

Noctua:

Medieval and Renaissance Studies at The W



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NOCTUA:
MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES
AT THE W

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Introductory Note

Dear Reader,

I am pleased to present the inaugural issue of *Noctua: Medieval and Renaissance Studies at The W*. This journal provides a forum for Mississippi University for Women students to present their original research on the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and is sponsored by the Medieval and Renaissance Studies Minor. The articles in this journal arise from The Medieval and Renaissance Studies Research Symposium that took place on April 15, 2016.

This issue opens with an original poem about King Harald Hardrada by Vikrant “Viktor Fray” Gautam, who, since Fall 2015, has been angry with King Harald for not invading Sweden when he had the chance. It is in the style of the Viking court poetry found in *King Harald’s Saga*. The journal continues with four articles in both history and literature. First, Katy Osborne examines the cultural expectations of wives through a study of the Paston Letters of the fifteenth century England. Second, Rain Gerteis discusses the expectations for female characters in *The Lais of Marie de France* in comparison with tales of courtly love. Third, Justin Kidd compares the views of marriage in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* with Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. The issue ends with Tera Pate’s assertion of a pagan influence on the roles of women in *Beowulf*. I would like to thank the aforementioned authors for allowing us to publish their work.

Thanks to the QEP Faculty Development Committee who funded both the symposium and the production of the printed copies of this journal with an APIL grant. Thanks, also, to Nick Adams, who designed the cover of the journal and the layout of the print version, and Rich Sobolewski, who created the online version of the journal. Finally, I would like to give special thanks Elizabeth Varvel, our editor, without whom this project could not have succeeded.

Dr. Kristi DiClemente

May 2016

To King Harald

Viktor Fray

In a little hut outside the castle walls
A young man looked on with hope
As you, our king, rode on your horse;
In Alexander's likeness he admired you.

You showed great promise during your early years-
Harald the mercenary was feared far and wide.
The legendary journey you went on throughout the world
Gave us great hope. But, dear king, you made a mistake.

Instead of fighting the Danes
You should have fought the Swedes.
Your ego won over reason
And in the end you lost all.

Perhaps if you helped Jaroslav
Across the Baltic Sea,
You would have the support of the Keivan Rus
And you could both expand your lands.

Again without settling your current debts,
You sailed to England.
You should have sailed back-
She had sent you omens throughout your voyage there.

You showed great promise during your early years-
Perhaps if you had a mentor like Aristotle
You would be as great as Alexander;
But that's just wishful thinking.

The Lady of the House

Katy Osborne

Women in the Middle Ages had very distinct responsibilities. However, those of a higher status often had more autonomy, especially in the case of their husbands' absences. These women were expected to take care of their everyday duties as well as those of their absent husbands. In the case of Margaret Paston, the daughter of John Mautby and wife of John Paston, she endured the absence of her husband throughout the majority of their marriage. Margaret often dealt with very important men of the community, her children, her extended family, and her neighbors on issues that were thought to be much more suited for a man. The letters written between Margaret and John Paston show the abundance of responsibilities placed on a woman in her husband's absence. Margaret was responsible for her duties, such as caring for her children and the household, but she was also responsible for the large estate and many tenants that John acquired.

Marriage between noblemen and women was often a political tool, and often was motivated by social improvement and economic gain. Parents arranged the marriages of their children largely to benefit the status and position of their family.¹ John Paston, son of William Paston, a well-to-do lawyer, was an undergraduate at Peterhouse in Cambridge when his father arranged his marriage to Margaret Mautby, who was the sole heir to her father's wealth. In a letter from April of 1440, written from Agnes Paston to her husband William Paston, she related the first meeting between John and Margaret. She explained that Margaret gave John a gentle welcome and that she hoped no great negotiations would be needed between them.

¹ Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 153.

After John and Margaret were married, John was still in school in Cambridge. After he finished school, John began practicing law in London. For these reasons, letters between John and Margaret were necessary so that she could properly handle John's affairs back home. The earliest surviving letters between John and Margaret are from early in their marriage while John was still at Peterhouse in Cambridge. The first letter from Margaret was from the summer or fall of 1441 and was rather businesslike. The letter was mostly concerned with local news. Margaret wrote, "This is to let you know that 1100 Flemish landed at Waxham, of whom 800 were captured, killed or drowned. If they had not been, you would have been home at this Whitsuntide, and I expect that you will be at home before very long."² The remainder of the letter dealt with the lord of Norfolk's presence in town for court. In contrast, the letters that survive from the later part of 1441 to 1444 are much more intimate and affectionate in nature. These letters were personal unlike those of their later years that were much more businesslike. In December of 1441, Margaret wrote to John about acquiring for her some wool to make winter clothing,

Please let me tell you that my mother sent to my father in London for some grey woolen gown cloth, to make me a gown, and he told my mother and me when he came home that he had instructed you to buy it after you left London. If it is not yet bought, please be so kind as to buy it and send it home as soon as you can, for I have no gown to wear this winter except my black and green one with tapes, and that is so cumbersome that I am tired of wearing it.³

² *The Pastons: a family in the War of the Roses*, ed. Richard Barber (London: The Folio Society, 1981), 18.

³ *The Pastons*, 19.

This shows that though their marriage may have been arranged, they were not unhappy. They cared for and respected one another.⁴

In 1443, Margaret was living with her mother-in-law at Oxnead, while her own mother was living with her second husband, Ralph Garneys, at Geldeston near Beccles. Margaret wrote a letter to John on September 28, 1443 with the latest gossip and news from home. She began by explaining how thankful she and her mother-in-law were that John had gotten over his recent sickness and went on to discuss their families. She wrote,

Right worshipful husband, I commend myself to you, desiring with all my heart to hear how you are and thanking God for your recovery from the great illness you have had; and I thank you for the letter you sent me, for I swear that my mother-in-law and I were not easy in our hearts from the times that we knew of your sickness until we knew for certain of your recovery.⁵

This concern is significant because, if Margaret had been with John she would have been caring for him through his illness. She also used affectionate language in this letter that is rarely seen in the couples later letters. “If I could have had my way, I would have seen you before now. I wish you were at home, if you would have been more comfortable here, and your sore might have been as well looked after here as it is where you are now; I would rather have you here than be given a new gown, even though it was a scarlet one.”⁶ Because this was writing from early in their marriage, John and Margaret had not yet had to face their toughest adversaries and trials. It

⁴ *The Pastons*, 17-20.

⁵ *The Pastons*, 20

⁶ *The Pastons*, 21

is understandable why their later letters are so divergent. They faced struggles that required their full attention and were not able to find solace and comfort in being physically near one another.⁷

On August 11, 1444, William Paston, John Paston's father, died. He left behind a widow and a young family, not to mention a vast estate to manage. Luckily, John was finished with school by this time and was able to take over his father's estate with the help of his brother Edmund. Margaret's letters to John began to change because the nature of their relationship changed. They were no longer newlyweds and their lives had become much more complicated. William Paston's estate caused many disputes among the Paston family because William's will was not clear, this led John to seize land that was not specifically allocated to his younger brothers, but had in fact been intended for them according to John's mother. This was the first of many quarrels the Pastons would face and one of the many feuds Margaret would have to endure and mediate due to John's frequent travels.⁸

In May 1448, Margaret faced one of the first of many quarrels she would endure in the years to come while John was in London practicing law. In Norfolk, there were two men, John Wymondham and James Gloys, who got into a fight in the city during mass. The fight was over Gresham manor, a property owned by the now deceased William Paston. This fight led to John Paston spending the entire summer pursuing the cause with Lord Moleyns, who also felt entitled to the property, but John made no progress. In an attempt to make his presence felt, John moved the Paston family into Gresham manor himself. The situation exploded while John was away on business and Margaret was in charge. It looked as though the manor was under siege. In Margaret's letter to John about the impending siege, she asked him to "get some crossbows, and

⁷ *The Pastons*, 20-21.

