

Beyond Damsels in Distress and Heroic Knight of Valor: The Evolution of Female Portrayals in Medieval Romance Art

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Abstract: In the context of romance narratives, where women play a fundamental role, this research delves into the evolving depictions of women in medieval romance literature. Existing scholarly work primarily focuses on women within ecclesiastical representations. Aspects of a women's daily life and roles in society are also studied. However, there is a noticeable dearth of research concerning women in the illuminations of medieval romance. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the the evolution of female portrayals in romance illustrations of the Middle Ages. The study analyzed four illuminations spanning from the High Middle Ages to the Late Middle Ages to trace the evolution of these depictions. In the prevailing archetype of medieval romance, women are often depicted as overly simplistic figures, primarily as objects of desire or as lovers. And while this may be true to come extent, it is hardly the whole story. This papers visual analysis reveals that her portrayals began as somewhat ornamental but gradually transformed into representations of women holding a more equal status with men and frequently taking on proactive roles in relationships. This shift in depictions may also reflect broader societal changes and the expectation of women's agency.

Keywords: Women in Literature, Illuminations, Female Portrayals

1. Introduction

The rich tapestries of illuminated manuscripts and paintings create a fantasy-like realm of chivalry, courtly love, and dramatic affairs. The Middle Ages offer a unique window into the changing roles and status of women within European society. While damsels in distress and ethereal beauties remain as archetypes, a closer look reveals a more multifaceted and independent female characters. Through meticulous analysis of illuminated manuscripts, paintings, and other artistic expressions of the era, this research paper delves into the evolution of female portrayals to understand femininity and her agency to unearth enduring legacy of women in medieval Europe.

2. Literature Review

This literature review includes sources and research that have helped uncover the complexity of women's representation in medieval romance art and daily life contributing to the understanding of the dynamic nature of gender and can be considered by theme.

2.1. Gender Dynamics

Rather than accepting the notion of medieval romance as marked by suffocating rules, Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant suggested within this period, there were “progressive” gender roles; knights wept tears, while women wielded swords [1]. However, “progressive” gender roles aren't reflective of the broader late medieval romantic landscape as just a couple of expectations doesn't hold true to the broader literary landscape.

Another study conducted by Jane Bliss argues that female characters often chose their own pseudonyms to hold suspense and symbolize what it means to be a woman [2]. Thus, Bliss asserts that romance is a feminist because although it isn't written about women, women are necessary for romance [2]. However, in many cases pseudonyms strip women of their identity and perceive them as only a sex figure rather for their character or at best are relevant because of their relationship with men.

The analysis on late medieval Chivalric novels with research done by Geraldine Heng, displays that masculine powers rely on capital ownership and military power which reflect how marriable they were [3]. Although most knights weren't necessarily poor at the beginning of the stories, most of them only gained much capital near the end, as a result, the female love interest was interested in the knight long before they were almighty with much capital. However, this study will keep in mind the correlation of capital and how marriageable a character is.

In Ulrike Wiethaus's scholarly piece, Wiethaus traces the evolution of religious women writers from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries [4]. During the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, these writers held the privilege of interpreting gendered symbols, thanks to their social status that provided access to spiritual discourse. This all changed in the fourteenth century where women were excluded from religious authorities, and a dominant mother-child narrative emerged, fostering a patriarchal view of women and their bodies.

In her article “A Good Woman: Gender Roles and Female Religious Identity in Late Medieval Bergamo,” Roisin Cossar presents the perspective that women in Bergamo during the 14th century did not directly confront the prevailing restrictions, rather they worked within it [5]. And while women had restricted access to religious authorities, they went to monasteries and parish churches instead. Furthermore, Cossar's work aligns with the discussions by Jo-Ann McNamara and Suzanne F Wemple, who argued that despite religious prohibitions, legally there were no specific constraints against these practices [6].

These articles and books exemplify the status and place of women and provide valuable context in the period.

2.2. Portrayals of Women in Romances

Roberta Krueger's analysis of Jean Renart's works shows complex female characters who defy traditional norms with grace and femininity which showcases a diverse range of agency and actions beyond victimization for a romance to be a romance [7]. While Krueger's analysis contributes instances of positive female portrayals, it is essential to acknowledge the prevailing themes that often present women as obstacles in the hero's quest.

