

“This Creature”: Discourse on Women and Discourse by Women in the Middle Ages

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Abstract

We have few records of what roles in literary production were open to women in the Middle Ages. Medieval texts written for women, mainly by the clergy, express the official church doctrine that a woman can be saved if she gives up being a woman and becomes a saint, preferably a virgin. This implied leading a “hidden” life, enclosed, silent, and passive. Texts written for a male or mixed audience, whether clerical or lay, are preoccupied with the female body as a source of sexual corruption. When women themselves write, as within the courtly aristocracy, they tend to follow the conventions of the courtly style, though they show a preference for topics concerned with women’s experience. From the fragmentary evidence we have of an oral popular literary tradition, it seems probable that women there had a recognized role, with genres and topics of their own: man-woman relationships and their implications, especially within the family, erotic love, and the defence of womanhood in semi-ritual “flytings” with men. Finally, visionary women’s discourse sanctioned a preoccupation with individual experience which, in certain “marginal” cases, developed into early forms of autobiography.

Περίληψη

Ελάχιστες ενδείξεις υπάρχουν για τους ρόλους που μπορούσαν να αναλάβουν οι γυναίκες στη λογοτεχνική παραγωγή του Μεσαίωνα. Μεσαιωνικά κείμενα γραμμένα για γυναίκες, κυρίως από κληρικούς, παίρνουν την επίσημη θέση της εκκλησίας ότι η γυναίκα σώζεται εφόσον παύει να είναι γυναίκα και γίνεται αγία, κατά προτίμηση παρθένα, πράγμα εφικτό μέσω μιας “κρυμμένης”, έγκλειστης, σιωπηλής και παθητικής ζωής. Κείμενα γραμμένα για ένα ανδρικό ή μεικτό κοινό, κληρικό ή κοσμικό, βλέπουν το γυναικείο σώμα ως πηγή σεξουαλικής μόλυνσης. Γυναίκες συγγραφείς της άρχουσας φεουδαρχικής τάξης ακολουθούν τις συμβάσεις της αυλικής ποίησης, παρόλο που δείχνουν κάποια προτίμηση για θέματα της γυναικείας εμπειρίας. Από τις σκόρπιες ενδείξεις που διαθέτουμε για την προφορική λαϊκή παράδοση, φαίνεται ότι οι γυναίκες είχαν σ’ αυτήν έναν αναγνωρισμένο ρόλο ποιητικής παραγωγής σε ορισμένα είδη και θέματα: οι σχέσεις ανάμεσα σε

άνδρες και γυναίκες και οι επιπτώσεις τους μέσα στην οικογένεια, ο έρωτας, καθώς και η υπεράσπιση του γυναικείου φύλου σε ημιτελετουργικές αντιπαραθέσεις με τους άνδρες. Τέλος, ο προφητικός λόγος των αγίων γυναικών θεσμοποιεί μια εστίαση στην ατομική εμπειρία που σε ορισμένες “περιθωριακές” περιπτώσεις οδηγεί στην εμφάνιση μιας πρώιμης αυτοβιογραφίας.

The expression in the title, “this creature”, is taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, where it is used throughout to refer to Margery Kempe herself. It is impossible to tell if this is her own way of referring to herself, or if the expression belongs to the scribe who is writing down her story. This ambivalence is indicative of the problem I would like to address in this paper: the difficulty of identifying a female voice in medieval literary culture.

It will be my premise in this paper that no individual, man or woman, can speak entirely outside the conventions of discourse, the rhetorical conventions, made available by the society in which s/he lives. As Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff points out (3-4), “the gender of a writer shapes what a writer does or can do with language and ... sex roles, along with other factors such as age, class, and occupation, affect the choices a writer makes in creating a literary text.” This premise leads to an approach which, in Elaine Showalter’s words, concentrates “on women’s access to language... on the ideological and cultural determinants of expression” (23). More specifically, this paper will attempt to examine what ways of speaking and writing—what conventions of discourse—were available to women of the Middle Ages, and what they did with them.

The forms of discourse that a society evolves, and the roles of speaking and writing (as well as of reading and listening) that it recognizes, depend of course on the structure of that society as a whole; for reading and writing, they depend very much on access to education. The discourse available to women, therefore, is closely related to the recognized social roles that women can occupy.

It is a commonplace that women were socially and legally subordinate to men in medieval society. This was indeed the official ideology of almost every nation and culture of the Old World throughout the Middle Ages. Legally a woman was under the guardianship of her father or husband unless she was a widowed head of household. Upperclass women were rather less free in their choice of a marriage partner than were middle or lower class women: since the

feudal family's lands were of vital importance to it economically and politically, marriage alliances were regulated by family interests (and in the later Middle Ages, the wealthier merchants and craftsmen considered dowries almost as carefully as the feudal lords considered land). If a peasant woman was a serf, she might marry outside the lord's lands only by paying a fee.

However, this form of dependence, the control of marriage, applied equally to men and women: the power of the family over the individual was general in medieval society. And we should not infer that the position of women was always in fact as limited as it appears to have been on paper, nor that the possible roles for women outside the narrow framework covered by legal definition were at all negligible.¹ Suzanne Wemple in fact argues that, especially in the earlier centuries, "an unstructured society afforded ambitious women substantial range for their capabilities" and that "the practical needs for the talents of women, not merely as wives and mothers but as administrators, educators, and religious leaders, largely determined the attitudes toward them" (149, 132). In a sense, medieval society was not effective enough to impose its official ideology very systematically, either in legal terms or in the regulation of behaviour. The church used the learning and administrative skills of women as well as men to establish and maintain its monasteries in the vast wildernesses of Europe; the feudal aristocracy needed its women to help secure and administer the landed properties that were the basis of its power; and both craftsman and peasant families depended equally on the labour of men and women.