⁸ *The Pastons*, 22-23.

windlasses to wind them with, and crossbow bolts,”⁹ she also asked for “...two or three short pole-axes to keep indoors, and as many leather jackets, if you can.”¹⁰ At the end of the same letter, she asked for a pound of almonds, a pound of sugar and some cloth to make gowns for their children. Not only is Margaret taking measures to protect their family from violence, but she is also taking care of their need for food and clothing.¹¹

February of 1449 brought a chance for Margaret to display her diplomacy. Just as she had feared, in late January, Margaret and her children had been driven out of Gresham manor by, riotous people to the number of a thousand... arrayed in manner of war with cuirasses, body armor, leather jackets, headpieces, knives, bow, arrows, shields, guns, pans with fire and burning timber in them, long crowbars for pulling down houses, ladders, pickaxes with which they mined the walls, and long trees with which they broke up gates and doors, and thus came into the said mansion.¹²

That is the explanation John gave in his petition to the king concerning Lord Moleyns. Margaret found refuge with a family friend, John Damme, a mile away in Sustead. Since John was absent, she did her best to put his case to the men at Gresham, and was able to report of some degree of success, though some people were still hostile towards her.¹³ She wrote to John, filled him in on the events at Gresham, and warned him to take care of himself. She told him to be cautious in London just as he would if he were at home and to beware of where he went, and whom he kept in his company when he was out. This situation put the Paston family’s lives at risk and Margaret feared she would be kidnapped or forcibly removed, so much so, that she sought safety for her

⁹ *The Pastons*, 33.

¹⁰ *The Pastons*, 33.

¹¹ *The Pastons*, 30-34.

¹² *The Pastons*, 35.

¹³ *The Pastons*, 36.

family in Norwich. Lord Moleyns was not on the Pastons' side and the issue went on until January or February of 1450. All that time, Margaret's chief concern was still Gresham. Thankfully, larger political concerns began to overshadow the local affairs and left the Pastons, namely Margaret, to pick up the pieces.¹⁴

By November of 1453, tensions had died down a bit and Margaret was once again able to write a letter concerned with errands rather than impending war. With all of the uproar over Gresham and protecting the Paston estate, it is easy to forget that Margaret still had to care for her household and children. She asked that John not be angry with her because it had taken her so long to handle his errands. Margaret realized how important it was for John to receive the things he needed from her, but she had been reasonably preoccupied. She wrote him saying, "I am sending the roll of parchment that you sent for previously, sealed up, by the bearer of this: it was found in your travelling chest. As to herring, I have bought a horseload for 4 [shillings] 6 [pence]: that is all I can get at the moment. I am promised some beaver, but cannot get it yet."¹⁵ However, Margaret was not the only one doing errands. She had quite the list for John as well,

As for cloth for my gown, I cannot get anything better than the sample I am sending you, which is, I think, too poor both in cloth and colour, so please buy me 3 ¼ yards of whatever you think is suitable for me, of what colour you like, for I have really searched all the drapers' shops in this town, and there is a very poor choice. Please buy a loaf of a good sugar as well, and half a pound of whole cinnamon, for there is no good cinnamon in this town.¹⁶

¹⁴ *The Pastons*, 36-39, 45.

¹⁵ *The Pastons*, 65.

¹⁶ *The Pastons*, 65.

These specific letters show the juxtaposition of John and Margaret's duties in a clear and profound way. John and Margaret's relationship often seems backwards. The separation between women's work and men's work does not seem to be as prominent in their lives as it was for many women in the Middle Ages. Margaret bought herring and beaver while John bought cloth, sugar loaf, and cinnamon.¹⁷

In the year 1465, Margaret found herself in charge of all of her and John's estates while he was away in London. In the letter, John named the people he trusted most. With the help of Richard Calle, the Pastons' bailiff, and John Daubeney, a local baron, Margaret was managing everything John owned. On January 15, 1465, John sent Margaret a long letter detailing how he wanted his household and estates managed in his absence. He asked that at least once a week Margaret meet with Calle and Daubeney to discuss what needed to be done. He said this was necessary so that neither Margaret, nor Calle and Daubeney had any excuse to leave matters unattended. He detailed how Margaret should tend to his income, household, his tenants, and put his servants to work. He described those individuals who were indebted to him, discussed important errands such as the selling of his malt, as well as how to pay his priests and alms-people. He expressed to Margaret how he felt his estates and household were not being well managed and asked her to manage them as if they were her own. John believed that Margaret needed the help of Calle and Daubeney to take care of his estate in a way that was pleasing to him.¹⁸

In the same year, John Paston ended up in Fleet prison for the second time during his ongoing lawsuit concerning the will of Sir John Fastolf, a wealthy English soldier and veteran of

¹⁷ *The Pastons*, 64-65.

¹⁸ *The Pastons*, 107-112.

The Hundred Years' War. During this time, Margaret was virtually in sole charge of his affairs. He could send his wishes and advice in letters, but could do nothing himself. The lawsuit and dispute over Fastolf's estate had caused the Pastons to have many enemies; with which Margaret had to contend. For example, in June of 1465, there were attacks on Costessey, a part of John Paston's estate. The tenants' cattle and sheep were driven out, and Costessey Hall was occupied. This put the Pastons' enemies in charge of the courts and subsequently, eight of the Pastons' men were indicted in the local courts, including John Paston III, the Pastons' youngest son. At the beginning of July, a similar attack was being planned against Hellesdon, where Sir John, the Pastons' oldest son, was now in charge. However, Margaret knew of it and wrote a letter to her Sir John to warn him. Thanks to her letter, the Pastons' men were well prepared and were able to impede the attack without a fight of any kind.¹⁹

In August 1465, Margaret and John were anxious to see each other. John had finally been released from fleet prison and had sent for her to come to London. In early September, Margaret left for London and returned home around September 19. The visit must have gone well because Margaret's next letter to John was affectionate in a way she had not been in many years. She referred to the 'great cheer' she and John had made when they met, saying that John had spent more on entertaining her than she had wanted him to. Business and distance often came between Margaret and John, but they still genuinely enjoyed each other's company.²⁰

The Pastons still feared an attack on Hellesdon and in October their fears were finally realized. There is no record of the attack, but Sir John and Margery, John and Margaret's oldest son and daughter, were in the house, and were seized and taken out. The duke's men then

¹⁹ *The Paston Letters 1422-1509 A.D. Volume 2 Edward IV. 1461-1471*, ed. James Gairdner (Archibald Constable and Co., Ltd.: Westminster, 1900), 203-206.

