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F*** from the Start: Misogyny in Medieval Literature**

**by
Amanda Dee**

Winner

2015 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

F***** from the Start: Misogyny in Medieval Literature

It all started at the very beginning. In *Genesis*, when Eve was created from the rib of Adam and when she bit into the forbidden fruit, the literary character of Eve determined the perception of women who would be born hundreds of years after the biblical story was told -- possibly until the end of eternity. About 1,600 years after this story allegedly originated, Joseph Swetnam decried the rib, the woman, as “a crooked thing, good for nothing else.” He blames Eve as representative of womankind for “man’s fall” (Greenblatt 1651). Interpretations like this, of the woman as the sinful servant to mankind, perpetuated misogyny and violence against women. Angela Jane Weisl explains this in the context of the medieval era: “medieval women inhabited a violent world” in which “women were at the mercy of laws which permitted them to be battered” (115-116). Setting them on the literary stage where Eve also stands, Geoffrey Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* includes three satirical portraits told by medieval women. Whether or not Chaucer intended his characterization of these women to critique their treatment, as Weisl says, “...they reflect narratives that real medieval women tell and incorporate accordingly the threats women face” (117). The prioress in Chaucer’s “The Prioress’s Tale” shares a story of a medieval woman within the Catholic Church, but, more tellingly, it reflects misogyny so powerful it transcended hatred and impossible contradictions.

To find a reference point for hatred, consult the canon of English medieval literature: anti-Semitism runs rampant through its pages. Kathleen M. Hobbs cites this hatred in medieval history: Even when most Jews were expelled from Christian-dominated areas in England or concentrated in Jewries, Christians, especially clergymen, did everything in their power to ensure Jews remained Others. In 1286, a bishop excommunicated a group of Christians who attended a Jewish wedding. Churchmen, despite the scarcity of synagogues, feared Christian passerby’s

would overhear Jewish prayer and risk “contamination” (193). Chaucer cites this history in “The Prioress’s Tale”: “the serpent Sathanas that hath in Jewes herte his waspes nest” (Chaucer 558-559), the symbol of evil, resides in the hearts of Jews. They “conspyre” (Chaucer 565) against the innocent son of the widow. They “kitte his throte” (Chaucer 571). Then, all the Jews are “heng” (Chaucer 634). Yet, the hatred, or at least the construed inferiority of women, was so intense it didn’t discriminate between Jews and Christians.

To show this indiscrimination, Charlotte Newman Goldy sketches the possible relationships between Jewish and Christian women through the 13th century “non-great” (228) Jewish woman Muriel of Oxford. When David attempted to divorce Muriel on the grounds of “infertility,” the bet din, the rabbinic court, rejected his request (Goldy 228-229). In an unprecedented case, David appealed the case to the royal court and divorced Muriel. Thus, Muriel was thrown to the fringes with other divorced women of both denominations. Goldy tracks Muriel’s web of relationships through loan transactions and royal documents and questions to whom infertile and/or divorced women, regardless of religious affiliation, she would turn for sympathy (229-230). In Oxford, there were no exclusive spaces: Christian and Jewish women would carry out tasks like food preparation in “overlapping space” (232). Regardless of their religion, women were subjugated to the private sphere. Goldie thus argues Muriel most likely would have turned to Christian as well as Jewish women in her time of desperation, alluding to the commiseration of women that transcended religious discrimination.

As Muriel of Oxford illustrates, women, in a sense, were in it together. They all were subjected to violence and hatred in this world of men. Hobbs argues the anti-Semitism in “The Prioress’s Tale” “doubles for the antifeminism consistently and openly leveled at women...” (185). In this realm, they also were subjected to the pushes and pulls of opposite ideals. In

contrast to Eve, the Virgin Mary embodies purity, innocence (Hobbs 184). Eve was “cursed” to the duty of childbirth while Mary is “blessed” as the virgin mother of Christ (Hobbs 184). Women, thanks to these depictions, must be virgins, as Howard Bloch describes, “who not only has never slept with a man, but also has never desired to do so,” (93) while the men and women around them sexualize them. Eve’s association with sin of the flesh dumped womankind into the category of materialistic, the opposite of medieval values. The Virgin Mary is blessed because she is not of the flesh; she is immaculate. Yet, women are of the flesh, they are seen as “ornamentation” (Bloch 42). Bloch says, “Their made-up bodies are not more beautiful” (39) because attention to their bodies draws attention to their corruption. Women not only are deemed the rib, an insignificant and replaceable part of man, but they are also forced to exist in ideal purgatory. Bloch articulates this: “The realm of esthetics is theologized with the result that whatever belongs to the realm either of the feminine or the esthetic is devalued within an ontological perspective according to which everything conceived to exist beyond the flesh, and thereby gendered masculine, alone has a claim to full Being” (46).

