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Beyond the Convention? Representation of Female Characters in Middle English Romances

Abstract: The paper presents literary images of medieval women in four Middle English romances, viz. *King Horn*, *Sir Isumbras*, *Havelok the Dane* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Its aim is to identify some conventional patterns of representation of female characters in the literary works classified as different subtypes of the genre of romance, namely ancestral romance (*King Horn*, *Havelok the Dane*), homiletic romance (*Sir Isumbras*) and Arthurian romance (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*). After Sharon Farmer and other feminist critics, the concept of gender is interpreted as one of the major *categories of difference* in medieval English society. This argument is supported by the analysis of the construction of female characters in the romances in question. However, while it is important to remember that the society of medieval England was to a large extent male-governed and male-dominated, which is the reason for the apparent centrality of male protagonists in medieval English literature, the function of female characters in literary works of that period is not necessarily secondary. The paper focuses on the importance of women in presenting the protagonist's genealogy and on selected strategies of representation, such as reversal of gender roles or marginalization of female characters. The essay attempts to demonstrate that the category of gender, as it is seen in the medieval texts, cannot be reduced to a simplified model of binary oppositions, since the romances also introduce the complexity of power relations and tensions between the sexes.

Keywords: Middle English romance; medieval studies; medieval literature; gender; feminism

Introduction

Over the last few decades, a growing number of scholars of literature and culture of the Middle Ages have shown interest in the position of women in the medieval society. Many medievalists and feminist critics have also investigated the construction of gen-

der categories in literary representations, especially the construction of the feminine. At least three major subdisciplines can be identified in the studies of medieval women, namely (1) historical studies, (2) studies of women-authored texts and (3) studies of literary representations of women in both male- and female-authored writings.

Historical studies seek information about the position of women in the communities and their roles in the society. This kind of analysis relies on documents such as acts of ownership, wills, court records and other legal sources studied in order to collect data about the lives of medieval women. This approach also focuses on prominent medieval women-- for example, female writers, patrons or mystics. One of the most influential works providing a comprehensive summary of historical studies of medieval women is *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis. It is a two-volume collection of essays on eminent female figures as well as on concepts closely related to the medieval understanding of femininity.

The objective of studies on women's literature of the Middle Ages is to examine texts produced by medieval women as an example of "minor literature"¹ (see Chance 2007, 2–19 *passim*). As Jane Chance argues in her preface to *Literary Subversions of Medieval Women*, medieval female authors "created their own feminized authority and convention through subversive voices that contested patriarchy's monologic voice" (16). The voices of women are often perceived as functioning on the margins of more "canonical" male literature (*passim*). On the other hand, the criticism of female-authored texts is closely related to the phenomenon of new canonicity since it often brings lesser-known works by women authors to the literary canon.

Studies of medieval representations of gender encompass analyses of literary and non-literary images of men and women. Among a variety of publications on the perception of gender roles in literature of the Middle Ages, a considerable number deals with representations of female characters and aims at examining how literary works reflect (or construct) gender oppositions. This essay comments on the status of medieval women from this perspective; it focuses on literary representations of women in Middle English romances, a very diverse group of texts that constitute a highly conventional genre, in which recurring patterns of representation can be identified. For example, the ideal of courtly love, crucial for the genre of romance, promoted an idealized model of a perfect knight and a perfect noblewoman. However, as the examples show, in many cases medieval romances recorded more complex tensions between the genders than the simplified model of binary oppositions.

This paper is not meant as a comprehensive study of gendered representations within the corpus of Middle English romances, but instead aims to demonstrate how

¹ The term "minor literature" goes back to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. To describe Kafka's work, Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of a minor literature, which they define as "[literature] which a minority constructs within a major language" ([1975] 2003, 16). For a detailed discussion of the term see especially the chapter "What Is a Minor Literature?"; for its application in the context of medieval women's writing, see Chance (2007).

certain strategies of representation of women construct the concept of the feminine within a variety of culturally significant texts representing different subtypes of the genre.² It focuses especially on the three early medieval romances: *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane*, both classified as “romances of England”³ (see Herzman 1999, 11), and *Sir Isumbras*, an example of a homiletic romance. In order to identify continuities or revisions of the notion of femininity with the development of the genre, the final section briefly refers to perhaps the most “canonical” of all Middle English romances, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which belongs to the Arthurian tradition, and is thus significantly different – both formally and thematically – from the three other texts discussed in the essay.

