

# Women and Religious Reform in Late Medieval Bohemia

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Throughout European history women have played an active role during revolutionary times by joining movements that attacked the established authorities. The part women played in the past has not yet been sufficiently studied but it seems that during periods of turmoil, from the time of the medieval heretics to the Russian revolution of the twentieth century, women became active agents for change in their societies. This is also true for fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Bohemia. Women, having been excluded from influential participation in public life, expectantly joined the religious reform movement that culminated in the Hussite revolution. As revolutionary forces opened up channels of public action to more groups in society, women, who had been thwarted more than any other segment, also shared in greater opportunities to make their will felt in political and religious life. Yet in fifteenth-century Bohemia, just as was the case in Reformation Germany and revolutionary France, any gains women made were temporary. The traditional stereotype that relegated the female sex to the home and obstructed her participation in public life reasserted itself. After the first heady years of the revolution, Czech women were slowly but steadily excluded from the halls and battlefields in which actions affecting their land were taken.

When John Hus began his ministry in Prague's Bethlehem Chapel in 1402, he was continuing in the rich reform tradition represented by the fourteenth-century preachers like Milíč of Kroměříž (d. 1374) and Matthew of Janov (d. 1393). Their goal was a general reform of religious life. Since to them religion, politics and society were interrelated, their program had implications for all areas of life. They did not so much criticize the Church's ceremony and doctrine as the ethical behaviour of its representatives. The reformers charged that the clergy did not lead people to the Christian faith, but were overly concerned with material goods, secular politics and the opposite sex. The reformers therefore took the initiative in exhorting both clergy and lay people to religious renewal. According to the reformers, purity of heart and life could be attained

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through contemplation, prayer, reading the word of God and hearing it preached, and through frequent participation in holy communion. For some it might even mean a retreat from the normal worldly pursuit of making a living into meditation. They expected that people who claimed to be Christian should live according to the pattern reflected in the New Testament. In their sermons they pointed out that it was not harmonious with apostolic behaviour to charge excessive prices for one's products, or to exact increasing rents and tributes. Nor was it in keeping with Christian behaviour for the prosperous to flaunt their wealth in costly finery since they ought to share their money with the poor. It was Hus' continuous harping on the clergy's extortionistic practices that first aroused his opponents' ire, leading to charges of heresy. The reformers were also sharply critical of the fornication and general sexual promiscuity they saw in their society.<sup>1</sup>

The priests were the worst offenders against what Hus understood to be the Christian morality, and so the clergy bore the brunt of the attack. At first the reformers had tried to persuade the clergy to voluntarily change their life style; when this failed, Hus, influenced by the Englishman John Wyclif, urged that the nobility and the king forcefully take from the Church its property and secular authority.<sup>2</sup>

After Hus's death in 1415, the reform movement became increasingly divided between moderates and radicals. The Four Articles of Prague best sum up the moderate program. Briefly stated these are: the laity is entitled to both bread and wine at communion, the word of God is to be properly and freely preached, the clergy is to be deprived of secular lordship and Bohemia is to be purged of all public mortal sins.<sup>3</sup> The moderates left the basic social, economic and political situation intact. They left the nobility and town patriciate their privileged position, and wanted to retain the monarchy as long as the ruler allowed them to worship according to Husite principles.

The radicals, who were of course not in complete agreement among themselves, wanted a more thorough reform. In religion, Nicholas, the bishop of the Taborites, criticized the moderate priests for continuing to use elaborately decorated vestments and the ceremonies of the old Church. Taborite worship was marked by preaching, congregational singing and reading and discussing the Scriptures – all done in the vernacular. In addition, men such as Peter Chelcicky and Martin Huska challenged the entire social and political structure of the day, denying nobles any right to special status and power over other people.<sup>4</sup>

To a large extent the Husite movement was the culmination of diverse lay religious tendencies of the late middle ages, including the female lay communities known as the Beguines. The Beguines were an integral part of the reform movement from its beginning. Since the early thirteenth cen-

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tury, women in large numbers pursued the medieval religious ideal characterized by the renunciation of wealth, property and family ties and by humility, meditation and such good works as teaching young girls and caring for the aged and the sick.<sup>5</sup> Many communities, especially those in Prague, were involved in sewing and other handicrafts. In Prague the Beguines lived in simple wooden houses, the first known to be constructed in 1279. By 1415 at least eighteen existed, endowed by private donors. The Prague communities were small, numbering from six to twelve members. Each group elected its head (procuratrix or magistra) and was in general subject to the spiritual supervision of the parish in which it was located.<sup>6</sup> The Beguines' interpretation of the Biblical message by and large agreed with that of the Hussites and, in the course of the political and ecclesiastical struggles that ensued in Bohemia, they soon came to the support of Hus and his followers. John Hus, close to the time of his execution, sent his thanks to Lady Petra of Růžany, who had founded one of the Beguine communities.<sup>7</sup> These pious women were in the forefront in debating religious matters and the Scriptures. They denounced priests who owned property, who were active in secular affairs and who performed religious ceremonies in ornate robes and only on special altars. Sometimes they violently prohibited priests from carrying out the services in the traditional style. During the revolution the Beguines were also prominent in their support for the more radical wing. On 3 January, 1421, they backed the radical priest, Wenceslas Koranda, receiving him enthusiastically in one of the larger Prague churches after the city council had refused to give him a hearing.<sup>8</sup>

There were several reasons why women were attracted to the Hussite movement. The late medieval movement of religious renewal included many individuals in pursuit of a genuine spiritual quest, understood in its classical sense of following what was believed to be a supernatural revelation without regard to the consequences to one's own physical or material well-being.<sup>9</sup> In Bohemia, as elsewhere, women and men joined together wishing to draw near to and acquire a more personal understanding of the God portrayed in the Scriptures and proclaimed by the Church for hundreds of years.

