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Deconstructing the Image of the Romantic Knight and Gender Power Relations in Medieval Art: From Glory to Misogyny

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Abstract. This paper investigates how the representation of knights in medieval art changed over time, from chivalrous symbols of heroism and honour, to embodiers of power, domination and misogyny. Early representations of knights depicted their role as defenders of the realm and virgins, while later works began hiring them as defenders of patriarchy and enforcers of gender inequality. The analysis is built on an in-depth research of illuminated manuscripts, frescoes and tapestries. The data helps us understand the representation of the knight through the lens of the social construction that placed women at the margins of the society and reinforced male authority. In relation to this, the ambivalence between the knight and the damsel is analysed, as well as the subsequent shift from the idealised knightly representation to an ambiguous and violent one. The analysis of the evolution of the knightly representation shows that the ideal image concealed the deeper societal and personal issues, the main being the subordination of women, and the role that art had in reflecting and legitimising this sexual oppression.

Keywords: Medieval art, knights, chivalry, gender power dynamics, misogyny

1. Introduction

The knight as idealised hero, loyal, brave and morally superior, seems to have been associated, from very early on, with images of the courtly figure painted on tapestries, portrayed in illuminated manuscripts and immortalised in magnificent frescoes. Surviving works of medieval art often depict knights as protectors of the realm and defenders of religious values with their association with the code of chivalry – a code of honour and duty – elevating them to an exalted status in both life and art. It's a tempting conclusion to stop here, however, as such images appear to show, if anything, a celebration of the knight whose image was not neutral but rather one that reinforced the gendered power structures and patriarchy that dominated medieval society. But a closer scrutiny leads us to a different path. As the medieval period progresses, we can observe a shift that subtly begins to complicate and challenge the image of the knight. While there are many works of medieval art that do continue to depict the ideal model of nobility, overall, as the medieval period wore on, a more morally ambiguous knight began to emerge. Knights were still powerful, but they continued to wield that power oppressively, particularly in their relationships with women. Such works highlight the ways in which knights, far from being symbols of virtue, became agents of power and control that reinforced models of subjugation toward women [1]. The shift from the knight as protector to a more morally ambiguous knight, far from being incidental, can be read as a critique of the chivalric code itself. The manner in which medieval art both constructs and reflects morals and mores, centred upon gender and power, thus takes on a particularly significant role.

2. Discussion

2.1. The Glory of the Knight in Medieval Art

The idealisation of the knight is meant to uplift, even to idealise. Courageous, loyal, morally superior to most people, knights appear in scenes of medieval art, from illustrated manuscripts to tapestries and frescoes, and are often depicted on artistic pedests, as champions of the realm and upholders of Christian values. In art that depict the Crusades, for example, knights are cast as Christendom's warriors, fighting the good fight against the 'infidel' forces who were (religiously) threatening the faith. In this way, the knight achieves the highest, most spiritual ranks. Not only is he a physical protector, he's a warrior who fights for God. This kind of glorification helps to obscure how many knights helped to uphold an oppressive, patriarchal society. And that's often

the case, because the same knight who would face deadly peril for 'the good fight' could also enforce a system of intricate social inequality. During the Middle Ages, a framework of patriarchy worked to constrain women to a subordinate, symbolic role that reinforced male power. While knights could be celebrated as courageous and morally superior men to many, there are plenty of examples of how the gendered system that they upheld meant that women were relegated to secondary and symbolic roles, if they were allowed at all. Male power was lauded, and female autonomy was dismissed. That's the more complicated story of chivalry. We can still celebrate the knight without ignoring the sexism and misogyny that he represents [2]. Figure 1 Illustrates how medieval European popular culture would celebrate knights as heroes, chivalric figures and gallant warriors – a representation, as discussed, that romanticised the lives of knights and, in doing so, obscured the social frameworks that upheld patriarchal values and reinforced the marginalisation of women socially and artistically.

