

SUBVERSIVE IMAGES OF WOMEN IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE: A SELECTIVE READING

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly assumed that medieval society is hostile to women's power. Women are continuously contained and constrained by the patriarchal norms of medieval Europe to strengthen the heroic ideals of masculinity, while maintaining the ideals of the domestic private sphere. This study shows that even within the domestic private sphere, women exert considerable amount of power to influence men's actions. In fact, what we see are models of powerful women capable of damaging the heroic ideals of men. Hence there is a tendency to control women's power. This essay explores how far this tendency to control is actually successful. If not then we are witnessing a tension between dominant patriarchal ideology and the subversive images of women. The resistance that women characters in medieval literatures pose to the hegemonic ideology is a matter of particular interest of this paper. At the same time, the nature of their containment and appropriation is also something that this paper wishes to examine.

Key words: Medieval society, feminism, masculinity, patriarchal society, genre, dominant ideology

In many instances of medieval English writing, we observe women characters that shatter our pre-conceived notion about the behaviour of medieval womanhood. For our pre-conceived notion is based on the conventional assumption attacked by Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski's edited work, *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*: "[m]edieval society with its wars, territorial struggles, and violence, seems particularly hostile to the exercise of female initiative and power" (1). But, in contrast what we see in these writings are women characters who instead of being passively confined to the domestic and private sphere, participate in adventures along with men, control men's courtly behaviour, and even in extreme cases take arms when they need to retaliate. Even within the domestic private sphere, women exert considerable amount of power to influence men's actions. In a nutshell, what we see are models of powerful women capable of causing damage to the heroic ideals of men, as the heroic ideals require feminization and repression of women. Grace Armstrong in her essay "Women of Power:

Chretien de Troyes's Female Clerks" refers to the theological justification of women's repression: "she is a powerful and dangerous foe of man; her sexuality must be firmly controlled if she is not to betray him or make him lose his soul" (31). This explains why "medieval society . . . seems particularly hostile to the exercise of female initiative and power" (Erler & Kowaleski 1). Consequently, there exists a tendency to control women's power. The question that arises from this assumption is worth pursuing: how far is this tendency to control women's power actually successful. If not, then what we are witnessing is reduced (castrated) masculinity; hence a subversion of heroic ideals, as masculinity is one of the important bases of heroic ideals. In other terms, how 'manly' are the men portrayed in these works? Do we see a complete undoing of heroic ideals, or a readjustment and negotiation? The answers to these questions—yes or no—will certainly lead us to a larger historical question: whether these women represent the actual historical womanhood of the time, which I wish to

address in this paper. At the same time we need to recognize the importance of genre in creating these anomalous portrayals of women.

The relationship between the genre of writing and dominant ideology is paradoxical. The genre is the product of the writer's creativity and innovative ambition. But at the same time, the writer is also a man of his time, and, hence subject to the dominant ideology. This complex relationship provides us with a model of women that simultaneously threatens the dominant patriarchal heroic ideals and also becomes constrained and repressed by it.

It is my interest in this paper to tease out the tension between the dominant ideology of medieval Europe and the subversive images of women. The resistance that these women characters initiate against the hegemonic ideology is a matter of particular interest to me. At the same time, the nature of their containment and appropriation is also something that this paper wishes to examine. For this purpose, I will focus on *Das Nibelungenlied* and the three stories of *Arthurian Romances* by Chretien de Troyes: "Erec and Enide", "Yvain" and "Lancelot."

To begin with, it seems appropriate to recount the anomalous images of these female characters: their actions and behaviours that make them subversive to the heroic ideals of the time. Simultaneously the processes of appropriation and containment that mark their portrayals will also be addressed. At this point, it is needless to state the obvious fact that heroic ideals are supported by patriarchal structures of society.

Das Nibelungenlied presents us with women characters who resist contemporaneous expectations. Both Kriemhild and Brunhild acquire the unconventionality by dint of their actions, as well as their individuality. They are "different" because they do not conveniently fit into the contemporary ideals of womanhood. Time and again they challenge those expectations with their actions, and reaction against them.

