

Student B
British Literature
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The Battle of the Sexes in British Literature, Part I

Women and men have had a lot of different roles inside their communities, their political organizations, and even their families during the past 500 and 1000 years. Some of these were public, and some were private. Starting back in the Middle Ages women in general were undereducated, quiet and rarely mentioned in literature, but in the early modern period they become more able to speak for themselves, and by the 18th century there were famous female writers and women in powerful positions. The changes in the relations of the sexes throughout the three time periods are clear, and they helped shape the future for women.

In the Middle Ages women had access to books, but these books that women had access to encouraged them to pray, and aided them in private devotions. During this period women were more likely to read English, or French, instead of Latin. This English was Old and Middle English. The power women had during this time generally was limited to the home or church, unless you were like Empress Matilda, who organized an army by herself, showing that women could cause havoc at any moment. Literature during the Middle Ages such as "Beowulf," "Judith," "Lanval," "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," and "The Book of Margery Kemp," illuminated the ideals of the sexes.

Men in the epic "Beowulf" were very testosterone driven. They spoke about battles, wars, soldiering, and were the protectors of the people around them. Women on the other hand were mentioned little within "Beowulf." There were seven women inside this story, and all but one of them were described in good terms. The only exception was Grendel's mother, but that was probably because she was Beowulf's enemy. Women were expected to be good subordinate wives, and inside the story you can see this loyalty when the Queen comes out with the cup of wine: she gives it to her Lord first, then to Beowulf. Women's opinions did seem to matter to some degree. The poet noted the Queen's reaction to the hero: "the wife was well-pleased with Beowulf's words" (Damrosch 45).

A poem after this that gave more light on the sexes in the Middle Ages was titled “Judith,” This an old English poem based on the Old Testament with its heroes that devote their military zeal to the glory of God. Men in “Judith” were again seen as warriors and at high ranking. They expect to get what they want. “At the point where the Old English poem begins, the “wickedly promiscuous” general, after his drunken feast, orders the beautiful Hebrew maiden Judith to be brought to his bed” (Damrosch 110). Judith sticks up for herself, however, and she beheads the general for what she says is a religious order of Christ. “Judith” puts an “emphasis on her power in contrast to the biblical source’s emphasis on God’s power to operate through the hand of a mere woman” (Damrosch 110). The poem shows that women could be heroic, even in the Old English period.

Marie de France was the first women thus far that we have learned about writing her own literature. In her story of “Lanval,” “Marie swiftly brings into play elements that had been largely absent in the historicizing stories of Arthur: bodily desire and its dangers, romantic longing, the realm of the uncanny, the power of women, the force of wealth and influence in even the noblest courts” (Damrosch 181). Marie de France also reveals the women were property and a king’s gift. Using all this ammunition it is easy to understand the contrasts in “Lanval.” Guinevere tries to get Lanval to commit adultery with her, but he wants nothing to do with it. She becomes upset at rejection, and manipulates her husband’s laws to imprison him. While Lanval is on trial his mistress returns and proclaims his innocence. How revolutionary is it for a woman to save a man in trouble? When the couple are riding away, Lanval rides behind his mistress in a subordinate position. Marie de France provides very new ideas during this time about the negative and positive powers of women.

Another story that deals with romance is that of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Gawain was described as being sophisticated, gorgeously dressed, and fearless. On his quest for the Green Knight, he runs into many temptations of women, which he turns down. Morgan Le Fay, who has gained powers from the wizard Merlin, turns up the end as the temptress trying to expose the sexual misbehavior of Arthur’s group. So here again we can see women as sex objects, but this story presents a different view of the matter. A women can test a man, and a man passes the test by regarding her as more than sex object. We are getting hotter now.

“The Book of Margery Kemp,” by Margery Kemp, is the last significant piece being discussed in the Middle Ages. When Margery Kemp wrote this

book, religion in the country was coming into the vernacular. Many people including John Wycliffe were pushing the idea that every person had the right to read, and understand the Bible. Biblical knowledge in turn influenced the ideas of Margery Kemp. After her first child she fell into a huge depression, and then was inspired to pursue a holier form of life. She would walk around town sobbing, and crying, which essentially made her into an embodiment of Christ. Her husband supported her to some degree, but again the concept of woman as sex object is presented. Her husband could not control his sexual desires, so he spousal raped her. She was challenged by important church authorities like the Archbishop of York, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Bishop of London. The only reason she was not burned is because she stuck up for herself under scrutiny.