Anna Caughey's research observations on epics such as “The Bruce” emphasize the tendency to depict women as potential barriers to a hero's mission [8]. In contrast, some works employ women as motivating forces to propel the knight toward achieving their military objectives. This study will utilize both sides of the narrative to best represent the field of romance.

Another study by R Howard Bloch points out that there had been an obsession with female virginity especially in French literature [9]. The study will similarly use references and connections

of the narrative with the catholic church in needed places due to religions prevailing presence of the time.

In Diane Heath's scholarly work, Heath examined Joan de Mohun's tombstone to show that Joan was buried with high quality material and therefore was buried with dignity [10]. The study takes insights like these to understand the status of women and their treatment and draw connections to female characters in the medieval period.

In an article written by Kathryn Gravdal, Gravdal argues that in Arthurian romance, rape scenes are a way to signify social class standings [11]. This can be seen in de Troye's work, where most rapists are of lower social class standings and the women are of nobility [11]. Thus, Gravel makes the assertion that de Troye uses rape to eroticizing sociopolitical hegemony. This provides context for de Troyes romances.

2.3. Visual Analysis

Jonathan J. G Alexander scholarly piece, *Iconography and Ideology: Uncovering Social Meanings in Western Medieval Christian Art*, Alexander examines medieval imagery in the ways of role models, social practices and values [12].

In Patricia Vinnicombe's journal article *Rock-Paintings Analysis*, on the component Vinnicombe looks at is "action" which mean the legs and body position for the subject in question [13]. This paper will evaluate similar components of body positions although not as specific as Vinnicombe.

Research by Diane Heath regarding the artworks on the walls of Medieval Canterbury cathedral, analyzed the paintings by looking at positioning of women compared to men (such as the ratio of men to women). She also analyzed the paintings with regards to the context of the paintings and taking account the gender dynamics in the painting along with the contexts.

This study will use similar methods at the three articles above with the aim to use social norms of society, context, and body positions to draw conclusions.

3. Method

This section aims to describe in detail what methods have been employed in the attempt to answer the project's broader research questions: to what extent did portrayal of women in medieval romance art change from the High Middle Ages to the Late Middle Ages?

To analyze gender representations in art of the Middle Ages, the study employed visual analysis and discourse analysis. This has included analysis of the following aspects of the works: clothing, woman subject's placement in relation to men, and their size and body positions within the paintings. Additionally, the use of books and articles allows for better understanding of the context of the various artworks.

The High Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages were chosen due to their popular romance stories that were present which reflected what was welcomed in society. In the Early Middle Ages, the majority of artistic works centered on religion and romance novels and paintings were very much absent thus the historical period of the study only encompasses the High Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages, 1000-1350 and 1350-1500 respectively.

From the High Middle Ages, the study will analyze two paintings: the 1316 Chrétien de Troyes manuscript illustration of *Lancelot du Lac*, and the second is an image from a love poem by Konrad von Altstetten found in the *Codex Manesse* of the early to middle 13th century. The second half of the study analyzes late medieval gender portrayals of Evrart de Conty's *Livre des Échecs Amoureux* (1370s) and *Roman de la Rose* which although was written 12th century, the illumination used is from the 15th century manuscript.

4. Results

The reviewed works offer valuable insights into the evolving portrayal of women in medieval romance literature, they also invite critical examination. Overall, while there are evaluations of women in artworks, they remain largely in the religious sphere. As such, there is little to no examination and analysis of women in romance paintings which is the gap that this study aims to fill.



Figure 1: Illumination From of Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot du Lac*

Figure 1 is taken from the 1316 manuscript of Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot du Lac*, this illustration is significant within the realm of Arthurian Romances. The original creator of a character King Arthur was Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose tales were then brought over to French translation and elaboration by Chrétien de Troyes and continued to be popular. The story follows Lancelot, a knight whose inner turmoil revolves around his profound love for Queen Guinevere while also maintaining unwavering loyalty to King Arthur, Guinevere's husband.