In addition, the Czech reformers held certain attitudes and took certain stands that materially and in a this-worldly sense attracted women. First, people like Milíč of Kroměříž worked for increased participation of the ordinary people – including women – in public life, especially in the Church. They were encouraged to share their feelings and ideas at religious meetings and to take greater responsibility for their own spiritual well-being by examining their moral conduct. Second, the preachers loudly and clearly expressed their disapproval of the tendency to regard the female as a sex symbol.<sup>10</sup>

In encouraging the broader population to participate in religious life, the reformers specifically included women. For example, Matthew of Janov, in a break from the tradition of most churchmen, concluded that women are more inclined to modesty, chastity and sobriety than are men. Males take pride in what they think is their natural ability, what today might be called *machismo*, and so are less suited to the religious life. Because they are closer to the Holy Spirit, women have the prophetic gift and divine mysteries are disclosed to them.<sup>11</sup>

Although Hus to some extent accepted the medieval view of women as particularly sinful, he qualified this by saying that those women who were pious and religious deserved special credit for having overcome so much more. Perhaps he was thinking of the many women he personally knew to be devout. In any case those who came to hear him preach chose to see themselves as active religious persons. Hus, like Matthew of Janov, provided for women's fuller participation in religious life. He stressed that women should participate in hymn-singing, but more than that, they should explain and defend the law of God to priests and rebuke those who offend against it. Thus they would tangibly share in the building of the Church.<sup>12</sup> In other words, women were to be active in spiritual and theological instruction. References in the literature of the period to treatises written by women indicate that some accepted the invitation. However, as far as we know none of these writings have survived.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Hussites were by no means exponents of equality between the sexes, their attitude shows favourably against the misogynist views of their opposition. Ruth Kelso has described a view of women current in Europe in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries that saw women as scarcely human and at that responsible for many of the world's woes, ranging from lawlessness and social instability to vanity and greed.<sup>14</sup> Some of the most outspoken representatives of this view were at the same time agents of the Church, its priests. Many of the opponents of the Hussites expressed similar disdain for the female sex. Stephen of Dolany, in his attack on Hussite worship services, derided the reformers for giving up their dignity and sense of order by singing masses and hymns together with women. It was laughable, said he, that anyone should deign to worship with them. In contrast to this, the Hussites welcomed women and encouraged their participation in the religious, social and military spheres of life.  
 On the other hand there was nothing revolutionary in the reformers' views on marriage that might attract women. Hussite theologians followed the traditional medieval view that marriage was a voluntary union of two free people for the primary purpose of propagating children.<sup>16</sup> It may have been that Hus's rather bleak portrayal of the actual conditions of marriage met with a positive response from women knowing what he said to be true from their own experience. His views are reflected in a letter to some young

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women around 1408.<sup>17</sup> A married woman, he wrote, can expect her husband to be unfaithful, drunken and bad-tempered. If she has children she can count on misery during pregnancy, at childbirth and later, she will worry about their health and security. If she has no children she will be disgraced and in sorrow.<sup>18</sup>

With respect to marriage, the radicals of Tabor, represented by their bishop, Nicholas of Pelhřimov, in some ways regressed in requiring parental consent for marriage, while at the same time they loosened the marriage bond.<sup>19</sup> The developments in canon law since the twelfth century moved away from making parental accord a requirement for marriage. Hus followed this, saying that agreement between bride and groom was more important.<sup>20</sup> Nicholas of Pelhřimov however returned to the older custom, stressing that the bride especially needs to get the permission of her mother and father. As far as women's rights was concerned this was a regressive step.

In other ways the Taborites opened up the marriage pact. They swept away the Church's prohibitions against marriage between god-parents and their god-children. Furthermore, under certain circumstances, when women felt led by God, they were allowed to separate from their spouses. This step was taken in response to pressure from the large number of women who left their homes to join the radical communities. There were even a few remarriages in Tabor's society, although in principle this was forbidden while the husband was alive. According to the Czech historian, Kejř, the Hussites granted divorce more readily than did the Catholic church.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, on the question of priestly marriage, the Hussites were divided. The 1421 synod of moderates prohibited priests from having any relations with women, including marriage. The Taborites on the other hand, permitted priests, monks and nuns to marry.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as medieval marriage law was generally more confining to women than to men, any loosening of the marriage bond benefited women especially when it meant escape from an untenable domestic situation.

It was however the radical Chlissas who offered women the greatest hope of release from domestic drudgery. In 1420 they dominated the thinking of many Hussites as Bohemia was threatened by a full scale attack from Europe, making radical solutions and repudiation of the old order appealing. Their leader, Martin Huska, promised an end to the old order and the beginning of a new utopia in which there would be no hunger or thirst and no pain even in childbirth. Evil lies, injustice and every sin would vanish from the earth to be replaced by faith, love, and justice. His assurance that conception itself would be achieved without male participation promised release from the sexual obligation spouses owed one another.<sup>23</sup> In an age when much sexual activity was marked by male brutality,<sup>24</sup> his vi-



sion was evidently attractive to many women. In response to Chillyast promises and expectations, according to their critic John Pribram, women by the droves left household and plot, husbands, children and domestic obligations for a kingdom of dreams.<sup>25</sup>

Women were not attracted to the reform movement only because of the active role it offered them and because of its views on the state of marriage. They also supported the reform movement because they agreed with its opposition to various social attitudes and practices that regarded the female primarily as a body naturally designed and artificially adornable for the sensual pleasure of males. The reformers frequently lashed out at what they called the sexual immorality of their day. Although the clergy bore the brunt of their attack, laymen and women were not spared.

One area on which the reformers focussed their criticism was that of dress styles. By the late fourteenth century, Burgundian clothing fashions had reached central Europe where their provocative cuts elicited the reproach of the preachers. The new styles made every effort to achieve the slender, pointed effect. They drew attention to the natural lines of the body while at the same time adorning it extravagantly with colours and ornaments. Clothes were made-to-measure to achieve the perfect fit. Somebody fortunately discovered buttons, an essential item if one wanted to climb in and out of the figure-hugging garments. The fashionable women wore narrow belts high under the breasts, with plunging necklines complemented by long trains, plus veils and steeple or cone-shaped hats measuring up to two feet in height. Similarly, the point of the shoe was often three times the length of the foot. All of this was made from the costliest fabrics and accompanied by precious jewelry and other embellishments.<sup>26</sup> The cost of the fashions was such that for the most part only the nobility and the patriciate were able to afford them. However many people with less income yielded to the temptation and lost small fortunes on fancy clothing.

