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LS 395.01: Medieval Women: Representations in Romances of England

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We will examine the complex ways women were represented in romances of medieval England and the intersections of love, chivalry, morality, and religion in these texts. In narratives that supposedly highlight the importance of women, why are some many women represented as passive victims (set adrift at sea), objects of exchange between fathers and prospective husbands, or pawns in games of treachery and evil? Are they merely passive objects or can they be desiring subjects? In what ways are women depicted by male authors and for what ends? What do the depictions say about medieval men’s attitudes, fears, projections, and societal ideas about the nature of women? Some of the roles we will investigate in these texts are women as 1) mothers: good or evil mothers-in-law; 2) daughters: dutiful or desirous or rebellious; 3) queens: innocent or evil, with power or stripped of power; 4) wives: good and loyal vs. adulterous and traitorous; sometimes mistresses; 5) true friends or helpers. Our discussions will be framed by an awareness of the alterity of these texts and the difficulties of modern readers’ judgments on texts from the past: how can we not impose our own attitudes and societal and cultural notions on texts from the past? How can we engage in a sympathetic reading of past texts, especially given that over 600 years separate us from their original composition, and what do these texts still say to us in the 21st century?

We will try to understand the texts in their historical contexts with cultural ideas of women constructed from an authoritative and misogynistic tradition promulgated and validated by the ultimate medieval institution: The Catholic Church. We will see how interpretations of the Genesis account of creation and the role of Eve in Sacred Scriptures by Church authorities inform ideas about women in much of the literature we read. We must remain aware, however, that despite patriarchal systems of control (legal, judicial, economic) throughout the Middle Ages, individual men were not women haters in their own lives: many respected and loved their mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives—despite overwhelming philosophical and theological treatises that depict women as temptresses, evil, lustful creatures luring men to sin, as loose talkers given to gossip.

TEXTS: Note: Some of the texts are in modern translation; some are in Middle English 1) Marjane Osborne, *Romancing the Goddess*, (Emaré, *Bone Florence of Rome* and Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*); 2) Geoffrey Chaucer from *Canterbury Tales*: *Franklin’s Tale, Wife of Bath’s Tale, Knight’s Tale*: Penguin edition; 3) TEAMS texts on line of *Sir Launfal* and *Lai le Freine*; 4) ERES texts of *Floris and Blanchejleur, Pearl,* and *Earl of Toulouse* as well as criticism and readings.

ERES: Go to Liberal Studies, then Charbonneau, then LS 395. Our password is romance
**GRADING:** Since we meet just once a week in a seminar format, you will be doing a week’s worth of work before you come to class (as much as 100-150 pages of reading). You will bring to each class period, a typed response to the text to be discussed that class. This response will be approximately 3-5 pages (250 words=1 page). Sometimes you will be asked to address specific questions, respond to outside critics, or incorporate some specific analysis into your response. Other weeks, you will respond in an open-ended and free way to the issues raised by the text in terms of the ways women are represented in the text. These papers will represent the bulk of your writing for the semester. We may use these responses as the beginnings of our discussion so that you will refer to your ideas and sometimes even read from your response (if asked or if it seems appropriate). As we accumulate more texts and critical points of view, these responses may also go back to earlier texts and reframe or re-interpret those first-formed responses. Thus, the papers will be an ongoing dialogue between you and the texts as well as between you and me and other members of the class. As a result, the responses might allude to previous texts and keep building on similarities and contrasts among the texts. For our last class, I will ask you to bring a **10-page synthesis of ideas** represented in the texts. Your final grade will be based on all these writings (once the attendance policy is taken into account). However, you must engage in lively, informed discussion each class meeting. Being silent is not acceptable. Your final grade may be lowered a full grade point if you do not participate.

**Attendance Policy:** In this class, as in many others, your attendance is essential to the give-and-take, the exchange and challenge of ideas at the heart of a true education. This exchange is particularly important in an upper-level literature course, which asks that you **engage** with the ideas of the text, that you **talk** with others about your responses in order to sharpen your own ideas and clarify your positions. You may hear views you disagree with; some you may find repugnant, offensive, or threatening. I expect civility and a level of discourse that allows all opinions to be aired. To attend class, then, is to hear issues raised, to hear other voices responding to these ideas, and to voice your own response to them. To miss class, then, is to miss a link that connects each of us to other minds. Since we meet only once a week, to miss one class is to miss a whole week’s worth of discussion and analysis. It is therefore essential to come to class **prepared** to talk and to share your insights and questions with others. **THUS,**

- 2 absences lower your final grade by ½ grade point;  
- 3 absences lower your final grade by a full grade point;  
- 4 absences lower your final grade by 1-1/2 grade points;  
- 5 or more absences means automatic failure. You have missed too much to say that you have “taken” or passed the course. If there is a family emergency or you are struck by a horrific illness or accident, the attendance policy may be more flexible. I need to know, however, if there is a problem. Please call me, email me or ask a friend to notify me about your present problem. Do not wait a week or two and do not just disappear.