The critical difference between men and women in the Middle Ages lies not in the area of individual freedom, of which there was very little for either sex, but in the manner in which women were gradually excluded from the main roads to political power. The fact that a woman could not normally be a soldier was less significant in the early Middle Ages, as long as she could rely on her male relatives to meet the obligation of a vassal to take part in his lord's wars, the necessary condition for holding land in feof. More serious is the introduction, in the twelfth century, of the practice of primogeniture (the desire to keep the fief intact by allowing only the oldest male heir to inherit) and the tendency to incorporate the woman's dowry with her husband's property (see Stuard, "Dominion" 160-165). Both these measures tended gradually to limit women's economic independence and their access to political power, which was largely tied to landed property.

The gradual stabilisation of the hierarchy of the church also adversely affected women. The Gregorian reform of the late eleventh century limited the influence of lay patrons (many of whom were women) on ecclesiastical appointments; attempts to supervise more closely the life of the professed religious led to the dissolution of the double monasteries (houses for both monks and nuns, generally headed by an abbess), thus making nunneries increasingly dependent on outside male supervision and their financial status more precarious (Stuard, "Dominion" 158-160). However, the most serious blow to the status of women in the church was the decline of the monasteries as institutions of education and learning. After 1200 the secular clergy, especially of the cathedral chapters, dominated education (see Power, *Medieval English Nunneries*, as well as Orme, Edwards, and the volume edited by Stuard). Women had no access to these new institutions of learning. A woman could become a nun, even an abbess—if she was of good birth, because the nunneries were primarily for the daughters of the nobility—and she could still acquire considerable local power through the management of her convent, but she could not become a priest. To the extent that education was a means to advancement, this means was decidedly less available to women after the twelfth century.

This is especially significant in considering the possibilities of a discourse of women, since education gives access to the written word. Written language is communicated—and preserved—differently from spoken language, provides different language roles, different discourses. Here, medieval women were at an important disadvantage. While in the 14th and 15th centuries schooling for men was available to a widening range of social classes, this was not the case for women. Women did not remain entirely without education. In England the women of the nobility, ladies and gentlewomen, certainly would learn to read, and to a certain extent to write, English and French, though rarely Latin. In the middle classes however, the son of the merchant would go to the grammar school, the craftsman or shopkeeper would often learn how to read, but their wives and daughters would remain illiterate.

This is why in discussing the role of women in the literature of the Middle Ages, one has to distinguish rather carefully between discourse *on* women, often discourse specifically addressed *to* women but written by men, and discourse *by* women, addressed to other women, to men or to

a mixed audience. The distinction corresponds roughly to Elaine Showalter's differentiation between a feminist critique, analysing images and stereotypes of women in literature, and a gynocritics, concerned with "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women." Certainly there was discourse by women in the Middle Ages, but it is difficult to locate since it rarely survives in written form. Women literally did not have control over the means of production of written texts. The consequences of this state of affairs, symptomatically enough, are perhaps best stated by Chaucer's Wife of Bath:

For trusteth wel, it is an impossible
 That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,
 But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,
 Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.
 Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?
 By God! if women hadde writen stories,
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,
 They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse
 Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.
 (Wife of Bath's Prologue, ll. 688-696)

Discourse on women

1. Discourse for an audience of women

There are plenty of medieval texts written for an audience of women. Most of these are religious in nature and produced in one sense or another from within the church. In England many were destined for the nunneries, since in the later Middle Ages the nuns usually did not know Latin and the monastic rule required edifying reading aloud at least once a day.² Saints' lives, devotional, and didactic works were translated or composed in the vernacular for this public. Similar texts can also be found in the personal libraries of the nobility, men and women, as well as scattered among the middle classes.

Most of these texts express the official church position regarding women: woman can be saved if, roughly speaking, she gives up being a woman and becomes a saint, preferably a virgin. Some of the earliest extant texts in Middle English are of this kind: the lives of Saint Katherine, Saint Margaret and Saint Juliana, and the treatise on *Hali Meidhad*, which might serve as an example:

Meidhad is þet tresor, þet, beo hit eanes forloren, ne bið hit neauer ifunden. Meidhad is þe blostme, þet, beo ha fullliche eanes forcoruen, ne spruted ha eft neauer.... Meidhad is þe steorre, þet, beo ha eanes of þe est igan adun iþe west, neauer eft ne arised ha. Meidhad is þet an iyettet te of heouene: do þu hit eanes awei, ne schalt tu neauer nan oðer swuch acourin; for meidhad is heouene cwen, ⁊ worldes alesendnesse, þurh hwam we beoð iborhen. Mihte ouer alle mihtes, ⁊ cwemest crist of alle. forr-þi þu Ahest, meiden, se deorliche witen hit; for hit is se heh þing, ⁊ se swiðe leof godd, ⁊ se licwurde. ⁊ þet an lure þet is wituten couerunge.

