

WOMEN IDENTITY IN THE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE*

BY

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Abstract

Ironically it is surprising to hear that Middle Ages had an abundance of women writers. But nobody knew them in the Era specifically of Geoffrey Chucer, William Langland, John Lydgate, John Gower and many English and Scottish Chaucerians. When it all started from the Anglo-Saxon period I.e. from 670-1100c, everything was there (following the oral tradition) and all writers were anonymous whether male or female but male authors gradually appeared and deliberately female authors were not allowed to take a step ahead in that direction. That idea of deliberating stopping female authors still is astonishing to hear and learn. But at the same time a belief was also held about almost all of the female authors, from the old Anglo Saxon Era to specifically to the later Medieval English Literature, were using Latin as their language.

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The position of women is often considered as a test by which the civilization of a country or age may be judged. The test is extraordinarily difficult to apply, more particularly to the Middle Ages because of the difficulty of determining what in any age constitutes the position of women. The position of women is one thing in theory, another in legal position yet another in everyday life. In the Middle Ages as now the various manifestations of women's position reacted on one another but did not exactly coincide; the true position of women was a blend of all the three.

—Eileen Power

In the beginning of the history of English literature, it is clearly stated that all literature was available only in the oral form/tradition. The old Church where Latin as language was followed preserved the earlier available old English texts/manuscripts such as the one by Caedmon wherein the poet follows the voice of God. And as the old Anglo Saxon literature started moving from anonymity to authorship there started appearing only significant male poets. No Women poet or author actually came to the fore. The whole available medieval English literature defines only the restricted roles of women in that patriarchal society of England dominated by the French but the real picture, when researched, did not come out like that.

As English literature proceeded further after the Norman conquest, it became clear that women were designated to be restricted to only do jobs which were forced upon them by the patriarchal English

Society of the time. So as such their representation on the whole in the medieval English literature is actually the reflection of their status in that society.

Medieval English literature was believed to be in the line of the Greek philosopher Aristotle who opined that while the male stands for 'form', the female stands for 'material' i.e. 'the body' of the movement. He was in reality suggesting the domination of male over the female or the body. It shows and proves that the only roles assigned to the women of the medieval English period were wife, mother, peasant, nun etc.

As was pointed out earlier, when the old English Anglo Saxon literature moved from anonymity to individuality, poets' names started to appear but they were male authors only. It was not that women authors were not there but hardly any women author was made to come to the level of Geoffrey Chaucer, William Langland and others. As the old English literature was supposed to be rested only upon the themes of war, religion and day-to-day routines of the people whereas it seemed that deliberately love and romance were left out for Geoffrey Chaucer to handle, in the same way female authors were deliberately ignored and overlooked. However some assumptions also arise that this deliberate left out of the female authors was partially because of the Latin language they were using at that time. Since Latin was the language of the church in the oldest period, so Latin influence can't be overlooked in their case also and is in fact the most important reason for their complete anonymity. Several anonymous text of the old English period were believed and accepted to be written only by men but this represented fact that they were the only sex writing at that time can't be accepted. As Chaucer presents man from all classes and sections of society like man as friars, pardoners, summoners, serving in ecclesiastical courts, women were presented as having many husbands in a rather obscene manner specifically in the fabuleux genre used by Boccaccio and Chaucer himself.

As per the study of Diane Watt, professor of medieval literature at the University of Sydney, Leoba, who was a nun and a missionary in France used to write letters to St. Boniface demanding support from his side. Those letters written by Leoba serve as the early specimens of first poetry written in Latin;

The omnipotent Ruler who alone created everything,
He who shines in splendor forever in His father's Kingdom,
The perpetual fire by which the glory of Christ reigns,
The perpetual fire by which the glory of Christ reigns,
May preserve you forever in perennial right.

—Carolyne Larrington

Although old and medieval English poetry forgot to appreciate and recognise the rhetorical skill and potential of Leoba but a hell lot of texts on nuns of those times established Leoba as a determined woman of her community.

Nearly fifty percent of the literary texts produced around 670-1000c. and even after that were lost in World War II, only a few of them actually survived and they were also not complete and were unfortunately only survived in fragments. So fragmentary nature of the texts survived was also a major reason for the women authors being completely ignored at that time. When Leoba writes her letters to St. Boniface, he also replies to her in his letters but thereafter letter exchanges between the two of them were either believed to be lost or only available in fragments.

