

Women from the Medieval Male Perspective

Zimo Chen^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University Renai College, Tuanbo New City, Jinghai District, Tianjin, China*

a. 80281117@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In this work, the book *Good Wife of Paris* (*Le Menagier de Paris*) serves as the beginning point for a discussion of the place of women in medieval society. It also demonstrates how current women have been influenced by the discipline of women in Western European culture from the Middle Ages onward, as shown in some of its literature. This article focuses on how men treated women in the Middle Ages and attempts to explore the historical roots of this discrimination. In the book *Le Menagier de Paris*, it is made clear that the wife is subject to the husband and offers a set of guidelines for newlywed women in the voice of a medieval aristocratic male. The analysis of *Le Menagier de Paris* reveals that the medieval order of marriage was male-dominated, and that this marriage structure has influenced modern weddings. The study focuses on the medieval order of marriage and the status of women as expressed in its contents.

Keywords: the Middle Ages, women, medieval women, male gaze

1. Introduction

According to *The Good Wife of Paris*, it is possible to understand the author's identity from two perspectives: an aging wealthy Parisian bourgeois and a husband-narrator. As a bourgeois in fourteenth-century France -- this book is said to have been compiled in 1392 -- 94 -- the author possessed a great deal of wealth and houses in the cities and suburbs [1].

Western European cities experienced remarkable growth in terms of population and wealth as well as independence and civil rights, all of which were recognized and safeguarded by the law beginning in the 12th century [2]. The dignity of the bourgeoisie also developed and intensified from the twelfth century onwards. Because commerce was one of the reasons for the birth of the city, merchants also acquired a higher status than before [3]. More significantly, whether they were familiar traders or members of the burgeoning bourgeoisie, the citizens of these cities comprised a politically influential third class in the upper Middle Ages. This historical background could shed light on the author's wealth and remind readers of the work's setting.

1.1. Brief Introduction about the Author

Although it was customary, *Menagier's* author, who was most likely from the haute bourgeoisie, does not provide his name in the text. He suggests that the poem was intended to be distributed primarily among his entourage, in which case it would not have been essential for him to identify himself. Thus, it would still have been known even if authorship was not explicitly stated in the

text. A contemporary reader, the *Chemin de poured et de richesse*, exemplifies this circumstance. Although it is not mentioned in the *Chemin*, the author of the *Menagier* was aware that a certain Jehan (or Jacques) Bruyant was the author of the *Chemin* fifty years after it was written [4].

The manuscript's original creator is thought to have been an older Parisian who wanted to support his young bride as she adapted to her new life as the wife and mistress of a respected and prosperous household [5]. There was a noticeable difference between the author, an affluent bourgeois, and a regular trader. He appeared to have some social standing and reputation and needed a bride to manage his land and care for the family. According to the author, to gratify her husband and protect him from any difficulties, a wife must provide him with unwavering support, materially and spiritually.

1.2. Brief Introduction about Good Wife of Paris

The *Menagier de Paris* (C. I393) is an excellent source for the history of medieval social conduct, mainly because it is deeply rooted in the socioeconomic realities of its time [6]. First, the author agreed that a marriage should be based on love and that both partners should be trustworthy and of excellent character. The husband-narrator also warns his wife against overly engaging with males outside her husband and family out of concern that she would attract dishonest people. To demonstrate that a wife should love her husband with all of her heart, he also used Scripture.

Moreover, to preserve their reputation, it was indicated in the section after that that the husband should keep his wife's follies and errors secret. Hide the truth even when a wife or husband cheats to protect your reputation.

In keeping with the style of a medieval household manual, the author dedicates a whole chapter to the wife's responsibilities for her husband's (and kids') welfare, including matters of nutrition, clothes, hygiene, etc. The author uses a saying from the country: "A house with a bad roof, a smoking chimney, and a quarrelsome woman" to illustrate how the wife's attitude should be peaceful and gentle on a spiritual level. Additionally, the author goes into great length about how to deal with numerous little insects, such as mosquitoes, and how to get rid of fleas from beds and clothing. Following these recommendations, the narrator returns to the spiritual side and mentions that women should serve as husbands' spiritual havens, which is significant for husbands.

Moreover, the author also talked about the importance of being dutiful. In the author's opinion, a lack of responsibility on the part of both husband and wife will destroy the whole family. And this part can also be seen as a supplement to the previous text.

Only rosemary and how to preserve roses for the winter are covered in the author's chapter on gardening; it is reported because, at the time, horticulturists believed rosemary could not thrive in France.