(Maidenhood is that treasure that, if it be once lost, will never again be found. Maidenhood is the bloom that, if it be once fully out off, never again sprouteth up.... Maidenhood is the star that, if it be once gone out of the east adown to the west, never again ariseth. Maidenhood is the one gift granted thee from heaven: if ever thou put it away once, never shalt thou recover such another; for maidenhood is queen of heaven, and the redemption of the world, by which we are saved. 'Tis a virtue above all virtues, and to Christ the most acceptable of all. Whence thou oughtest, maiden, so preciously to guard it; for it is so high a thing, and so very dear to God, and so acceptable. Hence it is a loss that is beyond recovery).
(Furnivall's edition and translation, 11. 131-141)

In the legends of the lives of saints and martyrs, the martyred male saint suffers martyrdom because he will not renounce his christian faith; the female saint is usually martyred simply because she refuses to give up her virginity, which seems to act as a symbolic equivalent for the Christian religion in many of these stories. In *The Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine, a popular thirteenth-century collection of readings (*lectiones*) appropriate to the feast days of the saints, there are 29 legends whose main characters are or include women; 20 are narratives of martyrs and the remaining 9 of confessor saints. Of the 20 martyrs, 13 are martyred in direct connection with their refusal to renounce their virginity, whether this is the main issue of their trial or the event that reveals them as Christian. In some legends a trial that begins with no particular connection to virginity, such as in the legend of Saint Katherine, becomes involved with the issue in the course of the narrative since the judge or torturer falls in love

with the heroic girl and wants to marry her (which she of course refuses). Of the nine confessor saints who are women, at least five gain sainthood largely through spectacularly renouncing sexual relations—there are three stories of women who dressed as men and lived as monks, and two stories of repentant prostitutes who take up the life of the penitent.³

It is instructive to see what constitutes a saintly life for a man, and what for a woman in the saints' legends. If we take as an example the *Life of Saint Alexius* (which in extant English MSS dates from the mid-fifteenth century and was appended to the *South English Legendary* at about that time), we notice that the hero's road to sainthood begins when he refuses to consummate his marriage. Instead he converts his new bride, convincing her to remain a virgin for Christ's sake, and then leaves her to begin a "hidden" life far from his wealthy and powerful family. For Alexius, the "hidden" life involves flight into the outside world. For his wife and his mother, who decide to follow his example, it takes the exactly opposite form of remaining enclosed in the house with no contact with the outside world. The life of the saint thus for both men and women involves a renunciation of sexuality, but for men it may be compatible with action in the outside world, which for women is typically excluded. Throughout the Middle Ages enclosure was the rule for women's monasteries, and after the twelfth century the church enforced strict enclosure for all women who entered the religious life.⁴ The model of sainthood proposed for women by the religious texts is usually enclosed, internal, silent and passive; the action it allows for is renunciation.

This does not of course imply that women who chose to live this role were necessarily either passive or silent: as recent studies have pointed out, the role of the saint was a not unattractive career that allowed several medieval women to acquire a voice, a discourse, not at all negligible for their society. "Sanctity became a route to authority" writes Suzanne Wemple (132). *Hali Meidhad* may again witness to the possible attractions of this role:

Syon wes sumhwile icleopet þe hehe tur of ierusalem
 ⁊ betacneð þis tur þe hehnesse of meidhad, þe
 bihald, as of heh, alle widewen under hire, and weddede
 baðe. for þeos, ase flesches þrealles beod i worldes
 þeowdom, ⁊ wunieð lahe on eordde. ant meiden stont
 þurh heh lif i þe tur of ierusalem.... Ant nis ha witerliche
 akeast, ⁊ in to þeowdom idrahen, þe ... of se muchel

hehschipe ⁊ se seli freedom ... ⁊ of godes brude, ⁊ his freo dohter—for ba to yederes ha is—bikimeð peow under mon, ⁊ his þrel, to don al ⁊ drehen þet him likeð, ne sitte hit hire se uuele; ⁊ of se seli sikernesse as ha wes, ⁊ mahte beon under godes warde, deð hire in to drechunge, to dihten hus ⁊ hinen, ⁊ to se monie earmden, to carien for se feole þing, teonen þolien, ⁊ gromen ⁊ scheomen, umbe stunde, drehen se moni wa, for se wac hure as þe worlt foryelt eauer ed ten ende.

(The high tower of Jerusalem was sometime called Sion.... And this tower typifies the elevated state of virginity, that beholds as from on high, all widows and wedded women, both [of them] beneath it. For these, as thralls to the flesh, are in the world's servitude, and remain below on earth. But the maiden stands, through her exalted life, in the tower of Jerusalem.... And is she not really cast down and drawn into servitude, who ... from so high elevation and so happy freedom ... and from being God's bride and his free daughter (for both together she is), shall become a slave under a man, and his thrall, to do and suffer all that he pleases, howsoever ill it become her; and instead of such blessed security as she was in, and still might be under God's guardianship, puts herself into drudgery, to manage house and domestics, and to so many troubles, to care for so many things, to endure vexations and anger and shame, from time to time, to endure so many woes, for hire so poor as the world ever pays at the end).

(Furnivall's edition, 11. 26-60)

2. Discourse for a mixed or male audience

The image of women in texts written for a male or a mixed public can be rather different from this official church discourse for women. We should perhaps first consider the texts written for the exclusively male audience of monks and scholars, in which—not unnaturally—woman is considered primarily as a source of sin, as the origin of all evil. If we refer again to *The Golden Legend* as our example, we read on the occasion of the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin that a woman is impure for forty days after the birth of a male child, but for eighty days after the birth of a girl, the reason being that the girl's body in the womb needs more time for its

completion and does not receive a soul until eighty days after conception. Why is this so? Jacobus gives three reasons:

Firstly, since Christ wished to be born as a man, He desired to honour man and to endow him with more grace; for this reason He allowed boys to grow more quickly, and the mother to be purified the sooner. The second reason is that woman has sinned more than man and should therefore be unhappier; and as her suffering has been doubled on earth, so too it should be doubled in the womb. The third reason is that woman has troubled God more than man has troubled Him, because she sinned more; for God is troubled by our sins....
(Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, pp. 149-150)

What renders a woman impure seems to be the sexual contact involved in the conception of the child: "The Virgin Mary was not constrained to obey the law of purification, since her childbearing was not due to human contact, but to the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit", we read in the same lesson for Candlemass.