Following the Middle Ages came the Renaissance, or most recently the time is called the “early modern period.” The previous way of thinking had largely vanished. New religions sprang up across Europe, and new scientific ways were beginning. Johannes Kepler confirmed that the universe was heliocentric, and the English physician William Harvey established that the body was powered by circulation to the heart. New ways of thinking were popping up everywhere. Also Henry the VIII was getting very nervous because he had not produced any male heirs to his throne, only females. Elyot even had said that in past history there was evidence that women had showed great examples of female sub service. During this time Juan Luis Vives wrote “Instruction of a Christian Women.” In this piece he explained that women were subordinate to their husbands and all of this natural order depended on the innate characteristics of the female in contrast to the male. There was an obvious contrast in ideas about women here. But this just represents the progression of ideas changing about women, along with the “Petition of the Gentlewomen and Tradesmen’s Wives” in 1642.

The “Petition of the Gentlewomen and Tradesmen’s Wives,” was a brash effort for women to get their voice out in the political government. Although this was not allowed they continued to do it, and used the church and the male leaders on the inside as a crutch. Women in England were nervous because of the Irish influence that might come in. They wanted to petition for Catholicism to not overtake their churches because they truly felt that they would be damned. As opposed to women of the middle ages, they were allowed to speak about politics, but only through the church.

Before the Restoration, aristocratic women had tantalized the court in private and privileged masquing. This changed during the 18th century. For audiences at the new theatres, actresses presented the possibility of erotic spectacle for the price of a ticket. Restoration comedy took as its subject appetite and opportunism, social hypocrisy and sexual power play. Wigs, fans, scarves, silk petticoats, and jewels were all props of the new commercial theatre. Women also began to self publish their own works of literature. These were still extremely controversial, as was everything that dealt with autonomy and innovation. Marriage also was a new tool because if parents could arrange the right marriage the whole family's status in the society would rise. Husbands were head of the household, and women were expected to bear children, supervise servants, meals, shopping, and social occasions. They were, however, encouraged to partake in pleasures that their education had set up for them. These activities included music, embroidery, letter writing, and talk at the tea table. "A Serious Proposal to the Ladies" was formulated with the main character Mary Astell. It preached to help women out with education instead of sending them off to get married and produce a division of labor. Nevertheless, it remained for the next 200 years, the woman with her children in the kitchen and men going off to work to provide for them.

A very significant person during this time was Aphra Behn. As a private investigator for the King, she had to petition the King and threaten starvation in order get paid, and she succeeded in getting the King to pay up. She established a career in writing plays for money which would make her the first women to earn a living with a pen. Behn was revolutionary for this time because she didn't sit there and let her husband take care of her; she made something out of herself and became her own celebrity.

The last piece we read that shows how woman have changed is Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*. There are many female characters in this play, unlike "Beowulf" where the women are sitting in the background. Maria is a main character in the plot, and she refuses to love a suitor who is put forward for her. She makes her own choice of husband, and the choice is a good one. This is different from early works when woman were there for sex and threw themselves at men. The story is written around lies, cheating, and sexuality.

From the beginning of the Middle Ages all the way to the 18th century women took a journey where they had more rights and more say in everyday life. The Middle Ages produced works of literature such as "Beowulf" that showed small amounts of evidence of women in the culture, to "Judith," and

author Marie de France surpassing ideas and meeting new heights. Then wrapping that up was “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” with Morgan Le Fey the temptress, and “The Book of Margery Kemp” where a woman goes against social norms and does her own thing. The Renaissance opened up for new ways of thinking after scientific studies were revealing new ideas. Pieces of literature such as “Instruction of a Christian Women” tried to keep women in a subordinate position, but “Petition of Gentle Women and Tradesmen’s Wives,” showed just how powerful women can be by using other routes to get their name into politics. Wrapping up with the 18th century women were in full force, and some such as Aphra Behn and Mary Astell were writing literature. *The School for Scandal* even put women in the front as main characters, and put them into provoking positions. From the Middle Ages where women were in the background to the Restoration where they were featured in literature the progression was long and hard, but these literary influences may have helped create the women of today.

Works Cited

Damrosch, David et al., eds. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature, Volume One*. 3rd Edition. Vols. 1A, 1B, 1C. New York: Pearson Longman, 2006. ISBN 0-321-33392-6