Both Kriemhild and Brunhild throw their first challenge against the dominant patriarchal structure by resisting marriage. Regarding a proposal of marriage, Kriemhild responds to her mother in this manner: "Why do you talk to me of a man, dear Mother? I intend to stay free of a

warrior's love all my life." (18). Kriemhild realizes how men's love is pernicious to the essential beauty of women, and therefore she remarks: "I mean to keep my beauty till I die, and never be made wretched by the love of any man" (18). She refuses to be an object of a man's sexual desire, for she understands its consequence: men's love makes women "wretched." Although unmarried and young, Kriemhild seems to know how women's bodies are exploited and made jaded by men under the sanction of marriage.

This notion is reinforced when the narrator describes the physical change of Brunhild after the bed-scene, when she is deceptively subdued by Siegfried and Gunther: "And now Gunther and the lovely girl lay together . . . But from his intimacy she grew somewhat pale, for at love's coming her vast strength fled so that now she was no stronger than any other woman" (93). This provocative scene also shows the process of appropriation of anomalies in women by men. Similar to Kriemhild, Brunhild shows her subversive traits by expressing her unwillingness to submit to the marriage institution (62). One of the most notable examples of her subversive qualities is illustrated in this compelling scene where she resists her husband from consuming her body. This act clearly marks her as arrogant and unwomanly (92). According to the narration:

[Gunther] tried to win her by force, and tumbled her shift for her, at which the haughty girl reached for the girdle of stout silk cord that she wore about her waist, and subjected him to great suffering and shame: for in return for being balked of her sleep, she bound him hand and foot, carried him to a nail, and hung him on the wall. She had put a stop to his love-making! As to him, he all but died, such strength had she exerted (88).

She is known as an Amazonian-type of woman and hence, unwilling to submit to the traditional role of women assigned by the patriarchal structure.

Brunhild is distinctive in her physicality. She is described as an eccentric type: "Brunhild's strength was clearly tremendous, for they brought a heavy boulder to the ring for her . . . of monstrous size—twelve lusty warriors could barely carry it!—and this she would always hurl after throwing her javelin" (66). It is not only her beauty that has attracted Gunther, but also her reputation as one who has defeated many brave

warriors, has served as a catalyst. Her extraordinary might is also evident when we see her flinging powerful Siegfried out of the bed when he tries to subdue her for Gunther (92).

While Brunhild possesses many manly traits, Kriemhild is seemingly attributed with essential womanly traits. Her sensitive heart characterized by her frequent weeping tendency at the slightest remembrance of her beloved husband, her proficiency in making clothes, her sisterly love, her proper courtly behaviour serve as evidences to this claim. But she has manly traits too. It is the latter aspect that is a matter of worry to the patriarchal society.

Her inclination towards personal property and revenge are two such subversive traits that create problems for the patriarchy. Kriemhild's rigorous claim on the personal property is something that situates her in a different position than other conventional womanhood of that time. This characteristic could also be seen as her aspiration of power, knowing that power is contingent upon economic strength.

There is power in having money that these women characters seem to understand. Brunhild too insists upon retaining her own personal property, realizing the power of wealth (74). Brunhild insists, "I mean to keep my money and I trust *myself* to squander my inheritance" (74). But society presupposes danger in women's possession of property as Hagen remarks, "No man who is firm in his purpose should leave the treasure to a woman. By means of [Kriemhild's] gifts she will bring things to the point where the brave sons of Burgundy will bitterly regret it" (148). Nevertheless, both women insist upon the right of owning their property, and Kriemhild makes it a reason for her enmity against the Burgundies.

Both these characters have a strong inclination towards revenge, which situates them in a position that is threatening to the patriarchal heroic tradition. The poet's narrative is suggestive: "Sixty brave men armed themselves, bent thus treacherously on slaying Hagen, the most valiant knight, in order to gratify Kriemhild" (220). It is due to her vengefulness that a valiant knight like Hagen has to see his end. Kriemhild uses a few ploys to attain her goal: her "tears," her "money" and her "words", the "verbal ability." It is because of Kriemhild's persuasion that truce cannot be

made between the Hunnish warriors and the Burgundies. Her act of preventing the warriors from making the truce can be seen as an example of subversive attitude to the heroic ideals (260). She binds Ridegar with an oath and tricks him to comply with her wishes. In this case, she is employing an indirect ploy to wield power. This compels Margrave Rudigar to compromise with his heroic ideals. In great agony, mixed with regret he states,

I must sacrifice all the esteem, the integrity, and breeding that by the grace of God were mine! . . . I invited them to my own home and offered them meat and drink with friendly mien, and I also bestowed gifts upon them—how shall I now conspire to kill them? People might come to think that I was turning craven (267).