Lineage, succession and social roles in *King Horn*

One of the most important themes addressed in Middle English romances is the subject of lineage and genealogy. Most romances begin with the minstrel⁴ legitimizing the authority of the protagonist by presenting his ancestry. In the opening lines of *King Horn*, one of the earliest English romances (Mehl 1968, 48), the narrator provides his audience with the names of Horn’s parents, King Murry and Queen Godhild:

Alle beon he blithe
That to my song lythe!
A sang ich schal you singe
Of Murry the Kinge.
King he was biweste
So longe so hit laste.
Godhild het his quen;
Faire ne mighte non ben.
He hadde a sone that het Horn;
Fairer ne mighte non beo born[.] (1–10)

² It is important to note that Middle English romances are not a homogenous group of texts and their generic classification, often very problematic, can be based on several different criteria: for example, thematic and formal similarity, the purpose of the poem (as in the case of homiletic romances), or its length. For a detailed discussion of the problems of classification of Middle English romances, see Mehl (1968, 13–38).

³ Both *King Horn* and *Havelok the Dane* can be classified as romances representing “the Matter of England,” alongside with texts such as *Bevis of Hampton* or *Athelston* (Herzman 1999, 11). Because of their focus on the issue of genealogy and succession, they can be also interpreted as ancestral romances.

⁴ In this context, *the minstrel* refers to the figure of the narrator rather than the hypothetical author of the poem. See Mehl (1968, 7–13) for a note on authors and audiences of the romances, especially for a commentary on the debate about the minstrel tradition.

Laura D. Barefield emphasizes the importance of women in the presentation of the king's genealogy (2003, 6–9). She notes that women are at least mentioned while establishing the protagonist's authority as a rightful king (8), which can be illustrated by the passage from *King Horn* quoted above. After a conventional opening, in which a minstrel addresses his audience and introduces the theme of the romance, he briefly presents Murry, describing him as a king in the west for as long as his life lasted (line 5). Then he provides the audience with the name of Horn's mother. However, we can immediately notice that the description of the king is more elaborate than the description of "his queen," which may suggest the superior status of the male ruler. Moreover, King Murry is a central figure in this passage, which is emphasized by the use of the third person masculine pronoun *he* in line 9 instead of the pronoun *they* (Middle English *hī*, see Bough and Cable [1951] 2002, 150; Algeo 2010, 131 esp. for notes on diversity of Middle English pronouns).

In line 8, Godhild is described with the formulaic phrase "faire ne mighte non ben," which refers to both her power and physical beauty. It is worth noticing that almost the same formula is repeated two lines later, with reference to her son, the future king. Fairness, or bodily perfection of female characters is highlighted in their descriptions in many romances, which can be seen in the narrator's presentation of the nameless wife of Sir Isumbras in the eponymous poem, Goldeboru in *Havelok the Dane*, or Guinevere and Lady Bertilak in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. However, physical beauty of male characters is also frequently mentioned. King Horn is presented as strikingly beautiful and, paradoxically, at one point in the story this feature saves his life; the heathen invaders decide not to kill him because they are impressed with his physical beauty (lines 85–93). The emphasis on the physicality of male protagonists can be also seen in other romances: for example, in *Havelok the Dane* when Havelok is recognized as a king because of his birthmark and the light emitted from his mouth during sleep (lines 593–599). Similarly, Sir Isumbras is identified by the sultan as a great knight because of his physical appearance (lines 241–249). Finally, the *Pearl*-poet provides the audience with an elaborate description of Sir Gawain in full armor before the protagonist sets out for the Green Chapel (lines 2012–2041).