*No late papers or assignments are accepted.*
Some issues to address in each text as a starting point:
• What roles are most often assigned to women/men?

• What attributes or associations are tied to certain behaviors and certain types of women/men? (i.e. in fairy tales beauty is nearly always tied to being chosen, getting rich, getting married, and being happy. External appearance signals inner value.)

• How and why do female/male characters succeed or fail? What kind of reward do they receive?

• How are "femininity" and "masculinity" defined? What is a "woman"? What is a "man"?

• What are the qualities of a "good" or "bad" woman or man?

• Explore how the role of women works to support or undermine the social and political system of the past and present readers. In their words, why this text at this time? Why that text at that time? You need to contextualize and historicize the text: How does this particular representation of women function? Does the text reinforce or challenge patriarchy? What does it tell us if it does both simultaneously?

• How does gender intersect with race, class, and other social categories?

• How do form and function intersect? (i.e. What Virginia Woolf says intersects with how she says it.)

Reading Assignments and Schedule of Classes:

January 27: Introduction to romance and to basics of Middle English

Feb 3: Chaucer’s Man of Law’s Tale

1) Read the tale Custance in Romancing the Goddess., pp. 126-71.
2) Read Osborne, chapter 1 (pp 3-49) and chapter 3 (pp 173-224)

Feb 10: Emaré
1) Read text, pp 51-91 in Osborne

Feb 17: Bone Florence of Rome
pp. 91-126 in Osborne
Views of Women document on eres.
Discussion of Constance variants: near incest, passivity, associations with Blessed Virgin Mary and ancient goddess figures. How do these tales counter the negative views of women you have just read about?
Feb 24: Earl of Toulouse (eres)

March 3: Floris and Blanchefleur (eres)

March 10: Sir Launfal --TEAMS
Fairy mistress theme; importance of otherworldly woman who has all the power and money to rescue the knight-in-distress: overturning usual chivalric values of male rescuing damsel-in-distress. Why use fairy mistress? Significance of wish fulfillment, fairy tale atmosphere. Role of Guinevere.

March 17: Lai Le Freine--TEAMS
Read Michelle Freeman’s “Power of Sisterhood in Marie de France’s Le Fresne” French Forum 12.1 (1987): 5-26; rpt in Women and Power

Spring break

March 31: Pearl

April 7: Chevalere Assigne (eres)

Back to Chaucer for the next 3 weeks. We will finish the semester with a reading of another 3 of Chaucer’s tales. There is a tremendous amount written on each tale as well as Chaucerian humor, irony, and any other topic you might be interested in. These books may be of special interest to you if you want to browse: Carolyn Dinshaw, Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics; Elaine Tuttle Hansen, Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender; Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales

April 14: Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale
Issues to think about: Amazon women and their loss of power; Emily as object of male gaze; Emily choosing Diana, goddess of chastity. Images of women in poem as supplicants (kneeling and weeping)
April 21: Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*
Mary R. Bowman, "‘Half as she were Mad’: Dorigen in the Male World of the Franklin’s Tale, ChR 27 (1993): 239-51;
John Stephens and Marcella Ryan, “Metafictional Strategies and the Theme of Sexual Power in The Wife of Bath’s and Franklin’s Tales” 56-75.

April 28: Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*
Respond to these issues in your paper for this week:
This tale has two quests:
1) the knight must solve a riddle: what woman desire. Crone gives him the answer that saves his life, but his inner life is still unchanged;
2) more important quest for an internal, spiritual answer. Will he have her foul or fair? To accept her present state as crone brings about an inner change in his state, a moment of revelation, inner understanding.

It is a riveting context for the question of true nobility and goodness and gentility (gentilesse). Tale can be seen as about reciprocity in marriage after the horrifying beginning with a man condemned of rape, a crime that negates women’s will, power, or sovereignty. Deeply ironic and more compelling given THIS man’s transformation.

