



Primary Source Analysis: The Good Wife's Guide p. 50 – 98

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Abstract. This primary source analysis aims to explore the context and content of the book “The Good Wife’s Guide” pages 50-98. In short, this essay will provide insight and inferences of the unnamed author; discuss about the historical context in Paris, including Christianity and the church, marriage and love, that influenced the development, tone and perspective of this book; a summary capturing the important points expressed by the author about how sisters and wives are expected to act at home or in front of their husbands; a terminology list; and finally, an argumentation reflecting my thoughts on reading and further research performed to support my ideas.

Keywords: The Good Wife’s Guide, Marriage, Middle Ages, Paris

1 Introduction

“The Good Wife’s Guide” is a medieval household book compiled by an anonymous Frenchman in the late fourteenth century. What is simply known about the author is his identity as a “wealthy, aging Parisian” [1]. Taking another approach to find out more about his lifestyle, this section discusses the social class of the author, a rich citizen of Paris.

For one fact, general social stratification in the Middle Ages followed the feudal system and divided people into three main groups: nobility, clergy, and peasants [2]. The term “bourgeoisie” was introduced in the Early Middle Ages. Its definition changed between the High Middle Ages and the Late Middle Ages, and to make it clear, the author, who is titled bourgeoisie, adopts the earlier meaning of the term: an affluent, urban inhabitant.

As the attraction of many wealthy residents, Paris was endowed with a productive and thriving economy. This allowed wealthy Parisians and the bourgeoisie to employ workers and servants. The gender and nationality of these workers varied, so as their roles: chambermaids, domestic servants, stewards, beguines, and most of them were “low-class migrant or urban dwellers” [3]. The estimated number of servants per household is a dozen [3]. The payment of servant’s taxes in livres (the French currency at the time) and the offering of gifts recorded in several testaments are evidence of the employment of domestic servants. Specific examples include Jehanne Haudry’s gifts to

three female servants, and five male servants, as well as to a few former servants [3].

For the bourgeoisie, there were several requisites for employing servants, in which the author should have met. One was wealth or enough money to pay workers. The second was the expanding labour market due to large number of immigrants from other countries. In Paris, a percentage of 63 male and 73 female immigrants was recorded in the Saint Louis miracle [3]. The last was the sizeable house able to accommodate such a large quantity of people. The rich and poor citizens lived in drastically unlike houses, differentiated by the number of decorations in the rooms in addition to the number and quality of the facilities and spaces in the house. Apart from the two basic areas that all houses contained regardless of the social class of the inhabitant, the living area and the sleeping area, rich citizens had houses with additional areas such as shops, gardens, and cellars [2]. With the space to fulfil such a large number, and the need for people to take care of their homes, prominent bourgeoisie had to hire workers to run the house.

These were all proven in the introduction of the primary source. "In the course of his manual, we discover that he has a large house in Paris itself, as well as a country estate and a farm. He possesses a staff of servants, stables, farm animals, mews, ample gardens in town, and fields in the countryside for hunting and farming." To elaborate, many rich people in the city owned a house in the countryside to grow food, raise animals and bees, hunt, and store supplies for later uses.

With the mistress at home and the servants taking care of domestic affairs, the men could go out to work. Despite the unknown job of the author, some possibilities of the job of a bourgeoisie includes that of a merchant, artisan and craftsmen [2]. Bourgeoisie also had the authority in governmental affairs. Due to the large amount of land possessed, bourgeoisies held discussions with kings and monastic lords about the arrangement and necessity of bourgs [4].

Parisians usually ate two meals a day: one around noon (called *disner*) and a lesser meal at the end of the day (called *souper*) [5]. Their diet was based on the Christian calendar and was divided into meat days (*jours gras*) and lean days [5]. Besides honey and the typical types of meat poorer people ate, rich bourgeoisie had other options on meat days. Food consumed included meat cooked in various methods like roasting and boiling, fresh fish, exotic spices, fruit, pastries, and delicious wine [3,6] These meals were eaten with polished tableware in fancy homes [3].

In addition to luxurious meals, wealthy citizens also took care of their clothing and ornaments such as "sumptuous cloths, furs, and leather and ivory goods, [...] golden vessels and ornaments." [3]. This is mentioned in chapter VI of "The Good Wife's Guide" when the narrator reminds the wife to take care of her furs, dresses, coats and her bearing.

2 Historical Information / Background Research

To begin, the ability for the author to compose such a piece of writing was due to the existence of universities and educational institutions since the tenth century. "Literacy and elementary learning" were spreading in Europe, which stimulated the initiation of universities and schools, providing people the chance to record historical event and

voice opinions and suggestions. [7]. The recognition of the University of Paris also increased the dissemination of literacy.