²⁰ *The Pastons*, 123-124.

ransacked the home and spent the next three weeks tearing down all the buildings. Three days after the attack, Margaret wrote a letter to John about the danger that was upon the Paston family and their supporters. The bailiff of Eye seized many of the Paston loyalists and took them to Eye prison. They also threatened to imprison or kill as many of John Paston's men, tenants, and supporters as they could. Margaret informed John of the destruction the attack had caused and then she had to pick up the pieces. Ten days later, she wrote another letter that gave the full details of the damage the duke had caused, and how the local people had reacted to it. Margaret told John,

The duke's men ransacked the church, and carried off all the goods that were left there, both ours and the tenants, and left little behind; they stood on the high altar and ransacked the images, and took away everything they could find. They shut the parson out of the church until they had finished, and ransacked everyone's house in the town five or six times.²¹

The attack bolstered the Pastons' support because of the pure destruction that was caused. Margaret expressed how she had been trying to encourage their tenants as best she could under the circumstances. She also had to draw up a list of things destroyed or stolen at Hellesdon. Items ranged from large quantities of bedding, linen and kitchen equipment to arms and armor from the church to personal possessions, such as gold thread belonging to John and Margaret's daughter, Margery Paston. These responsibilities would have usually fallen to John, but fell to her in his absence.²²

²¹ *The Pastons*, 128.

²² *The Pastons*, 126-130.

On May 21, 1466, when John was almost at the end of the seemingly endless Fastolf lawsuit, he died in London. There are no details surrounding his death, but soon after, Sir John took over his estate. Sir John was not known for being the most responsible of people, so Margaret kept a watchful eye on him.²³ Margaret's influence on the Paston estate and household did not stop there. There were many letters between her and her sons discussing how to handle John's will as well as choosing a wife for John III. She was never afraid to give motherly advice as someone who ran the Paston estate for much of her married life. In regards to John's will, she told Sir John, "... please take good advice about it... they will make you and me responsible for more things than are laid down in your father's will, which would be too great an expense for either of us to bear."²⁴ Still Margaret and her sons found difficulty in dispersing John's assets. Margaret wrote to Sir John, "... the chancellor, Master John Smith, and others [say] we have all been cursed for administering a dead man's goods without license or authority, and I think matters are all the worse with us because of it. For the reverence of God, get a license from my lord of Canterbury, to ease my conscience and yours..."²⁵ Sir John's estates had been in such trouble for the past two years that he could get nothing at all for them and he owed so much money that he was having to sell his inheritance to pay back his debts. All the while, Margaret was at his side, whether literally or figuratively, giving him good council and helping him make wise business decisions like her husband had helped her do throughout their marriage.²⁶

These accounts show a life of responsibility for Margaret Paston. The responsibility she held would be easily recognized by women of her status whose husbands were away often. Margaret dealt on her husband's behalf, with issues that were commonly reserved for men. She

²³ *The Pastons*, 131-133.

²⁴ *The Pastons*, 132.

²⁵ *The Pastons*, 166.

²⁶ *The Pastons*, 166-167.

sought the guidance and advice of her husband and his loyal friends, but went about the deeds and decisions herself. She did all of the things a mother and wife was expected to do, while also filling the shoes of her husband. She was often left to defend her family because of the enemies John Paston made in his line of work, but she protected her family and provided for their needs. Margaret proved to John that she could manage the estate as if it were her own, and took care of the things that mattered most to him. She served as a mediator between her children and John, while also submitting to his ultimate authority. Margaret managed to be a loyal, submissive, hardworking wife, while simultaneously being a strong, capable decision-maker and supervisor. Margaret Paston is the standard of what was expected from upper-class women when their husbands were away. She can rightfully be known as the Lady of the Paston House.

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True Love and Devotion as Defining Characteristics of the Women in *The Lais of Marie De France*

Rain Gerteis

The *Lais of Marie de France* is a collection of courtly love poems written in the twelfth century by a French woman known only by the name, Marie. This collection of lais belongs to the larger genre of courtly romance, and each of these tales tells a fairly similar story of tragic and forbidden romance. This concept of forbidden love was a defining characteristic of the genre of courtly love and is present in stories such as Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and several popular Arthurian tales. Courtly romances generally focus on a male character, usually a knight, who falls in love with a beautiful but unattainable woman. The knight has to undergo various trials to prove himself worthy of the woman's love. Love is depicted as a constant struggle which only the most worthy and admirable characters are willing to face. Female characters play key roles in stories of courtly romance by driving the actions of the male characters, however, their perspectives and personalities are limited to their roles as objects of male affection. Women rarely take on active roles in these stories, serving as a passive reward for the struggles and achievements of the male characters.

Several of the stories in *The Lais of Marie de France* do not fit these standards and provide more fully-developed and active female characters than the typical romance, like the women in the lais *Equitan* and *Bisclavret*. This has led many historians and literary critics, like Judith Rice Rothschild and Sarah-Jane Murray to view Marie's lais as a subversion of the genre. However, this is not evidence that Marie is in any way challenging the conventions of courtly romance. In fact, *The Lais of Marie de France* reinforce the traditional depictions of women in courtly romances through both their contrasting depictions of good and wicked women, as well as the resulting punishment for women who are not able to uphold the feminine ideal.

In order to understand how Marie's less traditional female characters fit into her depiction of women as a whole, it is important to understand how women were typically depicted in courtly romances. This is difficult to establish, as many works which are considered courtly romances do not fit the common definition of courtly love relationships. Courtly romances are often defined as depicting female character who, through their great beauty, command control over a man who must work to win her love, "for love of her he must become pale thin and sleepless" (Capellanus 5). However in her introduction to *The Lais of Marie de France*, Glyn Burgess challenges the idea of a concrete definition of courtly love, writing that "love in medieval literature, as in any other period, is too complex to be reduced to a single model which will not admit of variation" (Marie de France 27-28). Burgess goes on to say that while they certainly differ in characterization from classic tales of courtly love like the stories of Guinevere and Lancelot, some of the *lais*, like *Guigemar*, do fall into the category of courtly romances. Defining the role of female characters in courtly romances is equally problematic, and scholars frequently disagree on whether courtly women should be defined by their physical passiveness or their emotional influence over male characters (Wollock 6-7).

With such conflicting definitions of how women should be understood in courtly romances, how can a working definition of the traits of courtly women be created? Despite their often vast differences in characterization, the women of courtly romances are strongly characterized by their desirability and passiveness, in that they do not take action against male characters. Women in courtly romances are always depicted as an object of desire for the male character(s) in the story. Courtly love stories, like Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale," place great importance on the beauty of the female character, with extensive descriptions of her kind demeanor and exceptional looks. Chaucer describes the object of affection in this tale, a woman

named Emelye, writing that she was “that fairer was to sene/Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene” (Chaucer). In addition to her beauty, the woman proves her good character by remaining a passive bystander to the fighting of the two knights in the story, who both want to win her love. Whether or not they return the love of the knight, and some of them do not, these women never become the enemies of the male characters. They can be indecisive and sometimes unlikable characters, and, like Guinevere, a source of conflict in the story, but they themselves rarely take active actions against other characters.

Marie’s *lais* contain their own definition of the ideal courtly woman, defining her as, in addition to being beautiful and passive, faithful to her lover. While mutuality in love is not a necessary feature of courtly romances, Marie consistently depicts the ideal young lovers as being faithful to one another. These two lovers are “nearly always on their own and pitted against evil in various forms: a jealous husband an envious society,” and “it is in fact by virtue of their loving that the protagonists are set apart from the rest of society and privileged” (Marie de France 27). In these *lais*, devotion and mutuality in love are key characteristics in defining the ideal courtly woman.

