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What do We Really Know about Medieval Women?

Carolina Galdiz

At the onset of this project, I had hoped to do a comparative analysis of women in different social classes. My vision was that sources on the subject would endeavor to discuss women as a group and explore the rich factions that existed within that larger group. Instead, I found that the majority of sources compared women as a whole to men as a whole and rarely spent time comparing women to each other. An analysis of this class was made possible only by comparing the sources filled exclusively with information on noble women to the sources dedicated exclusively to research on manorial women. To some degree, the partiality in the sources might be due to the fact that the majority of the information we have about women from this time period arrives to us after passing through a male lens. This should come as no surprise when we consider that the legal estates of women at the time were based on their relationships to men and the control that specific men could therein exercise over them. In short, men have played an integral role in providing what we know today about the lives of Medieval women both by providing a baseline for their identity, and recording certain details about their lives.

Men's roles as clerks placed them in a unique position to narrate the daily occurrences of their judiciary system. Specifically, men in this job would have been responsible for writing the Manorial Court Rolls or the Records of the King's Justices of the Peace. According to Jewell,

[Manorial court rolls] are probably the best single source for the history of rural women in the Middle Ages, but they are limited to matter relevant to the manorial court, which dealt with manorial tenure, petty crimes such as breaching the assize of ale (and more rarely, bread), illicit gleaning and damaging woodlands, and more sophisticated civil disputes within the tenantry such as breach of contract and unjust detention of goods or animals. (58).

From these rolls, we get a clear picture of the daily life of a manorial woman, who primarily worked in the home and on the estate. It is interesting to note that “27 to 30 percent of the total people appearing, some 600 out of just over 2,000” were women (Jewell 58). Does this indicate that women would have done anything to preserve and add to her family’s resources? Or, rather, does it reflect the dependence of manors on working women at this time? These women were not merely sitting around and playing with the children; they were earnest laborers who toiled on the land. The other people represented on these rolls would have been “richer male tenants...in their capacity as manorial officials and pledges” (Jewell 58). The Records of the King’s Justices of the Peace would have contained similar accounts, but would have reflected the next tier up of society. What does it reveal about Medieval society that our richest source of information about women of the time are the accounts of the crimes they committed? Nonetheless, these records segregate the history by gender and class, providing us with accounts of manorial women’s lives that did not stack up to the laws men that imposed on them.

Conversely, medieval art, both in its function and in its content, clearly illuminates the disparity of lifestyles in women of different social classes. For the noble woman, art could be used as way to wield power. Coss notes, “high-born ladies could be generous patrons” (8). Specifically, he cites Countess Judith’s commissioned Crucifixion scene from the Weingarten Gospel book into which she had herself painted as a penitent before the cross (8). These gestures reinforced their influence despite their womanhood, and served as a visual reminder of the artist’s dependence on them. As we move into the highest social class, we see a subversion of the social assumption that women as a group were inferior to men as a group. Coss offers a more dramatic example of an aristocratic woman flaunting sovereignty when he notes that Juliana de St. Remy, lady of the manor, donated a church to Kenilworth Priory in 1189. At her pronouncement, this wealth was reallocated; She chose freely to manage that asset in that way.

Another artistic arena over which medieval noble ladies had full reign was their seals. This vehicle of self-expression was stamped on hot wax that sealed letters during their delivery, to certify that it had come from the noble person who had signed it. "Ladies' seals were normally oval in shape rather than round as in male equestrian seals" (Coss 38). Although originally "they portrayed the lady as a standing figure," they "soon came to contain heraldry, mirroring those of aristocratic males" (Coss 38). This transition from women marketing themselves as independent individuals, to women attributing their identities to their male ancestors, is telling of women's self-perceptions. In a space where they could define themselves authentically, they chose to do so in a way that associated them to their male houses. One obvious example of this is Eleanor Maudit's seal of 1325, an icon that featured four shields in a circle (Coss 45). These shields showed that "she was of the house of Clare, and that she had married Richard Fitz Marmaduke, Robert de Umfraville and Roger Maudit...In short, there was a considerable freedom as to which relationships might be shown, and why, and how" (Coss 45-6). Joan de Stuteville's seal, for example, "shows her riding side-saddle holding not her husband's but her father's shield, signifying perhaps her status as sole heiress" (Coss 47). Stuteville's was a very unusual choice considering the legal conventions of being a wife, as we will see when we discuss the women's three legal estates.

These two ways in which noble women autonomously interacted with art, as patrons of painters and as artisans of seals, had very different implications. Although both served as benign ways to exhibit their sovereignty, it is important to note a key distinction between the two; the former was public and the latter was private. In public gestures, such as commissioning of artwork or donating buildings, these women seemed to have wanted to disseminate a notion that they enjoyed a certain level of authority. Conversely, when it was a matter of branding themselves, they chose to do so in terms of their male relatives. What is the significance of this inconsistency? What does it tell us about women's self-perception in Medieval times?

