

Images of Women in Medieval Literature

By

Kathryn D Shannahan

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Paul Freedley
Myra C. Martin

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Introduction

With the change in status of women in contemporary society, the public has become more aware of the variation of images of women in society. These images range from the favorable and idealized to the unfavorable and despised. Scholars have especially begun to attempt to determine where these images came from and whether they reflected society. The Middle Ages are an important source for many modern ideas about women, love and society. Such ideas as the cult of romantic love and the idealization of women developed in this period. From this idealization and religious attitude towards love came many of today's male attitudes towards women and certain aspects of how women have seen themselves. When looking at the Middle Ages, scholars have divided into separate groups. The first group believes that women were idealized, adored and glorified as objects of love in keeping with a chivalric image of women. Men worshipped them and performed heroic acts for their ladies's love. The opposing view accepts the idealization of women but in the context of misogynous views and practices. Idealization is seen as a male construct and part of a change in misogynistic beliefs. Women are still identified with the same things, desire and temptation, but are dangerous as well. Both of these views employ literature, especially courtly love romances, as the

source of their information and also look at non-literary sources such as medical treatises and legal texts. More recently scholars have combined the two views to create a new understanding about female imagery in the Middle Ages. There was no single image which represented women. Instead, they see a complex coexistence of different images which include a wider use of misogynistic generalizations and idealistic descriptions. Scholars have realized that a good image does not equal an improved opinion; good images often had misogynistic intent behind them. By examining the images found in different forms of literature, I will analyze the complex imagery to demonstrate that there was no single idea concerning medieval women.

For many years courtly love literature was seen as exalting women. Scholars at one time thought that women were glorified in these stories, either as the epitome of femininity or the personification of love. C.S. Lewis believed that the modern idea of love was invented in the Middle Ages. He saw the idea of courtly love and the adoration of women as a turning point in the history of emotion. Heroines of romance, such as Guinevere, were worshipped by men; they could make their lovers duel, joust, or not fight at all. Often the women provided inspiration for their lovers and husbands. Just the thought of his lady would motivate a knight to overcome any obstacle. The ladies' mere beauty could cause a knight such as Lancelot to go mad. The Virgin Mary was also seen in this context. She was adored by many and equated with the ladies of romances. Her depictions in art became even

more idealized as she was conceived as looking younger and more beautiful than before, like a romance heroine. It was this idealized view in literature that led scholars to assume that medieval women were generally praised.

To understand these images requires placing them within a historiographic context. First it must be remembered that the term "courtly love" was not medieval but rather created in the nineteenth century by Gaston Paris, and promoted in the mid-twentieth century by C.S. Lewis. Scholars such as D.W. Robertson believe that it is nothing more than that: a modern name and there really was no such thing as courtly love in the Middle Ages, rather a series of moral and comical tales of human folly. Medieval writers themselves did not refer to any literary genre as courtly love. Instead they saw religious literature which warned against vanity and pride exemplified by love.

It is obvious that historical views of women have changed with time. Opinions in the Middle Ages were different from those held now. Even within our own century the depiction of women has shifted and with these changes so has the scholarship regarding them. When the prevailing view of women changes, so does the interpretation of historical texts. What was written in the Middle Ages reflected the religious, medical and common images of women. Scholars have spent years defining what these beliefs were and applying them to the literary sources.

The opinions of scholars are as varied as the images. Some such as D.W. Robertson, see love as less important than what

romantic historians believed. Rather than a "discovery" of a new style of life and ethics, Robertson sees courtly love in an Augustinian fashion, and follows Augustine in blaming the folly of man for the lesser good in life, which includes riches and fame as well as love. Women may be the objects of lesser desires but they are not the sole cause of the problem. Therefore Robertson does not concentrate his analysis on women but rather on pride and other lower loves. Others such as Lee Patterson believe that women and gender relations are at the center of the stories. He does not see one single female role but instead a whole range that mirrors the problems of medieval society. The work of Kathryn Gravdal reflects another opinion of women. She sees a less romantic society and a literature that deals primarily with male fantasies of domination: with rape. Sexual domination is a large part of many medieval stories, with maidens constantly being rescued and ravishment an ever present threat. Gravdal focuses entirely on the women and their roles (as victims): thus like C.S. Lewis she places women at the center of the literature but rather than love, it is exploitation that is the issue. R. Howard Bloch also focuses entirely on women but sees all the views of women as being misogynistic. He does not question the issue of idealization but rather its intent. If a woman was adored and praised, she was still the object of misogynistic views. He sees the attitude towards women as becoming generalized; they were all associated with the flesh. Even the nicest words and attentions were only the facade for a

deep distrust and even hatred. According to Bloch, men felt threatened by the growing importance and sexuality of women, especially after 1000 A.D., and sought various methods to reassure themselves that men were dominant.

Before any of the literature is analyzed, the problem of historical accountability must be considered. Scholars have already pointed out that courtly love is a modern idea. Thus how accurately do stories portray actual ideas and expectations about women? They reflected Biblical theories and religious ideas of the time but can they be used as social history? Lee Patterson argues that Chaucer's work is a historical source which reveals attitudes and assumptions rather than sociological descriptions. Not only does Chaucer reflect literary trends, for example the popularity of Troy material in his Troilus and Crisyde, but he indirectly refers to political and social problems in England at the time. "The Merchant's Tale" reflects the slightly hostile and wary attitudes towards the new merchant class in fourteenth century England. But what about Chretien de Troyes and Marie de France? Scholars do not have extensive biographical information about these authors apart from references to them in some court records. It is therefore harder to place these authors historically, but it would seem that they were living at court or at least affected by its standards. They probably were expressing some of what they saw but also used many other sources to make their stories more enjoyable. So while these stories at times seem to exaggerate the circumstance, the authors probably

reflected some aspects of society while creating some of their own views of culture.