There were, of course, much more sophisticated views on women in many of the scholarly texts. Johannes Scotus Erigena, the ninth-century Irish scholar who became master of the palace school of Charles the Bald, includes in his *On the Division of Nature* an allegorical interpretation of the Biblical story of the Fall, in which "woman" represents the corporal senses that deceive reason (the "man") and lead it to sin: "...the woman, or the carnal sense, is deceived and delighted, not discerning the malice... If the soul consents to this woman, the integrity of human nature is corrupted altogether."⁵ Joan Ferrante (1-33) quite rightly points out that, even though such an allegorical interpretation recognizes the presence of something "male" and something "female" in all human beings independent of sex, it still takes for granted (the whole metaphorical use of "woman" depends on this assumption) that woman is weaker, more easily deceived, and more corruptible than man; it also identifies "woman" with the carnal sense, the corporal, the body. What at first sight seems to be a purely "figurative" interpretation, then, turns out to be rather literal after all.⁶ It is the female body as a source of sensual corruption that lies behind these texts, the symmetrical equivalent of the demand for virginity that characterizes the

church's texts for women. Even in vernacular saints' lives meant for lay audiences, sexual sin is used as a kind of shorthand symbol for sin in general. And curiously enough, the sexuality which marks the church's image of woman can be seen in various forms in several other types of texts not meant for a monastic or clerical audience.

If we for the moment leave aside the courtly poetry (which I should like to discuss later), we still have a wide range of texts written almost certainly by men for a male or mixed audience. There is for instance the *fabliau*, that exceptionally versatile type of dirty joke that is found everywhere from the court to the tavern, and of which the finest examples in English are from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The image of woman in the *fabliau* is, I think it is fair to say, standardised: she is presented as intensely sexual and quite unfaithful, or rather amoral; often more clever than the men, and able to get away with most anything scot-free. In a sense we might say that the *fabliau* does not really consider woman responsible for her actions. She is often not punished for what she does, though her husband, her lover or her would-be lover may be cuckolded, ridiculed, or beaten. This is the image we find in Chaucer's *fabliau*: Alison in the Miller's Tale, but also May in the Merchant's Tale, the miller's wife in the Reeve's Tale, and the merchant's wife in the Shipman's Tale all get away with various misdemeanors by their quick wits in a tricky situation.

In the medieval theatre (I am here thinking mainly of the Mystery cycles, which came into existence during the late fourteenth century) we find some examples of an image of woman that seems to come from another tradition. Aside from the saintly women of the Biblical stories, there are also other women characters in the plays. Some are examples of the shrew, the woman who refuses to be subordinate to men; this form of gynecocracy is negatively connoted in the text, though it is consistently seen comically, as a subject for ridicule and slapstick rather than as a matter for serious concern. The most famous shrew in English literature is of course Chaucer's Wife of Bath. The shrew is sexually active and unfaithful, but emphasis is usually placed not on her lack of chastity as such but on the fact that she cannot be controlled, that she does as she pleases and no man can control her. One might venture to say that in the case of the shrew, the texts treat sexual unfaithfulness as a sign of gynecocracy, of women's rule over men. The shrew, as exemplified by the Wife of Bath and Noah's wife in the Chester *Deluge* play, has women friends

and expresses her solidarity with them—Noah’s wife stubbornly resists the will of God and refuses to get into the Ark if she can’t bring her “gossips” along, and the Wife of Bath insists on seeing her “gossip” Dame Alys in spite of her husband’s objections:

And so bifel that ones in a Lente—
 So often tymes I to my gossyb wente,
 For evere yet I loved to be gay,
 And for to walke in March, Averill, and May,
 Fro hous to hous, to heere sondry talys—
 That Jankyn clerk, and my gossyb dame Alys,
 And I myself into the feeldes wente.
 Myn housbonde was at Londoun al that Lente;
 I hadde the bettre leyser for to pleye,
 And for to se, and eek for to be seye
 Of lusty folk.
 (Wife of Bath’s Prologue, ll. 543-553)

But the Mystery cycles also at times present an image of woman as co-worker with her man or as having a recognised field of action of her own. In the Wakefield *Second Shepherds’ Play*, Mak’s wife Gill not only helps her husband steal sheep, but also gets a chance to defend the contribution of women to the household in general:

Why, who wanders, who wakys / who commys,
 who gose?
 Who brewys, who bakys? / what makys me thus
 hose?
 And than,
 It is rewthe to beholde,
 Now in hote, now in colde,
 Ffull wofull is the householde
 That wantys a woman.
 (Wakefield *Secunda Pastorum* ll. 415-421)

The women of Bethlehem in the Chester cycle “flyt” with the soldiers of Herod, trading sexual insults and fighting for their children. It is difficult to define what might be a “popular” literature of the Middle Ages, but in these texts we can at least say that we are confronted with a non-courtly, non-ecclesiastical view of women, and here woman is shown as a great deal more active than what the religious model recognizes.

