

## RETHINKING WOMEN'S PLACES AND WRITINGS IN THE MIDDLE AGES ENGLISH LITERATURE

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*Abstract: Changes of the canon about women's places as well as about their writings in the ME literature appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s when due to the efervescence of literary feminism the period was animated by the scholarly work of rehabilitating ME texts by and for women that had been largely ignored or dismissed as unworthy of study.*

*Our paper aims at presenting the changes in the canon by rethinking women's presence in the ME literature from a double perspective: women as fictional female characters and women as female writers.*

*Keywords: rehabilitation, women writers, positive, perceptions, feminist criticism*

Far from comprehensive our approach will sketch the context of female writing, feminism (as a modern concept, that appeared in the 1970s and early 1980s) and gender studies, and in this direction it will outline some of the works that medieval female writers did in these areas, and it will also explore the critical approaches in the field.

In order to re-examine the women's positions and their roles in ME English literature we need to look back to the Anglo-Saxon society and have some glimpses in Old English epic poetry in order to discuss some of the changes that overtake the portrayal of the literary heroine after the Norman conquest.

In Anglo-Saxon writings women appear as formidable creatures, 'mighty' women with enchanting powers, closely associated with the power of queens nowadays, highborn ladies, prepared to accept a dynastic marriage and characteristically seen as a focus of hospitality in a ceremonial male-centred society. They are 'wise in words', which is a queenly attribute. However the average woman's life was not valued since they were not the subjects of chronicles, legend or public record. Only wealthy and high-ranking women prevail and they are present due to the relation to their lords.

Apart from being merely hinted at or presented in their relation to men, women have their own 'voices' in Old English lyric poetry. Although this poetry focused on the theme of heroism and loyalty one can find poems with more personal expression of loneliness, sorrow, love, joy. The 'laments' are not only expressions of men's sorrows like *Deor's Lament* or the *Husband's Message* but also love 'songs' of their women.

The majority of critics deny heroism in women literary figures in this period but others, like Christine Fell (1987) affirms and demonstrate it. For her Anglo-Saxon women were intelligent, efficient and cultured people. An example would be the image of a woman

who can be a hero through her actions and her virtues, without losing her essential femininity, though placed in a masculine setting .

Marriage is of central importance for her in life. The emotional side of her life offers rare glimpses in the Old English poetry and in such cases, even rarely the love triangle is not excluded. For this kind of woman love is touched only by superficial emotions, it is not taken seriously and it lacks any commitments. The woman is always wife not mistress.

In the Post-Conquest literature this side will be treated with a more personal touch, showing a far greater interest in the emotional aspects. Old heroic epic is replaced by the chivalric romance and in particular the role of women changes and the man-to-woman relationship develops displacing man-to-man loyalties of the heroic world. Lyric poetry in particular presents the woman as a radiant young mistress. The male lovers are inferior to women, who become ideals of beauty and virtue. Moreover sometimes marriage is disregarded as being the end of a love affair( as it is in *The Knight's Tale* by Chaucer).

Starting with the thirteenth century the first touch of bookish anti-feminism appears with the image of the woman who succumbs to the charm of a cleric who tends to replace the knight. Even if the woman is not highly satirised in *The Owl and the Nightingale* for example, the anonymous writer throws the light of Christian morality on her love affairs in the debate between the Nightingale who is on the side of romantic love and the Owl whose moral status is closer to the Church. Marie's romantic lady in the tower is replaced by a wife confined under lock and key who turns to any person able to comfort her.