As can be seen, these images and sources can be problematic. It can be hard to tell fact from imagination. But these sources are the best information for discussing the imagery of women. The Bible was the first source used by many medieval writers and numerous of the literary females were derived from its pages. Another aspect of the female image was their physicality. Hagiographies, medical and legal texts are the best sources for descriptions of the female body. Lastly, the romances themselves do provide satisfactory examples of the female image. These sources may not be entirely accurate but they are the best examples of the female in the literature of the Middle Ages.

Origins of the Images

The medieval images that present-day scholars debate and that medieval theologians argued reflect certain generalizations about women which came from one main source, the Bible. The Bible provided many of the images which later medieval theologians took and conformed to their own ideas. The two polarities of female behavior or imagery in the Bible are Eve and the Virgin. Eve appears in Genesis as the cause of the Fall. Quite conveniently most theologians forgot the first story of Creation found in the Bible. Genesis 1:27 tells of God creating man and woman at the same time. But this version was quickly

surpassed by the later story of man being created first and woman coming from him. In this way woman was already inferior to man at the beginning of time. Then, according to the theologians' interpretation of the Bible, Eve tricked Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Medieval theologians seized upon this idea. For them it meant that it was Eve's fault that humanity fell from grace. Her trickery and guile led to Adam's temptation and subsequent fall. Many medieval artists also depicted the serpent as female, thereby associating all the evil with women. As worldly and weak, Eve was also depicted as particularly alluring and coy(1). Only a few scholars saw her positively as the mother of man; others mentioned it but only in passing. To most she symbolized sexuality and treachery. Naturally scholars then associated these negative values with real women.

Theologians wrote about the evils of women and warned against them. These views naturally permeated the society and become a part of the culture. For many, the association of women with sex was logically based on their interpretations of the Bible. The relationship with sexuality was intrinsic because before the temptation there was no sexual activity in Paradise. The most prominent theologian of late antiquity, Augustine (354-430), wrote about women and sex and his authority influenced later writings. He condemned sex and everything associated with it. Even though both male and female were involved in the act of

1. See Matarasso, P.M., trans. The Quest for the Holy Grail. New York: Penguin Books, 1969, p.131.

Descriptions of Eve and her sin are not just in theological texts. She also appears in some romances, as in the quote above.

sex, it was the women who were tainted because of their reproductive capacity and its relation to sex. Procreation was beneficial in its original intent but the association of desire with the act of sex was sinful. Nevertheless, Augustine suggested that women's primary role was to bear children, as long as desire was not a part of the process. However he reminded people that it was from the womb that the human race would originate and inherit the sin of the first parents, Adam and Eve. He also thought that women were a constant reminder of sin. Before him theologians had not connected sex with the Fall. They had seen the choice of Adam as a moral decision not a sexual one (2). However, Augustine did not invent the concept of sin in Paradise, he based his writings on the ascetic tradition of the Church. Nevertheless, he was the first to identify sex and original sin with the Fall. Based on his thoughts and writings, he codified the language used and identified sex as a curse and related it to other sins. Therefore, from Augustine onwards the church fathers saw Eve as a temptress, accomplice of Satan and destroyer of man (3). The influence of Augustine affected other theologians such as Bernard of Clairvoux, Francis of Assisi and Thomas Aquinas. These theologians were the only source on women for many years. There was no other literature until the eleventh century. Thus, these men were able to shape the opinion of literate Europe.

2. Pagels, Elaine. Adam, Eve and the Serpent. New York: Vintage Books, 1988, p.xxvi.

3. Warner, Marina. Alone of All Her Sex. New York: Vintage Books, 1976, p.58.

The New Testament provided another woman who was in contrast to Eve. Mary was sometimes called the second Eve because she too was the mother of man. But Mary was different because she remained a virgin and free from sin. Eve had also been a virgin before the Fall. Mary was anxiously anticipated because she would provide the Savior who would remedy what Adam and Eve had done. Her presence was crucial to the redemption of man. According to theologians, she became a model for women, but one that was unattainable. Her sexuality was emphasized by its absence. She had virtues applicable to women, such as motherhood, virginity, humility and obedience but was also the virgin mother of God and the combination of these made it impossible for any female to imitate her (4). She literally became "alone of all her sex," as Marina Warner calls her in the book of the same title and her perfection made her exceptional among women.

During the Middle Ages, as early as the third century, a cult formed around the worship of the Virgin and became very influential. This cult debated such ideas as the Immaculate Conception and whether Christ had siblings, ideas that were important because not much was known about the Virgin. The cult was responsible for making Mary much more prominent in the Church than she appeared in the Bible, for Mary is not mentioned very much in the New Testament. Most writings on her came from the Apocryphal texts that were not included in the canonical Bible.

4. Gold, Penny Schine. The Lady and the Virgin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.70.

But even Mary had different images which complicated matters. Medieval art helped to portray these images but even these changed with time. Romanesque images were different than Gothic (5). Romanesque images of the tenth and eleventh centuries, for example, tended to show very simple, solemn images while Gothic scenes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries showed triumphal ascensions of the Virgin. On the one hand she was the Queen of Heaven, enthroned beside Christ with a crown of stars. She almost became His equal with her ability to intercede in spiritual affairs (6). Interpretations of the Song of Songs identified her with the bride of Christ and as the personification of the Church. She was at the same time the mother of humility, seated on a simple cushion, nursing her child. Her role of mother was extremely important as it was one respectable social position for women. She evoked feelings for motherhood as well as faith in her son (7). She provided a set of positive ideas concerning women.