The reformers attacked the new styles for their seductive effect as well as for the fact that many people spend hard-earned money to be stylish at the expense of more necessary purchases. The first reformer-preacher in fourteenth-century Prague, Conrad Waldhauser (d. 1369) preached against the display of one's sensuality through clothing and wealth. The fact that he was well-liked by the Prague women suggests that they welcomed the release from obligations of placing their bodies on display as well as the abandonment of the constricting clothes. The canon, Votěch Rankův, reported that as a result of Conrad's sermons the behaviour and dress of Prague's women became markedly more modest. The fact that they appreciated his views became evident later when Conrad was cited before the general of his order to answer charges of heresy. A large body of women showed up defending the austere preacher against the accusations of his fellow friars. Millic's sermons had a similar effect. During one, in which he

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denounced the latest styles, a girl who was listening tore her ornaments from her head and trampled them underfoot in the style of Savonarola's followers a century later in Florence.<sup>27</sup> Another preacher, Thomas of Stintny (1331-1401), similarly warned women against the use of artificial beauty aids such as paints and wigs. The main reason he gave was that many women fell into poverty spending money to attain affected standards of beauty. Thus criticized dress styles because they were, according to him, sexually provocative and shameless. He added that he could not see how smearing one's face with makeup, wearing tight belts and shoes could be comfortable. The favourable response of the women to the preachers allows us to surmise that to some extent it was their criticism of the latest fashions that drew their women followers.

The concern the reformers had for women is perhaps nowhere more dramatically illustrated than in their activity among prostitutes. Their work here stands as a concrete sample of the reformers' attention to the material conditions of society's downtrodden members.

Prostitution as a profession was well established in Prague by the late middle ages, as it was in the rest of Europe. The city had a special area called Krakov where the prostitutes plied their trade. It is possible that they were in fact administered by the city council as in other parts of Europe.<sup>28</sup> The reformers directed special attention to them, and Mathew of Janov claimed that his predecessor, Millic, had converted two hundred harlots. It would be an oversimplification, if not distortion, of the true picture to say that the reformers worked to dissuade these women from their trade merely because they resented people enjoying themselves sexually. Although the reformers clearly showed a bent to what was later called puritanism in sexual matters, they attacked the profession of prostitution because the women therein rarely entered it freely and had almost no chance of escaping.

The prostitutes of fourteenth-century Prague existed in conditions that were little short of involuntary bondage. Many of the recruits reflected the sour economic climate that dominated Bohemia and particularly Prague as the fourteenth century drew to a close. Girls and women entered the trade as a result of financial pressure on themselves or their family. Their need for money had driven them to borrow from a rich creditor. Frequently they found themselves unable to repay the loan. In this situation a common tactic for the creditor was to require the debtor to work off the unpaid charge. For women with few technical or business skills the opportunities for doing so were limited. Prague had its share of madame-creditors who required women in debt to them to become harlots and to work for them in conditions hardly different from slavery.

The nature of a prostitute's bondage to her madame is reflected in the example of Dorthy Strygl's relation to her creditor Anna Harbatova.

Dorothy promised Anna that under pain of death she would not leave her employ until the debt was discharged. In 1396 - 1397, almost thirty years after the reformers had begun their ministry among them, there were four madames, Anna Harbatová, Lidka, Elizabeth Trchla and Manda, who had some fifty to sixty women in their service. Altogether the women thus in debt numbered in the hundreds.<sup>29</sup> It was virtually impossible for a woman to free herself from such an entanglement because to do so she had to pay off the debt in one payment. The average liability was two hundred and fifty groschen, an amount equal to that which a skilled labourer earned in one hundred and twenty-five days, or an unskilled one in almost two years.<sup>30</sup>

In late medieval Paris, the king and municipal authorities tried first to repress the profession, and when that failed, to regulate it.<sup>31</sup> In Prague the authorities did little to discourage it. In fact in 1395 one town official did what he could to keep it going, loaning one of the madames fifty groschen so she could stay in business.<sup>32</sup>

It is clear from this that women who resorted to professional sex in order to make their livings did so reluctantly and under compulsion. Hence when the reformers preached against prostitution and helped women out of it they did so not only to promote sexual chastity *per se* but because they were aware that the sexual trade bound some women into an almost inescapable servitude.

In addition to their verbal attacks against fornication and prostitution, the reformers took steps to help women materially when they left the profession. Most had no financial resources for reasons already described. Their opportunities for marriage or employment were also not bright. In response to their needs the reformers helped organize ventures that gave such women a place to live and establish themselves.

Some of Millic's attitudes did not exactly qualify him for working closely with women. A thorough-going ascetic, he feared women and distrusted his ability to resist their attraction. Hence he avoided hearing their confessions alone and would not shake their hands. Yet it is this man who receives the credit for restoring the "fallen women."<sup>33</sup> Millic started by giving the women a small house near his church of St. Giles. Under the care of Lady Catherine of Morava, they were given board, room and supplies for their personal needs. Occasionally Millic paid off their debts. From here some of them entered domestic service, some returned to their families and a few married. As a result of his effective speaking the number of women seeking help grew daily. The idea of establishing a bigger centre for their rehabilitation came from Keruse Hofart, herself a reformed madame. In her will, written on her deathbed, she gave Millic two former brothels that he was to convert for this purpose. The emperor, Charles IV, was so impressed with their work that in 1372 he ordered the destruction of "Venice," the main



brothel in the area, and gave the site to Milić's group. In its place was erected a new establishment including a chapel. The community, now called "Jerusalem," hosted as many as eighty former courtesans at one time. Milić, with the help of businesswomen such as the widow Ela, a further acquired a total of twenty-seven houses in the region. His goal was to change the character of the district by filling it with what to him seemed more reliable people who would counter the influence of the remaining prostitutes.<sup>34</sup>

