Lesson Plans: Social Roles

I. Infancy and childhood

A. Infants in medieval times were cared for in many ways just as modern infants are, though medical advice on the care of infants was often different from what we would consider good advice today. But of course medieval parents, just like parents of any other time, wanted to take the best possible care of their children. Look at the passage below from Bartholomew’s “On Infancy”:

“The flesh of a recently born infant is soft and delicate, and therefore various medicines and applications of warmth are necessary for it. And so Constantinus says that infants, as they are emerging from the uterus, should be wrapped in roses which have been mashed with salt, so as to soothe their limbs and free them from their sticky moistness. Then their palate and gums should be rubbed with a finger smeared with honey, so as to clean the inside of the mouth and soothe them, since honey stimulates the infant’s appetite with its sweetness and sharpness. They should be bathed frequently, oiled with olive oil scented with myrtle or rose. All their limbs should be rubbed, especially those of the boys, whose limbs should be harder because of exercise.

A strong constitution for one's child comes from good health in the milk that feeds it, and likewise the tender body of a child or infant is certainly harmed by disease in the blood of the wet-nurse. This is because of the weakness of the child's nature, and its easy susceptibility to the milk that feeds it.

Again, because infants also receive a lot of food, they need a lot of sleep, so that their natural warmth may be returned to the inside of their bodies, and this is required for their nourishment to be distributed. Therefore, by the instinct of nature, nurses are accustomed to push infants in cradles with a back and forth movement, with the result that from the mild motion, their warmth is strengthened, and soothing sleep is summoned into the head of the infant through a release of steam. A song is also often used, so that the senses of the infant may be delighted by the sweetness of a voice.”

i. What parts of this advice do you think still look like good ideas? What ideas about caring for infants have changed from medieval times to modern ones? What do you think could have motivated these changes?

B. There are not many pictures of children or infants in medieval artwork – the great exception, of course, is the infant Christ, as well as a few other Biblical figures such as the baby Moses. However, just as adult Biblical figures are often shown in medieval dress, we can get some clues about how medieval children looked from these Biblical illustrations, and a few other pictures showing children. Take a look at the pictures below:

i. Biblical stories and allusions:
   - Mary breast-feeding Jesus
   - Jesus talking to children
   - Saint Paul beating a boy
   - Saint Nicholas teaching children
   - Saint Anne teaching Mary to read

ii. Scenes from daily life:
   - A confirmation ceremony – a happy occasion
   - A boy learning – not a happy occasion!
A man and boy (father and son?) holding hands

A little boy catching a butterfly

iii. What ideas do you get about medieval childhood from these pictures? How are the children dressed? Who accompanies them? Are their activities the same as or different from those of the adults around them?

II. Love and marriage

A. The sad love story of Abelard and Heloise is a rare and famous description of romantic love in the middle ages. We are lucky enough to have both Abelard's and Heloise's writings about their relationship; take a look at the excerpts below.


   “In fact, there was in that same city of Paris a certain young woman by the name of Heloise, the niece of a canon who was called Fulbert, who loved her so much, that he was desirous that she might study the science of letters in everything that he could provide. Of no mean beauty, she stood out above all by reason of her abundant knowledge of letters. ... Then, too, I believed that I could win the maiden's consent all the more easily by reason of her knowledge of letters and her zeal; so, even if we were parted, we might yet be together in thought with the aid of written messages. Perchance, too, we might be able to write more boldly than we could speak, and thus at all times could we live in joyous intimacy.”

Abelard arranged with Heloise's uncle and guardian to be made her tutor. He moved into the household and taught her literature, but as time went by the two fell in love. They began a secret relationship, but they were eventually discovered by Heloise's uncle, who was ashamed and furious when he found out, and sent Abelard away. The two continued to communicate by letters, and when Abelard discovered Heloise was pregnant, he arranged to have her spirited away to stay with the sister until their son Astralabe was born.

B. As in the case of medieval children, many medieval pictures of people in love are from Biblical stories, like the following:

i. Gomer and Hosea (who loved Gomer so much that he took her back even after she was unfaithful to him)

ii. David and Abishag

C. Medieval marriages were performed in a variety of ways; not until the 16th century was it decided that a priest had to be present, so for most of the middle ages, many marriages were not performed by a religious officiant. Pictures of each type of ceremony are below:

Marriage ceremony

Religious marriage ceremony

i. Many medieval couples could not afford mainstays of modern weddings such as rings – instead, a coin might be broken in half, and one half given to each partner. For wealthy or noble couples, weddings were larger and more extravagant, as in this fanciful picture of the marriage of King Arthur and Guinevere. A wedding reception would follow the ceremony; the one shown here is an illustration of the Biblical story of the wedding at Cana, but in a medieval setting.

ii. Marriages in the middle ages were, in general, not primarily about love – instead, they
were intended to produce children, and in the case of wealthier families to consolidate land or power. But of course this does not mean that people who got married never loved each other, just that this was not the main idea when choosing a spouse. Marriages were frequently arranged, particularly for wealthy people, rather than freely chosen by the partners.

