

21 Women Writers From Before 1500 That You've Probably Never Heard Of

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Hypatia (370 ? – 415)



Hypatia was the daughter of philosopher Theon (who was the last head of the Museum at Alexandria) and was born in Alexandria in Egypt, studied in Greece, and is considered the first notable female mathematician and astronomer. Her most notable contributions to astronomy and science include the charting of celestial bodies and her work on conic sections. She edited the works On the Conics of Apollonius making them easy to understand, and thus allowing the work to survive the course of time. She is known for not acting like “normal” women at the time, dressing in scholarly clothing rather than traditional female clothes. She also remained pagan in an increasingly Christian environment. According to one source, she was murdered by a band of Christian monks after being accused of exacerbating a conflict between two prominent figures in Alexandria. She was seized on the street, beat, and her body dragged to a church where her flesh was mutilated and then burned.

The contemporary Christian historiographer Socrates Scholasticus described her in Ecclesiastical History:

There was a woman at Alexandria named Hypatia, daughter of the philosopher Theon, who made such attainments in literature and science, as to far surpass all the philosophers of her own time. Having succeeded to the school of Plato and Plotinus, she explained the principles of philosophy to her auditors, many of whom came from a distance to receive her instructions. On account of the self-possession and ease of manner which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not infrequently appeared in public in the presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in going to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more.

Al-Khansa (575 – 645)



Al-Khansā' was an Arabic poet and contemporary of Muhammad, whom she met in 629 and converted to Islam. She gained respect as a female poet by writing elegies for the dead and performing them for the tribe in public

competitions. An anecdote says that contemporaneous Arabic poet Al-Nabigha told Al-Khansa, "If Abu Basir had not already recited to me, I would have said that you are the greatest poet of the Arabs. Go, for you are the greatest poet among those with breasts." Al-Khansa replied, "I'm the greatest poet among those with testicles, too."

Mary the Jewess



Mary the Jewess (also known as Maria Prophetissima) is considered to be the first true alchemist and was written about extensively by the Egyptian alchemist Zosimos. She is credited with the invention with many different chemical apparatuses, including the kerotakis. Although none of her writings have survived, many quotations credited to her can be found in various hermetic texts.

Join the male and the female, and you will find what is sought.

One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth.

Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (717 – 801)



Rābi'ah al-Baṣrī was a Muslim saint and Sufi mystic credited with setting forth the doctrine of Divine Love and considered to be one of the most important of the early Sufi poets. Much of the poetry now attributed to her is of unknown origin and her own identity is surrounded by many myths including the myth that she was freed from slavery because her master saw her praying while surrounded by light.

Ironic, but one of the most intimate acts
of our body is death.

So beautiful appeared my death – knowing who then I would kiss,
I died a thousand times before I died.

'Die before you die,' said the Prophet Muhammad.

Have wings that feared ever touched the Sun?

I was born when all I once feared – I could love.

Princess Iwa

Princess Iwa (also known as Empress Iwa no hime) was a poet and the Empress consort of Emperor Nintoku. Much of the poetry attributed to her is considered some of the oldest existing Japanese poetry and seems to express her long and feelings for her husband. Few other details are known about her life.

You, who want two night-beds side by side,
you terrify me!

...

Like the robe of the summer worm, the silkworm,
to hide and lodge in two layers,
how could this be good?

Kassia (810 – 865)



Kassia was a Byzantine abbess, poet, composer, and hymnographer and is notable as one of only two Byzantine women to write in their own names during the Middle Ages. Many of Kassia's hymns are still used in the Byzantine liturgy, the most famous of her compositions being Hymn of Kassiani which is sung every Holy Wednesday.

And through a woman [came forth] the better [things]

Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (935 – 1002)



Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (also known as Roswitha) was a German secular canoness, dramatist, and poet who worked at Gandersheim Abbey. She is considered by some to be the first person since antiquity to compose drama in the Latin West. Though she was a prolific writer, her work was not taken seriously at the time because she was a woman. Many were also skeptical of her talents.

Scorn he should not render at the writer's weaker gender
Who these small lines had sung with a woman's untutored tongue

But rather should he praise the Lord's celestial grace

Sei Shonagon (966 – 1017 ?)



Sei Shonagon was a Japanese writer and court lady who served the Empress Teishi. She is best known as the author of *The Pillow Book*, a collection of lists, gossip, poetry, anecdotes, character sketches, observations, and other writings written during her years in the court.