These residences became virtual beehives of religious activity as the women's time was taken up in confession, frequent communion, listening to preaching, singing, prayer, and even self-flagellation and long periods of kneeling. One woman called Anka excelled all others in these activities. Frequently she wept to the point of losing her speech and beat herself until she lost all feeling. The medieval mystical mind found such behaviour impressive and praiseworthy, and even Milić, an accomplished flagellant, was so struck by Anka's asceticism that he said he regarded her as an example for himself.<sup>35</sup>

Milić's urban renewal project was unfortunately doomed to failure. At his death in 1373 it appeared as though the community would also die. The friars and endowed clergy who had been the targets of many of his sermons agitated successfully to have "Jerusalem" suppressed. But the pious men and women who had made up the community continued in their activities on a less obvious level. In 1392 a recently ennobled townsman gave them a new building, Bethlehem Chapel. The donor went through the proper procedures giving it a more secure and legal form.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to helping start the centre for converted harlots, women were instrumental in getting reform-minded priests into church offices providing them with protection in times of danger, and even giving crucial military aid during the revolution. Moreover, although we know few names and no written work remains, we are told by contemporaries that women wrote devotional works, preached sermons and in general engaged in theological disputes in support of Hussitism. Among the women who used their property and power to aid the cause of reform were three noblewomen, Margaret Peruce, Catherine Vraha of Sulvice and Anna Machova of Usti. We know very few biographical details of any of the three but enough is known to sketch briefly their contribution.

Sometime before 1440 Margaret left her family property of Peruce, a village with a small castle, for Prague about fifty kilometers away. In the city she joined the community of Beguines, moving in with another noblewoman, also a friend of Hus, Petra of Riciany. At the same time she retained her share in the right to appoint the priest to the nearby parish in Chlumcany. In 1400, with several local gentry who were the other patrons, one of whom was the priest in Peruce, she presented Egidius, the son of

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Mathew of Prague, to the church in Chlumcany. Egidius had a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Prague, which was also a main area of reformist activity.<sup>37</sup>

The frequent, if not normal, procedure was for patrons to provide local friends or relatives with an income by presenting them to their church office. This had happened in Peruce itself where the gentry family that also held a share in Chlumcany had presented one of its members as the priest.<sup>38</sup> In 1400 in Chlumcany, however, Lady Margaret persuaded the remaining patrons (or perhaps chose, because it was her turn) to accept a graduate of the University of Prague who like her had become an adherent of the reform cause.

The widow of Lord Conrad Kapler of Sulevice, Lady Catherine Vraha, also used her wealth on behalf of reform, making several endowments, one especially for women. As a mere patron, one could not ensure that one's successor might not replace a priest with one of his or her own choosing; hence placing a cleric sympathetic to one's own religious tendency might have only temporary results. Lady Catherine tried to avoid this danger by establishing in 1400 a perpetual office for a preacher in the main Prague Cathedral. In her endowment she followed the spirit in which Hus's own Bethlehem Chapel had been founded in 1392. The holder was not to spend time in masses and other ceremonies. Rather, in order best to contribute to the salvation of people's souls, she stated, he should preach sermons from the word of God. Just as the reformers were concerned that the populace hear the gospel in their native tongue, she too required the preacher to speak in Czech each holy day except Sunday, when the cathedral already had a Czech preacher. During Advent and Lent, Lady Catherine's preacher was responsible for Czech sermons three times a week.<sup>39</sup>

She also established an endowment allowing twelve single women, virgins or widows, to live in a community similar to that of the Beguines. According to the endowment, it was for "women who would renounce the vanities of this world and devote themselves to the service of God."<sup>40</sup> Altogether from 1400 to 1415, as part of the religious revival, seven such communities were founded, four by women or at least in houses owned by women.

Lady Anna Mochova of Usti similarly used her influence over her husband and sons as well as her rights as a patron to help the cause of Hussitism. Her energetic action on behalf of the reform movement so angered a contemporary chronicler that he compared her to the diabolical Jezebel of Old Testament times. Anna was married to John Kamenice of Usti, who in addition to Kamenice shared the town and estate of Usti with members of his family. The town was a few kilometers from an old fallen-down fortress, Hradiste, which was later rebuilt by the Taborites to become one of the main centres of radical Hussitism. The leading authority on the Bohem-

mian nobility, August Sedláček, described Anna as the most zealous among female supporters of Hus. Her activity explains partially why Hussitism was so deeply rooted in this area of southern Bohemia.<sup>41</sup>

One of her most important acts was in 1412 when she gave Hus a sanctuary in Kozl, a small fortress on the Usti domain. In 1412 conditions in Prague were growing increasingly tense and dangerous for Hus. King Wenceslas was unhappy with the reputation for heresy and instability the kingdom had acquired, and as a result he had three Hussite youths executed for disturbing a priest who was selling indulgences. Shortly thereafter the Pope excommunicated Hus and placed Prague under interdict. Although not without powerful friends, Hus decided to leave the city until things settled down. After going first to a castle in western Bohemia, by the end of 1412 he was in Kozl where he wrote most of his Czech works, including some especially addressed to his female friends in Prague.<sup>42</sup> In July, 1414, John Kamenice died. This weakened Anna's influence and as a result Hus had to leave Kozl for the castle of one of the king's courtiers responsible for settling the religious disputes.