King Horn opens with the death of King Murry at the hands of Saracens, who then conquer his land and exile young Horn and his twelve companions. Then the narrative shifts to a description of Godhild's sorrow after the loss of both her husband and son. After the invasion, she withdraws from the material world to live the solitary life of a hermit. At the end of the story she is reunited with her son, who arrives to reclaim the kingdom of Suddene and avenge his father. Godhild's presence in the kingdom throughout the story may be seen as symbolic – it suggests continuity of power and the potential for restoring rightful order.

During his exile, Horn lives in the kingdom of Westnesse, where he meets another important female character. Rymenhild, the daughter of King Aylmar, falls in love with Horn and wants him to take her as his wife (lines 411–414). The knight, however, declares that he should first prove his prowess in order to be able to marry the young

princess. He also wants to remain loyal to Aylmar, her father and his king. This episode proves that gendered interpretation of romances may be sometimes ambiguous – it is unclear whether the protagonist wants to prove his courage because he feels obliged to do so, or uses the courtly convention to control Rymenhild.

The passionate nature of the princess can be also interpreted as an example of a reversal of gender stereotypes. It is Rymenhild who declares her passion for Horn and urges him to marry her. Similarly, other women in Middle English romances sometimes act as seducers. One typical example is perhaps Lady Bertilak, who tests Sir Gawain by trying to seduce him.

Presentation of story line(s) in *Sir Isumbras* and *Havelok the Dane*

Reversal of typical gender roles can be also seen in *Sir Isumbras*. The romance tells the story of a mighty knight who loses all his possessions and power as a result of his excessive pride. He also loses his three sons, who are carried away by wild beasts, and his wife, who is taken into slavery by the sultan. When confronted with the series of misfortunes, Sir Isumbras has to prove his Christian virtue.

At the very end of the romance, Lady Isumbras is presented as fighting side by side with her husband against heathens (lines 724–729; cf. Herzman [1999, 5] for a comment on the exclusion of women from military actions in romances). Earlier in the story, she is also depicted as a powerful queen and the only ruler of the kingdom. Sharon Farmer notes that, apart from gender, other medieval “categories of difference” were social status, ethnicity, religion and sexuality (2003, 9–12). She argues that these categories can be analyzed together since they were interwoven and formed complex “matrices of domination”⁵ (9, 15 *et passim*).

It is important to remember that women presented in the romances are almost exclusively members of aristocracy. In medieval England, noblewomen were much more privileged than, for example, peasant women (Bradsley 2007, 1–3; Ward 2006, 2). The category of social status was often considered more important than the category of gender (Bradsley 2007, 2). Women might have been more powerful than men of lower social status, but they were always less powerful than men of the same social status (Ward 2006, 2). This status is reflected in *Sir Isumbras*; the queen is much respected by her male subjects when she is the single ruler, and enjoys greater power than any men

⁵ The term *matrix of domination* was introduced by African-American feminist scholars, most remarkably by Patricia Hill Collins, to examine the system of oppression experienced by Black women. In her 1990 work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins notes that models of injustice can involve intersection of categories of (for example) race, gender, social class, nationality or sexuality ([1990] 2002, 18). She defines the matrix of domination as the way these intersecting categories are organized to produce particular forms of oppression (18).

in the kingdom. After Sir Isumbras becomes the king, however, she is viewed as less powerful than him and becomes “hys qwene” (line 713).

It is also significant that the narrator does not pursue the story of Lady Isumbras after she and her husband are separated. Instead, the narrator presents only the adventures of Sir Isumbras and then the process of family reunion. One of the reasons for leaving that part of the story untold would be to create suspense – when Isumbras appears at the court of the queen, it is not yet explicitly stated that she is his wife. Another reason could be identified as the original purpose of the story. As a homiletic romance, *Sir Isumbras* was aimed at illustrating Christian virtues; thus, it has a simple plot line that centers around the topos of a virtuous man tried by fate.

