Noblemen and Noblewomen

The noblemen and noblewomen were usually very wealthy people. They were lords to the knights and peasants that lived on their land. Most of them lived on manors. Some nobles had one manor, while others had several. Those who had more than one manor usually lived in one for a few months and then traveled with their families to another.

It was the nobleman’s (lord) responsibility to manage and defend his land and the people who worked it. The nobleman appointed officials to make sure villagers carried out their duties, which included farming the lord’s land and paying rent in the form of crops, meat, and other foods. They also acted as judges in manor courts and had the power to fine and punish those who broke the law. Some noblemen held posts in the king’s government. In times of war, lower-ranking noblemen fought for their own higher-ranking lords, or at least supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

In theory, only men were part of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. However, it was quite common in the Middle Ages for noblewomen to hold fiefs and inherit land. Except for fighting, these women had all the duties that lords had. They ran their estates, sat as judges in manor courts, and sent their knights to serve in times of war if their husband was away.

Noblewomen who were not landowners were still extremely busy. They were responsible for raising and training their own children and, often, the children of other noble families. Noblewomen were also responsible for overseeing their household or households. Some households had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunters, and knights-in-training called pages and squires, who assisted the knights. There were also cooks, servants, artists, craftspeople, and grooms. Musicians and jesters who performed amusing jokes and stunts provided entertainment.

When they weren’t hard at work, noblemen and noblewomen enjoyed hunting and hawking (hunting with birds), feasting and dancing, board games such as chess, and reading. Noblewomen also did fine stitching and embroidery.

Although nobles and monarchs had the most privileged lives in medieval times, they were not always easy or comfortable. Lit only by candles and warmed only by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings. People generally bathed only once a week. Clothes were not washed daily either. Diseases affected the rich as well as the poor. And, of course, warfare was a great and ever-present danger.

Complete Activity 5
Activity 5 Noblemen and Noblewomen

15. What responsibility did noblemen have in the feudal system?

16. What was the role of noblewomen in the feudal system? How does a noblewoman’s role change when her husband is away?

Use the provided sources (The Life of a Nobleman, Conduct for Ladies, Comparison Chart, and Rules of Courty Love) to complete the following questions. Cite specific details from the documents.

17. Why would a nobleman allow himself to go into debt? (5A)

18. Describe the daily life of a nobleman (routines and responsibilities). (5A)

19. How should a lady “behave”, according to the Rules of Conduct for Ladies? (5B)

20. How are the roles and routines different for noblewomen and peasant women? How do the concerns in their lives differ? (5B)

21. What is courtly love? (5C)

22. How should a nobleman or knight treat his beloved? (5C)
"Not all nobles were grand seigneurs (wealthiest barons who were direct vassals of the king) were given the title of duke, count or marquis... They ranged from the great dukedoms with revenues of more than 10,000 livres [pounds], down through the lord of a minor castle with one or two knights under 500 livres, to the poor knight at the bottom of the scale who was a lord of no one except those of servile birth and whose only fief was a house and a few fields equivalent to a peasant’s holding.

Still, for the most part, nobles had more in common with one another than they did with those outside their order. They felt that, as aristocrats, a certain standard of living was expected of them, and they did their best to eat, dress, and conduct themselves like nobility, even if they ran themselves irretrievably into debt doing it. Keeping a grand house, serving sumptuous meals and having a large complement of servants and followers were all ways in which a lord could advertise his power, his wealth, his nobility.

In any case any noble was not certain how to behave befitting his class, there was no shortage of advice from contemporary writers. A popular rhyme of the day advised, “Rise at five, dine at nine, Sup at five, to bed at nine Is the way to live to be ninety and nine.” A French treatise titled Les quatre ages de l’homme (The Four Ages of Man) recommends the following daily routine – as interpreted by historian Joan Evans – to a knight or baron who was not engaged in war at the moment:

“He is to begin with a triple sign of the Cross and prayer; then, before getting up, he is to think of what is to be done in the course of the day... and to repeat it to himself three times that he may not forget. Then he is to hear mass; to give alms, if only a little; to dress very carefully, and to see that his nails are clean; and then to proceed with his business diligently. At midday it should be finished, so that he may eat and drink in peace.”

The next order of the noble’s day was to hold court at the table in the main hall, where he handled household business matters and dispensed justice. A great nobleman ordinarily had the right of the high justice; in other words, he held the power of life and death over everyone within his domain. A mere knight or petty baron was likely to have the right of low justice, which allowed him to sentence common criminals.