Lady Anna however was not yet through fighting for reform. She was part of that group of nobility that in 1417 used its power to protect Hussite clergy in their jobs. In 1414 Hus had gone to Constance in order to lay his cause before the church council. The fathers, unimpressed, executed him, and in response a group of Bohemian nobles wrote a letter protesting the council's actions. They also formed a pact vowing to defend their priests on their estates, should ecclesiastical authorities threaten them. In late 1416 the attack came. In December King Wenceslas decreed a restoration of the Catholics to power. One of the Hussite leaders, the lawyer John of Jesenice, was forced to leave Prague. More important, all but a few Hussite priests in Prague were expelled from their offices and their places were taken by Catholics. In 1417 the onslaught was extended to rural Bohemia. On 10 January the archbishop stopped ordaining and confirming to office any priest who would not swear loyalty to Rome. This was followed by a drive to remove Hussite priests from office throughout the country.<sup>43</sup>

With the Hussite movement on the defensive it was the Czech nobility who came to its rescue. Under the leadership of Lord Ceněk of Vartembek, the nobles put into effect their promise of September 1415 to protect their clergy. At the beginning of 1417 Hussite patrons expelled those priests who obeyed the archbishop and replaced them with those eager to advocate reform.<sup>44</sup>

Lady Anna Mochova participated in the action by Hussite patrons. Although her influence in Usti had substantially decreased since the death of her husband she was still the patron of the chapel in Hradiste. In January or early February 1417, having persuaded her sons who had recently come of age, she was one of the first to expel a Catholic priest, replacing him

with a Hussite. Later, in the autumn of that year, an anonymous Catholic writer damned her to eternal suffering with the words "you most fierce Jezebel, you persecute a priest as upright as Abel, in Ustil he suffered abuses, just as did Elijah. You shall writhe in hell."<sup>45</sup> The author did not vilify Anna's sons because by the time he wrote they had returned to the Catholic fold and because the mother evidently was the moving spirit behind the dismissal.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the three noblewomen, Queen Sophia, the second wife of King Wenceslas, also played an important role in supporting the Hussites, both within the royal council and in her own right as a patron. Sophia, the niece of the Duke of Bavaria, came to Prague in 1389 from Munich. She was openly received by the people who, albeit in vain, expected her to produce an heir to the throne and thus to prevent a turbulent struggle for succession. The queen soon found herself embroiled in violence. King Wenceslas was in the midst of a fight with archbishop Jenstejn, who was intent on the hopeless task of subordinating the king to the Church's authority. Soon thereafter, from 1393 to 1405, the king was threatened by several noble revolts in which the Bishop of Litomyšl in eastern Bohemia played a leading role. Twice the king was in captivity, and the second time, he had to mortgage the queen's estate, Albrechtice in northeastern Bohemia, to purchase his liberty.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of these disputes the queen's coronation had to be postponed repeatedly. When it finally took place in March, 1400, Wenceslas absented himself primarily because he loathed some of the honoured guests, such as his half-brother, King Sigismund of Hungary, and Bishop John of Litomyšl. The fact that he might again be taken captive if he left the safety of his castle probably also occurred to him. For the queen, her arrival in her new realm was anything but auspicious.<sup>48</sup> Undoubtedly the involvement of the clergy, first the archbishop of Prague and then the bishop of Litomyšl, in secular politics and the difficulties resulting therefrom for the royal family prepared the queen for the Hussite teaching denying priestly secular dominion.

Queen Sophia was an active participant in the religious circles and an eager listener to the preachers in Bethlehem Chapel. When the Roman curia stepped up its attack on Hus and the reform movement after 1410, she worked ceaselessly in court circles to defend him. In September and October, 1410, she wrote letters to Rome proclaiming that she attended the meetings at Bethlehem Chapel that the local clergy was trying to suppress. She urged that the curia drop its campaign against Wycliffite literature and that it leave preachers like Hus free to preach, even though they tended to compete with the parish priest.<sup>49</sup> Her concerns were reflected in her participation in the series of letters and dispatches defending Hus that emanated from Prague from 1412 to



1415. In November, 1412, along with the king and the nobility, she ordered Conrad, the administrator of the Prague archdiocese and its future archbishop, to settle the dispute surrounding Hus at home in a clerical synod. The idea was to get a hearing in a local and more friendly setting.<sup>50</sup> Later she used her right of patronage to her nine churches on behalf of Hussites. There is no evidence that she did so before 1417, but in that year she evidently joined with the noble league to fill her offices with Hussites. From 1417 to June, 1419, two months before the death of her husband and the outbreak of the revolution, she did not submit her candidates to the episcopal office. Her decision in 1419 to return to Catholicism was a result of the growing polarization within Bohemia.

The queen was basically a member of the moderate party of Hussites that wanted to reform the Church within its existing European structure, or if that was not possible, as Constance had shown, then they wanted the right for the Church in Bohemia to pursue reform on its own. As either possibility grew increasingly remote, many people felt they were left with one of two choices. The radical solution was to proceed with far-reaching social and religious reforms, being prepared to defend them with force if necessary. The reactionary solution was to make one's peace with the old order. The queen's decision was influenced primarily by events outside Bohemia. Questions of papal succession having been settled, the newly elected pope, Martin V, embarked on an energetic campaign against heresy. Despite Wenceslas' action on behalf of Catholics in December, 1416, the Pope was not satisfied. In the spring of 1418 he accused King Wenceslas of harbouring heretics and sent him a list of twenty-four demands to be met in order to bring his kingdom back into the fold of the Church. The heir apparent, King Sigismund, whose zeal for the Roman faith was well known, was expected to provide a secular force to implement the Pope's policy.<sup>51</sup> Early in 1419, just months before his death, King Wenceslas responded by returning all except four parishes and a number of altars in the royal cities to their Catholic owners. The queen, who herself had been cited for persecuting priests, went along with the king. She relented and began presenting Romanist clergy to her church offices.<sup>52</sup>

Certain energetic women of that time, such as Isabelle d'Este, were able to capitalize on their husbands' deaths and increase their own political power.<sup>53</sup> Queen Sophia was not so fortunate. Her appointment in the fall of 1419 to head an interim government until the new king arrived was short-lived. The revolution did not recognize any royal government until 1434 except for the brief regencies of Sigismund Korybut, the king of Poland's nephew. In November 1419 the forces of radical Prague, led by Ambrose, one of the priests expelled during the queen's purge of Hussites, attacked the royal castle, Hradčany. It appeared for a time as though they might break through so the queen decided to flee in the company of the



powerful young nobleman, Ulrich of Rožmberk. There was thereafter no end to the indignities she was made to suffer as she entered the protective custody of the less-than-friendly heir to the throne, Sigismund. In addition to depriving her of her independent source of income, he regarded her as a tool with which to accomplish his political and diplomatic ends. One of his goals was to patch up his relationship with the Polish king by offering him Sophia as bride. While negotiations proceeded, from her confinement in Bratislava she contacted her family in Bavaria to ask their aid. They were however able to do little for her, but from her correspondence we learn of her fear that Sigismund planned to kill her. She died on 4 November 1428 in Bratislava having made several attempts to escape.<sup>54</sup>