It is also interesting to note that these more popular texts tend to give less importance to the sexuality of women than either the religious or the courtly texts. The concept of women's sexuality does not disappear from the more popular texts, but it is neither so heavily stressed nor so exclusively a woman's characteristic. This may not be unrelated to the fact that women have easier access to oral discourse than they have to the written word, which brings us to the second part of our topic, discourse by women.

Discourse by women

1. Courtly women writers

What can we know about discourse by women, since they rarely had access to the written word? To begin with, there were some women who had access. They came primarily from the feudal aristocracy, and there are throughout the Middle Ages rather more of them than earlier scholarship would have led us to believe.⁷ There are twenty women known by name among the troubadour poets of Provence in the twelfth century, and there were almost certainly other women singers who composed their own verse, but whose lyrics remain anonymous.

Courtly discourse is erotic, and although in its most common version it describes the erotic reactions of a man to a woman, there are a number of lyrics concerned with the erotic reactions of the woman to a man. In eleventh-century Provence, where courtly poetry was invented, this form seems to have been used by women poets to write of their own erotic relationships, though male poets can also include passages expressing the sentiments of a woman. There are some cases where a woman poet seems to be writing in a very personal vein of her own feelings and experiences—the poems of Castelloza discussed by Peter Dronke (in Wilson 131-146) are of this kind. But as Dronke remarks, Castelloza is exceptional; what is generally contained in these lyrics is not the discourse of women but the courtly love discourse of the aristocratic community, the fashionable literary style of the times.

Indeed, it would have been odd if noblewomen had not wanted to participate in this new and exciting literary form. Courtly literature was the first literary discourse to develop in Europe independently of the church, and the first consciously fictional form of discourse in the modern age. It has long been recognized that women contributed significantly to its

formation and development throughout Europe; as Joan Kelly-Gadol writes (184), "At their courts as in their literature, it would seem that feudal women consciously exerted pressure in shaping the courtly love ideal and making it prevail." Women played a very important role in patronising and encouraging courtly literature, and a not insignificant role in writing pieces in the shorter genres of lyric and *lai*. It is quite likely that this active participation of women is a significant factor in shaping the courtly ideal of an erotic relationship freely entered into and based on reciprocal commitment.

In spite of this, however, I feel courtly literature is more marked by class than by gender determinants. The difference is that in this class, women are in a position to play a role as significant as that of men in cultural production and consumption. "Women poets step into a world where men have already composed for them", writes Peter Dronke (98). Since in addition courtly literature rapidly became highly conventionalised, women and men poets alike used the literary models available less to express their own feelings than to create imaginary emotional situations.⁸

The image of the lady in courtly literature is well known: in its most stereotyped version, the lady is the cause and goal of all the knight's actions; he perfects himself as warrior and as courtier for her sake, and her slightest gesture means life or death for him.⁹ Perhaps the most common form of courtly lyric is the supplication of the lover for the grace of his lady. I quote a fourteenth-century example:

Douce dame, que j'ai longtemps servie,
Je vous supplie, allegez ma douleur
Et ma plainte ne tenez à folleur;
Que soit par vous ma grand peine assouvie

Voyez comment pour vous aimer devie;
Je perds sens, teint, contenance et vigueur,
Douce dame, que j'ai longtemps servie.
N'avez donc plus de m'accabler envie
Qu je mourrai d'amoureuse chaleur
Pour vos beautés et vos fraiches couleurs;
Aussi vous prie: prolongez ma vie,
Douce dame, que j'ai longtemps servie.
(Christine de Pizan)

As in this poem, the lady is often spoken of in the vocabulary of feudal political relationships: she is the lord of

her lover, who serves her faithfully as her vassal and servant; she helps and succors him, or makes war on him. But since in its most common form the courtly relationship is illicit, the actual role of the lady is usually passive or defensive—she acts only on the lover, and he acts through her influence. In fact, in this, its most conventionalised version, courtly love proposes an image of woman not so very different, structurally, from that of official church doctrine: here as there, woman is passive and enclosed. The difference lies in the attitudes to sexuality expressed in the two types of texts. The saintly woman refuses sexuality, the courtly lady is explicitly erotic. But for both models, the pattern of action proposed for women is remarkably similar: woman can act only on the spiritual or intellectual plane, and only through analogy with the pattern of political power, which is predominantly masculine.¹⁰

There are other forms of courtly love lyric in which this rather formalised model of chivalric service is not so evident: *aubades*, laments, May songs, *chansons de mal mariee*, and less defined genres. Many of these represent the speaker as a woman, and critics speculate that they go back to popular songs where the singer may have been a woman.¹¹ Characteristic of courtly lyric is, however, that it is a very selfconscious literary style, in which the poet prides him/herself on being able to compose in all these varieties of voices. So we have songs for a woman speaker written by male poets, and women poets writing love songs for a male voice—such as the text quoted above, which was written by a fourteenth-century woman poet, Christine de Pizan. Perhaps in eleventh-century Provence, where this fashion originated as members of the aristocracy wrote elegant verse to each other as a social pastime, we can find a more personal note, some significant difference between verses written by men troubadours and by women *trobairitz*, though Dronke points out that even the most intimate lyrics are consciously modeled on classical prototypes and express Ovidian attitudes. Indeed, courtly love lyric from the beginning is rarely a private discourse, but usually performed publicly before an audience, or even written on commission in later years. Christine de Pizan, a late fourteenth-century writer who was not of noble birth but raised in a scholarly environment in close proximity to the court, actually succeeded in making her living as a widow at the court of Charles VI of France through commissions and patronage, writing courtly lyrics, lovers' debates, long allegorical poems and treatises. Among her compositions is a whole cycle of courtly lyrics interspersed

with narrative, *The Duke of True Lovers*, in which she writes from the man's point of view and in his voice. She can also do the opposite:

Le plus bel qui soit en France,
Le meilleur et le plus doux,
Hélas: que ne venez-vous?

