considered the shrew because of her aggressive nature and quick-witted tongue, the modern view of Kate is that she is a strong-willed woman who knows what she wants, and that does not include falling into societal norms.<sup>143</sup> She is determined to undermine her father’s marriage plans for her, as she sees marriage as a prison sentence and not a social achievement. Unlike upper-class women of her time, Kate uses her mind, rather than social status to determine her future.

Shakespeare’s Kate chooses to live outside the social norms, as her behavior and verbal altercations force suitors away. She has chosen not to marry. From the beginning of the play, we can see that Kate is a force to be reckoned with. She does not stand to be accosted by suitors or disrespected by her father. In one scene, she yells at her father, “I pray you, sir, is it your will To make a stale of me amongst these mates” (1.1.57-58)? During the 16th century, women were considered the social inferiors to men,<sup>144</sup> so this behavior would have been shocking for anyone in the social elite. Kate contradicts the social norms by defending herself. As the shrew in nature

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<sup>142</sup> Marianne Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*,” *Love’s Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984) 35

<sup>143</sup> John C. Bean, “Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” 71-73

<sup>144</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 133-137

defends itself, aggressively, one can see why she is deemed “the shrew.” The modern sentiment is that she is not just a passive bystander who lets her father chose her path, and instead she takes control of her own life and defends herself.<sup>145</sup>

After Kate meets her future husband, Petruchio, and quarrels with him, he decides to marry Kate to increase his wealth and social status. He states, “Horsensio, peace! Thou know’st not gold’s effects: Tell me her father’s name, and ‘tis enough: For I will board her, though she chide as loud. As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack” (1.2). Ironically enough, Kate is taken with Petruchio because he is intelligent, aggressive, confrontational, and he is the only man that can match her in a battle of the wits.<sup>146</sup> This is how Petruchio can ‘tame’ Kate. He refuses to allow Kate to express herself verbally. Instead, he puts Kate in her place by reminding her she belongs to him.<sup>147</sup> Petruchio states, “I will be master of what is mine own. She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house, My household stuff, my field, my barn, My horse, my ox, my ass, my anything. And here she stands, touch her whoever dare” (3.2.235-239). From this point on in the play, Kate employs her wits rather than her mouth. She learns that the best way to have a better life is to play into Petruchio’s game.<sup>148</sup> She continues to allow Petruchio to act out and abuse her. She knows that if she withstands this behavior, she will eventually manipulate Petruchio into believing that he has subdued her. By doing this, Kate has complete control of the situation, and Petruchio believes he has the advantage.<sup>149</sup>

In the third act, we are given Kate and Petruchio’s wedding. Petruchio shows up outrageously dressed, cursing in the chapel and refuses to stay for his own wedding feast. Kate is

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<sup>145</sup> Marianne Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*,” 45-46

<sup>146</sup> Marianne Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*,” 50-52

<sup>147</sup> Marianne Novy, “Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*,” 60

<sup>148</sup> Bean, “Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*,” 71-74

<sup>149</sup> Bean, “Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*,” 74-75

visibly upset but allows Petruchio to sweep her away with him. Petruchio acts in a beastly way to show Kate how ridiculously she had acted previously and to tame her. As scholar John Bean writes, "... she is reduced to defending the status quo against Petruchio's outrageousness."<sup>150</sup> Kate tries to regain composure and power over the situation by claiming that Petruchio will stay and not leave the wedding feast. Petruchio then acts ridiculous, sweeps Kate up while holding his sword, and flees the scene. Kate's father believes that Kate has bested Petruchio by getting what she wanted. Has Kate made Petruchio act more like her, is Petruchio swept away by Kate? Is Petruchio in for a scolding from Kate?<sup>151</sup> That is hard to discern, but the most important theme in this scene is the power struggle between Kate and Petruchio. No matter what her situation, Kate chooses not to allow Petruchio to define her or break her spirit and, in the end, the wedding crowd believes Kate has bested Petruchio<sup>152</sup>

In act four, Petruchio, and Kate are now at home, and Petruchio acts beastly and tyrannically to his servants and to her. He starves her and deprives her of sleep. He then explains that by acting out as she has previously, he will show her how ridiculous she has once behaved.<sup>153</sup> Petruchio believes that Kate will become so exhausted that she will have no other choice but to give in to him. As scholar Coppelia Khan states, "He reappears and explains his intention to tame the shrew by out-shrewing her: he will mistreat her and deprive her of what she needs, all under the guise of kindness and love. Therefore, by insisting that neither her food nor her bed are worthy of her, he will wear out her spirit with lack of nourishment and sleep."<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Bean, "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*," 68.

