

# The feigned power of women

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Courtly Love: A medieval European concept of nobly and chivalrously expressing love and admiration. To women, this was a life with a facade of power above men and men did all in their power to please. Perhaps there were positives, such as creating an overall respectable attitude toward women and providing a model for younger men on how to live, but it depicted some behaviors of men that are debatable.

In medieval literature, courtly love allows women to be on a figurative pedestal above men, however, upon closer examination, the texts of *The Miller's Tale*, *The Great Silkie of Shul Skerrie*, and *Le Morte d'Arthur* prove this ideology as completely fictitious. *The Miller's Tale*, the third story in William Chaucer's, *Canterbury Tales*, portrays a glaring example falsifying this ideal. Alison, the main woman in the story, is portrayed as having "[a] body like a weasel, slim and small...and certainly she had a wanton eye.

She believes she had control of her relationships when she exclaims after a wishful Nicholas grabbed her by the waist and begged for her love, " Upon my faith, you'll get no kiss from me! Why, let me go, stop, Nicholas..." Using her supposed supreme power over men as stated by courtly love, she believed that control of men and faithfulness to her husband was bolstered by refusing his advances. Nevertheless, Nicholas " spoke so fairly, offering so fast his all to her..." and somehow instantly won her love.

He quickly devised a plan to oust her husband from the house, allowing Nicholas to sleep with Alison, therefore turning the tables of control back to Nicholas, the man. Although Alison's intent was to retain control of Nicholas and have superiority over him, his yearnings for her reversed the structure of

power commonly known in courtly love. In the ballad, *The Great Silkie of Shule Skerrie*, the least control belongs to the woman.

A woman laments, " Little ken I my bairn's father, far less the land that he steps in. " *The Great Silkie*, a man on land and a seal in water, took advantage of a woman, while in the form of a man, and raped her. Showing that the woman had no control in the situation, the sexual desires of the man took precedence over the cautions of the woman. " It is not well, it is not well, indeed," she added.

Further adding fuel to the fire, he says, " Give to me my little young son. Not only does he refrain from apologizing for unduly raping her, but he also takes the child against the wishes of the woman. In this respect, the woman was completely taken advantage of, disregarded, and was subjected to whatever the man spoke or did, further signifying the erroneousness of woman reigning higher than men. The story *The Great Silkie of Shule Skerrie* shines a familiar hue like that of *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In the latter, King Uther has sexual longings for the Duke of Tintagel's wife, Igraine.

To fulfill this, he asks Merlin for help, and in return, Merlin asks for the child that will be born as a result. From the onset, the woman, Igraine, has unquestionably no power over the fate of the baby, losing any control in that regard. Merlin, in order help the King trick Igraine, says, " ye shall be like the Duke her husband..." In a blatant lie to Igraine, King Uther deceitfully changes forms and pretends to be the Dutchess' husband, who was killed off, and "...laid with Igraine more than three hours after (the Duke's) death.

By manipulating and conning others, King Uther essentially raped Igraine, being that she believed he was another man, and got away with it. After hearing of the Duke's death, Igraine "marveled who that might be that lay with her in likeness of her lord; so she mourned privily and held her peace," otherwise saying she got outsmarted and was used by King Uther. Although the concept of courtly love has noble meaning, it never could have existed.

Many of the ideals of courtly love foster respectable behavior for the young men of the time, but some notions prove to be too abstract to become a reality. The power of women as part of courtly love obviously proves to be a fantasy through these medieval texts. Desires of men will always triumph the facade of courtly love put in place to control the male gender.