This caused some trouble for the theologians because they had two opposites, Mary and Eve, who represented women but who also allowed them to subvert the sexuality of women and sexuality in general. After Augustine's writings became known, theologians began to criticize sexuality in any form. They became wary of the body and its connections with sex because Augustine had associated original sin with conception. Therefore Christ could

5. Ibid., p.45.

6. Ibid., p.53.

7. Atkinson, Clarissa W.. The Oldest Vocation. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p.103.

escape original sin because His father was not human but everyone else had inherited the sin of Adam and Eve (8). This wariness of sex and the body was especially addressed to women whose basic nature was seen to revolve around sex and who were identified with the earth and the flesh. The Virgin was spared this because of the Immaculate Conception. She was released from the pains of childbearing because of her virginity. Therefore women and sex became automatically affiliated with each other because of these images in the Bible, which theologians then emphasized. Even though the Virgin was in theory a "good role model" for women, women could not emulate her, so women were classified with Eve. Mary and Eve are therefore complementary. Because the Virgin reinforced adverse stereotypes of women, ones that theologians did not want ordinary women to be able to achieve, they placed the Virgin at a level which real women could not attain.

There were other women in the Bible who were also alluded to in literature. Exemplary women such as Judith, Esther and Ruth were commonly presented, especially in art, but they were not as holy as the Virgin. They did not bear the son of God but did defend the Church and their Jewish religious beliefs. Unfortunately sinful women were present as well. Delilah had the same notoriety as Eve and both brought down great men. Jezebel was another evil woman, a daughter of Eve. Rejected women, who were scorned by potential lovers, were classified with Potiphar's

8. Pagels, p.109.

wife (9). Then scholars put these women into almost hierarchical categories. Eve was the epitome of evil, with Jezebel and others like her slightly above. Ordinary women came next, followed by the women of the Bible. Then came the saints, almost as perfect as the Virgin but not quite. The Virgin truly was alone of her sex. No female had any hope of achieving her greatness. Other women could move in and out of ordinary or positive categories, such as the saints. These were normal Christian women who led extraordinary lives and became saints. There is also the example of the Magdalene, a sinner who became a follower of Christ and eventually a saint. Medieval scholars seized these images about women, categorized them and thereby influenced literate society.

Images of the Body

Christian ideas about the body, which began with the Bible, permeated medieval society by way of literature, medical texts and law codes. As Elaine Pagels points out, these ideas were codified through the writings of Augustine. He was one of the first to associate the evils of sex and connect them to the flesh and body. According to him, original sin began when Adam accepted the apple. After that fateful moment, Adam then proceeded to have intercourse with Eve and thus transmitted his sin to all future generations. Such thoughts about the human body, especially the female body, manifested themselves in

9. See Matarasso, p.142. Biblical women were not always named but instead referred to in context of the men they destroyed. The quote above from The Quest for the Holy Grail, refers to the women who influenced Solomon, Samson and Absalom.

various forms of literature and society.

From the writings about the Virgin and other Biblical women, another type of literature involving women evolved. This literature, hagiography, concerns the extraordinary lives of the saints. Most hagiographies were written about men, but in the twelfth century more women, especially lay women, became the focus of these stories (10). But like the ladies exalted in courtly romances, the saints celebrated in hagiographies are the product of a predominantly male discourse that elaborates an idealized view of female greatness (11). Such women saints as Catherine of Siena, Catherine of Alexandria, Margaret of Antioch and Barbara were written about, with special emphasis on the immediate physical nature of their suffering, as a demonstration of their piety and devotion.

Early Christian saints, such as Barbara, Catherine of Alexandria and Margaret of Antioch, became martyrs because of their steadfast devotion to their faith. They lived in the early centuries of Christianity when the Church was struggling to establish itself, but the legends about them were written in the later Middle Ages. These women faced pagan kings and fathers but never lost their faith in Christ. As a result of their devotion they were punished. All these punishments resulted in defenseless females fighting strong males with an emphasis on the saints' tormented bodies. Almost every story involves disrobing,

10. Bynum, Caroline Walker. Jesus As Mother. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p.137.

11. Cazelles, Brigitte. The Lady As Saint. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, p.43.

torture and physical transformations. Barbara is put in a tower, then jailed, disrobed and lashed. Christ heals her broken body but she is subjected to more torture. Her sides are torn and burning lamps are applied to her body before she is finally beheaded (12). Catherine of Alexandria is stripped, then whipped with thorny branches. She is then attached to four wheels with blades but Christ intervenes and breaks the contraption. She is also beheaded (13). Christina goes through a whole series of tortures. First she is disrobed and beaten, then attached to a wheel that is lit. When these are unsuccessful she is tortured with fire, snakes, has her breasts cut off, and her tongue severed before her heart is removed (14). The women survive the attacks on their bodies with the help of Christ, their holy bridegroom. Despite the brutal assaults and attempts at mutilation, the saints are spared pain and some provide miracles with their bodies. When Catherine is beheaded her blood is turned into milk, signifying her purity. A similar miracle occurs when Christina's breasts are cut off: milk flows instead of blood. The beauty of these women is emphasized throughout all the stories, as is their physicality. The result is what to the modern reader seems a vivid and disturbing imagery, rather obsessively focused on the female body.

A second group of saints, those of the late Middle Ages, did not have the same external oppressors as in Roman times, so instead tormented themselves. Their piety was exhibited

12. Ibid., p.102-112.

13. Ibid., p.113-137.

14. Ibid., p.138-150.

especially in the act of fasting which also places saintliness with the body. Some male saints also lived lives of fasting, but it was not their main focus as it was with these women. Food had been associated with women, especially in fertility cults, from pagan times. During the early years of Christianity the association became stronger as women were connected with the preparation of food. Finally, during the Middle Ages it was one of the things that women could give up. They rarely had control over land or property, so food became something they could relinquish or transform. But they did not renounce food just because it was available. By giving up food and tormenting their bodies with flagellation and physical discomfort they were imitating Christ in His suffering. Some, such as Catherine of Siena, received promises from Christ that their pains would alleviate the suffering of loved ones in purgatory (15). There was a food-related connection with Christ and the body as seen in the Eucharist. The bread became the body of Christ and many women identified with Christ by only existing on the Eucharist. Late medieval cults of Eucharistic devotion seem to have originated through female piety.