“The Good Wife’s Guide” could be assumed to be written before 1394 [5]. Courtesy books rose in demand and to prominence in the thirteenth century, and with that, female comportment instructions were written in the late fourteenth century [5]. Medieval marriage is complex and intricately entangled with religion, politics, property exchange, love, and sexual desires.

There were several models of medieval marriage, and the one George Duty proposed was “profane and religious” [6]. The mechanics of marriage in France was based on an agreement between clergies and nobles. Clergies wanted a “indissoluble and monogamous marriage”, while nobles wanted to divorce at will, summarises Sara McDougall from George Duby’s work [8]. In the end, the church decided to agree with the clergies, in which Sara McDougall explains that it was the result of the will of powerful people and the interests of both the nobles and clergies. By early thirteenth century, Christian marriage was “at least conceived of in the same way by knight and priest, king, and pope.” [9].

Throughout Europe, medieval women had a lower status than men. Thus, most women, if they did not choose to become nuns, were expected to marry and procreate [10]. A few reasons for marriage in Europe were property exchange and sexual desire, and not often because of love. [10] Marital love, according to Andreas Capellanus, is based on affection rather than love itself which corresponds to extramarital relationships [6]. The purpose of marriage explains why nobles wanted to marry to their blood: to keep their properties within their family’s control [8]. The marriage of nuns was strictly illegal in the Middle Age, France included, which is why the author uses the word ‘sister’ in the text. And even after marriage, women didn’t gain the same freedom and right as men. In ancient hierarchy society, husbands had control over “the sexuality and property of the obedient wife” [9].

Medieval marriage was both a religious and political matter, “an intersection between the natural and supernatural” [11]. It involved intricate laws and ceremonies, the publicity and legalization of an act, and the banning of certain immoral conducts such as unchastity. The church played a major role in shaping the codes, regimes and morals of marriages. Marriage changed from being a commitment to an agreement to the purification of the soul and other controls of the Church and the canon law. [11] The Catholic Church took two marriages as important examples: that of Adam and Eve and Mary and Joseph, [6] and would legislate the marriage of those baptized. To summarise the canon law, “the heart of a valid marriage was consent, expressed in the oaths exchanged between the principles.” [5] After the vowing, the pairs would consummate, and this would define their valid marriage. Churches would prefer this process to be done in front of people so that there are witnesses which would prevent the married couple to reject their marriage in the future. [5] If it was not performed in public, in which it is called a clandestine marriage, the two would undergo penance. [5]

3 Summary

The general idea of the primary source is to teach a sister how to become a “good” wife and the morals, duties, and rules she should follow. The criteria for being “good” can be concluded with 4 words: love, protection, management, and independence. The first word love can be branched off into three more specific adjectives: chastity, obedience, and fidelity. These words appear in the introduction of the book and correspond to chapter III and part of chapter IV of the primary source.

Chastity is about both parties being honest and loving and distancing themselves from the opposite sex. The relationship between wives and husbands should be more than just respect, and about opening their hearts to one another, to cherish their presence and their intimacy. Wives should especially love their husbands because they themselves evolved from the man’s flesh. According to the Bible, after creating the first mankind Adam, God decided to accompany the lonely soul with a woman made from Adam’s ribs and flesh. She was called Eve. Wives should care for their husbands like animals — like wild creatures such as birds and beasts, and the domestic dog Macaire, who were all loyal and faithful to their masters, protectors and those providing them nutrition, company, and shelter.

The narrator showed many examples of unchastity when wives (even husbands) “cheated” on the other. Examples included a dying woman confessing her extramarital affairs, a common woman who escaped to Avignon, and a male lawyer who had a child with another woman. Instead of blaming or exposing their misbehaviour to the public, a “good” wife and husband should do all possible to conceal the information and forgive with full heart. It is both the woman’s and the male’s responsibility to assure that the honor and reputation of the couple is not damaged.

Fidelity is about cherishing the husband and showing him love with physical care such as preparing him with what he needs when he comes home. This will keep the man at home and drive him away from other homes. For it is hard for a wife who has lost her first husband to remarry and find someone pleasant and suitable after.

Obedience is about completing duties. A wife should be utterly frank with their husband, both in her actions and in beliefs. Wives should not fake their niceties and blankly comply to the husband with rebellion or repulsion in their hearts. The thought of overpowering the man and wanting too much toleration can put the relationship of the couple to a freezing point. Husbands will love their wives if they are compliant, kind, loving and not ambitious to destroy their husband’s good name.

Protection is the key word in chapter IV. It is not only about protecting reputation, but also the husband’s body and soul, giving him comfort when needed and providing him with a safe and clean space to reside. For example, supplying him with comfortable linens, food, nice environment, and keeping rooms devoid of insects and pests. There are several methods recorded in the book to keep fleas, mosquitoes and flies out of the bedroom, to name a few smearing birdlime, using sheepskin, sticking the insects with unfinished cloth, and using special plants and organic materials.

