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History

Men and Women as Represented in Medieval Literature and Society

Anita Kay O'Pry-Reynolds

Men and women in medieval epic literature are portrayed in a way that is contrary to the modern day ideals of male/female stereotypes. There are few examples of gender equality in medieval literature, or for that fact in medieval historical records. In the traditional epic, the 'classical' hero is masculine, violent, and aggressive; men exuded heroic knightly personalities while the classical females are portrayed as vessels of chastity, purity, and goodness. During the period of the Middle Ages and in its literature there are highly idealized views on manners, society, and morality.

Contrary to popular stereotypes and Victorian romance novels, women in the Medieval period were not all damsels in distress waiting for the knight to come save them. Nor for that fact were all men of the era heroic saints on white chargers. Historian Jeffrey Cohen states:

the problem is one of cultural imposition and anachronism... the heroic code demands that its adherents live up to its ideals or perish striving. Chivalry established a rule-based method of living that, when adhered to, regulates the body in a way that is beneficial to the smoother functioning of the social body; this fiction is disseminated through the gesta of the hero.<sup>1</sup>

The damsel in distress, the chaste maid, good wife, and lady of the manor provide a reason for the hero to be heroic. There is a dependency on one another in the epics as well as the romances of Medieval literature. The male hero is defined by who he is, his quests and his victories; as the damsel is defined by the roles ascribed to her by society.

The works examined are fictional epics in which women do not play main characters but are predominately given supporting roles. These roles are important to the story and in some instances provide a catalyst for the plots within the story. The characters also serve as a guide or example of the proper behavior that is expected in Medieval society.

From the very beginning of the story of *Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart*, women play an important role. Chrétien De Troyes tells the audience in the introduction that the work is at the wish of his patroness, the Countess of Champagne. Chrétien implies that this tale is the idea of the countess, his patron, who provided the information that was the catalyst for the tale. There were very few female writers,

and those that did write were mostly involved in the Church; women's roles in literature and society were very restricted in the early part the Middle Ages. "Roles were never stable, but repeatedly re-situated between the poles of constraint and freedom, submission and authority, passivity and agency."<sup>2</sup> They were symbols of purity, motherhood, beauty, kindness, love, conquest and sexual desire. Objects to be worshipped yet at the same time many considered them the downfall of man. Women are central to the action in the *Knight of the Cart* from Guinevere, the Queen, to the beautiful damsel that Lancelot encounters along his quest. Women could not resist the handsome Lancelot.

Men and women of the Medieval period and Medieval literature were confined by the norms of society. The characters often reflected the standards of Medieval morality in real life. In order to understand their place in epic literature one must first understand their places in Medieval society and culture; being careful not to romanticize the lives of men and women of this time. It is imperative to go beyond the definitions of the masculine and the feminine and explore the way that men and women saw themselves, and each other. This is quite difficult given the lack of historical documentation of the lives of women but there are significant examples of women's thoughts and deeds as well as the reflections of their men on the women.

Women were viewed as daughters of the Eve's sin. In Medieval Europe they were responsible for the temptation of men, "source of the original sin and an instrument of the devil."<sup>3</sup> Medieval feudal society placed more emphasis on men than on women:

[in] vassalage and feudal relations is noticeable for the absence of a role for women. However, women were essential to the functioning of feudal society not only as brides and mothers...[they] were often at least the de facto administrators of the land and household...women were often the witnesses for charters.<sup>4</sup>

Men are represented as the heroic warrior archetype looking for a battle to fight if not in their own village then in other lands. The men would seek out a fight or join in another village's fight often as the repayment of a debt of honor. In the case of Beowulf and Hrothgar, it is the repayment for Hrothgar coming to the aid of Beowulf's father during a feud years earlier. Because of the rigid feudalism, this was a strict warrior culture; feuds and friendships were generational as were debts. There is a sense of civilization but it is still a violent culture. The people of this story respect bravery and revile cowardice. Men swear an oath of allegiance and would gladly die for and with their leader.

There is a sense of reverence for the some of the women in this tale. Women are somewhat central to the story. They are portrayed as

hostesses, wives, and in the case of Grendel's mother a warrior/monster. Wealtheow, the wife of Hrothgar is one of the few women mentioned in the epic but she is treated with honor and held up as an example of queenly duties. She is described in positive terms and her personality is characterized as one of adherence to the standards of Medieval womanhood. She is "observing the courtesies, queenly and dignified" and "welcoming," she influences the hall and the members of her husband's court.<sup>5</sup> Wealtheow is still an extension of her husband and his role in the tale.