A literary critic and scholar, Hope Emily Allen proposed that women literature in the medieval England, like the writings of Margery Kempe should be understood in the context of such Continental holy women as St Birgitta of Sweden, Marie of Oignies and St Catherine of Siena among others. In the conditions of an increasing awareness of the internationalism of ME literature in recent years ,texts written by such female writers as the one mentioned above have been introduced in working of scholars and teaching in English departments nowadays, in order to benefit for a comparative impulse in studying ME English female writers. Therefore we would like to mention some of the most influential ones:

Birgitta of Sweden was a Swedish noble woman who produced *The Revelations* which she sent to the Kings of England and France pleading for peace in Europe. Julian of Norwich in *Showing of Love* quotes her *Revelations* and Margery Kempe later imitated Birgitta's pilgrimage and literary activities.

Another influence on the medieval English women writing was that of Christine de Pizan whose books were translated into English. She had the merit of pioneering feminism by adding value to feminine virtue against the misogyny of the *Romance of the Rose*. Widowed at the age of twenty –four she turned to writing to support her young family, which was a very rare career choice for a woman living in the fifteenth century. Moreover she used her writings to challenge the misogynistic tradition when she participated in the *Quelle de la Rose*, a debate around the very popular *Romance de la Rose*:

*But if women had written books,  
I know for certain that things would be otherwise,  
Because women know that they are wrongly accused.*

A special place in the canon was that of Julian of Norwich who wrote different versions of the *Showing of Love*, in 1413(though it is thought to be earlier composed). All versions present the contemplation of the Virgin and the vision of the hazelnut in the palm of Julian's hand: *And so in this sight I saw that he is everything that is good as to my understanding. And in this he showed me a little thing the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the*

*palm of my hand as it seemed, and it was as round as any ball. I looked on it with the eye of my undrestanding, and I thought, "What may this be?" And it was answered generally thus, "It is all that is made."* (Reynolds and Holloway 2001).

The literary scene is also transformed by the presence of the first most accomplished woman writer of romances like Marie de France, although she writes in French. In her *Lays* (or short romances) love and marriage are the two coordinates that define her romance world: love is seen as a total commitment to the beloved and it is possible only between people of equally refined birth, making women equal to their lovers in rank. Marriage is not possible for all her lovers though it is often their aim.

Mathew Boyd Goldie from the Rider University considers that Marie introduces in her fiction more complicated subjects such as gender analysis. For him the *lai* becomes an exploration of the tensions between genre and gender, and between society and sexuality. (Case Studies in Reading, key primary Literary Texts, in *The Medieval British Literary Handbook*, pp.83). These forces sometimes work together and sometimes they clash. From the point of view of gender a middle class medieval woman in England was expected to marry, manage a household with children and look out for her husband's business affairs and eventually to generate income. But according to Latinity there is a kind of social hierarchy of women who were classified into: virgins at the top, widows below them, married women next and unmarried sexually active women at the bottom (Chaucer's *Wife of Bath, Prologue*). However according to the literary norms of Latinity there is one more type apart from the hierarchy, the religious woman, isolated from the human community, the so-called *anchoress*.

The same explorations are to be found in Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first autobiography of a woman writer in the English literature, though written in the third person, which presents the spiritual and social life of a middle class woman in the fifteenth century.

Moreover the literary critic associates a new modern concept to her spirituality, that of the *performative*, a concept theorized by Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick who suggest that *words and gestures are not simple expressions of of an individual inner emotions and thoughts, instead they make things happen.* (Mathew Boyd Goldie, pp.94). Kempe is *performative* in the way that she is permanently caught up in the nets of a clash between the norms of a middle-class wife and female religious. In her pursuit of spiritual purity she renounces sexual pleasure. Her spiritual life is also *performative* in the sense that *it helps her to change the structure of society around her.* (pp.97). Kempe struggled to have her book written down more than once *and her efforts are also parallel to the performative aspects of spirituality* (pp. 100).

But the great flowering of medieval English literature is reached with Chaucer and Langland in the second half of the fourteenth century.

What is her image like in terms of the literary types of the period?

*Holder of the keys- or a focus for tribulation?* Christine Fell's answer encompasses the two opposing types: Eve and Mary.