Before the revolution, women such as the queen sought to use peaceful and legitimate tools to help. But when the Hussites resorted to warfare to achieve their goals the women were there in the front lines actively fighting. It became clear in 1419 that King Sigismund, working hand-in-hand with a reunited Church, intended to re-establish Rome's authority in Bohemia. There were to be no more discussions between Hussite theologians and politicians and the Catholic party. If the Bohemians would not give in voluntarily they would be forced to do so by Sigismund's military might, which was bolstered by crusaders from all parts of Europe. To avoid annihilation, the Hussites, led by radicals like Nicholas of Husinec and the military genius John Zizka, hurriedly fashioned field armies in which people from all walks of life participated. From 1420 to 1434 these troops held sway in Bohemia and sometimes even in neighbouring lands.

Hussite women fought alongside the men as well as providing general sustenance and nursing aid. Indeed they were often accused of being the most ferocious and zealous fighters. One historian of Hussitism has suggested that it was Hussite women who gave Joan of Arc the idea to take to the battlefield in 1429 to save her native land.<sup>55</sup>

In general, in the late middle ages women were not allowed on the battlefield. As a corollary to the idea of the lady on the pedestal protected by knights in shining armour, there had developed the attitude that women ought not to participate in armed conflict or dress as males. Thus a woman of the gentry, Anka of Prasatin, was fined in 1378 by the Prague archbishop because for twenty years she had dressed as a man and ridden astride her horse carrying a sword she drew at times in self-defence.<sup>56</sup> Similarly the main charge brought against Joan of Arc was that she dressed in men's clothing in order to participate in battle.<sup>57</sup> This social and political prejudice against women fighting and their virtual absence from the battlefield explains why Hussite female warriors caught the attention of most contemporary observers.

There is some confusion as to whether women participated in an open and regular fashion with the rest of the Hussite troops. At the battle of Tyn

Horšův in 1422 the report suggests that they fought openly alongside the men. However, in other encounters the reports imply that the women needed to conceal their femininity in order to do battle. For example, on 12 July, 1420, the Hungarian troops reported that they had captured one hundred and fifty-six Hussite women dressed as men with their hair cut, armed with swords and stones in their hands. Another contemporary, Andrew of Brod, reported that some Hussite women rode their horses as did men and fought like them, and were discovered to be female only after being wounded and disarmed.<sup>58</sup> Apparently there were times when they openly engaged in battle, while at other times they considered it better to be discreet as to their sexual identity.

In any case many regarded the women as the chief instigators of that savage style of all-out fighting marking the combat procedures of the field armies of the so-called "brotherhoods." The radicals gave no quarter, spared few lives and above all rarely made truces with the enemies.<sup>59</sup> The instigating role played by the women was especially clear when the Hussites took the castle of Růčany in December, 1420, and the town of Chomutov in March, 1421. When the Hussite military captains wished to save the lives of the women and children, the Taborite women dissuaded them. A moderate Hussite, Laurence of Březova, testified that the Taborite women were not content to strip and rob their vanquished enemies but insisted on burning them all at one time.<sup>60</sup> Similarly the Hussite attack on Tyn Horšův in 1422 was so intense and the methods of the women so ferocious that the Bavarians decided they had better prepare to fight the Hussites.<sup>61</sup>

In order to understand fully the role of the women in warfare we need to examine the radical Hussites' view of their struggle. Before we do that however it needs to be stated that gross inhumanity and killing in war was not invented by the Hussites. The crusaders besieging Prague in the summer of 1420 likewise killed all Czech men, women and children that fell into their hands.<sup>62</sup> For the radical Hussites war was a holy cause and they saw themselves as God's warriors. They were sent by God to lead the faithful throughout the world in cleansing the kingdom of Christ of all scandals and expelling the evil ones from the midst of the just.<sup>63</sup>

Radical leaders such as John Capek insisted that all sinners, those outside Hussite communities, be killed and all buildings destroyed. This universal killing and total warfare was a fundamental doctrine for the radicals.<sup>64</sup> In one sense, the women in their bizarre fashion were simply taking the lead in putting these principles into practice and in applying them consistently and equally to both sexes.

As the revolution proceeded, the role of women receded into the background and their activities became more and more proscribed. The last reference to their participation in battle occurs in 1428.<sup>65</sup> The majority of reports on women's activity in public life fall in the years 1416-1420, that is

at the very beginning of the revolution.<sup>66</sup> By the end of 1420 efforts were being made to exclude them from participating in the affairs of their country and church.

Although the Hussites gave women more extensive opportunities and recognition, even among them there remained the deep-seated anti-feminine attitude. This was illustrated in a meeting between the radical and moderate politicians in December, 1420. The need as they saw it at the time was to unite the two parties for a common defence of the land and of Hussitism. For this purpose a meeting of both groups was called. It may have been a concession to the moderates or a sign of the growing anti-feminine spirit of all Hussites, in any case, citing fear of popular disturbances, women and priests were expressly forbidden to attend the preliminary meetings. The priests could not be excluded from the main meetings later but the women apparently were.<sup>67</sup>

The growing prejudice against women was most evident among the moderate theologians. Jakoubek of Stribro, a friend of Hus, had tried valiantly to keep the movement from splintering into its various factions. By late 1420, increasingly frustrated, he began to blame the women for the disunity and especially for the appearance of extremist sects. His was clearly a biased statement because we do not know the names of any women leaders of the radical groups but do know those of men like Martin Huska and Stephen of Repany. Had women in fact led the extremists, surely some of their names would have come down to us. His comments do however confirm that women's support of radicals such as the Chilians was significant.