Women played an important role because there had to be someone to recognize the brave and heroic deeds of the men; and there had to be someone to mourn the dead, the men would not be wailing and grieving. Michael Murphy theorizes that the men or knights would repay young women for entertaining them by "a queer mix of chivalry, savagery, and gaucherie...vow[ing] to send her the results of their conquests swords, shields, knight's heads and so forth romantically."<sup>6</sup> The women also fulfilled the roles as hostess and wait staff for the men as well as a social distraction. Since they served the mead and other drinks to the men, in some degree, they controlled the drunkenness and abilities of the men at a feast or celebration. "Nevertheless, we can see traces of such female influence even in a poem as unfeminine as *Beowulf*. Queen Wealtheow plays a small if very dignified part in his epic, but she seems to achieve a significant amount in her brief appearances."<sup>7</sup>

A different example of female characterization is Grendel's mother in the tale of *Beowulf*. A descendent of Cain, therefore, a child of sin, and the avenging warrior over the death of her son. Grendel's mother as a reflection of a child of sin shows the attitude of the Medieval Church toward women, many of the contemporary clergy lectured and sermonized on the sinful daughters of Eve, and that there was no wickedness as bad as a woman's wickedness.

Grendel's mother is described as evil and devious, she is human but still portrayed as a monster. Since she is an outcast as a descendent of Cain, she is not expected to live up to the same strict moral and social code as the other women in the tale, thereby, making her warrior-like status acceptable. She does demonstrate an awareness and acceptance of a code of honor when she seeks revenge for the death of her son. "In the European Middle Ages, as in virtually all periods of human history, warfare is seen as a masculine activity;"<sup>8</sup> she is warlike but she also shows the weakness of a woman by fleeing for her life from Heorot. It was a normal and expected activity for men but it was considered astonishingly abnormal for a woman to participate in war.<sup>9</sup>

Modthryth is also portrayed outside of the social normal; she acts in a more masculine manner than the rest of the women in the tale. Modthryth had people chained and tortured for an infraction as small as looking her in the face.<sup>10</sup> She was not the shining example of queenly virtue that is described in Wealtheow. However, she is tamed

by her marriage to Offa “she could grace the throne and grow famous for her good deeds and conduct of life.”<sup>11</sup> Both she and Grendel do not use their marriage or words to influence the men but they use the masculine traits of strength and swords, they are content to use strife and violence rather than feminine wiles to settle disputes.

The works composed in the 1170s at the mid-point of the Middle Ages reflect a time when roles and attitudes toward women were beginning to slowly change. Literature was one of the first places that these changes were notable. Europe was experiencing a cultural renaissance or revival. Relationships were changing between men and women, there was a new respect and the flourishing of courtly love. Still women were expected to be the

...perfect lady, whose deportment and manners do credit to her breeding; the perfect wife, whose submission to her husband is only equaled by her skill in ministering to his ease; the perfect mistress whose servants love her and run her house like clock work.<sup>12</sup>

And, of course, she was expected to be the perfect hostess who put the needs of her guests above her own.

A question that must be asked is literature influencing society or is society influencing literature. There is no definite answer for this question, historical documentation is slim for this event, but it seems that literature could have possibly been unfolding at the same time or slightly earlier. It is widely thought by scholars that there was a “women’s revival” about this time.

Men and women in the epic *Beowulf* were assigned the roles that were traditionally theirs in reality. There is very little difference in the actions of the male and female characters than one would find in any medieval court or village. There was a traditional hierarchy and it held fast in much of Europe. In literature and reality there are recognized gender roles; McLaughlin writes, “exploration of the complex relationship between the myths of masculinity and femininity and the reality of human behavior has revealed a profound ambiguity of gender and the tension inherent in any system of gender roles.”<sup>13</sup> Women and men knew their places and most stayed in that spot; “those who did undertake a role not usually assigned to their gender group often elicit strong reactions from the rest of society.”<sup>14</sup> Grendel’s mother was beneath her son in the social hierarchy of *Beowulf* and did not rise up and take the place of a warrior until her son dies. The monstrous woman flees when she is put in a position to fight for her life or flee, proving that beneath all the evil that she was still a weak-minded woman and unable to bear the rigors of being a warrior.