In terms of manorial women, artwork of the time should be observed with a critical eye. Jewell notes “Artwork is a fairly dubious source for the countrywoman, for although reapers and wool carders and suchlike are represented, their appearance in luxury manuscripts for the upper classes may have had a touch of the Arcadian about it: the peasants depicted about their tasks seem rather too well dressed” (59). What does this tell us about the society? How should we interpret this misrepresentation of their actual situation? Should we, as modern critics, interpret it as a reflection on the women or a reflection on the artist?

One possible answer to this question can be found when considering the following from Bardsley’s work: “Women brewed ale, wove silk, nursed babies, lent money, sold foodstuffs, sold their bodies as prostitutes, and managed wealthy households. Despite this range of occupations, women’s work had one thing in common: women tended to work at lots of tasks, often simultaneously” (Bardsley 59). Bearing in mind that manorial women in the Middle Ages were so busy that they were forced to multitask, we can conclude that it is unlikely that these women were posing for paintings. Therefore, although the goings-on of their lives were known and recorded in manorial court rolls and the records of the king’s justices of the peace, the artists might not have interacted directly with these women. Consequently, the author may have chosen to fuse the noble woman’s appearance with the hardworking virtue of an aristocratic woman to project an image of the ideal woman. This accurately reflects the cultural lumping together of women as a whole that I observed in my research.

This convergence is further evident in the legal estates of women, in which the influence of men is exceptionally apparent. Mitchell explains that “Legal systems throughout medieval Europe recognized three specific states in women’s lives, based upon marital status. Unlike men, who were either minors (under the legal guardianship of parents or custodians) or men-of-full-age with legal autonomy, women were unmarried maidens, wives or widows” (7). It is important to immediately note that Mitchell opens

her discussion by first articulating men's legal designations, seemingly setting them up as the barometer with which to compare those assigned to women. Additionally, these three groups transcended social class reinforcing the notion the women were merely lumped together. These legal distinctions are only worth making because the person to whom a woman is beholden changes as she moves through the categories. Mitchell continues by explaining each of the three estates of women saying,

In moving among these estates, a woman's legal status changed. Maidens remained under their fathers' control – or that of a guardian – until they married. When married, husbands assumed legal control over their wives. During widowhood, women in post-1066 England – unlike many on the Continent – were released from guardianship and were able to govern themselves and their property without the intervention of a male tutor, although they did not automatically have control over their choice to remarry or to remain single. (7)

Per our class discussion on the first estate, unmarried maidens were prized for their virginity. Most strikingly, we see this in the case of the Virginia of the Physician's Tale, who is sacrificed by her father in order to preserve this virtue when a threat to her virginity is made. Lacking agency of her own, she is completely subject to her father's will, which poses death as the only possible course of action. His decision to force her into martyrdom is completely unchallenged, as if he were ruling over property. His total control is most clear in that he names her Virginia as an extension of himself, Virginius.

Unambiguously, and in accordance with the laws of the time, she belonged to him.

We find an example of a similarly submissive woman in the "wife" estate in *Griselde of the Clerk's Tale*. Here, Chaucer provides us with the unlikely scenario of a marquis, Walter, marrying a peasant woman. He binds Griselde with an oath that she will remain loyal to his wishes regardless of their nature. Despite Walter's many tests, she remains submissive to him and always complies with his decrees. Additionally, although the tale mentions that she is, at times, called upon to adjudicate

disputes amongst the people, this virtue is ultimately projected onto Walter for choosing her and raising her to a position to do so.

The most infamous manifestation of these estates in Chaucer is the Wife of Bath. Socially, this widow masters the art of seduction and knows how to manipulate her resources to get what she wants. She views marriage as an institution of supply and demand and sees herself as an agent in this process. She wields her control over her body as her tool to amass material wealth, which she then consumes as her own discretion. Alison has this agency only because she has the wealth, both physically and financially, to do so. Her complicated character is interestingly explained through the window she gives us into her time as an unmarried maiden, during which she is married off at her father's behest at a very young age. As readers, we must ask ourselves whether this initial experience builds her resiliency as she enters being a widow, or undermines it. It is in asking these questions that we can begin to get a clearer picture of how a medieval woman's sense of self was formed. We can enrich our analysis of this question and circle it back to our initial conundrum of the male lens on female life when we ask why Chaucer characterized her the way he did. What is the effect of the Host's affinity for her? Why did Chaucer change the tale he had originally intended for her and replace it with one that further complicates her? Why are the female characters in the Tales themselves infinitely more static and is that a commentary on how Chaucer perceived that other men perceived women?

To conclude, it is difficult to verify the degree in which the male lens on our sources on female life impact their validity. It is necessary to acknowledge that this barrier to a comprehensive understanding of Medieval women exists. That being said, in researching their lives, we mirror the struggles of women of the time; just as they had to live in a society rampant with male conventions, we must filter through these conventions to find the women that lie beneath.