Upon an initial reading of these stories, the quality of faithfulness does not seem to play a part in any courtly romances. In fact, women in medieval romances were typically already married before they met the young knights who would become their lovers. Marriage is often depicted as an obstacle that prevents the two lovers from being together. Embodying the quality of faithfulness in courtly romances does not require a woman to be faithful to the man she is married to, but rather, the man who loves her. In being faithful to love, even despite obstacles like marriage, a woman embodies the courtly feminine ideal.

This view of love and marriage can be traced back to the origins of courtly romance in the writings of the Roman poet, Ovid. In his work, Ovid defines love as purely extramarital “and (it) does not contemplate matrimony as its object” (Capellanus 4). While the writings of Ovid were satirical, and present a view of love that is much too cynical to be truly romantic, these ideas were taken very seriously by medieval authors of courtly love stories and provided much of the basis for these works (Capellanus 4). The concept of love as a constant struggle to be overcome is present throughout courtly romances of the Middle Ages, and has a clear influence in *The Lais of Marie de France* as well.

Several of the women in the *lais* which follow the tradition of courtly romances are adulterous, and they seek true love outside of their happy marriages. The husbands of the women in these tales are old, cruel, and unable to provide their wives with children. In fact, Marie criticizes these old men in *Guigemar*, in which she writes that “all old men are jealous and hate to be cuckolded” (Marie de France 46). While cuckoldry is certainly depicted negatively in some of the other *lais*, Marie seems to indicate that cuckoldry can only be expected when a husband has nothing to offer his wife and is cruel to her. The women are not happy in these marriages, and their infidelity is justified by their search for true love with another, more fulfilling partner. Despite their infidelity to their husbands, the women in these *lais* still uphold the idea of faithfulness which defined “good” medieval women. In these stories, it was not so much the women’s faithfulness to their husbands which defined their characters, but their obedience to the men in their lives. These women display their passiveness by enduring their unfortunate circumstances until a knight comes to save them, rather than taking their own actions to free themselves from their husbands. In fact, the women do remain obedient to their husbands until the point that the knights comes along, actively seeking out these women. At this turning point in

these stories, the women become devoted to true love rather than their husbands, and their willingness to pursue love despite the obvious dangers is what characterizes them as admirable and upholding of the courtly feminine ideal as defined by Marie de France.

This idea of female obedience is particularly exemplified in the lai, *Yonec*, in which a beautiful woman is confined to a single room in a tower by her jealous husband. The husband is described as very old, and he is not able to provide his wife with any children. The woman in *Yonec* embodies the ideal medieval woman in both looks and behavior. She is described as “fair and noble,” and her kind personality and passiveness denote her as a “good” woman (Marie de France 86). It is because of her beauty and good character that she attracts a lover who literally flies in through her window as a hawk and transforms into a knight who claims that he has admired her from afar and loves her unconditionally. Despite their love for each other, the lai ends tragically, and the knight is eventually killed by the woman’s jealous old husband. Even though the knight is dead, the woman remains faithful to him by obeying his request for her to stay with her husband and allow her son to avenge his real father when he is old enough. She endures her husband’s cruelty for several more years and dies from fainting just before her son kills her old husband. In dying, the woman proves her devotion to the knight, showing that she was truly devoted to him because, now that her promise to him has been fulfilled, she is no longer able to live. Her death proves that she really was worthy of the knight’s love and embodies Marie’s idea of the ideal courtly woman.

The woman in the lai *Guigemar* faces similar circumstances to the lady in *Yonec*, although her story has a happy ending. *Guigemar* tells the story of a man who comes across a beautiful woman with whom he immediately falls in love. This woman has also been confined to the castle by a jealous husband, and the woman in *Guigemar* also remains obedient to her

husband, expressing hesitation before forming a relationship with the knight. Although she does make the decision to take in the knight, defying her husband, the woman does this because the knight is wounded. She is justified in her decision to take in the knight because if she did not, he would die. The woman falls in love with the knight, but after a short time together, her husband comes back and forces the knight to leave. The two lovers face great hardships over several years, but are eventually reunited and allowed to be with one another as a reward for their admirable devotion to one another.

The fact that the woman and the knight are in love is an important aspect of both of these stories, and justifies the women's unfaithfulness to their husbands. In courtly romances, love was separate from marriage, which was often depicted as oppressive and inherently loveless, leading married people to look outside of their marriages to find love. While Marie does not present such a cynical view of marriage in *The Lais of Marie de France*, ending some of the tragic and difficult romances with happy marriages, she definitely depicts love and marriage as existing separately, and presents the idea that adultery is not acceptable if it is done out of love. Marie depicts marriage as a societal convention which often gets in the way of true love, which makes sense when taking into consideration that medieval noblewomen rarely had the opportunity to choose to whom they were married, and they entered marriages for political and economic reasons rather than as an expression of love. For women, courtly love stories were often a way of "gaining control of their own choice in love and marriage" (Wollock 7). Marie supports this fantasy of gaining female agency in romance, but with a clear emphasis that this agency should only apply to situations in which two people are truly in love. In *Guigemar*, Marie shows that "love, even adulterous love, if loyal and deep, need not necessarily lead to the death of the lovers" (Marie de France 29). This distinction is important in understanding some of Marie's

other lais. Marie does not criticize love on the basis of adultery, but based on the faithfulness of the two lovers.

Several of the lais in *The Lais of Marie de France* present a far more critical view of love. In these stories, the characters abandon loving relationships in pursuit of a much more selfish and purely physical love. Lais like *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* are often seen as a challenge to the genre of courtly romance because of the depictions of love and women in these lais. The women in these lais do not represent the idea woman of courtly romances, taking on roles as antagonists in the story and characterized by their deceptive nature. While these lais do not fit in with the more traditional tales of courtly romance and have far more in common with the traditional *fabliau*, they are not necessarily out of place in the *Lais of Marie De France*. Two of Marie's characters, the women in the lais *Bisclavret* and *Equitan*, are a clear antithesis of this courtly feminine ideal. Both of these lais are far more critical of the motivations of their characters and more moralistic in tone than some of the other lais, like *Yonec* and *Guigemar*, which fit the traditional pattern of courtly romances. Medieval literary scholar Sarah-Jane Murray discusses some of the lais, particularly the lai *Lauüistic*, as criticisms of the conventions of courtly love and the portrayal of adultery in these tales, but an important distinction is made when she writes that "Marie's text can be understood as a subtle and very interesting critique of the covetous and destructive kind of selfish love, or *cupiditas*, portrayed therein" (Murray 2). *The Lais of Marie de France* do not offer a criticism of courtly love, but a criticism of selfish love and an inability to uphold courtly fame ideals.

Medieval scholar Judith Rice Rothschild explains that while she believes the lai *Equitan* fits in with the rest of *The Lais of Marie de France*, "Marie does attack l'amour courtois" (Rothschild 115). According to Rothschild, the lai has far more in common with the traditional

fabliau, and the lai is included more as a criticism of many of the conventions of courtly romance than another work in that genre. While both *Equitan* and *Bisclavret* do have far more in common with the traditional narrative of a *fabliau*, their place in *The Lais of Marie de France* contributes to the positive messages about women who uphold the ideas of courtly romance as depicted in other lais. *Equitan* tells the story of a happily married woman who betrays her husband by seeking out a relationship with the king. This story is interestingly, told right after *Guigemar*, which is credited as following the traditional format of the courtly love genre (Marie de France 29). *Equitan* greatly contrasts the story of *Guigemar* in its depiction of love. In this story it is important to note that both the king, Equitan, and the woman he falls in love with express doubts about pursuing this relationship. Equitan believes that only a man possessing of his wealth and status is deserving of such a beautiful woman, and his interest in this woman is depicted as having formed more out of pride than genuine affection. The woman also does not seem genuinely affectionate towards Equitan, becoming jealous and vowing to kill herself if he marries another, younger woman. To prevent this from happening, the woman plans to kill her own husband so that she will be free to marry Equitan. The lai ends with a moral: “evil can easily rebound on him who seeks another’s misfortune” (60).