In contrast, there are two parallel story lines in *Havelok the Dane*. The romance begins with an account of the miserable childhood of the English princess Goldeboru. After the death of her father, king Athelwold, she remains in the care of his trusted friend, Godrich, who soon becomes a treacherous usurper. Then the narrator presents a strikingly similar story of Havelok, the prince of Denmark. It begins with the death of king Birkabein, leaving his son and his two daughters in the hands of Godard, who murders the young girls and hands the boy over to a fisherman, Grim, with instructions to kill him. However, Grim notices a birthmark and a mysterious light coming from the protagonist’s mouth, and decides to save him.

A detailed presentation of both stories can suggest equality between male and female protagonists. Both characters are presented as the legitimate successors of their parents.⁶ However, obvious parallels in the stories may also emphasize contrasts between the two protagonists. While Goldeboru seems to be passive, Havelok is central to the development of the plot.⁷ This opposition may indicate a relatively stable interpretation of gendered categories, with agency generally ascribed to men. Interestingly, Sharon Farmer comments on the malleability of gender categories in medieval art, arguing that men, especially those of different ethnic origin, would be sometimes presented as effeminate (2004, 10). The idea of flexibility of gender-related representations proposed by Farmer is not necessarily exemplified in this particular work.

The romance also addresses the subject of marriage, another concept closely related to the medieval understanding of gender. In *Havelok*, marriage can be seen as symbolic. It is not only the marriage between two kingdoms: Denmark, represented by Havelok, and England, represented by Goldeboru. The parallels between the stories of the main characters may also suggest that marriage can be also interpreted as a realization of the notion of completeness. The natures of man and woman are symbolically

⁶ The issue of female succession, very important in the medieval discourse on lineage and rules of heredity, is addressed in the romance. It is worth noticing that the narrator sees the woman as the rightful ruler. The prejudice against the female ruler is expressed through Godrich, for instance, in a lengthy passage starting from the line 286, especially in his monologue. However, the narrator overtly sympathizes with Goldeboru, while Godrich, presented as a typical treacherous friend, is compared to Judas.

⁷ Cf. Herzman’s brief remark on Goldeboru as an active character (1999, 5).

united by marriage, just as two different lives and two different storylines are united in the poem.

Havelok the Dane clearly shows that the concept of marriage has a great political significance as well. In his influential work on political theology, *The King's Two Bodies*, Ernst H. Kantorowicz discusses the idea of marriage of the king and the land (1997, 217–218). His notion of “body politic” is related to a sense of completeness.⁸ Moreover, the figure of the king is to a large extent symbolic since it unites people of different social backgrounds. This aspect of kingship can be seen in the story of Havelok, who, despite his royal origin, lives the life of a lower-class man. Before his right to the throne is finally revealed, he enters various professions and, as a result, becomes the embodiment of a number of social groups, not only the ruling classes.

Female agency in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Another issue related to the function of female characters in medieval English romances is the question of changes and continuities in representations of women observable in the development of the genre. The last section aims to briefly address this subject by juxtaposing the romances discussed so far with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a work created later than the other three, and unique in many ways (see Mehl 1968, 194).

Amy N. Vines notes that late Middle English romances re-address and revise the notion of femininity (2011, 13). She also argues that they provide more space for female agency than earlier works of that genre (1–2, 7, 13). In *Sir Gawain*, Lady Bertilak tests the eponymous hero by trying to seduce him and appeal to his pride. However, it is another female character, Morgan le Fay, who is more important to the development of the plot. At the end of the poem, Sir Bertilak reveals that the whole trial for the knights of the Round Table was actually invented by her (lines 2446–2462). Sheila Fisher notes that Morgan's agency is disclosed very late in the story, which results in minimizing her importance for the course of events (2004, 172). She argues that the strategy of marginalizing Morgan is supported by the trivialization of her motivation, which can be noticed in the narratorial comment presenting her as driven by her well-known hatred towards Guinevere (171).