By practicing such extreme ascetism the saints were trying to transform the flesh so that the spirit of God could return to their bodies (16), but there was a paradox concerning this attempt at harming the body. While the female flesh was seen as

15. Bynum, Caroline Walker. Holy Feast and Holy Fast. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987, p.171.

16. Ibid., p.209.

connected with sin, the female body was also important as nourishment. Mother's milk was vital for a baby's health. Depriving the body of food should stop the process of lactation but in some instances it did not. Saints sometimes even nourished their followers with their milk. The Virgin Mary supposedly gave St. Bernard three drops of her milk. Other saints fed the sick from their breasts. A few saints even exuded oil, instead of milk, oil which had curative qualities. However, the Church did not stand behind these women as it had previously. Early saints were praised for defending the Church against pagans. These later medieval saints, while professing their faith in Christ, were not praised by Church officials. Church Fathers did not approve of such actions. Women were supposed to protect their bodies for their children. Priests tried to get the women to eat, castigated them and cajoled them. Nevertheless the saints continued their practices in the hopes of imitating Christ and becoming closer to Him. Therefore, despite the miracles and self-deprivation of the female saints there was also an emphasis on the female body which was sacralized or transformed, not destroyed.

Some scholars, such as Rudolph Bell, have seen in this behavior a medieval counterpart to modern anorexia. He points to ritualized fasting and vomiting as conditions that modern doctors would classify as anorexia. Basing his conclusions on diaries and other accounts, Bell is using modern ideas to describe a non-modern society. Others, for example Caroline Walker Bynum, argue

that this analogy is forced. These medieval women were not trying to obtain an ideal body, nor were they obsessed with beauty defined as thinness. Instead, they were demonstrating their devotion by controlling and purifying their bodies in the name of an explicitly religious transcendence.

The emphasis on the female body was not only reserved for hagiographies; law codes and medical texts also (rather naturally) focused on the body. They took the ideas of the theologians and incorporated them into their treatises.

Medieval laws demonstrated distrust of women, who were socially and legally disadvantaged. Laws often discriminated against women, especially in cases of adultery, divorce and rape. Under Constantine(c.331), for instance, men could divorce their wives because they had committed adultery, administered poisons or procured prostitution, but women were not permitted to divorce even if their husbands committed adultery, were drunkards or gambled (17). Married men could commit adultery with much more ease than married women. Single women could be unwilling objects of sexual desires because predatory husbands were rarely caught and punished, while married women could not commit adultery with anyone without being reprimanded, punished or ostracized. Generally the punishments were similar, men sometimes had harsher physical punishments when they were caught; however these punishments were few and far between. Cases of rape were harder to define. Law makers and clerics had a hard time determining

17.Brundage, James A.. Law,Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983,p.94.

what constituted rape and how it should be punished. Abduction was still a common form of procuring a wife in the early Middle Ages. If there was intercourse as part of a forced marriage was this rape? The law said no, if the woman finally consented and then it was dismissed as part of marriage. The woman had to protest for it to be rape, but she had to fight and protest audibly. Otherwise she was seen as consenting. If the attacker was known by the victim it was harder to prove a rape. However, if rape was actually found to have occurred, there were a variety of punishments. The man could be fined, lose some of his property, be flogged, provide the victim's family with compensation or be excommunicated. Unfortunately punishments were not very common because of the paucity of cases that were tried.

Most of these laws were ecclesiastical because the regular courts were not eager to try cases concerning sexual behavior. The Church was more disturbed by such matters. Although its courts made many of the laws regarding sex, marriage and divorce, theologians and canonists had difficulties writing legal treatises on human sexuality. They had to reconcile views found in the Bible, their own interpretations and the habits of society. The Bible (Genesis 1:28) states that man should be fruitful and multiply which would almost seem to be promoting intercourse. Some theologians adopted this and left the issue of sex alone. Others stated that the act of procreation should be limited to marriage. Some strict scholars declared that the act

of sex should only be for procreation and should not be enjoyed; such enjoyment would be considered a sin. They even tried to limit the times when a couple could have intercourse. It is no wonder that they had such a difficult time establishing boundaries on sexual behavior and writing laws that conformed to these views.

Women were commonly believed to have stronger sexual desires than men and therefore were often blamed for sexual indiscretions. Following from Augustine and other Church fathers, sexuality was identified with the female body and desire (18). Monks were warned not to allow women in their monasteries, not so much because the monks were weak, but because the women's sexual appetites were so strong. Medical evidence was thought to demonstrate that women had stronger sexual desires, linked to humors and body temperatures. The theory of humors was based on Galen (130-201) and his assertion that the body was composed of four humors, blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. Some authorities believed that frequent intercourse was necessary for women to maintain some degree of physiological balance and good health. Women were seen as colder and moister than men so intercourse was, as it were, a cure to help alleviate problems of humoral imbalance. Some physicians believed that women only became pregnant if they enjoyed intercourse. They were unsure of the conditions necessary for conception, creating a whole set of specifications dictating when they thought conception was

18. Bloch, R. Howard. Medieval Misogyny. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

possible. Some of this they based on the Church, such as stating that holy days were not propitious for conceiving. It was also recognized that women's bodies were different from men's and hence inferior. They were not as strong, as indicated by smaller limbs, and lacked certain male features. Some physicians thought that these features were internalized in the womb and its various parts (19). Since man was created first, his body must be perfect and woman's only a defective copy. There was not a lot of substantial evidence regarding women's bodies however, because male doctors were hesitant to examine women closely. They left such examinations to midwives. They were concerned about births but little else regarding female health (20). The few surviving gynecological texts prescribe various cures for female ailments such as wandering wombs and problems with menstruation. The only other major concern involved nursing. The act of nursing was very important because it nourished the child. Even the Virgin Mary was depicted nursing Christ. However, physicians generally based their views on little evidence.