Presentations of women as sexual objects in medieval English literature greatly influenced the perception of the modern authors and readers that all those anonymous women of the period of the

dark ages were involved in having sexual procreations with men. Prof Diane Watt in his study states that a lot of those women were actually married. In fact, If any of them were having relationships outside their marriages, those relationships were supposed to be of religious or spiritual nature. Those women were believed to be travellers to holy places like as was described in the work of Huceburc, the earliest first known female author whose work (survived fortunately) *Hodoeporicon [or voyage.Narrative] of St. Willibald* came out to be the first full-fledged political narrative of the old English poetry.

It is true that their complete texts could not survive but whatever remained prove the existence of a truly energetic and interesting political female Society of that time.

Life in the middle ages was hard for both men and women. For most people it was a life of drudgery and hard physical work. In the middle ages, middle class women sometimes owned their own businesses. It's a myth that the women of the middle ages were not educated. Some women were highly educated in fact. A woman named Trota of Salerno lived around the era 1100c. and she was a very famous doctor and she also wrote a famous textbook on medicine. Another famous medieval English woman was Hildegard. She wrote about natural history but she was also a theologian.

The latter medieval representation of women stood out to be a rather strong and significant portrayal of many female authors such as Catherine of Siena and Saint Teresa of Avila who were notable in their focus and strengthening of the discussions on the theology within the Roman Catholic Church.

In *The Legend of Good Women* Geoffrey Chaucer recounts 10 stories of virtuous women in nine sections. The legends Cleopatra, Thisbe, Media, Phyllis, Hypsipyle, Ariane, Lucretia, Phillomela, Hypermestra and most notable Dido. Cupid, the god of love, accuses Chaucer of defaming women. Queen of Thrace 'Alcestis' offers recommendations to Chaucer to write a book about women who have proved loving and faithful unlike Criseyde.

Women of the medieval period were thought to be inferior to men and they were mostly considered to be under constant control of their fathers brothers and so on. They were considered to be not competent enough to withstand the power of man. In other words, their roles were confined to only doing household duties. Below are some of the highlighted feminine roles depicted and described in the literature of the middle ages.

1. Women of the MEDIEVAL period was supposed to remain "virgin" until they were wed and only then were they supposed to be involved in procreations with men and produce children.

Some time ago while proceeding to an episcopal convention... I received most pleasurably what had been written by your Grace to my humble self and with my hands extended to the heavens, I took care joyously to extend immense thanks to God on behalf of your welfare. In your writing not only were the ecclesiastical compacts of [your] sworn vows- which you had pledged with a solemn promise - abundantly clear, but also the mellifluous studies of Holy Scriptures were manifest in the extremely subtle sequence of your discourse.

—Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren

If any of the women of the medieval times remained unmarried she was considered to be a "pure woman" like Mother Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Chaucer also presented this portrayal of "pure woman" in his *The Nun's Priest Tale*. Mother Mary remained 'pure' throughout her life and she was supposed to be wearing the child of God. The true Christian values represented through her character bring out the real Christianity that was supposed to be followed by all nuns and priests of the time.

2. The medieval literature brings out women as bearers of their children and their family. She was supposed to follow all her roles as was mentioned for them in the Bible.

3. The poor surviving conditions of the time forced the women of the middle ages to become where or prostitutes. And many of those women were either killed or outcasted by the medieval English society. Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* still can be considered as one of the best examples of women living lives of prostitutes. Here are some lines from the tale itself that showcase the role that the women of the medieval ages were supposed to play:

They hadde me yiven hir land and hir tresor;
Me needed nat do lenger diligence
To winne hir love or doon hem reverence.....

.....
Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith--
Lat go, farewel, the devel go therwith!
The flour is goon, ther is namore to telle:
The bren as I best can now moste I selle;(lines 210-213;481-484)

—Mary Carruthers

Some of the women who study and teach medieval literature even suggest replacing the anonymous old English Epic poem “**Beowulf**” with “**Judith**” so as to develop an eye for the position of women in society. It may apparently not seem to be a good idea but one thing surely can be done and that is to teach “**Beowulf**” through the translations done by women authors like that by Purvis where she presents Grendel's mother in the light of extraordinary feminine qualities and her strong fervor:

Grendel was torn apart, and she came looking for the meat
of her son, hanging from hooks in the ceiling.
Her home was a death-house, was becoming Grendel's tomb;
the hell-dam came – and was she less frightening
for being a woman? – hardly. The men in the dark room
screamed out that “he” was here, too caught in pain
and fear to see the claw at the end of an arm smooth
and hairless, sharp teeth in a softer jaw.

—Emily Mclemore

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