



Imprisoning Medieval Women

Gwen Seabourne

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The non-judicial confinement of women is a common event in medieval European literature and hagiography. The literary image of the imprisoned woman, usually a noblewoman, has carried through into the quasi-medieval world of the fairy and folk tale, in which the 'maiden in the tower' is one of the archetypes. Yet the confinement of women outside of the judicial system was not simply a fiction in the medieval period. Men too were imprisoned without trial and sometimes on mere suspicion of an offence, yet evidence suggests that there were important differences in the circumstances under which men and women were incarcerated, and in their roles in relation to non-judicial captivity. This study of the confinement of women highlights the disparity in regulation concerning male and female imprisonment in the middle ages, and gives a useful perspective on the nature of medieval law, its scope and limitations, and its interaction with royal power and prerogative. Looking at England from 1170 to 1509, the book discusses: the situations in which women might be imprisoned without formal accusation of trial; how social status, national allegiance and stage of life affected the chances of imprisonment; the relevant legal rules and norms; the extent to which legal and constitutional developments in medieval England affected women's amenability to confinement; what can be known of the experiences of women so incarcerated; and how women were involved in situations of non-judicial imprisonment, aside from themselves being prisoners.

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