1) How convincing is the Knight’s “transformation” from callous, ego-driven male to sensitive husband who gives the woman the power to make the best decision for both of them? Admittedly, it is swift and not fleshed out, but is it authentic and real? Go to text and re-read the key lines: Il. 1228-1235. Many people feel his words are thrown out carelessly, in despair from a bad position, a “whatever” sort of response to what he views as a no-win situation for him married to the old hag, the Loathly Lady. What specifically in his lines undermines this position that he has not changed?

2) If story is about transformative power of love (and its symbolic manifestation: after all there is magic in that the Loathly Lady can transform), then must you see the knight as changed? If not, how do you read the tale?

Feminist critics are disgusted that the rapist knight gets “it all” in the end: huge reward: a beautiful and noble wife, who has saved his life, etc. Carolyn Dinshaw argues “The hag has, after all, conformed herself--her whole body--to his desire...The patriarchal paradigm is still in place; the trade of the captive woman...and as before, the Wife exploits the commodification of woman’s sex that is the basis of that paradigm.” Elaine Tuttle Hansen says something similar: “The rapist not only saves his life but is also rewarded by the promise of that impossible being, an unfailingly beautiful, faithful, and obedient wife; the hag who gave him the answer, who had all the power, gives it up and transforms herself into a Constance or Griselda.”

Do you agree? What do the feminists not pay attention to in the text? Is mutuality or shared pleasure intimated by the text? Would that undermine the feminist critique?
When the hag turns into a beautiful woman, what happens to the force of her preceding argument that ugliness and age have their own value? The hag is an otherworldly creature, not human. Why? What significance for applying lessons to the human world? Does hag represent a wish-fulfillment for Wife of Bath or just a pipe dream? Why does she tell this tale?

**May 5:** Final discussions. Bring in your 10-page synthesis and final thoughts on all the matters of the class.
USEFUL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

I. Crusades:

First, 1095-1101—rapid and early success: Jerusalem is taken in 1099

Pope Urban's words in 1095: "Go forth, and God will be with you. Turn against the enemies of the Christian name the weapons which you have stained with mutual slaughter. Redeem your sins - your rapine, your burnings, your bloodshed - by your obedience. Let the famous nation of the Franks display their valor in a cause where death is the pledge of bliss. Esteem it a privilege to die for Christ where Christ died for you. Think not of kindred or home. You owe God a higher love. For a Christian, every place is exile; every place is home and country. "That land in which the light of truth first shone, where the Son of God, in human guise, deigned to walk as man among men, where the Lord taught and suffered, died, and rose again, where the work of man's redemption was consummated - this land, consecrated by so many holy memories, has passed into the hands of the impious. The temple of God has been profaned, His saints slain, and their bodies cast out upon the plains for the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field to feed upon. The blood of Christians flows like water in and about Jerusalem, and there is none to do the poor service of giving burial to their remains. Strong in our trust in the Divine Mercy, and by virtue of the authority of Saints Peter and Paul, of whose fullness we are the depository, we hereby grant full remission of any canonical penalties whatever to all the faithful of Christ who from motives of earnest and sincere devotion shall take up arms against the infidel. Should anyone die while engaged in this holy pilgrimage, let him be assured that, if he be truly penitent, he shall have his sins fully remitted, and pass to the joys of eternal life."

Second, headed by Louis VII, 1145-47, preached by Bernard of Clairvaux to retake Edessa which fell into Muslim hands in 1144—achieved nothing. Defeat at Hattin

Third, conducted by Philip Augustus and Richard Coeur-de-Lion, 1188-92, another failure. Frederick Barbarossa drowns at sea; Richard stayed longest but didn't retake Jerusalem; instead made peace with Saladin and returned to Europe in 1192.

Fourth, preached by Pope Innocent III; Constantinople was taken and looted in 1204; Papal Bull of 1209 changed notion of Crusade by giving the full legal and spiritual status of a crusade for the first time against an internal enemy: the Cathars. Known as the Albigensian Crusade.

Fifth-Eight: Together called the Thirteenth-Century Crusades, which included the conquest of Damietta, 1219; Sixth, in which Frederick II took part (1228-29); also Thibaut de Champagne and Richard of Cornwall (1239); Seventh, led by St. Louis, 1249-52; Eighth, also under St. Louis, 1270. After the Fourth Crusade, with the horror of Christians looting and murdering Constantinople in 1204, the spiritual ideal was thoroughly tarnished. After that point, the Crusades had a different history; Jerusalem was not the focus of interest; instead the ambitions and adventures of the great powers and princes of Europe commanded the scene and interests in the crusades varied and were so entangled with internal politics of Europe they are hard to follow.

