Overlapping female identities and feminine contexts in medieval romances

The manner in which amorphous female identities overlap and echo each other in Gawain and the Green Knight, The Wife of Bath's Tale and La Morte D'Arthur may appear to represent the ambiguity of distinguishable female personalities in romances beyond their status as ideological representations or roles in the story of the male hero. In these texts, however, the challenges that the hero is set by women imply that the men portrayed here are pawns in a larger scheme rather than an equal in any battle of the sexes, and the overlapping female identities are a result of them not understanding this wider femininecontext.

Geraldine Heng proposes this alternate context as an actual second ' feminine text' that can be found where the logic of the masculine, Gawain-focused narrative fails, as in the seemingly arbitrary rules of Morgan La Fey's game of exchanges. What initially appears like Gawain's story, with women serving only as representations of his motivations, becomes a struggle over him ' within the psychomania of a feminine narrative' that he does not understand. He wears the Virgin as a talisman on his shield at first, making her into an object to inspire him, but in the final confrontation with Morgan, the Virgin claims ' hir kny3t' (1769) from the sorceress, inverting the active and passive roles they had. This passage also clarifies that the struggle is between holy and heathen female representatives (one a part of Christian iconography, the other called ' goddess'), and that various female roles are also drawn into comparison by the text on many occasions. Morgan's plan is ultimately antagonistic towards Guinevere, but the Lady she uses as a ' ventriloquized double' is also caught in parallels with the queen. Guinevere is positioned near Gawain in court (109) in a scene very similar to his later seat

near the Lady (1003), and the description of the Lady as ‘ wener þen Wenore’ evokes Guinevere’s name so unmistakably that Griffith proposed the Lady to be a second, ‘ false Guenevere’ herself.

Paul Battles has analysed how editors have altered ‘ Þaȝ I were burde bryȝtest, þe burde in mynde hade’ (1283) or ‘ Though I were the most beautiful of ladies," the lady thought’, by changing ‘ I to ‘ ho’ and changing the second ‘ burde’ to ‘ burne’, so that the first encounter between Gawain and the Lady remains entirely from his perspective. This choice not only actively marginalises a female perspective, but prevents a significant moment of intercrossing knowledge, as the passage goes on to mention the specifics of the Green Knight’s challenge, which the Lady should not know. That moment hints at the connection of the Lady and Morgan that must have existed, and at a wider female conspiracy beyond Gawain. The Lady and Morgan are drawn into physical comparison in lines 950-69, as one is fresh and the other withered in equal amounts (‘ For if þe ȝonge watz ȝep, ȝolȝe watz þat oþer’) and this contrast is represented structurally by the equal balance of lines describing either. Despite these opposite appearances, their roles overlap through shifts in power, as the only female character who speaks, the Lady, is proven to be an instrument of Morgan’s wishes. Their respective roles within the narrative, within the accepted court system of society and on the margins, blur so that the purpose of Gawain’s challenge itself is confused by the interwoven ideological representations.

Some critics have decided that all Chaucer’s characters serve more to illustrate ideologies and moral positions, than as recreations of realistic interiority. D. W. Robertson imposed the same view on the Wife of Bath in

particular, declaring that ‘ Alisoun of Bath is not a ‘ character’ in the modern sense at all, but an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude.’ In ‘ Can We Trust the Wife of Bath?’, however, David Parker argues that she is written as a fallible individual who also represents a moral position, and there are clear contradictions in her character which arguably prove her to be the most human of all Chaucer’s pilgrims. Hers is the longest Prologue of all the Tales, allowing for disparities such as her fifth husband being called initially ‘ to me the mooste shrewe’ (505) and later kind enough to give her ‘ governance of hous and lond’ (814). Since she is not simply a representation of a moral argument, but instead a defined character, the reason for the parallels between her and the female characters of her tale cannot be as simple as women being indistinguishable beyond their societal roles. The queen setting a challenge for the knight mirrors the narrator herself challenging the male listeners, just as the hag’s conclusion that she can be ‘ good andtrewe’ (1243) as a wife if given governance in the marriage echoes the denouement of the Prologue, that Alisoun was ‘ kynde… and also trewe’ (823-5), with the necessary caveat ‘ so was he to me’.