The illustration captures Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot in an early stage of their relationship and presents a moment in which she questions his love for her. In the image, Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot are attired in an ensemble of blue and pink, albeit he has more pronounced saturation and hue of colors. Heather Pulliam's scholarship underscores how in the medieval milieu, clothing hues served as status markers [14]. Despite Guinevere's royal lineage, Lancelot's attire suggests that he is of higher symbolizing disparity between men and women in medieval society, and in artworks of the time.

Another aspect of the two figures, their similar heights, and the positioning they share in the image, can be juxtaposed with the gendered hierarchy of attire. In Geoffroi de Charn's *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry* from the 1350s states that both parties are mutually benefited from each other: a knight's heroic deeds are propelled by motivation towards the lady and then both partners are elevated in honor and status [15]. This explains the level seating on the parts of Guinevere and Lancelot; rather than expressing male dominance, it provides a visual representation of a somewhat mutually beneficial relationship.

In this depiction of the two on the bench, Queen Guinevere wears a crown with a veil atop her face. This crown symbolizes her royal status. The veil simultaneously symbolizes Christianity, modesty and submissiveness [16]. Bain and Mackenzie argue that a medieval woman acted as a repository for a man's status when she "reflect[ed] the illumination of his teachings by behaving in conformity to the example [he had] given" [16]. In this context, the veil seems to be more than a mere

artistic fashion choice, instead, a reflection that women like Queen Guinevere were expected to be modest and not overly assertive.

At the same time, her forward-leaning stance and the way she clasps Lancelot's hands might signify sexual interest rather than submissiveness. Although Queen Guinevere may demonstrate submission and the societal expectations of women in her attire, the way her legs are positioned and the way she clasps Lancelot's hands may suggest otherwise. This dichotomy across her attire and posture challenges simplistic views of women's roles in medieval society.



Figure 2: Illumination from *Codex Manesse*

Figure 2 is from the *Codex Manesse*, a compilation from the 13th century that housed poems and songs around the theme of romance from more than a hundred different authors accompanied by illustrations like the one above [17,18]. This illustration accompanies a piece of romantic poetry by Konrad von Altstetten written in High German. The poem revolves around the narrator and his love for his lady and how she is the only one for him. The painting portrays a man and woman laying down in front of a rose bush, and the man has a falcon in hand. In the image, the man is seen wearing a red and blue robe and his lady is wearing a red and green robe. From the richness of color on the woman's dress, one could argue that the lady seems to have a high status; understanding that rich materials denoted one's social standing in the period [14]. Additionally, the green and blue colors the two are wearing show connections to heaven and the Gospels, as they were traditionally seen as celestial colors [19,20]. From these distinctions in color, it can be assumed that the male figure and his lover are of equal status. Perhaps his lover was of even higher status from her more saturated robes. Regardless of her socioeconomic status, the male clearly views his lady as the love of his life, as he showers her with high compliments in the painting's accompanying poem.

The illustration portrays a distinct dynamic in the body placement, with the man's lover draping her arms over his shoulder affectionately as he leans back to rub his cheeks against hers.

While the poem revolves around her lovers love for her, the visual composition places the man at the forefront, somewhat eclipsing the prominence of the lady. Her posture hints at a role of an accessory, rather than that of the central figure. The presence of a woman does not guarantee her individual identity and it appears that the woman's presence primarily hinges on her relationship with the man, rather than her own character.

While she may have a high status or being either a noble or the daughter of a wealthy merchant, it appears that her relevance in this illustration is only because of her relations with a man who loves her.



Figure 3: *Livre des Échecs Amoureux* of Evrart de Conty

Moving to the late Middle Ages, figure 3 is from the manuscript of Evrart de Conty's *Livre des Échecs Amoureux* provides a third image that may be analyzed from the perspective of gender [21]. It depicts a popular love story from the 1370s that centers on a young girl and her lover while playing chess. In the image a woman plays chess against an opponent. Her lover peers over her shoulder while she plays the game and watches her moves. This clearly shows women being respected enough as mentally competent to play competitive games of intellect.

In the painting both the woman and her lover wear lavish clothing along with luxurious gold jewelry. The lady in the painting is seen wearing a scarlet red dress. In the Middle Ages such colors signified very high social standing as the fabric was heavy, made from the finest English wool and exceptional weaving skills; it was sometimes even on par with imperial purple [22]. Additionally, her scarlet red clothes almost outshine any other color in the painting, helping it make clear that she is the center of the painting. Even when it comes to saturation and hue, the woman's clothing outshines her lover's brown and black attires and almost definitely establish her high status [19].