<sup>151</sup> Bean, "Comic Structure and the Humanizing of Kate in *Taming of the Shrew*," 69

<sup>152</sup> Marianne Novy, "Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*," 75-77

<sup>153</sup> Coppelia Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edward (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1977) 85-86

<sup>154</sup> Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," 92

Petruchio continues this brutal treatment because Kate refuses to be the silent, obedient, and mild-mannered wife that society demands.<sup>155</sup>

Nearing the end of the scene, Kate, and Petruchio are on their way to Padua, and Petruchio argues with Kate, berates, and continues to starve her. In this scene, Kate plays along with Petruchio and pampers him like a baby. Petruchio believes he has broken his wife's wiley spirit and quips, "This is a way to kill a wife with kindness; And thus I'll curb her mad and headstrong humor. He that knows better how to tame a shrew, Now let him speak. 'Tis charity to show" (4.1). This scene, although it may seem misogynistic, is asking who needed to be tamed. As Phyllis Rackin notes, "Is it possible that, by the 'shrew' in the play's title, Shakespeare means to refer to *Petruchio* rather than Katharina? By the end of the fourth act, Katharina is treating her husband as if he were a whimpering baby who demands to be constantly humored."<sup>156</sup> Kate also says, "Then, God be blessed, it is the blessed sun. But sun it is not, when you say it is not, And the moon changes even as your mind. What you will have it named, even that it is, And so it shall be for Katharine" (4.5). As Rackin argues, "This is the language of a woman wise enough to be in charge, but who subjugates herself to please - or perhaps to control - her husband."<sup>157</sup> Kate's willingness to play along with her husband seems to indicate that she is in control because she is fully aware of the situation at hand. Instead of being tamed or broken like a wild horse, she plays her own game with Petruchio.<sup>158</sup>

In the final act, Petruchio makes a wager to prove that his wife is the most obedient of all the wives. He wins the wager when Kate gives a long-winded speech about the importance of

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<sup>155</sup> Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," 101-103

<sup>156</sup> Phyllis Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere." *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000) 46

<sup>157</sup> Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," 50

<sup>158</sup> Marianne Novy, "Patriarchy and Play in *Taming of the Shrew*," 60

being obedient to one's husband. At face value, this whole scenario and speech seem rather misogynistic, but the speech has a strong current of irony.<sup>159</sup> With this speech, not only does Kate have the last word, when Petruchio believed he had dominated his wife, but also, she is using her intelligence to make a jest of the whole situation between her and Petruchio. She gains control by expressing herself through innuendos and sarcasm. As a 16th century woman, Kate would also know she has no choice but to obey her husband. During this time, women were their husband's property. Kate knew that she had to subdue Petruchio to live a better life.<sup>160</sup> In this moment, Shakespeare has emphasized that women were not as dull minded as men had once believed, but they too could play their own games and gain the upper hand unbeknownst to their male counterparts.

During the 16th century, aristocratic women, like Kate, held more social clout than any other social class. These women were educated, more than likely well-off and through their achievements could receive more social status. As the historian Barbara J. Harris writes, "... they married more than once, bore large numbers of children, became rich through consecutive marriages, arranged their children's careers and marriages, exploited their connections at court, and carefully distributed their property when they died."<sup>161</sup> A woman's social achievements were based on her marriage choices, her political maneuvers, and her ability to determine her children's marriage and careers.

An aristocratic woman would achieve the most success in maintaining their social status through marriage. Through a series of legal, economic, religious, and political institutions, marriages were based on dowries and jointures.<sup>162</sup> As the man was the head of household, the

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<sup>159</sup> Kahn, "*Taming of the Shrew*: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage." 97

<sup>160</sup> Rackin, "Misogyny is Everywhere," 45-46

<sup>161</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 3

<sup>162</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 17

father usually determined the marriage contract. Marriage was important for two reasons: maintaining or gaining more financial assets for the daughter and gaining higher social status by marrying the daughter into a wealthier, higher ranking or more politically powerful family.<sup>163</sup> The marriage was a transfer from paternal to spousal ownership.<sup>164</sup> The dowry was a provision that insured the woman would be financial stable if she were to be widowed.<sup>165</sup> As women were not the social or economic equals to men, women were solely dependent on successful marriage arrangements that would ensure their economic livelihood<sup>166</sup> According to historian Barbara Hanawalt “...women tended to outlive men and were more often than not widowed.”<sup>167</sup> So her first marriage would be arranged by her parents for political or monetary reasons and her consecutive marriages could also be arranged, but she could also make calculated decisions and decide her own marital arrangements. Each marriage would be a deliberate effort to gain more wealth, property, political capital, and dominance as her own head of the family. Each time there was a marriage or if the husband dies, the woman would keep the dowry from her family or dowers.<sup>168</sup> In either situation, the woman was receiving monetary amounts, her husband's political status, and land entitlements in exchange for marriage. A woman could accumulate a sizable sum and become financially independent in her own right through successful choices in husbands. This alone was enough to establish her as wealthy, but her husband's social prominence would also gain her more social status.

