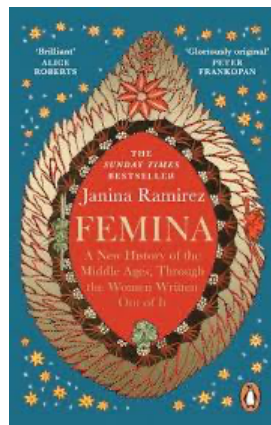


# An historian's approach to the importance of medieval women

by Steven Illingworth

Janina Ramirez is a lecturer in art history at Oxford University and has presented many television history programmes. In 2022 she published a book called *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It*. Like most historians, her aim was to write about the past with a new angle. In this case her new angle was to show how women played a very important part in the story of the Middle Ages. Most history books concentrate mainly on the men from that time and she wanted to write a book that was different from these.



Left: A photograph of Janina Ramirez (source: [Harris Manchester College](#))

Right: Front cover of *Femina* (source: [Penguin](#))

In the extracts from her preface and introduction to *Femina*, Ramirez explains what she is aiming to do with this book. Read these and then answer the questions that follow to show your understanding.

## Preface

'I am not rewriting history. I'm using the same facts, figures, events and evidence as we've always had access to, combined with recent advances and discoveries. The difference is that I'm shifting the focus. The frame is now on female rather than male characters. Both perform in the narratives, and we can only really understand one in relation to the other ... Approaching the past through women's lives and stories offers a unique prism through which to find new and overlooked perspectives.

Women have always made up roughly half the global population. Why then should they not inform the way we perceive the past? ... When society favoured male dominance and female subservience, the historian provided male-orientated history ... Through these remarkable women, I hope to show how we can effectively scrutinise historical evidence in more inclusive ways and engage with the past through fresh eyes.'

Janina Ramirez, *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages, Through the Women Written Out of It* (WH Allen, 2022), pp. xiii–xv.

## Introduction

'[In the past history was about] the exploits of privileged Western men, so history was recorded in a way which placed them centre stage. The loudest voice among many in this movement was Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) ... He is mainly remembered for ... bold statements ... including "the History of the World is but the biography of Great Men" ... Here, everybody but a "great man" suffers the indignity of being deemed insignificant. Women make up a significant proportion of those dismissed of course, but also included are those Carlyle perceives as "little men".'

Ramirez, *Femina*, pp. 14-15.

### Questions on Janina Ramirez's explanation of her aims in writing the *Femina* book

**1. According to Janina Ramirez, which of these reasons would be why very few women appear in history books about the Middle Ages? You can choose more than one reason.**

- a. Women never did interesting things in the Middle Ages.
- b. The documents from the Middle Ages, which historians use to find out about the past, were written by medieval people who did not generally value the contribution of women.
- c. All history books are written by men.
- d. There has been a tradition of writing history which is mainly about 'great men'.

**2. Which of these things would Janina Ramirez say are reasons for writing her book 'Femina'? You can choose more than one reason.**

- a. She wants to produce a more balanced account of the Middle Ages, where the contributions of men and women are valued more equally.
- b. She wants to write a book that only features medieval women, not mentioning any men.
- c. She wants to share interesting stories about medieval women.

**3. Which of these aims would describe best Janina Ramirez's role as an historian? You can choose more than one aim.**

- a. Her job is to repeat the same stories of the past written by other historians but to write them in a more interesting way.
- b. Her job is to find sources and stories that other historians have overlooked.
- c. Her job is to produce a more balanced account of the Middle Ages, which is not just about 'great men'.
- d. Her job is to prove that women have always been better than men.

## Creating the Bayeux Tapestry – what Ramirez says

Read what Janina Ramirez says about the making of the Bayeux Tapestry and answer the questions that follow.

'Despite hundreds of books, thousands of articles and numerous studies of the original, debates on central questions continue. Who commissioned it? Who made it? Where was it meant to be displayed? There does seem to be some consensus that it was most likely commissioned by William's brother, Odo of Bayeux, although the potential role of Edward the Confessor's wife Edith is noteworthy, and other suggestions abound too. Odo was made the Earl of Kent by William after the Battle of Hastings, and art-historical evidence points to the main monastery of his kingdom in Canterbury as the most likely place where the ideas and illustrations for the tapestry were developed ...

But what about the question of who made it? Really the Bayeux Tapestry should be described as a 'mistresspiece' rather than a masterpiece. Yet while no one would think of discussing *Starry Night* without mentioning the artist Van Gogh, or the *Mona Lisa* without extensive investigation in the life and times of Leonardo da Vinci, very few begin discussions of the Bayeux Tapestry thinking about the women who made it. It is an astonishing work of art ...