While this lai can be interpreted as a challenge to the genre of courtly romance in that it depicts characters pursuing extramarital affairs in a negative light, this argument does not make sense in comparison with lais like *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, which depict adultery as tragic, but not evil. In fact, *Equitan* actually supports the messages about courtly female behavior presented in the other lais. Marie makes it clear that in this situation, it was not the wife’s adulterous behavior, but her decision to take action and kill her husband that led to her death. Instead of waiting for her lover to save her from her marriage, which is happy, she decides to kill her

husband herself in order to get what she wants. Whether or not the woman is truly in love does not matter in this story, because she has gone beyond devotion to love by killing her husband, an innocent man. Burgess also agrees that it is the lover's "plan to dispose of the lady's husband" which defines the characterization of *Equitan* and the knight's wife, explaining that what these *lais* offer is a "condemnation of disloyalty" (Marie de France 30).

This moralistic disapproval of unfaithfulness also appears in the *lai Bisclavret*. In *Bisclavret*, a woman discovers that her husband is actually a werewolf. After interrogating him about his condition, she finds out that after her husband transforms into a wolf he cannot become human again unless he puts his clothes back. Upon learning this, the woman "tormented and harried him so much that he could not do otherwise but tell her" where he keeps his clothes when he transforms (Marie de France 69). Although she promises not to take his clothing, the woman deceives her husband, stealing his clothes and forcing him to remain a werewolf. After this she pursues an affair with a man she does not love, but who loves her. The woman's husband is described as a "good and handsome knight who conducted himself nobly," and it is clear that he loved his wife. While the woman "returned his love," and she is described as a beautiful and worthy wife, she breaks her promise to her husband (68). While Marie follows the traditional depiction of courtly women's beauty as a signifier of their good personalities in several *lais*, "she also seems to be aware that a pleasing exterior can mask a potential for cruel and misguided behavior" (Burgess 116). The women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* are deceptive in both their personalities and appearances.

Because they do not uphold the feminine ideal of these stories, the women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* could be interpreted as a challenge to the feminine ideal. Although the stories resemble those of courtly love stories in plot, the women in these *lais* have almost nothing in

common with women like Chaucer's Emelye. The women in these lais are selfish, disobedient, and scheming, and they take on extremely active roles in their stories, making an effort to determine their own endings. However, in the context of *The Lais of Marie de France* as a whole, these lais uphold the concept of the ideal courtly woman rather than challenge it. These stories are not part of the genre of courtly romance, but they do reinforce the ideas of courtly love by stressing the punishment of the characters who do not conform to the ideals of courtly romance. While it is difficult to determine Marie's exact stance on the concept of courtly love, it is clear that she views characters who embody the qualities of love and devotion favorably, and characters who make an active effort to destroy love are depicted negatively. Unfaithfulness in marriage is only acceptable when the marriage results in the tragic mistreatment of a woman, but women who betray good husbands simply to fulfill their own selfish desires are portrayed as wicked. The women in the lais *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* deceive their kind and loving husbands not because they are in love with these other men, but because they do not respect the love that their husbands have for them. It is especially difficult to view these women as a challenge to the more traditional depictions of women in courtly literature when taking into consideration that both of them receive just punishment for their actions at the end of the lais.

Appearance plays an important part in the punishment of the woman in *Bisclavret*, and her beauty is removed at the end of the story to reveal her true nature. As punishment, the woman and the man she left her husband for are exiled together. In contrast to the woman in *Yonec*, who actually regains her beauty after falling in love and becoming herself again, the woman in *Bisclavret* has her nose cut off to expose the ugliness of her true personality. The woman in *Yonec* is rewarded with beauty to reflect her personality once she experiences happiness in a loving relationship, and the woman in *Bisclavret* loses her beauty as a result of her

betrayal of the man who loves her. The woman is described as having several children who are born without noses, and many of the women in her family for generations after her are born without noses as punishment for this woman's trickery. Marie is clearly making a statement about the morality of this woman's actions. Medieval historian Carl Grey Martin writes that the woman's punishment "asks its audience . . . to ascertain the moral qualities and duties of her characters," and the conclusion the reader is meant to come to is that the woman was wrong for betraying her loving husband (25). The woman in *Equitan* is also punished for her actions, and she is pushed into a tub of boiling water by her husband.

The punishments of these women are a direct result of their actions in the *lais*. These women do not uphold the standard of the ideal courtly woman, and they are stripped of their deceptive beauty and forced to either live in misery or die. Their inability to embody this ideal of the passive, beautiful, and faithful woman, whom Marie depicts in *lais* like *Guigemar* and *Yonec*, is what leads to the tragic ends of these women. Unlike traditional courtly women, who admirably endure the tragedies of their romances and devote themselves to true love, these women chose to betray love by deceiving their kind husbands.

Although these *lais* are not truly courtly romances in that they differ from the genre in both plot and tone, they do uphold the ideas of the courtly romance by presenting an alternative depiction of wicked women who do not embody the feminine ideals of courtly romance. Despite their differences from some of the more traditional courtly *lais*, stories like *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* cannot truly be considered a challenge to the conventions of courtly romance, because Marie depicts these aberrations from the genre as deceptive and wrong. The good women in *Guigemar* and *Yonec* show how courtly women were supposed to behave, and these other stories are included as a moralistic alternative to this depiction of women. The morals at the end of both

Equitan and *Bisclavret* make it clear that Marie does not approve of the selfish actions of the women in these stories. While her exact opinion on the nature of courtly love is not clear, Marie is certainly not challenging the conventions of courtly love, and seems to be of the opinion that courtly romances can even be good if the feelings of the lovers are truly based on devotion and mutuality in the relationship. Marie's inclusion of these alternative depictions of women in *Bisclavret* and *Equitan* reinforces this idea, showing that women who actively betray love are deserving of punishment for their inability to represent the courtly feminine ideal.

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Influencing Chaucer's Marriage Template

Justin Kidd

Many of the stories told in the *Canterbury Tales* are heavily focused on the actions of husbands and wives within their marriage, actions they feel are the proper course, regardless of the positive or negative effects on their partner. Chaucer went to great lengths to inform the reader of the origins of these marriages, particularly if they are arranged or not, giving the impression that arranged marriages were the norm, and the concept of marrying for love was remote. The “marriage group” of Chaucer's *Tales* share similarities with works of Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio's views on marriage influenced Chaucer showing that giving sovereignty to one's partner, and having that sovereignty reciprocated, was the key to establishing happiness within a medieval marriage, and, ultimately, life. Comparing Boccaccio's *Decameron X, 10* and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, and *Decameron X, 5* and *The Franklin's Tale*, it is clear that these stories share striking similarities. Each of these stories deal with marriage through similar plots, characters, and other literary devices to convey the author's separate thoughts on marriage. Chaucer used the influence from Boccaccio, not to relay the same message, but to ask and answer, two very important questions concerning problems of 14th century marriage: could marriage work for both women and men in a positive light, and what is the criteria for making this happen?