M'amour, ma loyal'fiance
Mon dieu terrien sur tous,
Le plus bel qui soit en France,

Si c'est en votre puissance,
Pourquoi ne revenez-vous?
Lors je verrai sans doutance
Le plus bel qui soit en France.

It would require a more detailed study than this to determine whether Christine's themes, idiom or style change when she is writing for a female voice, and to what extent such a change is dictated by the genre.

But if style appears to be class-linked rather than gender-linked, the same is not necessarily true for all aspects of literary activity. Marie de France, a twelfth-century Anglo-Norman writer who composed her *lais* to be presented to a prince (probably Henry II of England), is another famous courtly poet of whose poetry it would be difficult to say that it represents a woman's discourse: she is writing in the style appropriate for a courtly audience, not in any style appropriate for a woman poet. One could speculate, however, that perhaps her *subject matter* was, in the Celtic tradition that she drew on, felt to be appropriate for a woman singer. It shows some similarities with the topics of the later ballads that we will be discussing below. Christine de Pizan herself, although she writes in the prevalent fashionable style of courtly *ballade* or allegorical dream-vision, using the discourse available to a writer in her position, shows a preference for themes concerned with the position of women and at one point became rather famous as the literary champion of women against the admirers of the misogynist poetry of Jean de Meung (see the study by Willard in Wilson 333-342).

The question of the specificity of discourse by women writers of the Middle Ages when they write in the dominant literary genres of their times thus awaits further study. The high degree of conventionality that characterizes courtly

literature makes it difficult to see qualities specifically “female” in the texts by women writers—or specifically “male” in texts by men. Indeed, since the very concepts of what is “male” or “female” are culturally determined and change over the centuries, we would have to ask ourselves rather carefully what we would be looking for if we are to apply these terms to medieval texts. There seems to be a difference between men and women writers in choice of subject matter, or rather in the degree of emphasis placed on certain themes, in the narrative poetry perhaps more than in the lyric. Nonetheless it does not seem possible to me to speak of a women’s discourse within the dominant medieval literary genres of courtly poetry.

2. Non-courtly discourse by women

Was there then no discourse specific to women in the Middle Ages, no speech roles considered appropriate to women as women, not as members of a particular social class or group? There are some indications that such roles did in fact exist, primarily in the oral literature of songs and stories, of which very little has been preserved in writing.

There are many indications that from the early Middle Ages through the fifteenth century, and in many parts of Europe, people sang songs (*cantilena*, *caroles* or in English carols) connected with dancing. Some of these were specifically women’s songs and dances, and judging by the irate reactions of churchmen it seems likely that they were connected with pre-Christian spring rituals. Not much has been preserved of the actual texts of these songs except through courtly or clerical versions, but at least one example is an assertion of the women’s freedom to choose their men, or indeed to go without one, for the season:

Swaz hie gat umbe
daz sint allez megede
die wellent an man
alle diese sumer gan

[Those who go around in this circle
Are all maidens
They will go without a man
All this summer.]
(from the *Carmina Burana*)

Other songs, of which English examples exist, are meant to be sung and/or danced by men and women together, and imply that the men and women square off in a formalised literary battle of the sexes. Such are the English songs about the holly and the ivy, where the men sing in praise of the holly and the women answer by praising the ivy (see Greene cxii-cxxvii). Though Greene cites no English evidence of how these songs were performed, Dronke quotes from the contemporary biography of the twelfth-century Icelandic bishop Saint Jon the description of "a favourite game among the people" in the form of an exchange of verses: "a man addressing a woman, and a woman a man—disgraceful strophes, mocking and unfit to be heard" (Dronke 105), which of course the good bishop prohibited forthwith. We know, then, that in at least one part of medieval Europe the "flytings" that we find traces of in the carols and the Mystery cycles were actually performed between men and women. There is no evidence that the audience of such songs found them as outrageous and unseemly as the bishops did; they seem to represent a genuinely recognized speech role for women, and do not necessarily have to end with the comic submission that Noah's wife rather grudgingly shows.

Women's songs would of course also include lullabies. But here we encounter the general problem that such popular genres are in the Middle Ages almost entirely orally transmitted and rarely preserved in writing. The carols, connected as they were with pre-Christian festivals and traditions, were apparently the object of deliberate and systematic re-writing by the mendicant orders in their efforts to raise the level of piety of the lay population. Many of the carols connected with Christmas have been given new or revised lyrics by the Franciscans, and almost all the lullabies which exist in writing have been moralised or ascribed to the Virgin Mary, so that it is difficult to be specific about the style or the themes of their possible popular predecessors.

A few of the earliest recorded ballads can definitely be dated to the fifteenth century. Buchan has argued that, some three centuries later when the ballads were first recorded from oral tradition,¹² there seems to be a distinction between the repertoires of men and women ballad singers. Anna Gordon's ballads are clearly handed down from woman to woman. Her repertory, according to Buchan's analysis, concentrates on man-woman relationships: there are ballads about love or marriage against family opposition, extramarital love, murder

or revenge stemming from erotic relationships, and erotic relationships with supernatural or magical beings.

