

GENDER AND MANUSCRIPT STUDIES

GENDER AND MANUSCRIPTS: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY MS FF.1.6.

I am currently working on my doctoral thesis, studying Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6., the "Findern Manuscript", which is a fifteenth-century household anthology produced in Derbyshire, England. When I began my thesis, my aim was to edit female-voiced lyrics, some of which can be found in this manuscript, but as I worked, I discovered that these lyrics were only part of the collection of texts in the volume which display a predominant interest in female experience. Other critics have noted various aspects of the manuscript that might appeal to a female audience, and have conjectured about female involvement in the volume's creation. In 1954, R.H. Robbins suggested that the manuscript might be the result of "the co-operative efforts of itinerant professional scribes and educated women,"¹ and more recently Carol Meale has claimed that this volume "shows every sign of having been assembled as a women's book."² My thesis then seeks to establish what these "signs" asserted by Meale might be, and to consolidate and explore the implications of her claim. Moreover, both of these critical responses to the manuscript seem to suggest, though not to identify, a female role in the actual compilation of the manuscript. Such a role could take many forms, from patronage—the selection of texts, commission of copies or of texts themselves—or of more physical participation such as composing texts, and of copying items into the book. I hope to argue in my thesis that most of these methods were employed (though not exclusively) by women who formed an extensive network of contributors.³

At this point, I would like briefly to describe the manuscript, then use Richard Roos' poem, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, preserved in Findern, as a test-case for my overall premise.

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The Findern manuscript is an anthology which contains an extremely wide range of secular material from a variety of genres.⁴ It contains extracts from Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* as well as preserving his *Parliament of Fowls*, *Complaint unto Pity*, Anelida's *Complaint from Anelida and Arcite*, and the *Complaint of Venus*. Lydgate is represented by two poems, *The Wicked Tonge* and *A Tretise for Lauandres*. The manuscript also preserves the anonymous romance of *Sir Degrevoant*, *Clanvowe's Boke of Cupide* (or *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*), two translations of French works: Richard Roos' translation of Alain Chartier's poem, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, and Thomas Hoccleve's version of Christine de Pizan's *L'Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*. Among these "canonical" texts appear twenty-four unique and anonymous lyrics, and it is

from these that female involvement in the anthology can first be deduced. Sarah McNamer argues that out of these twenty-four lyrics, fifteen were composed by women.⁵ Her argument for four of these is certainly indisputable in a heterosexual context, since they are love-lyrics with a male object, as demonstrated by their pronouns: for instance, "None butt he may me susteyn;/ He is my comfort in all payn,"⁶ and her argument referring to certain others, in which she sees echoes of the female responses from the Church's Marriage Vows, is also compelling.

Besides these unique poems, many of the longer narrative items reflect a concern with female experience. For example, one excerpt from the *Confessio* is the *Tale of The Three Questions*. In this Tale, (from Book I of the *Confessio*) a knight, who claims to be wiser than the king himself, is asked three questions by the king, which he must answer on pain of death. He fears he cannot, but his daughter offers to accompany him, and to answer the questions herself, and asserts: "For ofte schal a womman have/ Thing which a man mai noght areche" (ll.3206-7). Once she has answered the questions correctly, the king is attracted not only to the girl's intelligence, but also to her beauty. He tells her, "Of thin ansuere and ek of thee/ Me liketh wel" (ll.3332-3). He cannot reward her by marrying her himself due to her inferior social status, yet he agrees to prosper her father. The girl points out to him that the Earldom just awarded to her father in turn elevates her own status, making her a suitable bride for royalty. This remarkable personal assertiveness puts the king into a position which Gower describes almost as obligation:

This yonge king, which peised al,
Hire beaute and hir wit withal,
As he that was with love hent
Anon therto yaf his assent. (ll.3377-80)

Despite Genius's insistence on the young woman's humility, (see ll. 3423-5), her insistence on her marriage with the king also demonstrates that her wisdom has a rather more practical application—a concern for elevating her own status—which may be reflected in Gower's ambivalent statement that she "mad hirself a qweene" (l.3400).

