
The Impact of Females on Medieval Literature

Perhaps William Shakespeare is right: all the world may very well be a stage, with all the men and women being but mere players. What happens when, despite their exits and entrances, these actors play but one part? For lack of a complete character development, do these individuals lose their worth? Can this one part truly affect the interpretation of the play? While stock and static characters are standard in all forms of literature, seldom do these individuals have as striking a presence as the women in medieval literature. Geoffrey Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" portion of the Canterbury Tales and the Gawain poet's Sir Gawain and the Green Knight both describe standard female characters whose depictions offer a commentary on the social perception of women in the medieval times. Evident through the exposition of the love story surrounding Emily in the "Knight's Tale," heroes and men alike yearn for pure and innocent women to be their dotting brides. Sir Gawain's tale, however, presents the sultry wife of Bertilak as a contrast to Emily, thus unveiling women as a source of temptation and weakness to knightly morals. This tale also includes the mysterious Morgan le Faye as the manipulative witch figure, exposing society's fear of powerful women. Through the descriptions and character interactions, these poets illustrate that women serve specific and limited roles within society. Despite their single role in these works, however, their symbolic presence serves as a footprint in the ever-evolving perception of women within male-dominated literature.

For the role of an ideal love interest and future wife, Chaucer casts the young Amazon Emily. Even though Amazons are supposedly tall, aggressive, and strong-willed women, Emily's exposition strays in every way imaginable—a noteworthy alteration in personality considering the poet's specific use of her heritage. "Lovelier...than...the lily on its stalk of green," she wanders in the sunlight "like an angel out of heaven" (Chaucer 27). The description of her beauty objectifies her as a handsome prize to admire, but also goes a step further by unveiling her looks as testaments to her purity and passivity rather than the warlike aggression associated with her people. She must be a one-dimensional beauty in both her physicality and demeanor because that is her role. Despite social conventions, Emily wants little more than to remain a, "virgin all [her] life," longing to remain pure and undefiled by man's touch (59). Her desperate clinging to virginity strips her of passion and desire, leaving her a meek and innocent woman. To be without desire is to be without temptation and sin, rendering her the ideally submissive wife. Further exhibiting both her religious fervor and obedience, Emily prays, pleads, and makes sacrifices to Diana to guard her virginity. In these actions, Emily vows to offer herself in service to Diana should she aid in Emily's cause. After receiving a sign that her prayer will not be granted, she nevertheless willingly gives herself to Diana's "protecting care," trusting her to "dispose as [she] wish[es]," even though this ultimately means surrendering her virginity to Palamon (60). Her dedication to the goddess attests to Emily's willingness to submit her fate

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and body to the will of another. Through the description of her beauty, virginity and religious faith, Chaucer renders Emily a submissive wife.

With the role of "ideal wife" filled by Chaucer's Emily, the Gawain poet gives the role of seductress to Bertilak's wife. The description of her beauty differs markedly from the pure and innocent Emily. While her features are also "faultless," her "face and her fair throat freely displayed...her bosom all but bare" are in stark contrast to Emily's demure and reserved beauty (Gawain 56). Here, her physical attributes cause her to be a source of temptation for Gawain to stray from his code of chivalry rather than venture towards ideal love. Because her beauty is revealed in terms of her sexuality rather than her innocence, Bertilak's wife crosses over from a beautiful object to a coy temptress, from passive to aggressive. Although it would be simple to dismiss the wife as little more than a beautiful face, she appears to be a clever debater and astute reader of Gawain's reactions. She has a specific agenda to pursue in seducing the knight but recognizes the need to be tactful and persistent in her chase. Noting that she stands as Gawain's social superior, she knows that he is bound by the code of knights to obey her demands. Because of this "guile," she realizes he will be torn between serving the queen and respecting the king; she employs both subtle and overt tactics to get what she wants from him (49). She remains persistent in pursuit of Gawain, stealing kisses from him in each attempt, and resorts to flattery, proclaiming him to be the "noblest knight known in [their] time" (51). Although she ultimately fails in fully realizing her sexual desires with Gawain, she does manage to cause the once-noble knight to break his loyalty to his host by accepting her girdle. This reception of a personal item that Gawain later keeps from his host reveals the weakening of his character. By using her sexually charged physical appearance and through her clever manipulation of Gawain, the female figure is no longer submissive and pure. With this exposition, Bertilak's wife takes the role of the unfaithful temptress and corrupter of knightly ideals.