Giovanni Boccaccio portrayed marriage throughout his tales by constructing several stories of marriage under different parameters. Boccaccio's works in the *Decameron* would become one of Chaucer's greatest influences of tales of marriage and love. In the book, *The Decameron and the Canterbury Tales: New Essays on an Old Question*, there are several essays that support the idea that Chaucer knew of Boccaccio and the *Decameron*. In the essay *Just Say*

Yes, Chaucer knew the Decameron, Peter G. Beidler, supports the idea that Chaucer was influenced by Boccaccio suggesting that Chaucer would have most likely read many of Boccaccio's works and used them as inspiration in his *Canterbury Tales* (*New Essays/Old Question* 26). Biedler says that there are several of Chaucer's tales that share commonalities with the *Decameron*, including, "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale. Through comparing the similarities between the stories by Boccaccio and Chaucer, Biedler concludes that it is apparent that Chaucer was obviously influenced by Boccaccio (26). Bielder is not the only scholar following supporting for the claim that Chaucer would have known of Boccaccio.

Another scholar that supports the idea that Chaucer was influenced by Boccaccio is N.S. Thompson. Thompson, in his book called, *Chaucer, Boccaccio, and the Debate of Love: A Comparative Study of the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales*, suggests that the stories told by the Merchant and the Clerk are two of the more serious tales that revolve around marriage and have, what he calls, "*Decameron analogues*" (177). To give a better understanding to the problems Chaucer noticed that arose from marriage, Thompson offers a definition of what marriage meant to 14th century readers suggesting that marriage was a symbol of one's status. That marriage was used by medieval people in an effort to propel themselves politically, morally, and economically, and at the same time establish dynastic stability (229).

Chaucer offers several stories that pertain to love. In each of these stories he gives representations of problems that plagued 14th century marriage, problems he most likely saw firsthand. During the 14th century marriage was used to gain something of value for those that participated, except for women who, more often than not, were mere pawns. It's doubtful that there were any marriages that were recognized for love and affection during Chaucer's medieval time period, again referring back to Thompson's idea that marriage was mainly a means to better

one's worth or social status (229). Three stories clearly express the problems Chaucer notes in *The Canterbury Tales*.

The first of these tales deals with a story that has been retold several times, each retelling carrying its own message. The renditions of Chaucer and Boccaccio are very similar, yet the devices used by each author to tell their tales give each an entirely different meaning. "The Clerk's Tale" and the *Decameron's X, 10* offer similar stories revolving around a female protagonist and a maniacal, untrusting husband. Both show how an untrusting husband can lead a marriage into certain anxiety, but that a stoically patient and obedient wife will be rewarded for her faithfulness. In both stories the ruler is petitioned by his subjects to marry and have an heir. The ruler agrees only if he can pick his bride. In both instances the rulers pick a fair but poor girl to wed. It is the husband's devious plan to prove his wife's faithfulness and obedience, which leads the reader to sympathize with the wife, Griselda. Thompson supports this idea, stating, "It is remarkable that the pathos achieved by Chaucer can be found in Boccaccio's rendering" (281). This suggests that both authors strive to make the reader sympathize with Griselda.

While at first glance the intention of these stories is to show that women should act as Griselda does in order for marriage to work, it is the narrators chosen by Chaucer and Boccaccio that reveal the true intention of these stories. Boccaccio tells the narrative of Griselda through Dioneo, who recognizes how ludicrous the story is. Dioneo believes that a story like this would never happen. This gives the impression that anything represented in the story is meant to be sarcastic. By implementing a sarcastic tone with Dioneo, Boccaccio gives the impression that women should not shadow the actions of Griselda.

Chaucer gives a similar indication through a different narrator, a narrator that has a completely different outlook on women than the one Dioneo represents. Chaucer uses a clerk to tell his rendition of Griselda. This is an outstanding choice of a narrator, as it shows what Chaucer felt was the most problematic concern centered on 14th century marriage. The Clerk is not as lighthearted as Dioneo. The Clerk is expressed as a more serious narrator with an almost sinister perception of women as given by the church's teaching of the antifeminist tradition. In fact, in *The General Prologue*, the Clerk is described as, "Of studie took he moost cure and moost heede" (303). This hints to the how seriously the Clerk held to the anti-feminist tradition taught by the church.

The Clerk is serious when he tells his story of a woman totally devoted to her husband. The Clerk has most certainly studied the bible and tells that its teachings are true and should be followed by Christians. It just so happens that these teachings are often manipulated into subjecting women to the rule of men. This is a lesson the Clerk is trying to teach the other pilgrims, especially the Wife of Bath, as *The General Prologue* states, "And gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche" (308). Thompson suggests that the Clerk tried to make Griselda as human as possible and goes so far as to compare her to the Wife of Bath (281). This ties the Clerk's tale and the Wife's tale together in a remarkable way. There are similarities with the plot, setting, and characters of these stories, but a different message is conveyed by the author's choice of narrator to tell these stories. Chaucer brings to light the most overwhelming of his concerns with marriage: that the clergy and its misinterpretation of the bible and subsequent preaching of this philosophy is part of the antifeminist tradition. Chaucer expands on this in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" by giving an example of an average Christian man that takes the antifeminist tradition of

the clergy to heart, and that the lack of womanly sovereignty is the next major concern in 14th century marriage.

Chaucer offers medieval women a voice through Allison, the Wife of Bath, with her narrative in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Allison voices her own concerns about 14th century marriage in her prologue and reinforces Chaucer’s idea that antifeminism taught by the clergy was the biggest factor to the problems that plagued 14th century marriage. In her prologue, Allison tells her sympathetic story of being married off at the age of twelve. She goes through five husbands, with the infamous Jankyn being her fifth. Allison divulges that Jankyn is a clerk, and, like the Clerk in the *Canterbury Tales*, is very serious about the role his wife should play.

The seriousness represented by these two clerks suggests that the endless cycle of the antifeminist tradition being learned and taught throughout subsequent generations led to women losing love for the men that practiced this tradition as depicted in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue.” Allison explains, “We love no man that taketh kep or charge Where that we goon; we wol ben at oure large (321-322). Allison condemns clerks and the clergy for the actions of men that take heed to their antifeminist traditions stating, “That any clerk wol speke good of wyves, But if it be of hooly seintes lyves” (689-690). To show the seriousness clerks use to teach women to be more like Griselda, Allison claims that Jankyn would beat her and recite from his “book of wikked wives,” a book written by the clergy (673-796).

Chaucer further gives medieval women their voice when he uses the queen in “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” as she states, “What thing is it that wommen moost desiren” (905). This question, a question only a woman could ask, gives the sense that Chaucer feels that the lack of sovereignty given to women because of the clergy is the second most important problem with marriage. He does, however, offer a solution to this with “The Wife of Bath’s Tale.” The

solution, much like the question, comes from a woman, because only a woman can truly know what women want most. That question is answered when the old hag suggests, “For to be free and do right as us lest” (936). With the major issues of marriage brought to light in search of a resolution, Chaucer gives his own rendition on another of Boccaccio’s stories to show some of the problems that are, in comparison to what the clergy offers, minor, but play a significant part within their own respective marriages.