Jakoubek's views are summed up in his "Commentary on the Revelation of St. John," written in 1421 in the midst of the moderates' disputes with the radicals at a time when he was becoming more and more conservative.<sup>68</sup> He expressed his disapproval of women fighting, burning and murdering. He felt it was improper for women who committed atrocities on the poor, who stole and burned, to be involved in public affairs or to fight on the battlefield. War fitted women as a suit of armour did a sow. In an oblique testimony to what the wars had gained for women, he lamented that women were occupied with secular business and presided over secular courts. They were guilty of quarrelling, of creating disunity and producing new arguments against the faith. Submissiveness, modesty and humility were far from them. To escape punishment they fled to the hills and mountains joining others there in their love-making and immorality. Women and heretics avoided the learned and wandered from home to home mistleading the simple folk. They glossed and commented on the scriptures and carried on disputations without benefit of formal education. The result was that a great mob of women had spread errors of the worst sort against the crucified Christ throughout the kingdom.<sup>69</sup>

The revolution brought therefore no long-lasting gains for women. In the centuries following, according to preliminary studies, Czech women again retreated into domestic roles, leaving public affairs – whether in religion, politics or warfare – to men. In fact in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Czech women were in many ways more docile than those in the rest of Europe.<sup>70</sup> With the exception of men like Matthiew of Janov and Martin Huska, who recognized women as full-fledged persons with abilities and rights, Hussite leadership did not anticipate freer and more authoritative roles for them. The short-lived advances the women of Bohemia enjoyed came because in the struggle for support the Hussites needed all the help they could get. Women seized the opportunities and briefly shared in determining events in their country. For a fuller freedom, Europe had to wait for the pressures brought on by the industrial revolution and the world wars of the twentieth century.

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Notes

- 1 See M. Spínka, *John Hus' Concept of the Church* (Princeton, 1966), 82; J. Macek, *Tábor v husitském revolučním hnutí*, (Prague, 1956), I, 139-146; V. Novotný, *M. Jan Hus, život a učen.* (Prague, 1921), II, 206-207; and P. DeVoght, *L'Hérésie de Jean Huss* (Louvain, 1960), pp. 1-40.
- 2 See Hus' tract "On Simony" in *Advocates of Reform from Wyclif to Erasmus*, M. Spínka (trans.), *The Library of Christian Classics XIV* (London, 1953), pp. 258, 272, and H. Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 23-55 for a discussion of Wyclif's influence.
- 3 See Lawrence of Brezova's *Chronicle* in J. Goll, ed., *Fontes rerum Bohemicarum* (Prague, 1893), V, 391-394. Cf. Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 369.
- 4 Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 422-428; F. Seibl, *Hussitica: Zur Struktur einer Revolution* (Cologne, 1965), pp. 109-114, 145-148, 161-166; R. Kalivoda, *Revolution und Ideologie: Der Hussitismus in the Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries* (The Hague, 1957), pp. 25-69.
- 5 E.W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and the Beghards in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, 1954); H. Grundmann, *Religiose Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt, 1960); pp. 319-354; B.M. Bolton, "Mulieres Sanctae" in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. S.M. Stuard, (Philadelphia, 1976) and R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1972), pp. 35-60.
- 6 V.V. Tomek, *Dejiny města prahy* (Prague, 1875), III, 233-234; A. Kolářová-Cisarová, *Zena v hnutí husitském* (Prague, 1915), pp. 120-122.
- 7 F. Palacký, ed., *Documenta Mag. Joannis Hus* (Prague, 1869), pp. 101, 120; J. Pekař, *Zižka a jeho doba*, (Prague, 1928), II, 220.
- 8 J. Goll, ed., *Fontes rerum Bohemicarum* (Prague, 1893), V, 466; Pekař, *Zižka*, I, 41-42; III, 86-87.
- 9 Bolton, "Mulieres," p. 147.
- 10 Kolářová-Cisarová, pp. 16, 22, 27.
- 11 Kolářová-Cisarová, p. 42. The original, in *Regulae veteris et novi testamenti*, ed. V. Kybal, vols. 1-4 (Prague, 1909-1914), is unavailable to me.

