Women in the Medieval Period

Women in the Medieval period often face the stereotypical view of being weak, unnoticed, and having no weight behind their voice. However, a look into the works of writers like Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue* sheds light on the roles of women in higher ranking, in the courts, and of high social status carrying a significant amount of weight. These women carried weight in decision making and provided a voice of reason in the light of “men’s business”. However, these stereotypes can be seen to be apparent when it comes to women that are not in this ranking or high social status. Peasant women take the brunt of being unintelligent, weak, and to not be trusted. Because of this, although women will stand up for other women, justice to women in most of these tales can be seen to be lacking. Women in the Medieval period are oppressed but, in most cases, can be shown to express women of sovereignty, women of reason, and women of societal pinpoints.

Women who did not hold positions of power in the Medieval period were often oppressed and experienced an immense amount of injustice. In *Wife of Bath’s Tale and Prologue*, the knight who rapes an unnamed woman, who from contextual details can be assumed to be someone of lower social status, is brought before a court of women to convict him of his crime, which was death. The rape victim is not outright described as a peasant woman but can be inferred by the textual content. Guinevere and the ladies of the court do not reprimand the unnamed knight in his wrongdoings probably because of the social status of the raped woman, “He saugh a mayde walkynge hym biform/Of which mayde anon, maugree hir heed,” (Chaucer 508). However, due to the social status of both the raped woman and the knight, mercy is given to the knight in the form of being given a task that he succeeds in while the woman is left with injustice to the horrors that have happened to her. The rape of the woman and the penalty that the knight serves shows the queen, Guinevere, swayed by the position of the raped woman. Since the woman is not of high ranking, the queen shows mercy to the knight. If the knight had committed such a crime to a woman of status, Guinevere would have been most outraged and the punishment more severe. There is a call to question of why the queen was so merciful and saved a knight that was convicted of such a crime, “If a noble lady had been attacked the queen’s conduct would have been most outrageous; clearly she was not motivated by the desire to avenge an affront: in that case she would simply have allowed the law of the land to exact the extreme penalty.” (Huppe 379). While women of lower social status were often not given a voice, the women of high social status were held to high expectations and often faced a double standard against their male counterparts. The adulterous men were tolerated while adulterous women were always punished, “According to Jacques Rossiaud, in Medieval Europe female adultery, and only female adultery ‘was always very rigorously punished’.” (McDougal 206). The knight of Wife of Bath’s Tale is excused, and his adulterous ways are tolerated, while the raped woman is not punished by any adultery but punished in the form of injustice for the crimes of the knight.

On the off-hand, woman that did hold positions of power or had higher social status in the Medieval period can be described as often the voice of reason among her male counterparts. For example, the female characters in Willehalm are important to the story and to the outcomes of all the men’s fates. Unlike the average thought of woman being an object that only have use of their bodies for influence over men, these women have voices. All the women of Willehalm are of noble birth and hold positions of power, are the voice of negotiation, and mediators of conflict. The woman also holds strong roles between their lords, husbands, and brothers (Bennett). The court that the knight was tried by was a court of woman, that were to decide his fate of his crime. As previously stated, it is assumed the raped woman was of lower social status/a peasant and there is no motivation by the queen or her subjects of the court to avenge someone of their levels. The court system in “The Assembly of Ladies” is a utopian court system of the best form of law and order. The gender of the court describes fantasy or and idealization and is noteworthy. However, it questions the capability of the royal court to establish justice to all petitioners. “Furthermore, Loyalty’s postponement of her verdict at the end of the poem shows that even a court run by the best officers is unable to assure justice for all petitioners. This disjunction calls into question the royal court’s ability to dispense justice at all.” (Wendy 21). Although these women in power are voices of reason and decision making, they are only as reliable and just in their actions if she fulfils the expectations of her male counterpart, “She is ‘true’ or ‘false’ insofar as she fulfils the expectations of her lover, who articulates the expectations of her society in general.” (Stephen 88). The queen of The Wife of Bath’s Tale can be seen to hold the power of holding the knight’s conviction in her hands, “I grante thee lyf if thou kanst tellen me/What thyng is it that women moost desiren.” (Chaucer 508). While the raped woman of Bath’s Tale seeks justice with the king, the queen and her court are responsible for the conviction of the knight and can only be as convicting as her male counterparts would expect of her to be.

A woman’s sovereignty in high social status is a force in the eyes of worldly power and often trumps law and order. For example, the in Lincolnshire’s Guild, women could take part in the guild independently and freely. They were able to partake in electing officials, feasts, and meetings. However, there was an expectation the women followed the strict rules of the guild for allowance in, never holding an official position (Royal Holloway, University of London). These women were able to be free and independent but had to be held to the expectations of woman in the eyes of a man. Moreover, a poem previously mentioned called *The Assembly of Ladies* is a poem about an assembly of five ladies that present their complaints against men in a court. It shares a theme, like in most of Chaucer’s work, of women wronged or oppressed in their fortune with love. Although these women’s sovereignty was considered this worldly power, in order to maintain this power, the sovereign punishment must reflect without radical severity, “However, examining the history of the concept of sovereignty and its evolution, one finds surprising fragility. Sovereignty is based upon representation and perception, and is therefore vulnerable in regard to its audience.” (McBride 59). The women in the court of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* provide mercy but are under the assumption that their riddle will not be answered and the knight will face punishment regardless, however this is not the case as the knight does find the answer to the riddle, “This is to sey, what women love moost/ Withinne his brest ful sorweful was the goost.” (Chaucer 509). The court of *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* can only be as powerful in its sovereignty as their male counterparts allow and their punishment and repercussions for other’s are not radical in their severity.

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* explores the roles of those in higher social status and ranking and those of lower social ranking and status. Women in lower social status and ranking are often oppressed and are not given a voice nor receive justice for the wrongdoings that are bestowed upon them. Women in higher social status and ranking are the voice of reason, have power, are mediators and negotiators. However, the women of this status are only able to use their sovereignty and voice of power as their expectations as women allow them in relation to their male counterparts. The power of woman is only as powerful as the men she is surrounded by allows her. In conclusion the sovereignty of women and its ability to trump law and order is only as powerful if used correctly, sparingly and without radical severity in order to maintain that power.

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