There was also the training as a knight. There does not seem to have been any formal ceremony that marked a boy’s passage from page to squire, or knight-in-training. Often there was not even a clear boundary between the two roles. Well before they reached their teens, most boys had begun honing their knightly skills- practicing with weapons, riding and caring for horses, and learning how to hunt and hawk. But when they made the transition from page to squire, these things became their primary preoccupation. Theoretically a squire could be dubbed – declared a knight- by any other knight, however ordinary. But the higher the rank of the nobleman who conveyed the honor, the greater the glory, so most young men preferred to be knighted by the lord himself or, better yet, by his lord’s lord.

Above From The Way the People Live “Life in a Medieval Castle” by Gary L. Blackwood
Noblewomen of the Middle Ages were expected to follow certain rules of conduct in all circumstances of their life. By and large, these rules were set by their fathers, husbands, and brothers. In the 1200s, Robert de Blois, a French poet, codified these rules in Chastiment des Dames – a manual of conduct for ladies, or women of high social position. As you read the following excerpt, think about how women were thought of and treated.

1. En route to church or elsewhere, a lady must walk straight and not trot or run, or idle either. She must salute even the poor...
2. Women are criticized for the way they look at people, like a sparrowhawk ready to pounce on a sparrow. Take care; glances are messengers of love; men are prompt to deceive themselves by them...
3. Women must not swear, drink too much or eat too much.
4. The lady who, when a great lord salutes her, remains silent with bowed head is badly brought up. A lady removes her hood before those whom she would honor. One may only remain with head bent when one has something to hide... If you have an unattractive smile, however, hide it with your hand.
5. Cut your fingernails frequently, down to the quick, for cleanliness’ sake. Cleanliness is better than beauty.
6. One must know how to eat – not to laugh or talk too much at table, not to pick out the best pieces, not eat too much as a guest, not to criticize the food.
   ~From Joseph and Francesca Gies, *Life in a Medieval City*

**Activity 5B**

**Comparison Chart: Noblewomen vs. Peasant Women**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Noblewomen</strong></th>
<th><strong>Peasant Woman</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Primary Source</strong></td>
<td><strong>Primary Source</strong></td>
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<td>She gets up at 7a.m., and her chaplain is waiting to say morning prayers . . . and when she has washed and dressed . . . she has breakfast, then she goes to the chapel, for another service, then has dinner . . . After dinner, she discusses business . . . then has a short sleep, then drinks ale or wine. Then . . . she goes to the chapel for evening service, and has supper. After supper, she relaxes with her women attendants. . . . After that, she goes to her private room, and says nighttime prayers. By 8 p.m. she is in bed.</td>
<td>I get up early . . . milk our cows and turn them into the field. . . . Then I make butter. . . . Afterward I make cheese. . . . Then the children need looking after. . . . I give the chickens food . . . and look after the young geese. . . . I bake, I brew. . . . I twist rope. . . . I tease out wool, and card it, and spin it on a wheel. . . . I organize food for the cattle, and for ourselves. . . . I look after all the household.</td>
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<td><strong>Daily Routine of Cicely, Duchess of York</strong>&lt;br&gt;quoted in <em>Women in Medieval Times</em> by Fiona Macdonald</td>
<td>*<em>From a ballad first written down in about 1500, quoted in Women in Medieval Times</em> by Fiona Macdonald</td>
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**Rules of Courtly Love**

Courtly love refers to a code of behavior to be followed by aristocrats during the Middle Ages. The nobles celebrated courtly love, an ideal form of spiritual love in which a knight or courtier completely devotes himself to a noblewoman. The following set of rules is based on *De Amore* of the Andreas Capellanus written 1174.

1. Marriage should not be a deterrent to love. (Most marriage were arranged, so spouses had to be encouraged to love one another)
2. Love cannot exist in the individual who cannot be jealous.
3. A double love cannot obligate an individual.
4. Love constantly waxes and wanes.
5. A lover must observe a two-year widowhood after his beloved's death.
6. Only the most urgent circumstances should deprive one of love.
7. A lover should not love anyone who would be an embarrassing marriage choice.
8. Public revelation of love is deadly to love in most instances.
9. The sight or presence of one's beloved causes palpitation of the heart.
10. Good character is the one real requirement for worthiness of love.
11. Apprehension (anxiety) is the constant companion of true love.
12. Love is reinforced by jealousy. Suspicion of the beloved generates jealousy and therefore intensifies love.
13. Eating and sleeping diminish greatly when one is aggravated by love.
14. No act or thought is worthy to the lover, unless it is to show undying love.
15. Thought of the beloved never leaves the true lover.