The relevance of such a tale for a fifteenth-century reader can be seen from a brief comparison with the fifteenth-century letters of the Pastons of Norfolk. The evidence of their letters is that the social standing and material wealth of a prospective suitor matters far more in the business of marriage than any notion of romantic love. The betrothal of Margery Paston to the family's chief bailiff, Richard Calle, for example, makes unforgettable reading: Margery's brother Sir John vehemently states, "[no-one] should ever have my good will for to make my sister to sell candle and mustard in Framlingham"⁷—evidently the only

destiny he envisages for her as Calle's partner. Inducing the young Elizabeth Paston to marry "to the highest bidder"⁸ was a great preoccupation of her parents. Thus the young (unnamed) woman in Gower's tale is strikingly assertive in that she not only surpasses her father in wisdom but also helps her own situation in doing so, and thus might have been a suitable role-model for those reluctant, like Elizabeth Paston, to make a good match.

According to John Ganim:

The art of love for the medieval heroine, courtly or not, is literally an art and derives from a balance between competing and sometimes mutually exclusive desires and a working out of dangers, revenge, and resentment.⁹

This has been demonstrated in *The Tale of the Three Questions*, but is negotiated rather differently by the eponymous Lady of Roos' poem, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. In this poem a male suitor implores a lady to grant him her love, while she responds but does not accept him. The poem is a dialogue, overheard and reported by a narrator, in which the Lover and the Lady speak in alternate stanzas. Critics have already noted that Chartier (the author of the French original) is one of the first writers in the Middle Ages "to lend the Lady herself a voice,"¹⁰ and indeed the notion of the female voice and its power is central to this text. The Lady charges the Lover with gross deception. She envisages male courtly language as inherently deceptive, and argues that it bears no relation to genuine emotional feeling:

Ladies be nat so simple, thus I mene,
So dul of wit, so sotted of foly,
That, for wordes which sayd ben of the splene,
In fayre langage, paynted ful plesauntly,
Which ye and mo holde scoles of dayly,
To make hem of gret wonders to suppose;
But sone they can away their hedes wrye,
And to fair speche lightly their eres close. (ll.325-32)

Two points are important in this discussion of this text. Firstly, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* foregrounds the female voice in order to provoke discussion of it. Like *The Franklin's Tale*, which ends by posing a question about its subject-matter,¹¹ this poem's purpose is to present opposing views to encourage an ensuing debate. Indeed, this may have occurred in Chartier's lifetime. Ethel Seaton notes that Chartier "was condemned by the ladies of the court of Charles VII in a literary tribunal, and had to write his humble *Excusacion*,"¹² while Arthur Piaget details a fascinating *querelle* surrounding *La Belle Dame* almost on the scale of that provoked by *Le Roman de la Rose*. It begins with the "scandale à la cour du roi de

France"¹³, which grows into a gendered debate: male lovers apparently reproached Chartier: "[ils] accusèrent l'auteur d'avoir voulu endurcir le coeur des belles"¹⁴, and some even wrote a counter-attack, in which women were advised to avert their eyes from "si deraisonables escriptures" lest they become affected.

Most interestingly, women also wrote on the subject, and it is here that this literary battle becomes most relevant to our consideration of one household volume. For women wrote in denigration of Chartier's poem, and seemingly did not consider that it presented them in a favourable light. Addressing themselves to Chartier, they claim, "tu nous diffames,"¹⁵ and call his book, "ton faulx mensongier livre" (l.42), and "ton desleal ouvrage" (l.58). Furthermore, they demand that he retract and amend his poem: "Sy t'en desdiz et humblement demandes/ Grace et pardon, et ton faulx livre amendes" (ll.92-3). A further part of the *querelle* surrounding this work seems to have been the creation of numerous continuations and versions by anonymous authors who took matters into their own hands. In many of these, the lady eventually succumbs to the Lover's charms.¹⁶

If this *querelle* itself documents genuine responses to Chartier's text, it should warn us that we cannot assign gendered viewpoints too readily based on our own ideas about appropriate female or male behavior. If, however, it is a literary game it should be seen as a series of responses to the questioning of gender roles and language in Chartier's own text.