*Whatever her role, she says, medieval English literature has at least a strong tendency to show the woman as a figure to whom tribulation, whether external or self-generated, was no stranger. Her sufferings, moreover, are essentially linked to her weakness (...) Her place is in the scheme of salvation as well as of damnation. (...) As both virgin mistress and Virgin Mother of God, she is the object of unrelenting importunity.* ( *Women in Anglo-Saxon England*, 1987, pp.192)

The portrayal of women in medieval literature generally conforms to the two types mentioned above: there is Eve who is frail, seducible and full of temptations and Mary, -virginal, maternal, compassionate. Most of Chaucer's fabliau women are frail but some of them play the roles of Eve *more tastefully than others* (Christine Fell, pp. 182). In *The Shipman's Tale* there is a prosperous and competent young woman, the wife of a merchant who symbolizes domestic independence. The *Wife of Bath* on the contrary is bullying and domineering, for her marriage is seen as a business deal. She is even superior to her husband and this *provides a satiric look on the courtly dominion of the lady over her lover.* (Christine Fell, pp. 184). She is the widow of three rich husbands who adds the pleasure of sex to those of money and love. The courtly heroine, who figures as a kind of secular Mary delineates herself from the middle-class housewife or the peasant widow. From this point of view literary criticism speaks about Chaucer's work as being complied with the misogynist works of his time and the anti-feminist approaches.

While some scholars have located feminist literary practice in actual medieval women like Christine de Pizan, still others have turned to fictional female characters. Perhaps one of the most frequently cited examples and one of the most controversial is Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, considered by the majority of them as a touchstone for feminist literary theory.

The question is whether we ascribe feminist motivations to women or literary figures that lived before the term had come into English (the word does not appear until 1894) (Gottlieb, 1985). In answering this question we will take into account the point of view of Diane Cady from Mills College (*The Medieval British Literature Handbook*, 2009), who, referring to *The Wife of Bath* and her insistence on the right to pursue sexual pleasure or to use her body for economic gain re-considers the interpretation from feminist positions, while from a medieval perspective, *read as misogyny* (pp. 201).

By the mid-1980s a wellspring of feminist work began to appear in medieval studies. New anthologies and editions expanded the canon and, in some cases, made available for the first time new writings by medieval women (see, for example Dronke 1984; Wilson 1994; Petroff 1986; Thiebaut 1994). New scholarship renewed interest in medieval women like Christine de Pizan and Margery Kempe, as well as texts written specifically for women, such as the *Katherine Group*. *Signs* (1989), *Exemplaria* (1992) and *Speculum* (1993) all published special issues on medieval women.

More recently, essays in *Women Medievalists and the Academy* (Chance 2005) have explored the role that women medievalists have played in the formation of medieval studies.

In contrast to Carolyn Dinshaw's argument that Chaucer's women *envision the place of the Other in patriarchal society* (10), Elaine Tuttle Hansen reaches quite different conclusions. While she admits that initially she saw Chaucer's portrayals of women as sympathetic, and perhaps even as an articulation of an embryonic feminism, but as time passed she began to have doubts because:

*What often sounds like a woman's voice (in Chaucer's texts), what is spoken in the name of women, inflected by different and highly realistic, sometimes subversive dialects, always enters and leaves Chaucerian story not as the enunciation of an autonomous speaker, but as urgent problems for male characters, male narrators, and (? male) readers.* (Tuttle Hansen, 1992, 12)

The modern reader is also displaced from the old canon because of the changes caused by the development of feminine criticism on the one hand and a greater and sustained attention given to fifteenth century texts on the part of the new modern criticism, on the other hand, which have added new lights to the prism. The readers have to rethink ME texts of

female writers from this new perspective and to re-think the boundaries between them and male writers, between interpretations of misogyny and feminism, between what Cixous names *écriture féminine* and traditional language, metaphorically speaking they have to find their own rooms in the new canon.

*Other voices, other rooms!*

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