Having already designated the roles of both the innocent beautiful woman and the evil beautiful woman, the Gawain poet casts Morgan le Faye as the evil ugly woman. Serving as a contrast to the youthful beauty of Bertilak's wife, Morgan appears "ancient" and "unsightly" with flesh hanging in folds on her face and a "buttocks round and wide" (Gawain 38, 39). Being neither delicate nor comely, Morgan immediately functions as a striking contrast to all of the women characters introduced heretofore. Because the nature of the physical descriptions have lent themselves to reveal aspects of the women's personalities, the old woman must therefore possess sinister qualities to compliment her external appearance. Only in the last 100 lines are her unattractive attributes qualified. As a notable figure in Arthurian legend, Morgan le Faye typically acts as an antagonist to Camelot and strives to bring an end to the Knights of the Round Table. In this particular tale, Bertilak himself admits that Morgan "guided [him] in this guise" in order to "puzzle [Gawain's] wits" (73). Shrouded in all of her mystery as an unnamed figure in Bertilak's court earlier, she actually serves as the mastermind behind this plot against Gawain. Her evil and manipulative nature manifests itself in her external demeanor. Because

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she uses her intelligence for evil means rather than for good, Morgan le Faye acts as the witch figure-feared for her intellect and shrouded in mystery. Only through her knowledge of the "subtleties of science and sorcerers' arts" acquired at Merlin's knee, can the plot ever take place. Intriguingly, however, Morgan remains the sole character to hold complete power over the men in the story-not solely because of her physical appearance but more importantly because of her mental prowess. Because of her old and haggard appearance, cunning wit, and her mysterious abilities in sorcery, Morgan le Faye embodies the third and final female stereotype for women in the medieval texts: the evil witch.

While the female characters of both the "Knight's Tale" and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight serve specific roles within the text themselves, they are also called to serve a role as symbols of the perception of women in the medieval times. Granted Emily acts as the source of conflict between imprisoned Arcita and Palamon, both of whom are madly in love with her, she more importantly represents the most desirable attributes for love. An object of affection during these times must first and foremost be beautiful (as this was the first quality that drew the men to her) and secondly, must possess a willingness to submit body and soul to one's partner. While Bertilak's wife serves as the giver of the girdle of invincibility within the actual tale, she more importantly represents the threat of temptation for men. Women who flaunt their bodies and manipulate their authority to get their way must be carefully avoided or handled with caution by the medieval men who desire to keep their knightly codes of chivalry intact. Beautiful women, however, may be forgiven for deceiving and seducing the hero, unlike the corrupt ugly witch. Although in the course of the Sir Gawain tale, Morgan le Faye acts as the evil witch whose magic enables Bertilak (via the Green Knight) to test the honorability of Arthur's court, she more importantly functions as a symbol of the danger behind a woman with intelligence and cunning to medieval men. She is the impetus behind the plot of the tale; without her Gawain would never have learned his lessons about keeping his word. In this sense, these actors step beyond their stock role of virgin, seductress, and witch. They represent medieval society's reaction to women possessing these attributes: marry the virgin, resist the seductress, and be wary of the witch. Not only do these stereotyped women impact the interpretations and analyses surrounding the literature itself, it is from the nature of these limited parts that they play that deductions about the role of women in society can be drawn. Furthermore, these roles are not finite, nor do they exist as stereotypes grounded solely in medieval literature. Modern literature and society continues to employ these standards of women's roles. Not until people strive to break these assumptions can the roles be changed. All the world is a stage, and all the men and women are merely players-but the scripts can be in the hands of the players and their parts can be rewritten.

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