These problems are represented in Boccaccio’s *Decameron VII, 9* and Chaucer’s, “The Merchant’s Tale.” Again, there are apparent similarities between the two, yet how the stories play out offers an emphasis on the difference of the moral lessons within the two. Both stories have a similar plot, setting, characters, and a marriage involving a much older man and a much younger wife; however, it is the actions of the characters that give a different meaning to each story. For instance, in the *Decameron*, Boccaccio’s suitor is pursued by the young wife. However, in Chaucer’s tale, it is the suitor that does the pursuing. This offers a sense of who each author feels is more at fault in marriage, whether that fault lie with the men or the women. Another major difference happens at the end of each story, involving the actions taken by the husbands. Each ruler is fooled at the base of a pear tree in a garden, where the couples in each story spend time together. In Boccaccio’s version, the ruler is merely manipulated into leaving the wife alone with her beau. By his actions he is slightly facilitates in the infidelity of his wife. However, in Chaucer’s version, the ruler takes great precautions to keep his wife faithful, and does considerably more to facilitate his wife’s infidelity.

This leads to anxiety and distrust in the relationship, which, paired with his terrible love making, not only leads to his wife’s infidelity, but to him facilitating greatly in her infidelity. The Merchant emphasizes in his tale of the husbands facilitation, stating, “He stoupth doun, and on

his bak she gooth” (2348-2349). Once in the tree, the idea that May was sexually unsatisfied with January, and was only looking to satisfy her sexual desires, is represented by how Damyan treats her once she is in the tree with him. “The Merchant’s Tale” states, “And sodeynly anon with Damyan Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng” (2352-2353). With this, Chaucer emphasizes the point that insecure, anxious husbands literally facilitate their wives infidelity. This point is enforced by Peter G. Beidler as he offers, “In both Chaucer and the *Decameron*, on the other hand, the young wife is disappointed in her husband’s sexual efforts and *therefore* is attracted to a younger man. May’s unexciting wedding night makes this only too clear in the Merchant’s Tale, while in the *Decameron* version Lidia makes her motivation in seeking Pirro’s love” (*Italica* 270). With the problems surrounding 14th century marriage, it is a wonder that anyone entered into this holy contract, despite whatever gains might be had.

The two authors help clear up the doom and gloom of marriage by offering one final tale. The tales told by the two are again very similar, and offer a perspective on the idea that a marriage that was good for both husband and wife could be obtained. Chaucer suggests through the stories that focused on marriage that with understanding, patience, honor, and sovereignty, shared equally between husband and wife, the problems that riddled 14th century marriages could be overcome. “The Franklin’s Tale” and the *Decameron* X, 5 both offer such tales. Although both of these stories revolve around a husband and wife that exhibit the previously mentioned qualities, their marriage was still jeopardized by the influences of the medieval societal constructs. This notion is represented by persistent suitors looking for the love of each respective wife. Each wife denies the advancement of their suitors by requesting them to do impossible tasks. Both suitors employ a magician to complete these impossible tasks. It is only the speeches of the husbands that change the minds of the suitors and allow the wives to keep their honor and

virtue. Thompson confirms the parallelism of the two stories by stating, “Although there are major differences in Chaucer’s narrative, its concerns exhibit the complexity that would come if both of Boccaccio’s versions had been an influence—even if we can never know this absolutely—because the evidence for such a dual perspective is there” (265).

The similarities between the two authors is apparent, but the subtle differences and actions of their respective characters lead to a different perception of marriage in the 14th century. Chaucer offers a unique perspective on stories that had already been told to form questions and answers to what problems plagued 14th century marriage. It is apparent that he was heavily influenced by the earlier works of his predecessor, Boccaccio. Between the parallels these authors offer in their writings, one can see that Chaucer uses this influence to a more serious approach to the matters that plagued medieval marriages. The questions he offers go directly against the antifeminist traditions implemented by the church, and give husbands a good idea of things to avoid in marriage. Unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer offers women a voice to bring to light the oppression they experienced due to the antifeminist tradition and the insecurities of husbands. Through his stories, Chaucer suggests that women should be like Griselda yet maintain the more assertive and independent qualities of the Wife of Bath, if the need arises. This helped to educate the people of the 14th century, and gave them a feasible means that would have allowed them to abandon the old traditions and exhibit better qualities. In doing this, marriage could possibly become a greater union for both men and women

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The Female Heroic: An Examination of the Roles of Women in *Beowulf*

Tera Pate

The history of the *Beowulf* manuscript is often a history more of loss than preservation. Composed between 700 and 900 AD, the manuscript that scholars refer to today is thought to be a transcription of an oral poem sung by a traveling bard. This assumption begins the history of the manuscript's loss because its author would not have been an unprejudiced source. During the time period mentioned before, 700-900 AD, the Anglo-Saxon world of *Beowulf* was changing: Christianity had been introduced into the Pagan culture. To establish its supremacy in this Pagan culture, the Church found it expedient to assimilate previous cultural practices with their own doctrine. For the *Beowulf* manuscript, this pattern means that while the main story would have been kept, certain cultural and religious practices that were deemed too pagan might have been replaced by more acceptable, Christian practices. Common literary tropes from the time period, like the woman as weaver and the woman as carrier of the mead cup, provide an effective starting point for determining exactly how much change in the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition the Church enacted.

The Church's practice of "preservation" was not the only source of loss both for the manuscript and for the information on the lives of literary women that it contains. After it was put on paper, the manuscript went missing, not to be rediscovered until 1563 when it was found in the collection of the Old English historian, Laurence Nowell ("Manuscript" par. 10). This rediscovery was most likely due to the dissolution of the British monasteries under the reign of Henry VIII during the years 1536-1540. If the manuscript was previously being held within one of these doomed monasteries, it would have accordingly surfaced when the monastery was shut down and been sold to the highest bidder, which creates another ironic connection between the

vacillating influences of the Church and the manuscript's fate. After changing hands for a number of years, the manuscript came to be in the hands of the minor nobleman Sir John Cotton who in turn donated it to a group of trustees seeking to form a British Library (par. 10). On the eve of October 23, 1731, a fire in the trustees' literary warehouse in Westminster, Ashburnham House, damaged the manuscript permanently, with portions about the hero's fight with the dragon as well as words on the margins of each page burned beyond recognition (par. 11). Mishandling of the damaged manuscript in later years ultimately added to this original damage. Through a pattern of cultural integration and accidental damage, many parts of the original text were lost.

One missing portion that has been largely ignored, though perhaps more through scholarly neglect than through physical damage, is the place of women within the text. The trope of the female heroic in Anglo-Saxon literature has become even scarcer than the manuscript that housed its tradition. The heroic poetry of this time period is too often defined as a genre dealing exclusively with the machinations of one or two supremely heroic male protagonists. The glorification of the male, occasionally at the expense of the female, is a defining element in this genre of poetry. However, women did exist in the warband culture, and they did hold power. Even more interestingly, the power that they held during the time of *Beowulf* was going through a transition due to the aforesaid introduction of Christianity. These transitions needs to be highlighted, to show that these women (particularly the characters of Wealhtheow, Grendel's Mother, Hygd, and Modthryth) are not simply static figures from one moment in time, but highly dynamic characters that reflect both Pagan and Christian influences. In short, as the tropes of literary women during this time period show, there is room within the male heroic poetry for a female heroic language, a language that is perhaps only evident to women, but that exists

nonetheless. The two genres, one established and one largely unrecognized are not mutually exclusive of one another.

