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The Voiceless Medieval Woman

The preface to *The Eighth Edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature* states that the selection of works provided is meant to show “not only gradual development, continuity, and dense internal echoes” in history, “but also of sudden change and startling innovation” (xvii). In each respect do the works featured reflect the roles and expectations of women up to the 1400s: there are consistencies and sudden transformations as years and perspectives pass on.

In *Beowulf*, the female presence is almost mute. The chief female character is, perhaps tellingly, the “monstrous hell-bride,” Grendel’s mother (58). After her son’s murdering spree is brought to an end and he is slaughtered by the epic’s masculine, ideal warrior, Grendel’s mother vows revenge. She is a peculiarity in the story—she is one of the few female characters and the only one with significant effect on the story, yet she is nameless and can be viewed both as a vicious monster and as a pitiable figure. Grendel’s mother is the antithesis of a lady at the time—she plays the man’s game of revenge, and she kills one of the king’s closest friends in an attack that shows she is on par with a male warrior (59). Her blood is so scorching that it melts Beowulf’s sword; thus she is “hot-bloodied” in Shakespearean terms and given to conflict as opposed to passive acceptance (65). She is not willing to allow strictly men to handle matters of violence.

Marie de France’s *Lanval* shows a very different portrayal of women by showing an ideal and poignant contrast. The fairy queen is “whiter than hawthorn blossom” (105-106). She has characteristic gray eyes, a feature that appears as a trope throughout works in the time period (567). The fairy queen has “slender flanks” and a “shapely figure” with blonde, curly hair (562-567). Her physical description is given great attention, yet her past and personality are not emphasized in the poem. She seems rather like a prize, an otherworldly treasure to be found. This ideal is juxtaposed by the example of Queen Guinevere, who shows another type of woman: one who challenges the loyalty of men and has an accusatory disposition (261-272). Lanval says that the fairy queen is better because she possesses “beauty of both figure and face, in god breeding and bounteous grace” (291-300). It is her body and her manners that make her a good woman. The wealth of her two aristocratic maidens reveals the importance of luxury and how the good life of riches can be linked to a magical realm—both would appear equally likely to happen to the common person in the 1100s and beyond (54-66). Women are a possession earned through service to the king, given like land to all good knights; Lanval is the exception tand the fairy queen is his post-due prize (17-20).

While Queen Guinevere plays the role of a temptress in *Lanval*, she is a minor character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Her main purpose seems to be to further accentuate the beauty and magnificence of King Arthur’s court: she has “eyes of grey” and a woman “seemlier” than all in the world (81-84). It is next to this beautiful woman that Sir Gawain sits during the Green Knight’s ominous appearance. Thus Queen Guinevere is chiefly there as a decoration or trophy of the King, but there is a character who serves as a temptress—and the whole of the poem can be viewed as an unfolding of Morgan le Faye’s plans. Through Lady Bertilak, Morgan le Faye is able to tempt Sir Gawain’s flesh; through Lord Bertilak she is able to tempt Sir Gawain’s spirit and courage. Sir Gawain’s failures represent the failures of the court, and as such, through the work she is able to teach King Arthur a lesson in humility. What is unique about Morgan le Faye in this poem is that, unlike in *Beowulf* and in *Lanval*, and even in contrast to Queen Guinevere within the same work, this woman is powerful. Herein is a shift to a more prominent woman, one who can humiliate men and trick them into revealing their *own* personal failures.

Following *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Late-Medieval society can be depicted through the various perspectives of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. The Wife of Bath is depicted as jealous and deaf in the “The General Prologue” (446). Her depiction does not cast her in too positive of a light; at the time, she would have appeared as improper and disturbing. Despite mourning her fifth husband, she wears flamboyant scarlet red leggings (456-459). She represents the gap-toothed woman who knows the ways of romance (476-478).

Through the Wife of Bath’s tale, she creates a story that betrays the silence of *Beowulf* and other selected works. Playing greatly on the fears of Medieval men, she creates a strong female lead among a cast of characters largely female. Her fairy queen, like *Lanval*’s is in control, but even more so and on a different level. Rather than a prize to be won for her beauty, when the fairy queen makes her first appearance, Chaucer writes, “a fouler wight ther may no man devise”(1005). The chief focus of the tale is the knight’s quest to find out what women want most of all. Some women want riches, others honor, and the list goes on to mention pleasure, lust, flattery, independence, freedom from judgment, and endless praise (931-950). The fairy queen, however, reveals the answer: women want power over their husbands (1043-1045).

The sum of these works is a growing depiction of women as too powerful to not be controlled, willed by passion and yet capable of outwitting men. Women with pale skin and gray eyes are considered otherworldly and beautiful, with blonde and curly hair falling under a secondary type of beauty. Among these works, there is a striking absence of a good average woman—as though only from a magical being could there be a woman depicted as truly virtuous. Alison in the Miller’s Tale is the closest to an average woman featured in the works, but she is manipulative and cast unfavorably little more than a purely sensual creature. Even the strong fairy queen depicted in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s tale, is depicted as magical and, at the conclusion, a beautiful woman. The maiden raped by the knight is not mentioned again later in the poem; her role is that of a prop and plot device (892-894). This betrays the bitter truth that each author recognizes: women have been rendered voiceless. These stories speak as “internal echoes” from generations that have long-since faded away, and the echoes of the men are much louder than the quiet voices of the women ringing through the often hallowed history of Medieval literature.