For Kate, her social status was achieved through her birth, as her parents were already wealthy and of high status. Kate was not interested in marriage, as proven by her statements and

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<sup>163</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 44-45

<sup>164</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 124-129

<sup>165</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 23

<sup>166</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 24-25

<sup>167</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 143

<sup>168</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 19-22



behavior, and she would not have achieved any more social status through her marriage with Petruchio, as she was wealthier and of higher social status than he was. Since women were dependent upon men for their economic stability, Kate was still under the financial and legal control of her father. Eschewing this pivotal convention of marriage was in direct contrast to what other women in her social class were striving to achieve. Her sister, Bianca, who was scheming and hoping desperately to marry so she could complete her wifely and female duties, is a great example of how typical aristocratic women behaved. Kate was not interested in subjecting herself to men, especially men she found to be beneath her.

Marriage was a transition from life as a maiden to a wife and was the source of physical and mental anguish. As the historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford write, “An atmosphere of prurient teasing pervaded contemporary wedding rites...”<sup>169</sup> The wedding night for upper-class women was mentally traumatic and included being sexually interrogated, undressing of the couple, and watching the couple consummate their wedding.<sup>170</sup> From her previous quote about marriage, Kate acted like a shrew to avoid this violent transition into marriage in order to secure her mental state as well as protecting her maidenhood until she married Petruchio. Kate stressed her independence through her verbal freedom and by pushing away potential suitors, to the chagrin of her family. In the play we can see that her father was not authoritative and therefore this allowed Kate to take control. Regardless of whether he had financial power over her, she created her own social status within her social circle to achieve autonomy.

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<sup>169</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 129

<sup>170</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 129

As an aristocratic wife, a woman's career was to contribute to the family's success and class.<sup>171</sup> This culminated in the production of children, their rearing and successful political arrangements (either through marriage or career); an aristocratic woman was expected to bear many children. She was also in charge of the education of the children, procurement of household items, finances, and smaller chores, like sewing or needlework.<sup>172</sup> However, the success of the household relied heavily on the production of children. Children from the household could be called to court for schooling or to act as a member of court. Tutelage at court was highly sought after by all aristocratic families as daughters and sons would be steps closer to marrying members of the royal family.<sup>173</sup> The upper-class woman was highly successful if she could retain a spot at court for her child and successfully contract a marriage with a high-ranking royal family member or member of court. This catapulted the family name, achieving the highly sought after high social status.

Since Kate was not interested in marriage, she was not interested in achieving a higher social status for her family. Men held dominion over women and could physically discipline women, but women were not to physically harm their husbands. As Mendelson and Crawford write, "... most women conceded the duty of female submission, whether this obligation was grounded on the consequences of Eve's sin [or] the laws of the land..."<sup>174</sup> Kate harms those around her (e.g., binding and beating Bianca and hitting her suitor over the head with a lute.) This was not in line with how a lady should conduct herself. Since there were no repercussions to her actions, Kate is given dominion over herself. Due to her actions, Kate is given the nickname of the shrew by her contemporaries. She is aggressive, wicked, and confrontational. She is not

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<sup>171</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 26

<sup>172</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 125-163

<sup>173</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 27-36

<sup>174</sup> Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 134

what any man would consider a good wife, nor is she considered a lady. Her behavior and actions show she is not interested in the thoughts of her peers. Since most aristocratic women were mindful of their behaviors and took great care in how they were perceived, we can see that Kate rails against this to be her own person.<sup>175</sup>

As progressive as Kate may seem, she is not a modern feminist. Women were owned by the men in their lives, their power was in the household and wielded through financial gain or marriages, and their contributions to the house were children. Women in elite classes rarely held careers outside of the home. They were subject to different laws and could not hold property as men could.<sup>176</sup> The female was the lesser sex. Regardless of whether her actions or crude or socially inappropriate, Kate created her own social status within her home.<sup>177</sup> She was revered, feared, and left alone. She was intelligent and knew women were subjected to a man who could physically and sexually abuse them. She knew success as a female was weighed by the products of her uterus. Kate could avoid this with her behavior until her marriage to Petruchio. Kate was also smart enough to know her place in society. She knew that women were subject to men's whims, so after she married, she played into her husband's whims. Once she had her husband convinced that she was 'tame', she knew she had the power in the relationship. As the man is the head of the house, she became the neck that could turn the head. She was a strong-willed female lead that showed the true intelligence and power of women.

Although the character of Kate had chosen a different path than most real Tudor upper-class women, Kate could create her own autonomous social status by using her verbal freedom. After her marriage, she still retained personal power by using her mind to manipulate her

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<sup>175</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 61-69

<sup>176</sup> Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1440-1550*, 43-45

<sup>177</sup> Kahn, "Taming of the Shrew: Shakespeare's Mirror of Marriage," 124

husband. She is a reminder that the goal to maintain her social status was indicative of her time period and gained in various ways.

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