But while the doctors were stating that women were more inclined to sexual action and promiscuity, this view was not always reflected in the literature. Authors often took liberties when describing the adoration of women. Often descriptions of these women became quite spiritualized in their depictions. They were almost like icons, beautiful, but objects rather than subjects of desire. This goes against medical teachings of the

19. Atkinson, p.30-35.

20. Ibid., p.52-54

time which associated men with the spirit and women with the body. The authors were changing this and going against "evidence" and theological teachings. So while the legal and medical texts did influence writers to some degree, they did not have a controlling impact.

Literary Images

The first examples of love literature came from the troubadors who traveled through the European countryside in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Troubador poetry became popular in the courts of Europe and started to form a new type of literature, exemplified by a lyrical poetry in the south and narrative romance in the north. These romance poems became the first examples of romance literature.

As the romances became more popular, authors began to write handbooks about love. One such example is The Art of Courtly Love by Andreas Capellanus (c.1170). However, the opinion on this book has changed. C.S. Lewis thought it to be a handbook for lovers, instructing them through the difficulties of love. D.W. Robertson saw it differently, not as a handbook but as a warning. Capellanus was making fun of the troubador love and warning readers not to partake in such foolishness.

From these beginnings came the courtly love literature in which there are several images of women represented. The best

known authors of love literature were Chretien de Troyes (c.1135-83), Marie de France (late 12th c.) and Chaucer (c.1340-1400). Not much is known about Chretien de Troyes, whose patron may have been Marie de Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Chretien may have been active in both the English and French courts due to the marital and political connections between the two in the twelfth century. One of the most popular scenes for the literature was King Arthur's court and Chretien was one of the first to write about it. He was the first to mention the notorious affair between Guinevere and Lancelot. The actual King Arthur was a relatively insignificant king of the fifth century. Oral tradition passed down the story which Chretien incorporated into his literature and then placed into contemporary times. Even less is known about Marie de France. Scholars are not positive who she was or about the identity of her patron. They can only make guesses based on the limited evidence. Much more is known about Chaucer, including where he was born, his patron and when he died. He was influenced by the courts of France and England and incorporated both styles into his writings.

The variety of images in the literature ranges from virgins to vixens and includes love objects, idealized ladies, women who can heal and women who can harm. There are also various prominent figures in the literature who are good examples of the diverse images. Queen Guinevere was one of the most complex figures in medieval literature and one of the most common because of the popularity of Arthurian legend. In some stories she was a

secondary figure, the dutiful wife who obeyed her husband. She was seen as an adornment and nothing else, remaining on the periphery. In others, the queen is a deceptive and sensual woman who manipulates the king. Chretien de Troyes and the anonymous author of the Quest For the Holy Grail both present this latter image. In their stories Guinevere is in love with Lancelot and meets him secretly. They even consummate their love in some rare versions.

He (Lancelot) came next to that of the queen;
Lancelot bowed low and adored her, for in no
holy relic did he place such faith. The queen
stretched out her arms towards him, embraced
him, clasped him to her breasts, and drew him
into the bed beside her, showing him all the
love she could, inspired by her heartfelt love (21).

Guinevere has complete power over both Lancelot and Arthur. She can make Lancelot do whatever pleases her as in the Knight of the Cart in which she manipulates him into fighting at her whim.

'Sir my lady now orders you to do the best
that you can.'

'Tell her that it would never displease me
to do anything that might please her, for

I am intent upon doing whatever she may desire.'(22)

In the same story she manages to trick Arthur into believing her

21.Chretien de Troyes. Arthurian Romances. trans. William Kibler. New York:
Penguin Books, 1991,p.264.

22.Ibid., p.280.

rather than his advisors, who distrust her because of her affair with Lancelot. In the Quest for the Holy Grail, Guinevere taints Lancelot with her adulterous love so that he is unworthy to see the Grail. This second image of Guinevere hardly seems related to the first.

There are other Arthurian women who exhibit the opposite qualities or a little of both. In Eric and Enide, Enide seems unassuming and quite harmless at first. In fact she does little that can be called wrong or evil. She is totally devoted to her husband. Her only "fault" is her beauty which distracts her husband Eric so that he does not fight as he should. Other knights speak to him of this problem, so Eric decides to test Enide's devotion. Yet throughout the story Enide remains faithful and accepting of all that Eric does. She is not depicted as deceitful or false, only beautiful.

There are other lesser women who appear in these stories that demonstrate different images. Some are pure and innocent, bashful in the presence of men. Then there are the defenseless maidens who must be rescued and protected. In contrast, there are maidens who blatantly offer their bodies to passing knights. Some are coy, others almost brazen. There is no one type depicted but instead a whole range of types.

Almost all of these women fit into the same physical description. The authors vary little in their idealized and standardized depictions. Every woman, except for the occasional witch, is blonde and beautiful. They all have perfect features

with long graceful necks and curvy slender bodies. They are compared to goddesses and nymphs. Eyes are compared to sapphires, lips to roses and skin to creamy silk. Even if they wear rags they are beautiful. Despite these glowing descriptions there is little to individualize these women. Rarely does one appear to look any different from another. Because of these generalizations, they have little substance or personality. Even the saints fall into this category, but while beauty is admirable in the romance heroines, it draws unwanted attention to the saints.

In the *lais* of Marie de France women are presented according to a diverse range of images. Even though she herself is a woman, Marie gives her female characters the same attributes as her male counterparts. Some of her female characters were dutiful, others calculating. Guildeleuc loves her husband, Eliduc, so much that she releases him from marriage so that he can marry another woman whom he loves. This is an example of conjugal devotion at its extreme. Guildeleuc has become a parallel to female saints who give up marriages to devote themselves to the Church or who live in chaste marriages. The "Lai of Guigemar" presents a positive healing image of a woman. When Guigemar is wounded by a magical deer, only the love of a woman can heal him.