The role of a warrior was the dominion of men and it was through warfare that manhood was proven and displayed. Warfare is documented in many medieval texts and they are “peppered with references to gender, references which equated fighting with virility... [a

man who failed in warfare was considered almost by definition "effeminate" and became subject to ridicule."<sup>15</sup> Beowulf, Hrothgar and the rest of the Danes and the Geats, as well as Grendel have proven their worth and their manhood in many battles. There were no shrinking violets in Beowulf's company. Unferth is the only courtier that seems afraid to face the monster and join Beowulf on the mission. This clearly renders him unworthy in the eyes of the others. Unferth has failed in his assigned role as a man.

Women's literature and history in the Medieval period is still a young field academically, while men have been well documented and researched. As the studies have matured somewhat there are many references now being written about in scholarly works showing that women played a more important role than once thought. By the late eleventh century there were women warriors; McLaughlin discusses this stating "chroniclers generally noted the activities of women warriors with little comment."<sup>16</sup> The latter part of the Middle Ages sees a newfound respect and confidence in women.

The men and women in the tale of *Beowulf* are constrained by their gender roles. They are forced to play their parts the way that the author and society viewed them. Even when one can see the changes begin in medieval literature, there is still a decided gender bias that dominates both secular and religious works. Men and women had their place and it was not considered normal for them to step outside of the bounds of the gender roles assigned to them. Women might not have been the helpless damsels in distress waiting to be saved by the chivalrous knight in shining armor as they were portrayed as in romantic literature but they filled the roles that their cultures assigned them.

The images of most of the women that Lancelot encounters in the *Knight of the Cart* are façades; they start out showing him an image of innocence, helpfulness and vulnerability. However, there is an agenda beneath their beauty and courtly manners. One of the first women that he encounters is a damsel who offers him shelter in her home; her condition is that Lancelot lie with her.<sup>17</sup> The only reason that he even considers lying with the woman is that he needs to rest and replenish his energy to continue on his quest to rescue the queen. Lancelot refuses her at first because of the great love that he has for the queen. The lady in this instance is providing the audience with a way to see that Lancelot is loyal and faithful to his queen and is only going to bed this woman out of obligation; and then only after he rescues her from her faux attackers.

In *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, the Lady Bertilak is the temptation of Gawain; both of these women are examples of how the men are tempted to act dishonorable. Both the Lady Bertilak and the damsel are unconfined or uninhibited by showing their forwardness in seeking sex with Gawain and Lancelot, while Guinevere is seen as the model of queenly actions. The damsel can see that this troubles Lancelot greatly and in the end, she decides not to have sex with

him. Here the damsel is a symbol of temptation as mentioned in Richards' book trying to lead Lancelot into sin and dishonor.<sup>18</sup> She is also a test of Lancelot's love for Guinevere and his personal honor.

The damsel that Lancelot has spent the night with at her home cares greatly for him so much so that she does not wish him to be hurt when he swoons at the sight of Guinevere's comb and hair. She throws herself off the horse and rushes to him pretending to want the comb. She does this because she does not want him to be ashamed for his weakness.<sup>19</sup> Here she is representing kindness and love and possibly for Lancelot a courtly love since he would not sleep with the lady in question. Perhaps, the lady feels remorse for tricking Lancelot and forcing him into a position where he would have had to dishonor his true love for his queen. She has remorse for her actions and this proves that women are not evil and bent on the destruction of man.

At one point Lancelot must be willing to fight for the damsel who is under his protection; another knight desires her and will take her by force if necessary. Julia Dietrich states, "women, even in the most privileged class, could be bereft of security and control of their own person."<sup>20</sup> Here the damsel is property, to be fought over by the men. She is the spoils of the fights. A woman alone could be captured by any man; he could do what he wished with her but he often would be forced to marry her, but if he took her from another knight in a battle then she was his by right of victory. The victor could do what he wished with the woman without fear of reprisal. Lancelot must prove that he is brave and loyal to the woman under his care. In this instance, she is proof of his loyalty, his honor and his ability to protect the weaker under his charge.

The women in this story cannot resist the handsome Lancelot, he is the epitome of the chivalrous knight. Men believed that women were in constant danger of "being seduced...because of their natural frivolity and sensuality."<sup>21</sup> At the same time, they thought that they, women, were the seducers of men, the evil sinful daughters of Eve. The female character that Lancelot encounters have to show interest in him physically as well as emotionally. They need to be rescued so that Lancelot has a challenge in his quest, someone to fight and temptation to defeat. Lancelot is "made to look foolish several times for love, but he is willing to risk his reputation for his lady's pleasure" this makes the tales more interesting.<sup>22</sup> What would he do and how far would the women go to achieve their own agenda? Tales about happy housewives and devoted daughters would not have kept the interests of the Medieval audiences. The "authors' purposes, audiences' interests... [were] set on a landscape of violence."<sup>23</sup>