Just as the hag consciously deceives the knight to impart a lesson by disguising herself, Alisoun deceives her audience by only revealing the information of her true appearance as the knight learns it rather than maintaining the garrulous style that leads to extended Ovid references. In a foreshadowing of the character’s mutability in the service of proving a lesson, the hag had previously appeared as twenty-four dancing young maidens, and his approach to them is described in the line ‘ toward the

whiche daunce hedrow ful yerne’(993) as eager, contrasting the repulsion felt by him towards the old hag in the line ‘ a fouler wight ther may no man devyse’(999). A man’s actions, hypothetical or literal, are emphasized in the descriptions of these female apparitions, as the way a man may choose to act towards them seemingly decides their importance. This emphasis of his actions demonstrates his journey towards choosing a lack of action at the end, and putting himself in his wife’s ‘ governance’ instead. The transformation of women already hints at a ‘ governance’ of nature and flexibility of roles beyond his knowledge, however. The enticing young maidens in a forest serve a different traditional role in chivalric tales (that of tempting the knight) than an old hag representing wisdom, and the woman’s active choice to embody both in addition to her actual appearance to teach the knight a lesson connects her to Alisoun as storyteller. They are both challenging him to discover what knowledge they already possess by confronting him with different overlapping female forms.

In Morte D’Arthur, Elaine of Corbin purposefully disguises herself as Guinevere, in a deliberately confusing seduction similar to Morgan la Fey’s deception of Gawain using the courtly role of the Lady. Due to this deception, Elaine encompasses both the female role typical of romances, the beautiful queen representing ideal Christian femininity, and the deceptive enchantment usually associated with marginal, otherized figures like Morgan le Fey or the scheming Dame Brisen who tricks Lancelot in this section. Even Elaine’s name connects her to another character within Morte D’Arthur, Elaine of Ascolat, who also loves Lancelot in vain and uses her body to barter with him. 8 Malory allows the reader to empathize with this more deceptive

Elaine by having the offspring of this union be the virtuous Galahad, and by having her appeal to the reader for understanding directly: ‘ A grete cause I have to love hym, for he hadde my madynhode’ (472/11: 9). This justification allows for greater understanding of their encounters outside of Lancelot’s misunderstanding, and echoes Malory’s defense of Guinevere’s adultery with Lancelot: ‘ she was a trew lover, and therefor she had a good ende’ (625/18: 25). She is also connected through imagery to the dove that greets Lancelot at the entrance of Pelles’ castle, as it has ‘ a little censer of gold’ in its mouth, while she has ‘ a vessel of gold betwixt her hands’ at first meeting. Being connected to an animal by a symbol of monetary value may appear dehumanising, but the biblical associations of a dove demonstrates that God and fate have selected her for this fateful union in a manner similar to the Spirit of God landing as a dove on Christ’s shoulder after his baptism to claim him 9 , validating her deception and emotional motivation as part of a larger scheme. The parallel may also connect her further to Guinevere: Elaine’s deception will soon be redeemed by her child, but Guinevere repents for her adultery with the piousness Malory details in later books.

While Elaine’s scheme may echo Uther previously fathering Arthur by pretending to be Ygraine’s husband in Book One, the consequences of this coupling arguably remain within the ‘ feminine context’ unknown to Lancelot. The female body of Elaine again shifts but this time into the role of mother through pregnancy, which she welcomes and uses to defend herself from his anger (‘ slay me not, for I shall have a son by thee that shall be the most noblest knight of the world’: appealing to his desire for an heir in order to manipulate him), rather than being a woman being drawn against her will

into a male plan to continue his lineage. The feminine context frames this as another challenge for the man where both the plan and outcome are beyond his reach, and although her father is aware of the prophecy, Malory emphasizes Elayne's love and that she was ' glad' to have him in her bed, prioritizing her emotions over thoughts of legacy. Siobhan M. Wyatt posits that another consequence, his regret over his initially violent outburst, ' prepares him for the necessary penitential mood of the Grail quest'. This interpretation may seem to reduce Elaine as a character, but by tying her body's mutability to the powers of fate which guides knights' quests, the feminine deception she embodies again becomes part of a wider scheme beyond Lancelot's understanding.

Female characters overlap and parallel each other because of how they are framed by fate or the narrative, but also because of their own actions in deliberately deceiving and challenging men. Rather than detracting from their individuality, therefore, these connections can portray the schemes of women as beyond the understanding of the male chivalric figure, hinting at the second ' feminine text' beneath the conventional focus of the genre.

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