Some of the earliest preserved ballad texts (*The Wee Wee Man*, Child 38; *Riddles Wisely Expounded*, Child 1; *Thomas Rymer*, Child 37; possibly *Tam Lin*, Child 39) are about encounters between human beings and supernatural creatures, often with sexual relations explicit or implied. In *Thomas Rymer*, Thomas encounters the Queen of Elfland and kisses her, as a result of which he must serve her seven years. He goes to Elfland with her and is enjoined not to speak a word or he will be unable to return. At the end of seven years the Queen returns him to the world of men, thus saving him from being selected as tribute to the Devil. In *Inter Diabolus et Virgo*, the fifteenth-century version of *Riddles Wisely Expounded*, a girl answers the Devil's riddles and thus avoids being carried off as his mistress to Hell.

From 1450 to 1700 there is a gap of many generations, and to bridge it I can only refer to indirect evidence: in Thomas Deloney's narrative *Jack of Newbury*, written in 1597, there is a scene in which young women spinning sing a ballad of a love story ("The Fair Flower of Northumberland"). If these few indications entitle us to a working hypothesis, then we could perhaps formulate it as follows: women did sing songs similar to the later ballads in the Middle Ages; their repertory was primarily concerned with man-woman relationships and their implications, within and outside the family. If we add to this the evidence of the dance songs and carols, we would have a rather fragmentary corpus of discourse by women, a discourse that would include erotic elements and the defence of womanhood in the battle-of-the-sexes, flyting pattern. There would then be some indications that in oral tradition women had a discourse particularly theirs, with a particular range of topics, though we would probably say that they had their own themes and genres rather than their own style. We might speculate that the repertory of, for example, Marie de France may be related to such a speech role for women (cf. Ferrante in Wilson 65-66), and that the women figures in texts by male writers represent, with varying degrees of ideological filtering, a man's conception of this socially sanctioned role.

This discourse, however, should not be seen as a vehicle for the expression of personal feelings. It is a socially defined speech role—which is perhaps one reason why the texts of the oral tradition are anonymous: they are not conceived as personal expression. It is, nonetheless, a voice with social recognition, institutionally established, quite different from the

passive silence offered by the church or the formalised class discourse of courtly literature. It presents relationships between the sexes as a woman's topic, but it does not present an image of women as more sexual than men, or as more clever, dangerous or unfaithful.

3. Writing through a scribe

There is a third way in which a medieval woman can have access to discourse, in addition to being herself literate or to working within oral tradition. She can have a man write for her. The Paston women write letters, usually through a male secretary. This mode of writing becomes particularly important as, with the growing popular piety of the later Middle Ages, an increasing number of women appear who choose the role of the "saint" outside of or beyond the conventional nunnery: anchoresses, mystics, visionaries with a divine mission.

There are many of these women across Europe, of varying degrees of orthodoxy and saintliness.¹³ Most of them are from the nobility or the gentry, as for example Hildegard of Bingen, Birgitta of Sweden or (probably) Julian of Norwich (1346-1416). Some of them, like Hildegard of Bingen, are not only literate but highly educated. But the role of saint gives these women access to the written word whether they themselves can write or not, since what they have to say is a divine revelation and must be written down in a form as close to their own original speech as possible. "Visions gave them authority... in their visions women were told that they must write" Petroff points out (20). The discourse appropriate to a divine revelation is of course socially given—as was the discourse of courtly love or the oral tradition—but just as these, it can be chosen by the woman herself who then appropriates this language for herself. And "visionary discourse" allows her—especially if her internal religious discipline is not too highly developed—to concentrate on her own individual experience, sanctioned as of transcendent significance by the role she has assumed. Elizabeth Petroff (22) argues that medieval women's visionary writing is part of the gradual development in the later Middle Ages of a concept of interiority, of selfhood, and is in fact largely constitutive of that self: "The self that medieval women writers reveal is one that came into existence through language and before their very eyes in the course of visionary experience."

The most interesting example of this phenomenon for our purposes is Margery Kempe (1370-1440), the daughter of a mayor of Lynn and married to a merchant of the same town. The sainthood of Margery Kempe has never been recognized by the church, but she persuaded many people of the genuineness of her revelations, and two of her followers wrote them down from her dictation. She chose to give them the form of an autobiography, which gave her the opportunity of being occupied in detail with her own sentiments and her own life.

Margery Kempe is not an exceptionally saintly woman, which is what makes her so interesting to us. She is only vaguely aware of the great mystical tradition of Europe. The messages that God gives her are primarily meant to comfort her in her struggle for recognition in the face of considerable scepticism in the church hierarchy, and to encourage her in the expressions of her sanctity. God commands her to wear a white dress, for example, and sanctions her uncontrollable screams when she attends mass. He commands her to go on pilgrimages, from which she writes mostly about the good people who believed in her and helped her or the bad people who refused to believe.

Critics are easily exasperated by Margery Kempe precisely because she does not conform to the high spiritual standards of women like Julian of Norwich or Saint Catherine of Siena. She uses the discourse of a visionary without showing the spiritual maturity of the true visionary, and critics usually point out her egocentricity with one hand and praise her book as the first autobiography in English with the other.¹⁴ I would like here, however, to suggest looking at Margery Kempe in another light. She is a middle-class woman trying to use a discourse that she has not completely mastered, turning it to a purpose which does not quite coincide with that for which this mode of writing is socially sanctioned. And what breaks the mode, in particular, are the autobiographical details that she inserts, not to demonstrate some step in her spiritual progress or some principle of divine grace, but just because they happen to concern her as an individual.