Examining the text of *Beowulf* in isolation tells us little about the nature of the power held by these women. For this reason, a frame of reference is needed. To create this frame, we can at both the preceding accounts of female action within the Norse mythos and the later descriptions of the female saints within the Church's hagiography. To represent women within the Norse culture, we can look to *The Poetic Edda*. It, like *Beowulf*, was set to paper at a time later than its composition: approximately 1200 AD. However, as the translator Carolyne Larrington says, "it is thought that most of the mythological verse and a few of the heroic poems pre-date the conversion of Scandinavia to Christianity in the late tenth century," which places the poems around the same period in which *Beowulf* was written (XI). However, within the *The Poetic Edda*, we see a Norse world that is still saturated with the Pagan religions; the impact of Christianity has not yet been felt. For a more Christian viewpoint, Cynewulf's *Elene* and *Juliana* as well as the poem anonymously authored poem *Judith* (which is contained within the same manuscript as *Beowulf* and presumably transcribed by the same member of the clergy) offer the most relevant outlooks. Through an examination of these texts, two closely connected depictions of women are the most pronounced: the woman as carrier of the mead cup and the woman as weaver.

The ideal of the woman as carrier of the mead cup is ancient. It is prevalent within *The Poetic Edda* where we see the goddesses Freyja and Sif dispensing mead within their respective halls and at gatherings of the gods (Edda 50; 89). In *Beowulf*, it is also a constant motif, with the gold-bedecked queens Wealhtheow and Hygd passing the cup amongst the hall thanes. These episodes are sometimes easy to ignore. They come between the three main fights and

often do not seem to contribute much to the story as a whole. This view is the one that has crafted the current, biased definition of heroic poetry. However, as Michael J. Enright focuses on in his *Lady with a Mead Cup*, the passing of the cup was a much more powerful ritual than is often assumed.

Within the first portion of *Beowulf*, we see Wealhtheow, queen of the Danes, moving amongst the thanes before the hero's fight with Grendel. She moves first to Hrothgar, her lord and king of the hall, and only then to his thanes, finally reaching Beowulf. This movement is purposeful, not a random choice of whom to serve first. When she passes the cup to Hrothgar, she is establishing his supremacy, his right to rule over the hall. The thanes that have drunk and pledged to serve Hrothgar come second. Beowulf, because he is a guest and not sworn to the hall, comes last. Effectively, Wealhtheow is moving to establish rank within the hall. This procession is not a passive female gesture, but an active acknowledgement of royal favor.

However, this assignment of rank may not always be met with courtesy by the thanes. Here, we see another female power play and also the creation of a sort of magical aura surrounding the woman. Wealhtheow creates this aura in a seemingly simple way. While she does start with the king and moves down the ranks, she does so with a single cup. This cup is drunk from by all of the men. In a way, this communal cup creates a "fictive kinship" among the thanes; the mead becomes the metaphorical blood of common kinship (Enright 18). It is no coincidence that a woman is functioning in this role. If Hrothgar is the head, the father, of the hall, Wealhtheow is the mother. She is the one with the power to create a continuous line of descent through the continuation of blood. Therefore, it makes sense that she would be the one to carry the mead that is indicative of blood in order to create the "fictive kinship" within the hall (18).

This status of the woman as mother is closely linked to older Pagan concepts. Women were mysterious to the men of the warrior culture in their functions within the household. The woman, through the birthing of children, seemed able to work her will within the world. Perhaps because of this semi-mysterious status of the female sanctum, women were often associated with magic. The mead cup being metaphorical of blood is a magical rite by itself; however, Wealhtheow's words add another link between woman and magic. When reaching each thane, she elicits an oath from each. When she passes the cup to Beowulf, he promises to slay Grendel. The words spoken to a woman over the transformative mead will become fate when those words are in accord with the woman's will in a way that is reminiscent of the older tradition of women as workers of charms and incantations. As Kathleen Herbert states it, Wealhtheow is not simply "practicing diplomacy and counselling, she is practicing magic" (31).

This link between the words of the female becoming fate accord well with another image of women: the woman as weaver. In the Norse mythos, fate, or *wyrd* as it was called, was weaved on a loom by the goddesses of fate, the Norns. This mythological concept again links back to the idea of women in their mysterious aspect within the homes. The Medieval woman would have spent a great deal of her time weaving, a pastime that was deemed acceptable for women. The link between the past legacy of magic and fate and this current pastime is seen in several forms. One link is seen within the products of the loom, the beautiful tapestries that often depict historical scenes. These tapestries served a purpose very similar to that of the traveling bard. They preserved history and told a story. This concept of the weaver as preserver and crafter of history is closely linked to the Norns.

Within *Beowulf*, we see the woman as weaver appear not in the obvious traditional form (in the home), but in the compound of words translated as "peace-weaver." Peace-weaver is often

defined as a woman given in marriage to a member of an antagonistic kingdom in order to weave peace. Characters such as Wealhtheow, Freawaru, and Hildeburh are most often described using this epithet. However, the concept of the woman as weaver of peace between warring nations has recently been proven erroneous as the scholar L. John Sklute makes clear. The actual epithet “peace-weaver,” or *freoduwebbe* in the Old English vocabulary, is only used three times in the entirety of Old English poetry. It is never used to describe a marriage between warring tribes. In one of its usages (the one that occurs in Cynewulf’s *Elene*), it is actually used to describe a man (Sklute 205). Obviously then, the definition of the peace-weaver as a woman who weaves peace between nations is erroneous.

Instead, peace-weaver is more accurately defined in a way that links back to the first concept of weaving mentioned above: weaving as an acceptable pastime for women within the home. The weaving in this sense is not the actual work with the weft and the warp to create cloth, but instead a more metaphorical weaving of bonds within the home. This creation of domestic serenity links back to a common trait of the word’s usage; it is used to describe a bringer of “good tidings” (206). This molding of an optimistic outlook is basically what the carrier of the mead cup is doing. She is weaving the fate of her hall by weaving throughout the thanes with the mead cup. She is smoothing over conflict. Hence, she is weaving peace. In this way, the seemingly differing concepts of woman as carrier of the mead cup and weaver are linked and work to create the deeply faceted female characters within *Beowulf*.

When taking a closer look at the common tropes of women within Anglo-Saxon literature, it becomes clear that women are not nearly so insignificant or so easily written off as some scholars have deemed to be an acceptable practice in the past. It is an acknowledged fact that the female heroic is different from the generally recognized male heroic machinery in epic poems. It

is subtler, revolving more around the powers of the mind than around the brute, physical strength of the body. The female path to power is more convoluted and requires more examination to pinpoint within each individual text, but it is a large enough presence to warrant definition and scholarly recognition. The tropes of women within *Beowulf* reflect the roles of women within the Anglo-Saxon culture. Just as the bard weaved his tales of the rise and fall of kings using elevated words and stylized rhetoric, the woman of each court weaved the personal history of her people through strategically placed words and careful attention to ritual. The heroism of the woman shaped the history of her court in less obvious, but just as important ways as the heroism of the male hero. In short, through careful attention to the previously ignored lady of the mead cup, it becomes clear that the women of *Beowulf* deserve a much higher status in the field of academia surrounding the poem than the one they have previously been given.

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