May you never find a cure...until you
are cured by a woman who will suffer for
your love more pain and anguish than any

other woman has ever known, and you will
suffer likewise for her (23).

The "Lai of Equitan" presents a conflicting image. Here the wife in question is married to Equitan's seneschal or steward. With honeyed words she manages to captivate Equitan and trick him into plotting to kill her husband but the plan is spoiled by the husband's unexpected return.

Marie also wrote about King Arthur's court in two of her *lais*. The "Lai of Lanval" includes Guinevere as an evil, conniving woman. This *lai* brings in the fairy lover who was popular in literature. Having fallen in love with a fairy princess, Lanval swears to keep their love secret. Unfortunately Guinevere had her eyes on Lanval and tries to seduce him.

Lanval, I have honoured, cherished and loved
you much. You may have all my love; just
tell me what you desire! I grant you my love
and you should be glad to have me. (24)

When he refuses her advance, she becomes angry and complains to Arthur that he tried to seduce her. Lanval tries to defend himself but has a promise to keep. By becoming deceitful and a liar, Guinevere has become like Potiphar's wife in the Bible (25). Lanval is saved from the wrath of the court by the arrival of his lover, who whisks him away.

Chaucer also represents a range of female imagery. The Wife

23. Marie de France. The Lais of Marie de France. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. New York: Penguin Books, 1986, p.44.

24. Ibid., p.76.

25. Bloch., p.136.

of Bath and Criseyde are among the best known Chaucerian female characters. Criseyde, a parallel of Helen, is seen as the cause of the fall of her lover, Troilus, and of the city of Troy. She discards the love of Troilus and gives her heart to another. Her fickle heart causes Troilus to grieve and be killed in battle. Emily in "The Knight's Tale" is a paradox because she is like Enide. Her beauty causes problems between two cousins, who fight because of her. They both fall in love with her and will do anything to win her affection. She does nothing to provoke them but instead is an innocent bystander. May in "The Merchant's Tale" is not innocent or naive. She attempts to deceive her aging husband. When her husband goes blind, she takes a lover and even courts him in the presence of her husband. When he miraculously regains his sight and beholds the two lovers entangled in another's arms, he tries to chastise his errant wife. Instead she is able to cajole him and trick him into believing her and not his aging eyes. Alison in "The Miller's Tale" is also unfaithful, described by Chaucer as having a body as slender as any weasel's and as soft and tender (26). She and her lover come up with a ploy to trick her husband and allow them time in bed. Her husband is fooled but another admirer is not and wreaks havoc on the lovers. However, Alison is able to fool her husband and he is unaware of her transgression. But Chaucer also presents the ultimate faithful woman, Griselda, from "The Clerk's Tale." Her husband takes her out of poverty to marry him

26. Chaucer, Geoffrey. The Canterbury Tales. trans. Nevill Coghill. New York: Penguin Books, 1951, p.106.

but then tests her devotion. He hides their children in a neighboring realm and pretends they are dead. Then in an ultimate test of faith he tells Griselda he is going to remarry. She is to be sent back to the poverty from which she came. Only at the end is his ruse revealed and the family reunited. Throughout the whole escapade Griselda never complains but accepts her husband's will.

Throughout all the literature, no matter what style, there are two polar images represented: if they do not strictly fall under the titles of Eve and Virgin they are very close. The virtuous women are often not perfect like the Virgin and often are not virgins, as exemplified by all the loving and pious wives. They can love their husbands and still be holy. Some even convince their husbands to live in chaste marriages. But since they do not cause the downfall of any men, they cannot be associated with Eve. Instead they are the Biblical holy women, unlike the wife in the "Lai of Equitan" who is directly responsible for problems in the kingdom. In contrast, there are some women who do consciously deceive men and cause their destruction, such as some versions of Guinevere. The author of the Death of King Arthur believed that Guinevere was to blame for Arthur's death. Her adulterous love of Lancelot results in Arthur exiling Lancelot and then following him to France to fight him. While Arthur is away, his nephew tries to take over the country. Arthur must return to defend his realm but is killed in the battle with his nephew's forces. The implication is that if

Guinevere had kept her desires under control nothing would have happened. Women such as this are definitely daughters of Eve, but there is a group in between. These women do not knowingly cause any problems but the fact that they are women is problem enough for their men. Their essentially passive beauty causes men to fight and do ridiculous things. They cannot really be classified with Eve but their tendency to cause complications cannot truly associate them with the Virgin. Chretien's Enide is one of this type.

There is also a problem with male association with women. Lancelot was condemned because of his adulterous relationship with Guinevere. He was denied sight of the Grail until he repented (27). Galahad was able to attain the Grail partially because he was not intimate with any women. The women did not even have to be evil for the association to be detrimental. Enide was hardly threatening but her love enthralled Eric. He was so besotted with her that he neglected his knightly duties. Other knights reproach him for being under the influence of a woman, implying that his masculinity had been threatened by her domesticity. After all, women were associated with sin and flesh. There was also the antique and Biblical idea of women being unclean because of menstruation. For many different reasons men would want to stay away from women unless absolutely necessary.

27. See Matarasso p.136. In this scene Lancelot is accused by a holy man of losing the joys of heaven and the company of angels because he has been bewitched by a woman.