My second point in reference to *La Belle Dame* is that to a reader of the Findern anthology, the poem can be seen to inter-relate with certain other texts within the volume. In fact, the reader may feel that Roos' poem dramatises many of the claims made by Christine de Pizan and Hoccleve in *The Letter of the God of Love*¹⁷ about the emptiness of men's speech (Roos calls his lover an "avantour", a boaster, l.814), as well as the falseness of the lover's courtly posture:

Si se faignent estre loyaulx amans
Et se cueuvrent de diverse faintise;
Si vont disant que griefment les atise
L'amour d'elles, qui leurs cuers tient en serre,
Dont l'un se plaint, a l'autre le cuer serre,
L'autre pleure par semblant et souspire,
Et l'autre faint que trop griefment empire,
Par trop amer tout soit descoulouré
Et presque mort et tout alengouré. (ll.36-44)

[The loyal lovers' pose they strike is false.
 Hiding behind their myriad deceits,
 They go declaring that a woman's love
 Inflames them sorely, keeps their hearts locked up;
 The first laments, the second's heart is wrenched,
 The next pretends to fill with tears, and sighs;
 Another claims to sicken horribly:
 Because of love he's grown quite pale,
 Now perishing, now very nearly dead.]

Christine satirises men's courtly posturing and emphasises their deceptiveness. One might note Christine's recognition (made explicit in *La Belle Dame*) that such professions of love are by nature insincere (ll.67-86). This point is also made in the context of women being deceived by male lovers in *Anelida's Complaint* (also preserved in Findern), where the grief-stricken Anelida reproaches Arcite:

Alas! Wher is become your gentilesse,
 Youre wordes ful of plesaunce and humblesse,
 Youre observaunces in so low manere (ll.247-49)

As a model of inquiry into textual relationships in Findern, I hope this brief description of *La Belle Dame* serves to demonstrate the complex network of textual relationships within C.U.L. MS Ff.1.6, many of which foreground the female voice and explore its role.

Rosemary J. Appleton
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1 Rossell Hope Robbins, "The Findern Anthology", *P.M.L.A.* lxxix (1954): 610-42; p.611.

2 Carol M. Meale, "'...alle the bokes that I haue of latyn, english, and frensch': Laywomen and their books in late medieval England," in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain: 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; second ed. 1996), pp.128-158; p.141.

3 This is substantiated by the presence of a number of women's names in the manuscript, which have been traced by Kate Harris. See Kate Harris, "The Origins and Make-Up of Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6.," *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 8 (1983): 299-333.

4 A facsimile is available: see Richard Beadle and A.E.B. Owen, *The Findern Manuscript: Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6* (London: Scolar Press, 1978).

5 See Sarah McNamer, "Female Authors, Provincial Setting: the Re-Versing of Courtly Love in the Findern Manuscript," *Viator* xxii (1991): 279-310; p.282.

6 See McNamer, p.285.

7 See H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922; repr.1995), p.43.

8 Bennett, p.31.

9 John M. Ganim, *Chaucerian Theatricality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.66-7.

10 James Loyd and Virginia León de Vivero, "The Artful Rejection of Love from Andreas to Chartier," *Modern Language Studies* 9 (1979):46-52; p.50.

11 Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende. (ll.1621-3)

12 Ethel Seaton, *Sir Richard Roos c.1410-1482: Lancastrian Poet* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p.82.

13 Arthur Piaget, "La Belle Dame sans Merci et ses imitations," *Romania* 30 (1901):22-48; p.27.

14 Piaget, p.27.

15 *La Response des Dames faicte a maistre Allain*, in Piaget, pp.31-5, l.12. Line references are hereafter given in the text.

16 See Arthur Piaget, "La Belle Dame sans Merci et ses imitations: V," *Romania* 33 (1904): 189-208; p.200.

17 Space prevents me from exploring the differences between Christine's original and Hoccleve's version here.

MARGUERITE DE NAVARRE'S PORTRAIT OF MARGUERITE PORETE: A RENAISSANCE QUEEN CONSTRUCTS A MEDIEVAL WOMAN MYSTIC

It is rare to find a well-documented example of a medieval or early modern woman's reactions to a female-authored medieval text. Just such an example is that of Marguerite d'Angoulême (Marguerite de Navarre), who read the manuscript of Marguerite Porete's *Mirouer des simples ames* (*Mirror of Simple Souls*) now housed in Chantilly, Musée Condé manuscript F xiv 26. In 1547 the queen expressed her appreciation for this book in her last long poem, the *Prisons*, which devotes over a hundred lines to praising the *Mirouer* and its author (III.1315-1422).¹

This paper examines the queen's responses to the *Mirouer* and, in particular, her representations of Marguerite Porete. It addresses the following questions: First, how did the queen construe the *Mirouer* and its author as orthodox and