
Women Portrayal In The Works Of Peter Abelard, Boccaccio, And Margery Kempe

According to the stories of Boccaccio, Margery Kempe, and Abelard and Heloise, it can easily be assumed that religion, culture, and social life in medieval Europe did bring restrictions to the activities of women. Although some women who lived in medieval Europe do show cases of pursuing lives of “substantial agency”, it was not common nor easily accomplished without various advantages. Accordingly, yes, women could navigate through the restrictive expectations placed on them. These women who accomplished this however were obliged to use their beauty, wealth, or sex. Also considering the sign of the times, women were seen as purely figures of sex and reproduction. With that being said, women could navigate through societal restrictions but done so in a now unethical modern way.

When considering *The Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, he immediately states in his Forward, his passionate admiration for beautiful women. Boccaccio believes he is a distraction for the gloomy lives women live. “they spend most of their time within the narrow confines of their bedchambers” (Boccaccio, p. 4). As understandably neutral as that sounds, Boccaccio ends his Forward by expressing an almost angelic power that he holds over women sexually. “And if, God willing, spirits are raised, let the ladies give thanks to Love: by relieving me of his bonds, he has permitted me to attend to their pleasure.” Boccaccio expresses that women will obtain what they want by being beautiful. He is also hesitant on revealing the real names of the women in *The Decameron* as he does not want to embarrass them by revealing a sexual story.

Another great example of beauty and sex leading a woman to escape the restrictions upon her is from the fourth story on the fifth day in *The Decameron*, told by Philostrato. Ricciardo, a young eligible bachelor finds Caterina extremely beautiful and engaging. The two are vulnerable with each other as they confess the love they share. “Caterina, I beg you, don’t make me die of love” “God grant that you don’t make me die of love” (Boccaccio, p. 341). The two decided to sleep away on the balcony and fornicated a great deal of times. After being caught asleep and in the nude by their parents, marriage was forced upon them. Luckily for Caterina, this meant having a rich young man from a good family as a husband, and essentially, more power than she would have had before sleeping with Ricciardo.

When reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*, although it is never clearly stated, readers can assume that Kempe was either wealthy or had connections to wealth. Kempe’s ability to undertake her businesses hints that she has access to additional help or resources. Although her businesses didn’t last long, she did become more dedicated to religion following her business.

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ventures. She also did a wide array of traveling throughout Europe which was especially expensive at the time and commonly portrayed as a luxury to the wealthy. Lastly, she had her husband come to an agreement on remaining celibate even though they had been married for some time and had children.

Kempe has an ironic conversation with Jesus Christ himself. "For it is suitable for the wife to be homely with her husband". Not to mention Kempe previously wanted a celibate marriage with her husband, after reproducing multiple times of course, and Jesus is essentially motivating her to have sexual relations with her husband. However, it can be assumed that Kempe's husband only agreed due to the fact that children were already in the picture. He could of also been having an affair simultaneously. Kempe's husband might of also been convinced due to the assumed wealth that Margery has. Whether or not the full uncovering's of their celibate relationship are ever clearly revealed, Kempe did succeed to navigate through the restrictions put upon her as a women in medieval Europe.

When considering The Letters of Abelard and Heloise, the pair are idolized and remembered for their romance. Both intellectuals and passionate about learning, it seems to be a perfect and memorable match. Abelard is aware of Heloise's intelligence yet he is mainly interested due to her beauty. "I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed, confident that I should have an easy success;" (Clanchy, p. 10). Of course Abelard had the common trait shared among men of acknowledging sex right away when seeing a women. Abelard's spoken words in his letters show the restrictions that will need overcoming by Heloise. For example, the place of a woman amongst a society is spoken about throughout the readings. Heloise had constant reminders of how to present herself and act within social standards. Ironically enough, Heloise faced social pressure of what a woman was supposed to be while Abelard himself really didn't reflect or is was ever described with a masculine figure or features. Even though masculinity wasn't pressured on him, he still maintained a suitable roll in society.

As Heloise writes to Abelard, she is outspoken that she is not planning to marry him for money. It can be assumed that this is true, considering her Uncle, who probably granted her with her education, has shared some of his wealth with her. One may also believe this claim is true as she did overcome many of the social normality's. Heloise is described as an independent women during the time. Heloise successfully got an education and expresses a passion for learning and interest in those who admire education. She also managed to maintain a relationship with God, and eventually joining him as a nun. By doing so, gained acceptance and support for her relationship with God.

Although Heloise had access to wealth from her Uncle, she still overcame social normality's as she didn't come from a high class. She became known for her education and known for her

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leadership amongst fellow nuns. Heloise is blessed with her Uncle as he made it easier to overcome to restrictions granted upon medieval women. Not only did she have access to his wealth, but he allowed her to pursue an education. Commonly enough, women from Heloise's class were usually arranged with either a job, put into a marriage, or practiced religion on a deeper level once entering womanhood.

Heloise falls into the restrictions placed on women with her sexuality. Her sexuality shows her weak side and how she is placed into the restrictions amongst medieval women. Not to mention, Heloise is beautiful, so it can be assumed her sexual nature was challenged more times than others due to her attractive nature she may have on men. "for me to be reduced for those desires, so that I could increase in many ways; in order that this member should justly be punished for it's wrongdoing in us". Heloise goes on to describe the meaning of "this member" as "the parts of shame". It becomes obvious that Heloise is struggling with remaining pure in God's terms. With her natural beauty and intelligence, one can assume she has been enticed multiple times.

Based on the readings from Giovanni Boccaccio, Margery Kempe, and Abelard and Heloise, it can be concluded that women could and did navigate through the restrictions forced upon them in medieval Europe. The women Boccaccio portrays are nothing less than beautiful, Kempe had wealth and a questionable husband, while Heloise was beautiful, educated, and had access to her uncle's wealth. Although they failed at times, these women are all great examples of defying the restrictions placed upon one within society, religion, and culture. However, in medieval Europe, it seems as if it was only possible to do so with the advantage of beauty, sex or wealth.

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