II. CULT OF THE VIRGIN

Mary as Mediator: In Christian iconography as well as in Christian literature, there was a new attention to the significance of Mary in the later Middle Ages especially. In the early Middle Ages, the emphasis was on the male trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Why the timing? Possibly the mariology of Bernard of Clairvaux (one of most influential churchmen of the 12th c) from whom the fertility cult of earlier ages flowed into the Christian West. His sermons and prayers invoked the grace, gentleness, and tenderness of Mary, especially as a mediator between sinful man and an austere God. The relation between her maternity and virginity was the basis for pariahs on both sides of the eucharistic controversy who spoke about her privilege: she gave birth as other mothers do, yet without pain and without loss of her virginity. As Mother of God, she was unique not only among human beings, but among all creatures. Her title of "Virgin Mother" attests to the fundamental mystery of Mary. An obvious corollary of doctrine of virgins birth was emphasis on virginity and on clerical celibacy.

Mary was able then to undo the damage done by first female Eve. From Eve we humans were brought into sin, mortality; but through the Virgin we are brought into eternal life and salvation. Just as Christ was the Second
Adam, Mary was the Second Eve. The curse of Eve and the blessing of Mary; the disobedience and pride of Eve and the obedience and humility of Mary. A new duality about woman’s nature sprang up. The Marian hymns became wildly popular in the Middle Ages. The cult of the Virgin grew as a parallel concept to the development of the code of chivalry in aristocratic circles.

III. Medieval Women’s Voices through Male Hands to Modern Ears


The Wife of Bath is sometimes read as the epitome of a modern feminist insofar as she claims that experience is the ground of her authority (thus reversing the hierarchy which devalues feminine experience and privileges masculine authority). She takes on the men at their own game of name-dropping and refuses to be silenced by the patriarchal powers that be. Yet to commemorate her as a feminist simplifies both history and textuality. During passage of 600 years, women’s social, legal, cultural and ideological status has shifted considerably and with it the corresponding modes of resistance. The Wife is a textual signifier, an effect of language whose "meaning is therefore subject to play of difference in language itself.

Aroun her cluster a number of issues central to the rereading of the Middle Ages in feminist terms. One issue is how to negotiate the alterity of the medieval past and attend to the meaning of its specific historical systems of difference. Another how to interpret various acts of medieval ventriloquism: female voices that proceed from male authors. Such voices, like the Wife’s are equivocal. They do not wholly speak from the place of their male authors since the meanings they embody are cultural rather than the sole property of individual authors, yet neither can they be romanticised as the repressed and marginalized voices of women from the past. To think how a voice like the Wife of Bath’s might constitute a point of resistance is to move away from naive readings of her as either a militant feminist or as trapped in the prison-house of masculinist ideology, towards a strategic exploration of how medieval subjects--male and female--are caught up in systems of power relations. To historicize is both to seek for historical meanings and to recognize the limits of those meanings; post-structural understanding of language acknowledges that meanings are plural and thus constantly open to revision. (p.2)

The Clerk appears to give support to the idea that the Wife is part of a sisterhood: "for the Wyves love of Bathe-whose lyf and al hire sect God mayntene/in heigh maistrye..." 1170-72. Sect occurs only 4 times in Chaucer: there seems to be some kind of company of wives, but what is their status? The Wife does not claim allegiance to any female sect in her prologue (p3). Even Christine as early feminist oversimplifies issues: her aristocratic subject position, the political effects of her interventions and the act of inserting herself into a prestigious male textual tradition: an act that is simultaneously an exceptional entree to an elite male club and a subversion of its very credentials. The scene of women versus clerks is a powerful antagonistic dynamic in late Middle Ages. Wife appears in a specific discourse: a secular narrative poem written by a man. Textual dynamics suggest that when the Clerk aligns her with a sect, she is named rather than naming herself. A male cleric is given the last word on the Wife, however much this is ironized by the writer. Yet to hear her voice as simply the product of a chorus of male narrators is to arrive at impasse of early feminism in 70s; now, feminists are interested in how textual representations are the site where women can fight back. Phallocentric discourses and knowledges, like medieval antifeminism, depend on images and metaphors of women to support and legitimate their speculations; binary oppositions of sexual difference which such discourses try to nail in place undo (p4)themselves continually.