A further subversive trait is shown to its extreme extent when Kriemhild takes arms in her hand and slays Hagen, "the best knight that ever bore shield" (290-1). Moreover we see that because of the feud between these two ladies, many noble knights have to lose their lives.

Patriarchy demands the submission of women, whereas these women refuse to play that role. The portrayal of such anomalous women characters not only disrupts and challenges the heroic ideals within the stories, it also threatens the dominant ideology of the time. Therefore, there is a tendency to appropriate and contain women's power.

The process of appropriation and containment is evident in the text when both Brunhild and Kriemhild's bodies are appropriated by coercing them into marriage. In Brunhild's case, men even use a deceptive ploy to appropriate her body. Siegfried and Gunther's homosocial bond, their plot and treachery play crucial roles in the process of appropriation of Brunhild. This reminds the readers of Eve Sedgwick's telling formulation in relation to *homosocial bonding*. According to her, homosocial bonds between men maintain, even enhance patriarchal structures. In this structure of society, the status of women and the gender roles are inscribed through the bonds between men (Rivkin & Ryan-).

Both women are denied their personal property. But all these moves, rather than solving the problems, create greater problems. As we see, it is

because of Siegfried and Gunther's heinous plot that the complication arises. The reason Siegfried dies is because he angers Brunhild in the process of appropriating her. It is also the cause of the feud between Kriemhild and Brunhild that leads to the tragic end. Therefore, often it is apparent that the appropriation process is itself subversive to the heroic ideals.

This idea is best exemplified in the final scene when the ultimate appropriation is conducted by the father figure Hildebrand, who slays Kriemhild to save the patriarchal structure of society. But this act, instead of saving the heroic ideals, destroys it to a great degree. For the moment he raises his hand on a woman, the heroic ideal is debased. The appropriation process itself is more subversive to the heroic ideals than these women. The ending of the text is noteworthy, "I cannot tell you what happened after this, except that knights and ladies, yes, and squires too, were seen weeping there for the death of dear friends" (291). The sight of knights and noble squires weeping suggests their descent into womanly behaviour. Therefore, what we see is an undoing of heroism, a mark of reduced masculinity.

It seems necessary now to shift to Chretien de Troyes' women characters, not only because his women characters are subversive, but also because it will give us an insightful comparison. Similar to *Nibelungenlied*, these women characters' actions and behaviour not only separate them from ideal womanhood of the time, but also position them as threatening to the heroic ideals. At the same time their subversive characteristics are not as blatant as those of Kriemhild and Brunhild. Often they take an indirect path to wield power. The indirect path is usually marked by trickery and manipulation. Their beauty and sexuality are often used as weapons to manipulate the situation to their advantage.

In "Erec and Enide," the potential threatening characteristic of women is implied at the beginning when Sir Gawain warns King Arthur about conducting the ritual of hunting the white stag:

He who can kill the white stag by right must kiss the most beautiful of the maidens of your court, whatever may happen. Great evil can come from this, for there are easily five hundred damsels of high lineage here, noble and wise daughters of kings; and there is not one who is not favourite of some valiant and

bold knight, each of whom would want to contend, rightly or wrongly, that the one who pleases him is the most beautiful and the most noble (37-8).

This caution from Gawain, apart from revealing the influence of women over men, also expresses the threatening position that they hold against the continuation of chivalric traditions. This postulation is reinforced further when we see that as soon as Erec is married to Enide, he loses all his knightly vigor. The narrator relates,

Erec was so in love with her that he cared no more for arms, nor did he go to tournaments. He no longer cared for tourneying; he wanted to enjoy his wife's company, and he made her his lady and his mistress . . . All the nobles said that it was a great shame and sorrow that a lord such as he once was no longer wished to bear arms (67).

A negative ramification of women's sexuality and love is shown here. Women's love is so dangerous that through it a woman can attain power over men, to the extent that she becomes his "lady" and "mistress." This extraordinary love makes Erec shift the norm of adventure, as he decides to take his wife as a companion, instead of any other squire or knight (70).