In the household section of the text, The author first discusses three categories of servants: skilled laborers, long-term laborers, and short-term coolies. The responsibilities and methods of administration for these three servants are also outlined. According to the author, his wife serves as the household's mistress. The narrator shows his wife how to get along with the maids and let them do their work to prevent problems. He also instructed his wife to spot and fend off mice, weasels, or other creatures that might enter the barn.

Last but not least, the author outlines the same demands for his wife's clothing, including how to prevent insects from eating it and how to remove stains from it.

2. Male Gaze in Good Wife of Paris

The *Good Wife's Guide*, *Le Menagier de Paris*, is a rare example of French medieval female domestic instruction. It dates to the late fourteenth century. *Good Wife of Paris* has an intense

masculine gaze from the narrator's viewpoint and the overall material. It is clear from this type of book or manual, formerly quite popular in the Middle Ages, that women were not given an entire personality in that era, at least not among the nobility, and were instead considered an object or a tool. It provides a comprehensive description of the abilities required of a wife of a medieval lord.

2.1. Author's Narrative Perspective

The narrative perspective of *Good Wife of Paris* is unusual in that it doesn't adopt a wholly objective narrative, instead giving the impression that a husband is lecturing his fiancée. The rise of the bourgeoisie reinforced their sense of dignity, wealth, and power, and this change was also reflected in the written works of the time. "We are talking here about what brought honor, not what happened" [7]. In this medieval household book, the narrator substitutes the idea of his wife obeying him for her obedience to the husband-to-be [8]. Meanwhile, it appears that the author is taking it upon himself to teach his wife how to be a "good wife," portraying himself primarily as a tutor in manners and morals, as a sort of home priest concerned with the religious upbringing and healthy growth of his wife's soul [9].

Intriguingly, there were a variety of other medieval writings from the same era, referred to as "conduct books" for women, including works like Christine de Pizan's *Treasury of the City of Ladies* and *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. In most cases, authors of these writings urge female readers to reinvent themselves by praising chastity, silence, and submission while criticizing female rage for endangering male rule [10].

2.2. Medieval View Towards Marriage

In terms of marriage, the author sees the house as an amoral haven from the outside world and a prison for the medieval lady [11]. But in specific ways, prostitutes and so-called virtuous women are the same in medieval marriages. Their sexuality, for instance, was also a commodity [12]. Moreover, even though the church emphasized chastity as the preferable alternative, marriage was far more common [13]. On a moral level, however, both the church and the secular worlds concur that having strong ethical principles is crucial. Marital harmony resulted in social connection because it maintained national peace, calmed tensions, and solidified alliances [14]. However, such a connection is only from the male perspective. Even though the husband should protect his wife's reputation, the ultimate purpose is to maintain the family and, thus, the husband's reputation.

Thus, it can be observed that the bourgeois and narrator's views overlap to some level, but I believe that these two perspectives show the author's subjective, and objective aims when writing the book. This household book demonstrates the delicate balance of the bourgeois family in the Middle Ages and bourgeois expectations of wives and families in medieval Western Europe. And from the viewpoint of the text, we can see that a variety of social phenomena at that time are based on medieval men's attempt to control social order and secure social standing, which I will further explain in reasoning.

3. The Influence of the Medieval Male Gaze

Good Wife of Paris shows the medieval bourgeois, wives, and family relations in the Middle Ages. Nor does the author write from the perspective of a married bourgeois male -- one could even argue that he wrote the book in preparation for his wife's second marriage. This book can be seen as a medieval rule book for secular weddings, and some parallels with medieval earthly marriage can still be found in the modern marriage order.

First, as an essential element of medieval marriage, bourgeois dignity urges people to order social life, and the family is the smallest social unit. The Middle Ages produced several "literary

works”(Treasury of the City of Ladies, The Book of the Knight of the Tower, etc.) similar to Good Wife of Paris. Whereas the rule-makers often ignored the other side of the marriage, there was no thought of the wife in the book or any respect for her individuality -- she was there to serve the family and the husband.