In this ideal purgatory, Chaucer begins his tale with a prologue referencing the mother’s “brest” (Chaucer 468). Women of the Church felt the weight of the paradox of femininity especially. Hobbs explains, “For religious women, then, virginity became most valuable when it was maintained against all odds, resulting in an exchange of sexual violence for sacred violence” (123-4). This is why the prioress focuses her tale on what the Church strives for her to become: a virgin, male child. The only women in the tale besides its teller are the Virgin Mary and the widow, the mother of the murdered son. Since women are subjected to sin and inferiority from their birth, the prioress fixates on “the little clergeon, dead at the age of seven” who never “reached an age where desire or desirability would have been an issue” (Hobbs 191). In other

words, the innocent boy was set in time before Eve bit the apple, before she lost her virginity. The prioress, Hobbs says, “vents” her frustrations about this paradox for women in the Church and all women. The prioress as a literary spokesperson for women at this time resides on the pedestal of morality, the pedestal where women are forced to stand and embody humanity’s sin.

In contrast, the virgin boy is sinless, for he is blessed with a voice after the maliciously depicted Jews tried to take it away from him. The boy, however, ardently desires a more pedantic prayer for the Virgin Mary, which ultimately stains the morality he should represent. The prioress praises the widow for singing prayers for Mary to her son; yet, the boy recites and recites the “O alma redemptoris” in Latin until he memorizes it (Chaucer 642). Hobbs argues this dedication isn’t out of purity and good intention: “The clergeon offers praise to the Virgin in words he does not understand. The clergeon’s repetition of a Latin song does not signify knowledge; rather, it signifies only dutiful repetition” (192-3). This act is one of the most misogynistic in the tale: the “povre widwe” (Chaucer 586) who unconditionally loves her son and also rests on the same moral plane as virgins (Weisl 1-5) isn’t honored by her son. It is an ironic act of desire that God supposedly rewards (for, the fate of the boy—whether or not his soul ascended to heaven—is never explicitly revealed, Hobbs points out). Eve was punished for acting on fleshy desire; the boy is rewarded for acting on fleshy desire. Misogyny in this era (as it continues to do today) transcended logic.

Anti-feminine attitudes in the medieval era also transcended hatred, one of the most powerful and dangerous feeling of humankind. So, how could medieval women in literature and in real life win? They couldn’t. Weisl articulates this by saying the danger for women in literature was their materialism, their bodies. For women in religious literature, it was martyrdoms, sacrificing their bodies. Weisl adds, “For religious women, then, virginity became

most valuable when it was maintained against all odds, resulting in an exchange of sexual violence for sacred violence” (115). This sentiment is a classic, one that has passed the test of time – through the Romantic, Victorian, Modern, and even Post-Modern eras in England and around the globe.

“No one says, ‘I am a misogynist’” (Howard 47)

Men and women have oppressed women since the story of the first man and the first woman. It’s been justified again and again by one of the most dangerous sentences anyone can think or say: ‘We’ve always done it this way.’ The tale of the Garden of Eden may just be a story, but “art does not just ‘reflect’ life, it has a ‘normative reflect’ on it” (Weisl 116). Chaucer’s Canterbury women not only fail to address misogyny or at least tell a story without violence against women, but they also tell the “the most overtly violent tales,” illustrating “just how pervasive the narrative necessity of violence against women really is in medieval literature” (Weisl 117). This violence and misogyny is still considered necessary. In Afghanistan today, parents celebrate the birth of a boy and lament the birth of a girl. In Jenny Nordberg’s *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, an Afghan girl says, “What is the difference between men and women? In Afghanistan, it’s freedom.” This lack of freedom, of a voice, drives young girls to live bacha posh, to live as boys until they can no longer do so (Nordberg). Around the globe today, women are still shamed for revealing their bodies, their sinful skin. People still laugh about rape. We must interpret the origin story of humankind also as the origin story of misogyny because blindly appealing to tradition perpetrates oppression, pain, violence -- because oppression over women today may not be as visible, as bloody, as it is depicted in Chaucer’s tales, but it is still slitting throats and silencing the voices of women.

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