While the of the painting presents an assertive woman playing an intellectual game and allowing her partner to watch, her veil can still at the same time be interpreted as a marker of modesty [16]. Even in this fashion choice, her high social standing is clear as her veil is dressed with net decorated with jewels along her forehead. Therefore, while a veil may represent modesty and maintain ties with religion, it also highlights her high social standing [5].

Looking at the woman's body positioning she shares a little more space in the painting compared to her lover. Indeed, in her focus on her game she seems to be the main focus of the painting. She has a character of her own and almost gives the effect of allowing the man to watch her in the activity she will do with or without him. The viewer gets the sense that the man is appealing to the woman for attention, while she is focused on her own affairs. This painting is another example of medieval gender roles that a modern audience with only surface assumptions of such roles might not expect. No women are being rescued or controlled in the painting; rather, a woman is playing a game of mental skill and allowing her male companion to watch.



Figure 4: *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean De Meun

Figure 4 features the manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose*, was written from 12th to 13th centuries and portrays both men and women enjoying an enclosed garden together [23]. The love poem was initially penned by Guillaume de Lorris and later completed by Jean De Meun [19]. However, the manuscript and this illustration didn't come in until the 15th century, as a result this illustration will be held the Late Middle Ages as this study look at the illustration time period rather than the when the story was written. This choice is primarily influenced by the manuscript's widespread popularity, making it likely to reflect the values and societal norms of the broader Middle Ages. To delve deeper into the analysis, our attention will be directed towards the group of characters located in the upper left-hand corner of the painting, where the majority of characters are situated.

The illustration portrays a gathering of young women and men in a walled garden which filled with trees, flowers, grass and a fountain in the middle. In the Middle Ages walled gardens with these characteristics are garden of love which as the name suggests represents courtly love where people fondle and kiss [24].

Their attire suggests that they primarily belong to the nobility or are the sons and daughters of affluent merchants due to presence of gold jewelry adorning their attire and the rich, vibrant colors of their clothing. For example, a lady seated beside a musician is notably adorned with gold jewelry, both around her neck and upon her veil. Her depiction closely resembles the portrayal of women in preceding artworks. There is a lack of differentiation in attire between men and women with clothing remarkably similar, suggesting they have comparable social standings: this underscores gender equality in the illustration.

Moving onto the placement of men and women in this illustration, both genders are portrayed equally. On the right-hand side of the garden, a man is depicted playing a musical instrument, and he is encircled by both men and women which makes clear that although there may be romantic love, women are not portrayed, stereotypically, in a submissive manner and fawning over a man. Furthermore, it signifies that the veil worn by women serves primarily as a symbol of religious and

modesty rather than one of submission. Women in this setting are neither passive nor subservient in social settings.

In the illustration, there are minimal gender disparities between men and women, and they are depicted as occupying nearly the same social status: Women are not portrayed as mere accessories to men but as equals in their social interactions.

5. Conclusion

The depiction of women in medieval art underwent transformation reflective societal norms and values that goes against the present prevailing stereotype of what medieval romance is. Throughout the high medieval period, women's depictions varied. They were sometimes presented as equals to men, while at other times, their status was akin to being an accessory, like an ornate necklace meant for display like the illustration in *Codex Manesse*. However, it's essential to recognize that not all depictions of women conform to this pattern, as evident in the illustration featuring Lancelot and Queen Guinevere where although there may be some signs of disparities in gender, their status remains largely at par.

As the Late Middle Ages approached there was a shift in the portrayal of women. Artworks and manuscripts from this era depicted women as active participants in social and romantic contexts engaging as equals in various facets, including courtly love, intellectual pursuits, and leisure. While traditional gender roles persisted in throughout the centuries, there was recognition of women's individuality and potential in the Late Middle Ages. In essence, these artworks glimpse into the intricate interplay between tradition and the evolution of gender roles. Despite gender norms remaining visible, her actions and intellect prove that she isn't the archetype of a damsel in distress. Through the lens of art and romance, we witness multifaceted female characters with her own agency even in chivalry.

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