In the second place, it can also be discovered that Good Wife of Paris differs from how the church views and restricts marriage. The church in the Middle Ages had to make compromises with the world of the secularists to strengthen its position. Still, they kept a traditional perspective of marriage where individuals devoted themselves to God. Even though many religious individuals are single, the church values marriage and strongly encourages monogamy. This book shows husbands instructing their spouses to grow rosemary and preserve winter roses. This kind of romantic gardening instruction was undoubtedly out of keeping with the ascetic church's asceticism at the time. Other than those components, the text's primary focus is on the duty of wives. The author thoroughly describes a wife's responsibilities, including how to care for her husband, keep the house tidy, treat servants, and more. It is logical to assume that women's household and societal responsibilities were solidified in the Middle Ages in religious and secular contexts. And as can be observed from several literary works by both European and American authors, this societal trait was inherited and developed in the future, even impacting the American continent. For instance, the description of Scarlett O'Hara's mother in *Gone with the Wind*, a well-to-do plantation owner's wife, who plans the family's meals and daily activities, the prayers at dinner, the hiring and firing of servants, and the division of farm work, demonstrates that even in the 18th and 19th centuries, women's domestic duties and jobs were mainly similar to those in the Middle Ages. While in the East, the ancient Chinese family life also demanded the wife to be frugal and devoted to her husband, this appears to have developed into a social custom that endures today.

No matter the dignity of the bourgeois in the Middle Ages, the tradition of marriage in the Middle Ages, or the family duties of wives in the Middle Ages, it cannot be ignored that they are all built from the male perspective. In primary sources of the Middle Ages, it is rare to find women writing about themselves, even if some could read and write. It's entirely understandable why we see a solid male gaze in these sources. Since ancient Greece, women have not had citizenship, and the Middle Ages saw a lot of wrongful convictions against women, such as witch hunts. Men have dominated the social order for a long time -- even now. In *Gone with the Wind*, the author asks the wife to support her husband unconditionally, provide a comfortable living environment for her husband at any time, and even hide her husband's infidelity to protect her husband's reputation if necessary. A woman is a "wife" first and a "woman" second. In religious settings, men and women must commit themselves to God if they don't wish to devote themselves to their families; nevertheless, men tend to have more power over this. Despite being intended for women, this book lacks anything specifically female, places demand on them and does not discuss whether they can achieve their ideas. But a woman must first be a good wife to be a good wife. Women might have needed marriage and a family back then, but not today.

4. Conclusion

This work uses the male gaze to analyze *Le Menagier de Paris*. Leaving aside the book's religious themes, it is evident from its content that men predominated in medieval marriages, which is examined and investigated in this work. The paper concludes that women in medieval marriages were still subject to men and that this form of marriage has continued to impact modern times when combined with similar efforts by contemporaries.

The formation of the medieval marriage order is explored in this article's historical and social analysis of *Le Menagier de Paris*. The research and study of the medieval marital order have consequences for the debate of the present spousal order as well as the social position of women.

References

- [1] Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose. *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier De Paris): A Medieval Household Book*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.), page1.
- [2] Andrew T. Young. *How the City Air Made us Free: The Self-Governing Medieval City and the Bourgeoisie Revaluation*. (Rawls College of Business Texas Tech University, January 2017), page9.
- [3] Andrew T. Young. *How the City Air Made us Free: The Self-Governing Medieval City and the Bourgeoisie Revaluation*. (Rawls College of Business Texas Tech University, January 2017), page4.
- [4] Epurescu-Pascovici, Ionuț. *From Moral Agent to Actant: Conduct in Le Ménagier de Paris*. (University of Bucharest. July 2012), Page215.
- [5] Kyri Watson Claflin, *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book* by Gina L. Greco; Christine M. Rose (*Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*, 2010) Page 111.
- [6] Epurescu-Pascovici, Ionuț. *From Moral Agent to Actant: Conduct in Le Ménagier de Paris*. (University of Bucharest. July 2012), Page 214.
- [7] Andrew T. Young. *How the City Air Made us Free: The Self-Governing Medieval City and the Bourgeoisie Revaluation*. (Rawls College of Business Texas Tech University, January 2017), page12.
- [8] Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose. *The Good Wife's Guide (LeMénagier De Paris): A Medieval Household Book*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.), page10.
- [9] Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose. *The Good Wife's Guide (LeMénagier De Paris): A Medieval Household Book*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.), page9.
- [10] Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose. *The Good Wife's Guide (LeMénagier De Paris): A Medieval Household Book*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.), page18.
- [11] Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose. *The Good Wife's Guide (LeMénagier De Paris): A Medieval Household Book*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012.), page15.
- [12] Ruth Mazo Karras. *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England (Studies in the History of Sexuality)* (Oxford University Press, 1996), page84.
- [13] Ruth Mazo Karras. *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing unto others* (Routledge, 2017), page80.
- [14] Sylvana Vecchio. "The Good Wife," in *AHistory of Women: Silences of the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), page 109.