- 12 V. Flašhans ed., *Mag. J. Hus, Opera omnia*, vols. 1-3 (Prague, 1903-1907; repr. Osnabruck, 1966) and vols. 4-6, Czech works, (Prague, 1904-1908). See especially vol. 3, pp. 33-68 and vol. 5, pp. 40-60, 114-124, 223-229. Cf. Kolářová-Cisarová, pp. 77-79.
- 13 Kačna, a servant girl of the lords of Sternberk, questioned by the archbishop's vicar-general, confessed to having in her possession a prayer written by herself. For other evidence see Kolářová-Cisarová pp. 40-41 and Pekař, *Zižka*, I, 234.
- 14 See her *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, 1956), pp. 11-13.
- 15 Kolářová-Cisarová, p. 136.
- 16 J. Keřt, "O manželském právu husitů" in *Pravnik*, 92 (1953), 52.
- 17 On the other hand, Hus in another context stated that God had raised marriage to a higher state than all others (Novotný, *M. Jan Hus*, pp. 26-27).
- 18 M. Spínka ed., *The letters of John Hus* (Manchester, 1972), pp. 20-21; H. Workman ed., *The Letters of John Hus* (London, 1904), pp. 15-17.
- 19 However, for a propertied woman it could be quite costly to marry without parental consent, because according to the law of the land she would lose her dowry by doing so. Keřt, "O manželství," p. 55.
- 20 J.T. Noonan, "The power to choose," in *Viator*, 4 (1972), 427; Keřt, "O manželství," pp. 54-55.
- 21 Both Rokycana, the leading priest of the moderates in the 1420's, and Bishop Nicholas of Olomouc at divorce ceremonies. The reason for the break-ups were not given (Keřt, "O manželství," pp. 55-57).
- 22 Keřt, "O manželství," p. 54.
- 23 Kalvoda, *Revolution*, pp. 161-164.
- 24 J.L. Flandrin, "Repression and change in the sexual life of young people in medieval and early modern times," in *Journal of family history*, 2(1977), 200-203.
- 25 Kolářová-Cisarová, pp. 161-164; Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 404-406.
- 26 L. Kybalová, *Pictorial Encyclopedia of Fashion* (New York, 1968; trans. from Czech), pp. 127-129. See pp. 20, 127-138 for illustrations.
- 27 Kolářová-Cisarová, pp. 30-32, 46, 59.
- 28 Flandrin, "Repression and change," p. 199.
- 29 F. Graus, *Městská chudina v době předhusitské* (Prague, 1949), pp. 67-68.
- 30 F. Graus, *Dějiny venkovského lidu v Čechách v době předhusitské* (Prague, 1957), II, 441-443.
- 31 W.W. Sanger, *The History of Prostitution* (New York, 1859), p. 97.
- 32 Graus, *Městská*, p. 106.
- 33 It was Anna Kolářová-Cisarová who as long ago as 1915 documented the important role played by women such as Keruse Hofart. They have however received no mention from major historians of Hussitism such as Bartoš, DeVooght, Seibr, Kaminsky and Heymann.
- 34 V. Novotný, *Nabozenské hnutí české ve 14. a 15. století* (Prague, 1915), I, 74-76; Tomek, *Dějiny*, III, 302-305; Kolářová-Cisarová, p. 32-35; Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 11-13.
- 35 Tomek, *Dějiny*, III, 305; Kolářová-Cisarová, 35.
- 36 O. Odložilík, "The Chapel of Bethlehem in Prague," in *Studien zur älteren Geschichte Osteuropas* (1956), I, 125-141.
- 37 J. Emler ed., *Libri confirmationum ad beneficia ecclesiastica pragensium per archidiecensium pas* (1956), I, 125-141.
- 38 A. Sedláček, *Hrad, zámky a tyrye království českého* (Prague, 1935), VIII, 227; J. Klassen, *The Nobility in the Making of the Hussite Revolution* (New York, 1978).
- 39 Tomek, *Dějiny*, III, 439.
- 40 Tomek, *Dějiny*, III, 439.
- 41 Sedláček, *Hrad*, IV, 138.



- 42 Flašhans, *Mag. J. Hus*, (vol.) V, pp. 40-60.
- 43 Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 224-227, 240-241; J. Klassen, "The Czech Nobility's Use of the Right of Patronage on Behalf of the Hussite Reform Movement," in *Slavic Review*, 34 (1875), 351-352.
- 44 Klassen, "The Czech Nobility's Use of the Right of Patronage," pp. 341-359.
- 45 Palacky, *Documents*, p. 697; Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 247, n. 78.
- 46 Emler, *Libri confirmationum*, VI, 131, 218, 247.
- 47 F.M. Bartoš, *Čechy v době Husové* (Prague, 1947), pp. 121-200; F. Palacky ed., *Archiv Český* (Prague, 1840), I ;
- 48 Bartoš, *Čechy*, pp. 169-170.
- 49 Palacky, *Documenta*, pp. 409-415; Novotný, *M. Jan Hus*, II, 445-446; Bartoš, *Čechy*, p. 333.
- 50 Palacky, *Documenta*, pp. 411-413, 423.
- 51 F.M. Bartoš, *Husitská revoluce* (Prague, 1965), I, 49-50. Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 266-267; Palacky, *Archiv český*, I, 147.
- 52 Emler, *Libri Confirmationum*, VI, 293; Palacky, *Documenta*, pp. 640-641; Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 267.
- 53 M. Bellonci, "Beatrice and Isabella d'Este," in *Renaissance Profiles*, ed. J.H. Plumb (New York, 1961), pp. 151-152.
- 54 F.M. Bartoš, "Česká královna v husitské bouři," in *Jihocesky sbornik historicky* (1937), X, 15-24; Bartoš, *Husitská revoluce*, vol. I, 69, 75, 152.
- 55 Pekař, *Zižka*, IV, 41. At the same time Joan is said to have regarded the Hussites as heretics and her enemies. D.B. Wyncham-Lewis, *King Spider: Some Aspects of Louis XI of France and His Companions* (New York, 1929), pp. 113-114.
- 56 F. Tadra ed., *Acta iudicialia consistorii pragensis*. (Prague, 1893), I, 119; Tomek, *Dějiny*, III, 216-217.
- 57 J.H. Smith, *Joan of Arc* (London, 1973), pp. 126-127.
- 58 Kolarová-Cisarová, pp. 75-77; Pekař, *Zižka*, IV, 40.
- 59 The standard military histories of the Hussite wars are H. Toman, *Husitské válečnictví za doby Zižkovy a Prokopovy* (Prague, 1898), and J. Durdik, *Husitské vojevůdci* (Prague, 1953). See also F. Heymann, *John Zižka and the Hussite Revolution* (Princeton, 1955) pp. 450-453 and passim, and Pekař, *Zižka*, II, 64.
- 60 Goll, *Fontes rerum*, V, 477-478; Heyman, *John Zižka*, pp. 189-191, 207; Pekař, I, 53, 229; III, 91; Kolarová-Cisarová, pp. 173-177.
- 61 Goll, *Fontes rerum*, V, 627; F. Palacky ed., *Urkundliche Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hussitentums* (Prague, 1873), pp. 197, 199; Pekař, III, 171; Bartoš, *Husitská revoluce*, II, 32, n. 23.
- 62 Heymann, *John Zižka*, p. 144.
- 63 Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 346.
- 64 Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 347.
- 65 Kolarová-Cisarová, p. 175.
- 66 Pekař, *Zižka*, I, 273.
- 67 Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 412-518; Heymann, *John Zižka*, pp. 191-192.
- 68 F. Šimek ed., *Jakoubek ze Stříbra: Vyklad na Zjevení sv. Jana I* (Prague, 1032), pp. 313-314; F.M. Bartoš, *Literární činnost M. Jakoubka ze Stříbra* (Prague, 1925), p. 64.
- 69 Pekař, *Zižka*, IV, 198.
- 70 J. Jančák, *Zeny české renesance* (Prague, 1977). See especially pp. 7-23.