During the adventure, Erec strives to silence her, while she warns him of possible danger, and thus ruins his adventure. Each time she warns Erec, she is violating the heroic ideals in the sense that she is participating in the act of saving him. According to the heroic ideals, adventure should be abrupt and sudden. So in this sense, women's words are connoted as subversive. The command of silence is the act of appropriation to which Enide, time and again, shows her resistance—even if unintentionally—driven by her essential traits: caring, loyalty and love towards her husband.

In "Yvain" similar danger is suggested in woman's sexuality and love. As we see due to Laudine's love, Yvain gives up adventure and tourneying. The conversation between Laudine and Yvain is useful to show the nature of power women hold over men:

'My lady, it is no lie to state that there is no power so potent as the one that commands me to consent to your will in everything . . .'
'Now I would gladly know what gives you the conviction to consent to my wishes without

question . . . sit down now and tell me what has overpowered you.'

'My lady,' [Yvain] said, 'the power comes from my heart, which commits itself to you; my heart has given me this desire.'

'And what controls your heart, good sir?'

'My eyes, my lady.'

'And what controls your eyes?'

'The great beauty I see in you.'

'And what wrong has beauty done?'

'My lady, such that it makes me love' (320)

Again women's sexuality and men's attraction towards it endow women with power that is ruinous to heroic ideals. Furthermore, this scene also shows the manipulative nature of women: how women by manipulating their "words" influence men to their advantage. Manipulation is a device that women use to exert their power and this characteristic is no exception to Lunete. By using her verbal ability, she manipulates the situation of Laudine and Yvain and weaves their wedding plot. Her life-saving aid to Yvain in the crucial situation when Esclados' vassals are hunting for him puts her in a more powerful position than our hero. This event also challenges the heroic ideals of men, as she performs the role of the saviour of man.

The appropriation and containment process is evident when she falls victim to male violence, as Laudine's seneschal and his friends accuse her of treason and demand that she be burned (Armstrong-38). On the other hand, the appropriation of Laudine's sexual and verbal power is done by the homosocial relationship between Gawain and Yvain, as it leads Yvain back to the life of adventure and tourneying, the practices of heroic tradition. Sir Gawain insists,

A man must be concerned with his reputation before all else! Break the leash and yoke and let us, you and me, go to the touneys, so no one can call you a jealous husband. Now is not the time to dream your life away but to frequent tournaments, engage in combat, and joust vigorously, whatever it might cost you . . . See to it that our friendship doesn't end because of you, dear companion, for it will never fail on my account (326-7).

In response to women's indirect and subtle way of exerting power, men too employ a similar ploy of appropriation.

In "Lancelot", Queen Guenevere indirectly manipulates the situation in her favor. It is for the love of the queen, that Lancelot sacrifices his honour and rides the cart of shame. The narrator relates, "Love, who held sway within his heart, urged and commanded him to climb into the cart at once. Because love ordered and wished it, he jumped in; since love ruled his action, the disgrace did not matter" (212). Her manipulative nature is evident when she guides Lancelot in the tournament according to her will.

From the above discussion it is noticeable that *Nibelungenlied* is a little bit more straightforward in its approach to women's power, although its women characters do at times, like Chretien's female characters, take indirect measures to exert power. In this sense, all these female characters fit into Joan Ferrante's historical formulation of medieval women:

With limited opportunities to exercise real power over their own or others' lives, women in medieval literature and sometimes in real life find subtle or hidden ways to exercise such power, to manipulate people and situations . . . Their sphere is more limited, their tools more subtle. Outwardly many accept the role society expects them to play, that of the quiet figure with no public voice, but secretly they subvert it often to serious effect. They rely for the most part on their wits, on intrigues, oaths, hidden promises—or the practice of magic, which involves cleverness and specialized knowledge (213).

Ferrante's historical formulation indicates that the secretly subversive female characters of these literatures do carry some resemblance with actual womanhood of the time. From the evidences laid out so far, it can be stated that all the female characters that have been discussed, to this point, fit well with the secretive type referred by Ferrante's assertion, as ones who covertly subvert the expected role assigned to them.

It is not only the subversive quality of women that represents the historical phenomenon, but also the processes of their appropriation which bears more direct historical relevance. As Grace Armstrong suggests,

If courtly narrative often shows women being abused, imprisoned, and spied on, one reason is that male lust in these fictions has not been controlled by societal sanctions. A second

equally compelling reason is that Christian teachings hold woman to be very dangerous in a way that could be seen to justify repressive behavior toward her (30).