Depressing Things: A dog howling in daytime . . . A lying-in room when the baby has died . . . a hot bath when one has just woken

Murasaki Shikibu (978 – 1014 ?)



Murasaki Shikibu was a Japanese novelist, poet, and lady-in-waiting at the Imperial court during the Heian period. She is best known for her novel *The Tale of Genji*, considered to be one of the world's finest and earliest novels. Some scholars even argue that she was the world's first modern novelist. The novel is organized into three parts and spans 1100 pages. Helen McCulloch writes that *The Tale of Genji* "transcends both its genre and age. Its basic subject matter and setting—love at the Heian court—are those of the romance, and its cultural assumptions are those of the mid-Heian period, but Murasaki Shikibu's unique genius has made the work for many a powerful statement of human relationships, the impossibility of permanent happiness in love ... and the vital importance, in a world of sorrows, of sensitivity to the feelings of others."

I am wrapped up in the study of ancient stories ... living all the time in a poetical world of my own scarcely realizing the existence of other people ... But when they get to know me, they find to their extreme surprise that I am kind and gentle.

Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (1001 – 1091)



Wallada bint al-Mustakfi was born in Cordova in 1001. Born into a powerful family, her father was Caliph of Cordova and her mother was an Ethiopian

Christian slave. Wallada was known for her great beauty, in addition to being intelligent and cultured. She was a controversial figure for walking out in public without a hijab and for mimicing certain fashions of the harems of Baghdad. She also gained recognition in poetry competitions for finishing incomplete poems (competitions that were almost entirely male), where she met the love of her life, Ibn Zaydún.

You know that I am the moon of the skies
But, to my disgrace, you have preferred a dark planet.

Forsooth, I allow my lover to touch my cheek,
And bestow my kiss on him who craves it.

Héloïse d'Argenteuil (1100 ? – 1164)



Héloïse d'Argenteuil was a French nun, writer, and abbess, best known for her love affairs and letters with Peter Abélard. Their true love story has been stamped as one of the templates of romantic love. Héloïse was a strong-willed woman who was fluent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

My tears, which I could not refrain, have blotted half your letter;
I wish they had effaced the whole, and that I had returned it to
you in that condition; I should then have been satisfied with the
little time I kept it; but it was demanded of me too soon.

Princess Shikishi Naishinnō (1149 – 1201)



Princess Shikishi (Shikishi Naishinnō) was a Japanese classical poet and third daughter of Emperor Go-Shirakawa. Later in her life, she became a Buddhist nun. Her poetic talent was recognized even at the time. Her love poems are believed to be too emotionally profound to be written simply for the sake of traditional poetic convention.

String of beads, if you must break, break. If you last longer, my
endurance is sure to weaken.

My thoughts, useless dreams in midair – even if you break, do not
break, painful string of beads.

Mahadeviyamma



Mahadeviyakkha (also known as Akka Mahadevi) lived in the south of India in the 12th century. From an early age she was initiated into the worship of Shiva and much of her poetry revolves around descriptions of her beautiful Lord. Legend says that the local Jain King of the area desired her as his wife. Her family agrees in fear of incurring the King's displeasure. After the wedding though, Mahadeviyakkha was unwilling to reciprocate the desire of the King. Her family criticized her unorthodox behavior and Mahadeviyakkha consequently left her marriage and renounced her worldly life.

The arrow that is shot should penetrate so deeply
that even the feathers do not show.
Hug the body of the Lord so tightly
that the bones must be crushed to crumble.
Weld to the divine until the very welding disappears.

Gormonda de Monpeslier



Gormonda de Monpeslier was an Occitan female troubadour from Montpellier in Languedoc. Her lone surviving work has been called "the first French political poem by a woman."

Rome, rightly
You have straightened
Many crooked things without reserve
And opened the door
Of salvation,
Whose gate was crooked
By good rule
You bring down foolish derision;
He who follows your path
Saint Michael carries him
And keeps him from hell.

Hadewijch



Hadewijch (also known as Hadewijch of Antwerp) was a 13-century poet and mystic. Most of her extant writings are in a Brabantian form of Middle Dutch and her writings include visions, prose letters, and poetry. Little is known of her life but she was probably the head of a Beguine community, a sect of devout women who gathered together to live in simplicity and service. She is associated with the movement Minnemystiek or “love mysticism.”