Guinevere's role is that of an unattainable goal, Lancelot knows that she can never be his, he must love her from a distance but still he can participate in the courtly love of the medieval society and literature. It is treason for these two star crossed lovers to consummate their feelings for one another physically. In a way, she is Lancelot's

Holy Grail. He risks all to save her from her capturers. Sandra Prior writes, "Lancelot's outstanding act of chivalry...the freeing of the queen, receives less than its due" because of the act of adultery.<sup>24</sup> Chretien, however, develops a story of chivalry, courtly love and a passionate love of a knight for his lady fair. He stops short in addressing the complex issues of the relationship between Guinevere, Lancelot and King Arthur, after the lovers have given in to temptation. It seems indirectly that he lays the blame at Guinevere's feet because Lancelot has not given in to this point and is able to resist all the other instances of temptation. Guinevere is his downfall, his Achilles' heel, the one temptation that he is unable to continue to resist.

The role of women in Medieval life and literature is a complicated one. Historical documents reflect little activity on the part of women unless they were somehow involved in religion, but literature is full of well-rounded female characters. Cook and Herzman argue, "the frequency with which women appear in such legal documents [charters and wills] suggests that women's activities in feudal society were more complex and public than often imagined."<sup>25</sup> In the stories of King Arthur, Lancelot and other notable romances of the time there is a shift in the roles of women; some of them are moving out of the shadows and becoming important parts of the story. In the early part of the Medieval period women's roles were that of a supporting cast, as the Middle Ages reached its high point women began expressing their opinions and a more active and equal role in society. Some literature presented the women who were becoming more active in a less than positive light seeing them as troublesome and not knowing their place; but over all there is a positive reaction in the romance of the period.

The women of *Lancelot, Knight of the Cart* reflect the changes that were beginning; they are not seen as simple-minded victims and support characters but people with emerging strength and wills of their own. Most men of the time knew that their wives and female relations were not simpletons, and were quite capable of managing their own affairs. The ideal of the weak and victimized damsel in distress is a view of women that came centuries after Lancelot. It was written likely as a product of the overly romantic Victorian era. There is however, an underlying emphasis of the power that women have over men, this brings the Medieval audiences minds back to the thoughts of the Medieval church on the view of women's sexuality and their disposition to lead men into sin. Lancelot and Guinevere are the leading couple in the world of Arthurian romance. Their story has been told over the centuries embellished by each person that picks up their tale but timeless in their love for one another.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Masculinities: Heroism, Sanctity, and Gender*. Georgetown University. [www.8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/e-center/interscripta/mm/html](http://www.8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/e-center/interscripta/mm/html). June 29, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Dietrich, "Review of For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh; Medieval Gentlewoman: Life in a Gentry Household in the Late Middle Ages; Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages; Young Medieval Woman" *NWSA Journal*, 13:2. Summer 2001. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University 2001), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffery Richards, *Sex, Dissidence and Damnation: Minority Groups in the Middle Ages* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), 25.

<sup>4</sup> William Cook and Ronald Herzman, *The Medieval World View 2nd Edition* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2004.),167.

<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heany, *Beowulf* (New York: Farr, Straus, and Giroux, 2000) Verses 613-624.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Murphy, "Vows, Boasts, and Taunts, and the Role of Women in Some Medieval Literature" *English Studies* 66.2-1985 P. 105-112.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Meagan McLaughlin "The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare, and Society in Medieval Europe" *Women's Studies* 17. 3-4 -1990, 194.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Beowulf* Verses 1933-1940.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* verses 1952-1953.

<sup>12</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1924, 1963. Kindle Edition, 2011), 81.

<sup>13</sup> McLaughlin, 193.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>17</sup> Chretien De Troyes. *Lancelot: Knight of the Cart*. (Cambridge: Charles Rivers Editors. 2011). Kindle Edition E-book. Verses 539-982.

<sup>18</sup> Richards, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Chretien De Troyes, Verses 1369-1552.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrich, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Richards, 128.

<sup>22</sup> Robert and Laura Lambdin, "Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart" *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*. (Westport/London: Greenwood Press. 2000), 344.

<sup>23</sup> Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe 400-1000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002), 275.

<sup>24</sup> Sandra P. Prior, "The Love That Dares Not Speak Its Name: Displacing and Silencing the Shame of Adultery in Le Chevalier de la Charrete" *Romantic Review* 97.2: March 2006, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Cook and Herzman,167.

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