The dominant ideology of the medieval time encourages such appropriation of women's power, as women were regarded as the descendents of Eve, "the devils gateway." It is for this reason in *Nibelungenlied*, women are called "she-devil" when they try to exert power over men. The theological justification of appropriation is deployed here, which is an effect of the education of "patristic misogyny" (Armstrong-32).

But the claim that these subversive women and the processes of appropriation bear historical relevance cannot be established without addressing the discrepancies between Chretien's romances and the *Nibelungenlied*. While Chretien's female characters pretend to be receptive to the assigned roles, *Nibelungenlied*'s female characters show insurgencies right from the very start, although they are eventually forced to accept the roles assigned to them. This difference indicates that the genres of these works play an important role in subject formation. This is not to refute Ferrante's claim that these women represent historical women, rather it is only to suggest that the way these women characters are represented depends largely on the genre of writing into which they are incorporated. Not only that, the nature of their appropriation and containment is also determined by the genre. Moreover as we see, the containment and appropriation process in these Arthurian romances are not as subversive to the heroic ideals as we have seen in *Das Nibelungenlied* through Hildebrand's slaying of Kriemhild, although a subtle readjustment and negotiation of heroic ideals in the appropriation process is evident. These discrepancies of subject matters can be grasped by illustrating the generic differences of these two disparate but similar works: the genre of courtly romance and heroic epic.

It is also important to recognize the intrinsic connection between genre and dominant ideology. For no matter how innovatively ambitious a literary genre may be, it mirrors the dominant beliefs. In this sense, we are supposed to get a glimpse of—if not the womanhood of the time—at least, the dominant perception about them. Susan Crane's telling formulation about the genre of

romance in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* is noteworthy in this context:

. . . the sex-gender system is inherently and intensely ideological. Convictions about gender underlie choices in every social context . . . This is the quality of gender that helps to situate romances in their historical moment. Romances place themselves in their time less through referentiality of their representation than through their participating in forming, playing out, and disputing interrelated beliefs that have meaning for their authors and audiences. The romance genre is a particular vehicle among many for the expression, perpetuation, and critique of gender in the culture as a whole. Considered as social forces, genders and genre partake of ideology in their capacity to constitute social identities through powerful appeals to imagination (6).

Seen in the light of the above lens, the reason we have women characters indirectly subverting the dominant beliefs in Chretien's romances becomes clear: the genre of romance is engaged "in forming, playing out, and disputing interrelated beliefs" of the historical setting. The fact that this romance genre is subtle about representing powerful women suggests that it is engaged in establishing, as well as revising contemporary ideas about gender. Another plausible factor is that the romance genre is mostly patronized by women, which makes its representations favourable to women, but of course, within the spirit of secrecy. The narrator's assertion in the opening passage of "Lancelot" serves as evidence to this plausibility:

Since my lady of Champagne wishes me to begin a romance, I shall do so most willingly, like one who is entirely at her service in anything he can undertake in this world . . . I am not one intent upon flattering his lady . . . I will say, however, that her command has more importance in this work than any thought or effort that I might put into it (207).

Such assertions endow women with power, but it also reflects what Ferrante has suggested earlier: "an indirect and hidden way of exercising power." From such position it is not at all surprising that the created images of women will also be indirectly subversive. Crane argues, "despite this hierarchized conception of gender difference, romance also represents gender contrarily as

unstable, open to question, and in danger of collapse" (13).

In contrast to Chretien's romances, *Nibelungenlied* belongs to the genre of heroic epic. Nevertheless it contains the influence of French courtly romance. Therefore, despite formal similarities, there reside some differences in ethos. Consequently, while *Nibelungenlied* represents the treatment of women in the Germanic heroic tradition, Chretien's works represent them in the tradition of French courtly romance. The result is the discrepancies that have been shown above: while Chretien's courtly romances represent powerful women who indirectly control men's actions and manipulate their situation covertly, the women in the Germanic tradition go to the extreme extent of taking up arms to retaliate. In this sense, both Chretien's women and *Nibelungenlied's* women are similar to each other based on their respective historical context. But the difference is also enormous: unlike Chretien's women, *Nibelungenlied's* women also take arms when they need to retaliate. This reflects the ideological differences between these two generic traditions.

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