III. The feudal system: working the land

A. You may have heard the term “feudal” used to describe medieval society. The feudal system of medieval Europe organized society in a hierarchy. It was a very rigid hierarchy; there was little social mobility except, through learning, into the ranks of the church. The king was at the top; other lords, who served as knights, were his vassals, meaning that they obeyed him and went to war for him, while he helped protect them.

i. Coronation of a French king (Pepin the Short)

ii. The French king Clovis and his sons the princes

iii. A knight

iv. Two knights fighting

v. Benediction of a knight by a bishop

B. These wealthy lords lived on estates called “manors,” and they had vassals of their own. The majority of those subjects were serfs, poor peasants who farmed a small piece of land, giving the landlord a part of the harvest. Farming was very hard work, and serfs lived a hard life of great poverty. In addition to farming the land, serfs would perform services on the manor such as wood-cutting. Here Bede tells the story of Adam in Paradise as a happier and easier time for managing the earth:

i. "On Farming," Bede, Hexaemeron:

"Therefore the Lord God brought the man whom he had made, and placed him in a paradise of pleasure, so that he could manage and maintain it." [Genesis 2:15] When it says “so that he could manage and maintain it,” this seems to look back to the place where it is said, “and there was no man to manage the earth.” However, in this commentary on scripture, we might add the words of Saint Augustine: “Why should he manage or maintain it? Did the Lord perhaps want the first man to practice agriculture? Or is it unbelievable that he had condemned him to labor before his sin? And so we should think, unless we were to see some people practicing agriculture with such pleasure in their hearts that it would be a great punishment for them to be called away from it to something else. Therefore agriculture has some element of pleasure, and certainly this was much greater when no misfortune ever befell the earth or sky. For there was no suffering from labor, but rather enjoyment of purpose, when those things which God created sprang forth with greater health and vigor because of man's assistance, so that the Creator himself was praised more richly, because he gave reason to the soul rooted in an animal body, and the ability to work enough for the spirit's desire, not so much as the body's needs unwillingly compelled.”

ii. Serfs' activities:

a) A lazy man next to harnessed plow – most serfs worked much harder than this!

b) Noah harvesting grapes

c) Cutting wood
C. Other ways of using the land included hunting and fishing, as well as herding sheep. Hunting was a highly skilled occupation; children would be apprenticed for years to hunters who would teach them the skills of the trade. Animals were hunted with bows and arrows, spears, nets and snares, and sometimes with dogs. Noble sport hunters would have a horse they could ride while hunting, but people who engaged in hunting as a trade would not have been wealthy enough to own a horse.

i. **Hunting scene**

ii. **Monkey hunting a porcupine**: Many medieval manuscripts are decorated with pictures of monkeys doing things people usually do – hunting, fishing, spinning wool, etc.

iii. **Hunting a stag**

iv. **Hunting a bird**

v. **Shepherd and soldiers**

IV. Other roles: making a living outside the fields

A. Merchants and traders: Merchants were outside the feudal agricultural system, but the trade they managed within that system, and the goods they brought from outside it, made them a very important part of the medieval economy. As time went on, large market towns developed, and gave rise to an alternative social structure to the feudal system of the manor. These commercial ventures created a need for a currency that could be widely exchanged, and to associated occupations like moneylending. These profitable occupations were sometimes frowned on by the Church, which warned against greed and avarice.

i. **Merchants**: These merchants are illustrating the Biblical story of the expulsion of traders from the Temple, but their clothes and appearance are clues to the actual appearance of medieval merchants.

ii. **Moneylenders** illustrating the principles of avarice and generosity.

iii. **Townspeople** having a discussion with the king.

B. Women's occupations:

Medieval women participated in some of the same activities as men. Poor women might perform some of the same farming and cultivation tasks as men, while women living in convents could aspire to some of the same scholarly work as male monks. They also had tasks of their own. Women of all walks of life would learn as children to spin wool into yarn and to weave cloth on looms. Even the mistress of a wealthy house would contribute to the house's economy by making cloth. A wealthy woman would have servants, many of them female, to help her, both in household tasks and raising children – think back to the lesson on taking care of infants, where the wet-nurse plays an important role.

i. Adam and Eve farming and spinning: [12th century, another 12th century manuscript]

ii. **Mary learning to weave**

C. Activity: Study [this beautiful picture] which shows various activities of medieval people. What activities do you see represented? Are there activities and professions we have discussed that you do not see here?