Figure 1. Medieval knight in armour (Source:royalacademy.com)

2.2. The Role of Chivalry and Gender Expectations

In doing all these things, chivalry held knights to an idealised set of standards in their conduct towards women. Chivalry was often romanticised as a code of honour. It promised to be a courtly ethos of respect, especially in its treatment of women. For these reasons, chivalry was seen as an important element of medieval culture by Gothic romantics. In the popular imagination, chivalry promised ladylike protection and the dignity of womanhood. But a closer analysis of the Medieval's art reveals that medieval chivalry stiffened gender norms that presupposed a significantly diminished autonomy for women. Courtly love, as depicted in many medieval works of art, provides a prime example of this. In many medieval images, knights are often shown offloading their loyalty and service upon the noblewomen in their midst. In secular art, we frequently see knights rendering homage to noble vassals, often as part of a courtship ritual. In religious art, we see knightly figures converted through a dramatic act of dedication or devotion. In most of these images, the female figures are inert and passive. They are often presented as beautiful, pure and virtuous – but they are valued not for their own abilities or qualities but because they serve to inspire male rather than female greatness. The artistic representation of courtly love implies that a woman's only role is to be an object of male experience, and not a subject who can act [3]. The male is presented as the doer of deeds, while the female is reduced to the position of a passive, beautiful, virtuous cipher, who exists merely to motivate male heroics. Courtly love, while it can be sweet and romantic, was ultimately just another cultural rope that reflected the broader ideals of medieval patriarchy. In a worldview that elevates men to be the active agents of history, women exist merely as accessories to male ambition.

2.3. The Dichotomy of the Warrior and the Damsel

Figure 2. Damsel In Distress Painting (Source:pinterest.com)

Another image that recurs in medieval art is that of the knight and the damsel: men (knightly) saviours hovering over women (damselly) in danger. From manuscript illumination to works of sculpture, this image is rendered time and time again, almost in a formulaic fashion. It encodes a gendered power dynamic that sets up men as the powerful protectors, and women as the passive prey who need saving. While these scenes celebrate a hyper-masculine ideal of defending the weak, prevailing over the powerful and performing deeds of chivalry, they nonetheless infantilise women, turning them into helpless bystanders, beholden to the intervention of men for their fortunes to change [4]. For example, there are many works that depict knights saving women from various monstrous creatures and overcoming male assailants: through this motif, women are rendered constantly in need of saviours, and incapable of prevailing on their own. This dynamic reinforces the ideological construct of women as weak and dependent on male protectors, which was integral to the broader social structure that located men as the protectors and women as those who needed protection. The damsel-in-distress motif therefore works not only as a narrative, but as a visual counterpart to gendered power relations where male heroism is dependent on female passivity, and the women's reliance becomes a validation for the widespread subjugation of women. In Figure 2, this image of a knight rescuing a woman tied to a tree clearly illustrates the 'damsel-in-distress' motif described: the knight takes on the role of the protector, while the woman is helpless, depicting the gendered power dynamic that places men as the proactive and women as the passive [5].

3. The Shift from Glory to Misogyny

3.1. The Subtle Shift in Artistic Depictions of Knights

As the Middle Ages progressed, representations of knights began to subtly evolve, growing in nuance, dynamism and moral ambiguity. Works of art from the later Middle Ages feature knights not merely as figures of virtue, but as figures whose power is often used in perverse or even violent ways, particularly in relation to women. This shift in representation can reflect broader societal changes, particularly the questioning of feudal and chivalric hierarchies in the later medieval period. Artists focus on the violent underside hidden in the ideal of knighthood. As such, representations of medieval knights gain a new level of ambivalence and complexity during this period. Coercive scenes such as that depicted in Figure 3, in which a knight violently raises his sword above a naked, kneeling figure, reflect this increasing focus on the dark side of knighthood that grows in the period. The knight's sword was a physical manifestation of his power, though it was also symbolic of the broader power he could use to harass and oppress women and other marginalised groups. In addition to depicting knights as protecting maidens at risk, artists began to depict them as figures of violence, using their weapons violently and oppressively at the expense of their subjects [6]. The image exemplifies this shift in representation and the rise in ambivalence in depictions of medieval knights.