Women as marginal writers

Curiously, Christine de Pizan has also attracted both interest and criticism for, I think, similar reasons. Daughter of an astronomer and wife of a royal secretary, Christine has mastered the discourse of her choice—mainly allegory and

moral treatise—better than Margery Kempe, though her ventures into the fields of scholarship and learning were met with a similar scepticism. But she, like Margery Kempe, allows autobiography to break through the boundaries of the genres she adopts much more than her male colleagues. Her biographers find her own information reliable where it can be checked, and there is much more of it than was generally sanctioned even in the allegorical genres that employ naive narrators as a conventional technical device. The impression is similarly irritating for the traditional literary critic: it is “bad” writing, but at the same time it is unique and interesting. Recent feminist readings have reinterpreted these passages as the results of her struggle to establish a voice for herself, a feminine discourse: “It would seem that she uses the circumstances of her oppression, converting them into sources of a privileged viewpoint.”¹⁵

The point I would like to make here, then, is double. Women in the Middle Ages both had their own modes of verbal art and participated in the dominant modes of their society. Their own modes were part of an oral tradition that remained largely unrecorded in writing or influenced written texts only indirectly, being incorporated into courtly or religious forms that were no longer the special province of women. When women composed in the dominant modes of discourse, they almost always adopted the accepted style of fashionable literary expression, and thus do not write anything identifiable as “women’s discourse”.

However, toward the end of the Middle Ages it apparently became possible for women to “bend” existing models of discourse in new directions: in the direction of individualised expression, autobiography, and concern with one’s own personal and unique experience. Possibly this was made easier for women writers precisely because of their marginal position in medieval intellectual life. It may be that marginality makes it easier *not* to master (or to be mastered by) a given social model for writing, and thus to contribute to the shaping of something new and different.¹⁶

I believe it is significant that in both cases of marginal writing which I have discussed here, Margery Kempe and Christine de Pizan, the writer is marginal in another sense as well: both these women come from the middle class rather than the nobility. Both gain access to medieval intellectual life through the back door, so to speak: Margery Kempe through adroit use of the movement of lay piety, and Christine de Pizan through her family’s association with the clerks of the royal

court and the University of Paris. They are examples of a woman writer appropriating and “bending” a certain mode of discourse for her own purposes, but they are also examples of the middle class (to which Chaucer also belonged by birth) transforming in form and function the literary patterns of feudal society: the discourse of personal expression grows in importance as the middle class grows. Ultimately, then, I would argue that the possibility of a discourse for women, whether the traditionally accepted speech roles for women or the creation of a new female discourse within the existing patterns of verbal art in the Middle Ages, is dependent on changes in the context and function of these rhetorical modes within medieval society as a whole.

Notes

¹ There have been several recent publications on the role of women in medieval society; see for example Power, *Medieval Women*, Bornstein, Stuard (ed.), Shahar, and particularly Bridenthal, Koonz and Stuard.

² Elaine Power’s *Medieval English Nunneries* is still the standard work on the subject.

³ Saints Marina, Theodora and Margaret become monks; Saint Mary of Egypt and Thais are penitent prostitutes. Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* was written in Latin but quickly translated into English and many other vernaculars. It is by no means the only collection of its kind, but can serve in this context as an authoritative and widespread example.

⁴ Cf. the discussion in Boulton.

⁵ Johannes Scotus Erigena, *On the Division of Nature*, as translated by Robertson 99-105.

⁶ For an extensive discussion of the usual attitudes of the mendicant preachers toward women, see Owst.

⁷ There are several recent anthologies and studies of medieval women writers. Wilson and Petroff present selected texts with biographical and critical introductions. Dronke has a series of perceptive critical studies. Bogin refers specifically to women courtly poets.

⁸ Much the same is true for the women writers of Latin verse or prose epistles in the eleventh century that Dronke studies (84-97); as he points out, the use they make of Ovid’s

Heroides, both as a model for a literary voice and to maintain a certain impersonal distance from the eroticism they express, is perhaps symptomatic of the ambiguities inherent in the assumption of a literary discourse both highly formalized and highly personal.

⁹ Ferrante (65-97) has an extensive discussion of the image of woman and its narrative function in courtly literature.

¹⁰ In the eleventh century, in the region of Southern France where courtly love was invented, the women of the feudal aristocracy could and did exercise political power in their own right, a fact which is probably not unrelated to the image of the lady constituted in this poetry. But courtly love as a literary convention continued to be influential long after the political situation of women had changed.

¹¹ There is considerable debate about the courtly "woman's songs", lyrics in a woman's voice, in the various vernaculars of Europe. The discussion concerns both the popular or courtly nature of particular bodies of texts, and their spontaneous or conventional character. The more traditional position is taken by Dronke (97-98), while a discussion of the questions involved and examples of a more radical approach can be found in Plummer.

¹² These are the ballads of Anna Gordon, Mrs. Brown of Falkland, recorded 1783-1800 and learned mostly before 1759 from her aunt, who had learned them from "nurses and old women" (Buchan 62-73).

¹³ Many of them are represented in Petroff's anthology of medieval women's visionary writing.

¹⁴ See for example the comments of William Provost in Wilson 297-302. There have been some studies that succeed in leaving aside the issue of the "genuineness" of her revelations and concentrate on the real achievements of her book: Weissman's paper and Joan Mueller's study in Rose (155-171) are particularly good examples.

¹⁵ The phrase is by Nancy Margolis, quoted by Petroff (304).

¹⁶ I should perhaps stress that many women writers mastered the literary discourse of their choice to perfection: Heloise, Julian of Norwich, and Hildegard of Bingen, to mention only a few of the most outstanding.

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