Tighten
to nothing
the circle
that is
the world's things

Then the Naked
circle
can grow wide,
enlarging,
embracing all

Marguerite Porete



Marguerite Porete was a French mystic and writer. She is best known for *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, a work of Christian spirituality dealing with the workings of Divine Love. She died in 1310 when she was burnt at the stake for heresy in Paris after a lengthy trial. Her book is cited as one of the primary texts of the medieval Heresy of the Free Spirit.

I am God, says Love, for Love is God and God is Love, and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. I am God by divine nature and this Soul is God by the condition of Love. Thus this precious beloved of mine is taught and guided by me, without herself, for she is transformed into me, and such a perfect one, says Love, takes my nourishment.

Laldyada (1320 – 1392)



Laldyada (also known as Lalla Ded or Lalleshwari) was a mystic of the

Kashmiri Shaivite sect. She wrote many devotional and mystic poems, expressing her longing for the Divine. She remains an important cultural icon in Kashmir.

To learn the scriptures is easy,
to live them, hard.

The search for the Real
is no simple matter.

Deep in my looking, the last words vanished. Joyous and silent, the
waking that met me there.

St. Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380)



St. Catherine of Siena was a Dominican Tertiary known for her compelling work of Christian mysticism, *The Dialog of Catherine of Siena*, which she wrote “during a state of ecstasy while in dialogue with God the father.” Many of her works now rank among the classics of the Italian language. A main theme in Catherine’s writings is that man, whether in the cloister or in the world, must ever abide in the cell of self-knowledge, which is the stable in which the traveller through time to eternity must be born again.

How a soul, elevated by desire of the honor of God, and of the salvation of her neighbors, exercising herself in humble prayer, after she had seen the union of the soul, through love, with God, asked of God four requests.

How the desire of this soul grew when God showed her the neediness of the world.

How finite works are not sufficient for punishment or recompense without the perpetual affection of love.

Julian of Norwich (1342 – 1416)



Julian of Norwich was an English anchoress who is regarded as one of the most important Christian mystics. She is venerated in the Anglican and Lutheran churches, but has never been canonized, or officially beatified, by the Roman Catholic Church. At the age of 30, Julian suffered from a severe illness and had a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ. Her book, *Revelations of Divine Love* now known as *The Short Text*; is believed to be the earliest surviving book written in the English language by a woman. Twenty to

thirty years later, Julian began to write a theological exploration of the meaning of the visions, known as *The Long Text*.

For I saw no wrath except on man's side, and He forgives that in us, for wrath is nothing else but a perversity and an opposition to peace and to love.

Margery Kempe (1373 – 1438 ?)



Margery Kempe is known for dictating *The Book of Margery Kempe*, a work considered by some to be the first autobiography in the English language. This book chronicles, to some extent, her extensive pilgrimages to various holy sites in Europe and the Holy Land, as well as her mystical conversations with God. Margery was an orthodox Catholic Christian and, like other medieval mystics, she believed that she was summoned to a "greater intimacy with Christ" through multiple visions and experiences she had as an adult. Margery was known throughout her community for her constant weeping as she begged Christ for mercy and forgiveness. Part of Margery Kempe's significance lies in the autobiographical nature of her book: it is the best insight available of a female, middle class experience in the Middle Ages. Although Kempe has been depicted as an "oddity" or a "madwoman," recent scholarship on vernacular theologies and popular practices of piety suggest she was not as odd as she appears. Her Book is revealed as a carefully constructed spiritual and social commentary. Some have suggested that her book is written as fiction and a form of artistry, implying that she intentionally "attempts to create a social reality and to examine that reality in relation to a single individual."

Isotta Nogarola (1418 – 1466)



Isotta Nogarola was an Italian writer and intellectual. She became one of the most famous female humanists of the Italian Renaissance. Her most influential work was a performance piece, "Dialogue on Adam and Eve," in which she discussed the relative sinfulness of Adam and Eve and thereby opening up a centuries-long debate in Europe on gender and the nature of woman.

Why... was I born a woman, to be scorned by men in words and deeds? I ask myself this question in solitude... Your unfairness in not writing to me has caused me much suffering, that there could be no greater suffering... You yourself said there was no goal I could not achieve. But now that nothing has turned out as it should have, my joy has given way to sorrow... For they jeer at me throughout the

city, the women mock me.