Figure 3. The Fall of Chivalry: A Knight's Brutality Towards a Defenseless Victim (Source: pxhere.com)

3.2. The Marginalization of Women in Medieval Art

The greater the knight's centrality in medieval art to power and superiority, the more passive and excluded the role became for women. Whereas earlier descriptions of courtly amour or chivalric piety might have elevated women to a symbolic high ground, later works tend to turn women into targets for male predation or trophy-holding. This exclusion manifests itself in paintings of knights who, rather than guardians, take over women either by kidnapping, forcing or violence. The ritualised revelling of knighthood in these pictures is tied up with the humiliation of women, and the misery or weakness of women can increase the knight's prestige and power [7]. Sometimes, they also depict women as a reward for a knight's courage or military victory, as evidence that women's worth was determined by the men around them, not by themselves. This depiction mirrors a remarkable transition in the public conception of gender, in which women's agency and autonomy were further dishonoured and represented in paintings less to embody the feminine good than to affirm the supremacy of men. Thus, the exclusion of women in medieval art speaks to more generally to institutions that attempted to oppress and box women into positions that bolstered the patriarchal status quo.

3.3. The Intersection of Power, Violence, and Gender

What the various permutations of the knight's image in medieval art show us, over time, is the deep interconnectedness of power, violence and gender as the knight, then an embodiment of physical as well as social power, often used violence as a way through which to demonstrate his superiority over others – be they enemies on the battlefield or women whom he dominated, symbolically or literally, in artworks and texts. Many medieval artworks show knights using their power to prove their might over women through forced weddings, abductions and popular displays of dominance, such as in the artworks showing them as war spoils [8]. Indeed, as Najiia Alameldin clearly shows with her analysis of knightly romance in her Master's thesis 'Femme Fatales in Medieval and Lesbian Literature', the knight's power and status were at times grounded in violence and even facilitated as a way of asserting knights' perceived right to entitlement over women in public and private domains. Women were believed to be subjugated to male authority both in public and private spheres [9]. The sword, both metaphorically and literally, became the defining and entitling mark of the medieval knight: his sword being his phallus with which he dominated and claimed power over his designated sphere. The knight, often depicted in early art as a defender of women, gradually turns into an enforcer of misogyny in much of the later art, his power and status now reinforced by the abasement of women. With this glorification of knightly violence, medieval art helps reinforce the gendered hierarchies that were being upheld in society, showing how art played its own role in upholding and perpetuating systems of domination.

3.4. The Knight as a Symbol of Patriarchal Authority

As medieval art evolved, knights became not only symbols of chivalric virtue and military prowess but also embodiments of the broader patriarchal authority that dominated the period. This transformation in artistic depiction reflects a society in which men were systematically positioned at the top of social, political, and religious hierarchies, with women and marginalized groups

relegated to roles of subservience and dependency. In early medieval art, knights were often shown as heroic figures who upheld justice, fought for moral and religious causes, and protected the weak. However, as the cultural landscape shifted, the knight came to represent the oppressive structures of patriarchy, with their power becoming a tool for enforcing social order rather than challenging it. In many later artworks, knights are depicted not as protectors but as enforcers of a social system that upheld male dominance and control over women. The symbolic power of the knight's armor, weaponry, and status came to represent more than just physical protection; it symbolized the ideological framework that reinforced male authority in both public and private domains. Artists began to emphasize the knight's role in maintaining societal hierarchies through depictions of marriage contracts, forced relationships, and the ownership of women as property. These images reflected the broader patriarchal norms of the time, where women were seen as possessions to be claimed, controlled, or traded, rather than autonomous individuals with their own agency [10].

4. Conclusion

This paper has traced the gradual evolution of the knight in medieval art from an ideal hero who rescues women and protects the weak to a more morally ambiguous and repressive figure, and how that influence provided insight into the cruelties of the patriarchy in which they operated. It argued that the submissive damsel-in-distress motif, commonly depicted in medieval art, was emblematic of the passive roles that women were often depicted as occupying, and that it also demonstrated their dependence on men for protection. However, it also discussed how, as the depiction of the knight evolved, so too did society's awareness of the knights' collusion with a social framework that excluded women and other minorities. By looking at these changes in the art, the article demonstrated the crucial role that art has played both in keeping some of the harsher elements of society at large socially acceptable and in illustrating the ways in which those same structures of inequality were entrenched. The glorified knight, for all their gallantry, was thus a figure that hid, but nonetheless perpetuated, the brutal systems of control and manipulation that, in many ways, defined the social structure of the medieval world.

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