Images of Love

Throughout all the images of women, whether good, evil , or somewhere in between, there is one constant that is associated with them and that is love. From ancient time love and women have been classified together. The Greeks and Romans made the personification of love female in the form of Aphrodite/Venus. The voluptuous and beautiful goddess came to symbolize love for later generations. Lovesick individuals were constantly asking for her help or that of her son, Cupid. By medieval times she had lost little of her mystique. Troubadors still wrote poems in her name. Through all of this, the image of woman and love became almost one. However, as this idea was not new to the Middle Ages, what made the medieval perception different? Women were not simply associated with love, instead they became the center of men's obsessive attention and their suffering. They were an ideal to strive for, objects, icons, but hardly humans. At the same time love also became central, an apparent goal and determinant of chivalry. Medieval women were not only dangerous because of their sexuality but because of love. Men were known to do ridiculous things because of love and were therefore often inspired to acts of heroism. Lancelot is an excellent example. He walks across the Sword Bridge without feeling any pain. At Guinevere's command he fights or refrains from fighting, putting himself in danger. Others go to their deaths over love, such as Troilus. The love of women was considered dangerous by many,

such as Andreas Capellanus. He presents arguments between potential lovers in which the woman always wins. He writes about what love does to a person and it is not always ennobling. Earlier scholars and theologians warned about love, such as Saint Augustine. They warned about the folly of love and the different types. Only pure love, such as that of Jesus Christ, was acceptable. The carnal love felt between the sexes was not holy or pure. Of course this was the love associated with women. However love was also a form of suffering, but a perversely welcome form. Men willingly put their lives in danger in the name of love. So not only were women dangerous because of their sexual aspect and their association with the Fall but they were dangerous because of their affiliation with love.

One aspect of love was the disease associated with it: lovesickness. While this affliction could affect both sexes, it generally was identified with aristocratic men. Literature followed this trend. Only a few of Chretien's women were afflicted, such as Fenice in "Cliges." Marie de France also mentions a few women, such as the lady in "Guigemar," who are victims of lovesickness. Cures were directed at men, and women were rarely mentioned in such treatises as Constantinus Africanus' Viaticum (c.1087). Women were usually the cause of men's problems. Symptoms of this ailment included listlessness, lack of sleep and lack of interest in food, characteristics seen as being female (28). The association with the feminine was due

28. Wack, Mary Frances. Lovesickness in the Middle Ages. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990, p.151.

primarily to the failure to eat, still associated with women as Bynum and Bell have shown. Cures included wine, good company, baths, sexual intercourse and music (29). Treatises concerning this ailment came from the east and were gradually integrated into Christian society. Over time some doctors considered this to be a real disease caused by women, or the occasional man, and writers incorporated it into their works.

Besides love there is another aspect of life that is associated with women: adultery. The legal aspects of adultery have already been discussed, but there is also the historic and literary approach. Some scholars have seen courtly love literature as supporting, even promoting adultery. This may be an extreme interpretation but it cannot be denied that adultery was common in courtly love and associated with women. A woman was far more likely to be called an adulteress than a man would be called an adulterer. Once again the association of women, sex and love is prominent. The fact that there were so many laws regarding adultery may suggest that it was a common occurrence. The Church tried to restrict people but was often ignored. Hints at adultery are found throughout the literature but rarely is there direct evidence. Very few couples in the romances actually consummate their love. Most only talk about it or fantasize. The most famous consummation is that of Guinevere and Lancelot as in the Knight of the Cart. Another famous scene is between Tristan and Isolt. They are partially excused because they are under a spell and know not what they are doing. Normally,

29. Ibid., p.41.

however literary couples remain in their marriages or wait until they are married. However, this did not excuse them from sin, longing for another, committing adultery in one's heart was as sinful as the act of intercourse. Nevertheless, the few scenes that there are, are usually associated with the sinfulness of women and not men.

Within particular poetic genres, one can see a surprising range of images with certain stereotypic conventions. In the pastourelles, poems set in an idyllic spring landscape involving an encounter between a knight and a peasant girl or shepherdess, the girl is seen as a sexual object by the chivalric narrator. The narrator, aristocratic in title and manner, rides into the country only to encounter the beautiful young shepherdess and fall in love with her. Normally he observes her, commenting on her beauty, before approaching her. He will then express immediately his desire to be with the girl (presumably behind a bush). If the maiden is lucky she will escape but sometimes she is unable. She is often forced to submit to the knight's desires but occasionally she actually enjoys it and asks for more. In other instances she is rescued by her peasant lover or proves to be more aggressive at love-making than the knight. These women are not the same as the women of the romances because they are peasants. According to Andreas Capellanus, noblemen should take whatever liberties they wished when confronted by a peasant girl (30). To modern audiences and scholars, such as Gravdal, this

30. Andreas Capellanus. The Art of Courtly Love. trans. John Jay Parry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p.150.

enticement and bribery of women represents rape. However, medieval male readers saw it as humorous. In fact it can be argued that these stories represent a satirical humor by mixing the chivalric with the common. Chivalry did exist and the troubadours did write love ballads about longing for women. But the pastourelles, which seem different from the other romances, are possibly mocking chivalric troubador poems. It was not uncommon for writers to satirize love literature. Andreas Capellanus parodies the antics of lovers in his book, The Art of Courtly Love. While formerly it was thought that his book was describing the benefits of love, scholars have now decided that he was not. So it is entirely possible that these pastourelles were mimicking the troubador poetry in which the man longed for the lady.

This longing, written about by troubadours and satirized by others, became the focus of Dante's writings. He transforms the simple desires of the romance hero into religious longing. The devotion shown by him in his La Vita Nuova may be one of the most extreme cases found in literature. This transitional figure did not write a strict romance but instead combined an autobiographical account of his love of Beatrice with some traditions of courtly love, such as the stories of King Arthur (31). His love for Beatrice begins when they are only children.

The moment I saw her I say in all truth that

31. Dante is seen as a transitional figure because he incorporated trends of both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. He is not truly a medieval writer nor a Renaissance writer.

the vital spirit, which dwells in the inmost
depths of the heart began to tremble so violently
that I felt the vibration alarmingly in all
my pulses (32).