First, an important point: women made the Bayeux Tapestry. Exactly who these women were, where they lived and worked are questions we may never be able to answer. We do know that during the eleventh century, female artists outperformed men in the field of embroidery. Women have excelled at needlework and textile production since antiquity. While the three artistic graces of painting, sculpture and architecture had been dominated by men, the creation of fabrics, from spinning wool to decorating textiles, was mainly the realm of women ... William the Conqueror's own chronicler, William of Poitiers, went so far as to write: 'Everyone attests to the great needlecraft of English women in gold embroidery'.

Such a demanding project required a single-sex team that could work in close quarters, collaborating over long periods of time. The medieval embroiderers most likely worked together at Barking Abbey [near London] to create the tapestry.'

Ramirez, *Femina*, pp. 140–45.



Fifteenth-century  
illustration of women  
weaving from Paris,  
Bibliothèque Nationale de  
France, MS Fr. 12420, f.71r  
(source: [Gallica](#))

### Questions on Janina Ramirez's account of the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry

**4. Which of these points is Janina Ramirez making about the creation of the Bayeux Tapestry? You can choose more than one point.**

- a. We have no idea at all about who made the tapestry, why they did it, when they did it or where they did it.
- b. It was probably embroidered by women because we know that embroidery was mainly done by women, not men, at that time.
- c. It was probably produced in France.
- d. It was probably produced in England.

**5. Why does Janina Ramirez mention famous paintings by Vincent Van Gogh and Leonardo da Vinci? You can choose more than one reason.**

- a. She thinks the Bayeux Tapestry is better than the paintings produced by these two men.
- b. She thinks that the tapestry should be seen as a special work of art, just like *Starry Night* and the *Mona Lisa*.
- c. She is making the point that women artists, such as those who made the tapestry, deserve to be praised as much as famous male artists.

**6. What is Janina Ramirez saying about how women are shown on the Bayeux Tapestry? You can choose more than one answer.**

- a. The number of men and women shown on the tapestry is roughly equal.
- b. Only three women are shown on the tapestry.
- c. It is important to focus on the images of women on the tapestry because most of the evidence from 1066 just tells us about what the men were doing.
- d. The pictures of women should be ignored because the main story of 1066 is about men fighting battles.
- e. The pictures of women on the tapestry should be studied because they tell us how ordinary people suffered when the Normans invaded England.

## A picture of a woman and child on the Bayeux Tapestry



Section of the Bayeux Tapestry depicting a woman and child (source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Read what Janina Ramirez writes about this picture from the Bayeux Tapestry and answer the questions that follow.

'One of only three women depicted in the main narrative of the tapestry, the female figure clasps the hand of a young boy as a building burns behind them. The woman reaches out her other hand towards one of the men holding a torch, as if calling to him ... In this case the woman and child are victims of war, and so this tragic scene shows the vulnerability and suffering that so many across England experienced in the face of the invasion. This tone is at odds with the celebratory mood throughout the rest of the tapestry ...'

'The very scarcity of female figures naturally makes the three that are included notable. Women are conspicuous by their rarity; the presence of non-presence. There is the woman shown holding onto a child in front of a burning building. We can assume that she is not an identifiable individual but a symbol of a group of people: victims of war. No inscription tells us who this woman is, and she features alongside scenes of the construction of the castle at Hastings ... In the absence of any more information, she appears to be a generalised representation of the women and children who suffered after the invasion.'

Ramirez, *Femina*, pp. 149, 155

**7. Which of these points explain best Janina Ramirez's response to the image from the Bayeux Tapestry showing a woman guiding her child away from a burning building? You can choose more than one point.**

- a. We have no idea who this woman is, so the image is no use to historians.
- b. The historian needs to use their imagination to make up a story about the woman in the image.
- c. Historians should aim to use their wider knowledge of the topic to try to make sense of the image.
- d. The evidence suggests that the woman in the image was a victim of the Normans as they took control of England by force after the Battle of Hastings.

**8. Why do you think Janina Ramirez has chosen to focus on this particular image from the Bayeux Tapestry? You can choose more than one reason.**

- a. It is one of only three images of women on the tapestry so it is an interesting change from scenes of men fighting battles.
- b. It provides evidence about medieval women that is hard to find in most documents about the Middle Ages.
- c. It shows how the events of 1066 had an effect on the non-fighting civilians, especially women and children.
- d. She thinks this picture shows the 'celebratory mood' of the tapestry.