The emphasis on the character's beauty, recurrent in early romances, is also visible in *Sir Gawain*. In a description of Bertilak's court, the image of the beautiful and young Lady Bertilak is contrasted with the repulsiveness of Morgan. The depiction of the latter may seem atypical of the genre of romance. She is presented as mysterious and threatening, and this impression is emphasized by her physical appearance since

⁸ According to Kantorowicz, the concepts of kingship and forming of a nation can be seen as closely related to the notion of hybridity. He also notes that the king's two bodies, “body natural” and “body politic” are always unified and indivisible, integrated in the figure of a king (1997, 9).

her whole body – except for the face – is veiled in clothes. Possessing both wisdom and magical powers that she has learned from Merlin (lines 2446–2455), she is greatly respected by men at the court. Fisher argues that romances often depict women as puzzling and deceptive, especially for men (2004, 150–152). In Gawain’s much-discussed misogynist speech, the knight lists himself among a number of Biblical men deceived by women, starting with Adam, who was deceived by Eve:

Bot hit is no ferly thagh of wymmen be wonen to sorwe.
For so was **Adam** in erde with one bygyled,
And **Salamon** with fele sere, and **Samson** eftsones –
Dalyda dalt hym his wyrde – and **Davyth** thereafter
Was blended with Barsabe, that much bale tholed.
Now these were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wynne huge
To luf hom wel and leve hem not, a leude that couthe. (2415–2421; emphasis added)

Gawain refers to the Biblical tradition while enumerating “the noblest men of old, favoured by fortune” (Anderson 1996, 272), whose only failure can be found in trusting women, which eventually leads to men’s misfortune. He further explains: “Thagh I be now bigyled, / Me think me burde be excused” (lines 2427–2429). The protagonist justifies his act of disloyalty to Bertilak and, at the same time, the breach of the code of conduct by commenting on the deceitful nature of women. However, the ending shows that it is, in fact, the woman’s actions that result in the poem’s questioning of the medieval ideal of a perfect knight. By extension, female characters may be seen as challenging the concept of chivalry and uncovering its artificiality by expressing the pressures put on both genders by courtly culture.

Conclusions

A close reading of female characters in the four Middle English texts representing different subtypes of the genre of romance proves that certain patterns of representation of women can be identified. Among a variety of such strategies, it is possible to identify: subversion of gender roles (as in, *Sir Isumbras* and, to a degree, also in *King Horn*), presentation of clear oppositions between the masculine and the feminine (as in, *Havelok the Dane*), as well as marginalization and trivialization of female characters (as in *Sir Gawain*).

Although scholars such as Sharon Farmer tend to reject “falling back into old binaries” (2003, 10), which have often characterized feminist readings of medieval texts, several instances of contrasting male and female protagonists, especially in terms of agency, can be found in the discussed works. Analysis of narrative development in selected romances may suggest that men are usually central to their plot. Unsurprisingly, they are presented as much more active than women – they are usually engaged

in fighting against enemies and fate, while female protagonists are often depicted as passive, waiting for a change of fortune (cf. Herzman 1999, 5–6). In addition, female characters are frequently described in less detail than men. They are often presented using conventional phrases: for example, formulaic expressions related to their beauty. The emphasis on men and the masculine, seen for example in the formulation of the chivalric ideal, reflects the patriarchal character of the medieval English society, in which bonds between men, especially between the king and his knights, were crucial for the functioning of the society.

On the other hand, romances provide numerous examples of active and powerful women, which is illustrated by the wife of Sir Isumbras or Morgan le Fay. In the romances in question, written from the male perspective, female agency is generally perceived as a threat to men (see Fisher 2004, 161). Characters such as Morgan or Lady Bertilak question the authenticity of important medieval concepts, for example the ideal of courtly love, and introduce complex tensions between genders, often destabilizing the binary opposition between men and women. Through their physical and psychological features as well as through the social roles they perform – especially the roles of mothers, wives and queens – female characters reflect how femininity was defined in medieval England. The complex function of women in the discussed works shows that the medieval concepts of the feminine are occasionally challenged in the romances, even though the gender roles connected with the patriarchal model of the society may frequently be presented as fixed and stable.

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