This first meeting guides him through his life; Beatrice becomes Love personified and drives him to write poems about her, dream about her and even become ill because of her scorn. Love had possessed him and controls his actions. Beatrice's actions dictate his life. Her happiness brings him equal joy while her anger causes him to suffer anxiety and angst. Even in death Beatrice continues to have a profound effect on him. His love does not diminish; instead he composes the book years after her death. This is a demonstration of how love ennobles men. He feels that he is a better person because of her love. But love can also make him look foolish. He becomes ill, he rants and raves, he desires nothing else but to see her. He is consumed by the power of love.

His love of Beatrice is essentially religious. William Anderson interprets Beatrice as Dante's vision of a messenger of the Virgin sent to save him (33). Throughout his life he was devoted to the Virgin and now has transferred his devotion to Beatrice. Her goodness and charity were meant to inspire him and help him remember Christ. With his use of analogy, Dante has made Beatrice like Christ. She embodies the goodness, obedience

32. Dante. La Vita Nuova. trans. Barbara Reynolds. New York: Penguin Books, 1969, p.29.

33. Anderson, William. Dante the Maker. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950, p.87.

and love of Christ on earth. She is no longer an object of pure desire but instead an object of God. Through her love Dante begins to understand himself. With her death he began a "new life" which begins with an understanding of Christian love. While she was alive he could comprehend ordinary human love but after her death he began to know pure love. Beatrice has become a bridge between the ambivalent lady of the romance and the Virgin. Now instead of a woman leading a man astray, she leads him to God.

Conclusion

The analysis of the images has now come full circle. A relatively good image of women based on the Virgin started the paper and Dante's almost religious imagery of Beatrice ends it. Between the two images was a variety of other images. As discussed, there are two areas of thought concerning these images. Early scholars focused their attention on the devotion of women, while others disagreed and based their studies on the misogynistic views. More recently attention has focused on a combination of these opposing views. When discussing these images one factor must be kept in mind. Whereas all the images may appear sexist to modern readers, this was not so to the medieval reader (who obviously had no idea of the term "sexist"). Modern opinions have to be separated from medieval. A complimentary medieval image may seem very different from present

day ideas of equality .

Scholars have studied the various images of women. Some have tried to categorize ,others have reflected on what the image meant to society. Did it reflect a role in society, an opinion of society or did the image somehow change society?

Many have pointed to the rise of women in terms of social prestige and numbers in the population. Women could hold land, run estates, have some authority as rulers and even theoretically have some say in marriage. Eleanor of Aquitaine (c.1122-1204)is often pointed to as an example of such a woman. However women like Eleanor were not very common. Did a typical woman like her nevertheless influence the literature? To a degree they did. Women were often the patrons of the troubadors and writers. They implored the writers to create stories to amuse them and thus influenced the writers into creating a literature for women. With time the literature incorporated a male audience as well. By having to focus on females, male writers may have used negative imagery as a way to subvertly chastise women, but scholars are not positive of their intent. However scholars do know that the female population did increase after the millennium which resulted in there being more women in positions of control. However, the general upsurge in prosperity and wealth, which some have attributed to being exclusively female, was felt by everyone and not just women.

Writers probably did reflect some of what they saw. Women did have a special place in society as mothers, wives and nuns.

They nurtured the community both spiritually and mentally. Nuns did receive some respect but not as much as male members of the clergy. The most respected female was the Virgin. Her cult became very important to the laity of Europe. This was a woman who was worshipped and in some people's minds was equal to Christ. No other major religion had a female so prominent in its theology. Chivalry was not a made up term, it did exist. There was courtesy paid to ladies and tournaments were held in their honor. But whether knights acted foolishly or acted like slaves of love is highly doubtful, it may have simply been a part of the pageantry. Writers probably took these aspects and incorporated a few ideas of their own, or borrowed some from the ancients, to create their stories of romance.

Did the literature cause the image of women to change? In all likelihood it had little affect on society. Commoners would not have had access to the romances. These stories were a creation of the courts, a diversion and pastime. They were only read by a small percent of the population. The peasantry would hear of miracles by saints or the Virgin but would have little idea what romance heroines were like. In a time when literature was just beginning to to be reborn it was highly unlikely that it would change a whole society's image of women.

Lastly there is the idea of convention. Did these writers use conventional forms to compose their romances? Genres such as this normally have conventions which authors follow. These forms are often based on reality and then transformed to appeal to the

public. The romances do have many conventions shared by all. The heroine is beautiful, her lover will do anything for her, a fight of some sort ensues and normally a rescue is included. This last argument assumes that the authors based their stories on some fact and then used forms which were expected of the genre and may not be wholly reflective of society.

Some scholars have tried to categorize all the images of women into one or two categories and then made the assumption that there was one general view of women. Others have used modern restrictions to make all the images appear to be misogynistic or adoring. However neither of these approaches is correct. There was a complex range of images concerning women based on the variety of sources and opinions. Penny Schine Gold has called the multiplicity of images a result of the ambivalence of men toward women(34). This may in part be true but men also felt fundamentally anxious about women and their sexuality. For years men had been told that women were evil and suddenly there was a rise in the female population. This increase may have been caused by a variety of reasons. Many men died fighting in the Crusades. Their wives then took over the estate until young sons became old enough to take over. Women's health may also have improved along with diet. Food became more abundant at the same time that the population grew. Whatever the reason, suddenly there were more women to contend with and this may have threatened some men into becoming unsure of themselves and their

34. Gold, p. 151.

sexuality. Some may have had an ambivalent attitude towards women and not really cared about the literary images. Others, such as theologians, made a concerted effort to shape the imagery of females. The writers may not have intentionally been doing this, but they too created an idea about women. It is their writings that have come down to us and given us the evidence on the imagery of the medieval female in literature.

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