Protection is also about “shielding the husbands from all troubles.” The man will take care of the outside, so women should minister to the inside. Just like a man who provides his horse with sufficient food, sanitation and care, the wife should do the same

to ensure the husband's happy stay at home.

Management covers a wide area of responsibilities including growing the garden and managing the house and servants. Servants are categorized into three types based on the time they spend or live in the house. Quick jobs include those of porters and grape harvesters, skilled jobs are those of tailors and the like, and domestics are servants and chambermaids who stay for a long time. Some of the wife's role incorporates communicating to servants beforehand about wages and selecting "mild-tempered" workers to avoid any bargaining or problems during or after their work, as well as commanding the workers to work at the right time, doing the right things. In need of help, sisters can contact Master Jehan the Steward or Dame Agnes the Beguine and ask for instruction, management and advice.

Last, a wife should be independent, that is, she should be mistress of the house and have enough authority to order the servants, improve and correct their faults, grasp their obedience, and supervise them in case of procrastination. Additionally, a wife should know how to handle a situation when there are wolves, foxes, or rats near or inside the house. These animals can be killed with powder, baits, cats, rat traps and with other methods.

To summarise in one quote, the book illustrates the husband-narrator's desire for "his own happiness in a prosperous, bountiful, and peaceful residence with an obedient spouse attending his needs, overseeing the management of his home, and guaranteeing his good name."

4 Terminology

Adam; first male human created by God

Common woman; a woman who engages in sexual activity mainly for money

Virago; made from man

Vita; life, represented by Eve

Macaire; a dog who stayed beside his master's dead body to protect and guard him. He didn't eat, sleep or drink and attacked any threat that approached

Sister; member of religious order of woman

Cock shell; a shell, worn by pilgrims coming from St. James

Simple women; women who have not received any education

Hose; pants or any clothing that covers the legs of men

Breeches; pants with a waist that wraps the upper leg and comes down to knees, commonly worn by men

Trenchers; a square or circular wooden plate used to slice bread or cut meat

Gall; contents of gall bladder, used by wives to mix in milk to kill flies

Anoint; apply liquid, especially oily ones

Tallow; hard, fatty substance from animals

Sops; food, typically bread, soaked in liquid and then eaten

Hermit; solitary people who lives in religion seclusion

Penitent; (in Roman Catholic Church) a person who confesses sin to the priest and is imposed a penance

Abstinent; refrainment of certain behaviours and consumptions like sexual intercourse and alcohol

Lucifer; lord of the angels of Paradise

Monseigneur de Berry [12]; captain of Paris

Thresher; a person who separates grains from cereal plants

Fuller; a person who cleans oil and other contaminant off cloths to make it thicker

Steward; a servant who managed the household and the owner's property

Draper; a person who sells fabric and textiles

Chambermaid; a maid who cleans the bedroom or living area of the house

Dame Agnes [13]; maid who teaches the wife how to behave and manages other servants

Beguine; women who lived religious lives without joining a proper religious order

5 Argumentation

After reading “The Good Wife’s Guide” several times and browsing numerous research journals, it is apparent to me that females had less authority and civil rights than men in the general Middle Ages. The primary source, written from a masculine perspective, enforces the need of wifely guides and the profusion of laws for married women. Even female authors like Christine de Pizan have written female conduct books like “*Trésor de la cité des dames ou Le livre des trois vertus* (1405),” which elaborates the morals and duties females with different backgrounds, power and wealth should follow. [5] This reflects the need for these types of books at the time, the thinking and believes of male and female importance and their contributions to societies. It also seems that medieval people believed that the extreme establishment of rights, morals and expectations will protect women in their disadvantaged position and ensure their quality of life. It was embedded in most people’s mind that women had a lower social class, as it was written in the primary source. Females were also severely punished for their mistakes and crimes. It was a double standard. Quoting scholar Sara McDougall, “Extramarital activity involving a wife seems to have provoked a sort of cultural horror that extramarital activity involving a married man did not.” [14]

There were of course, similar laws and punishments for men. Sara McDougall wrote an essay called “The Opposite of the Double Standard: Gender, Marriage, and Adultery Prosecution in Late Medieval France” in which she points out male adultery was more severe than female ones and that the court targeted men more than women because they had greater ability to pay fines and were easier to locate. However, from many scholars’ perspective and my inference, the total laws and restrictions to men couldn’t exceed those imposed on women.

The Middle Ages demonstrated female oppression. In the primary source, even though the narrator tried to be objective and write in a way that will not offend women, his tone couldn’t conceal his superiority and control over the wife. To illustrate my point, in the examples he gave about “cheating,” he described in detail when it was targeted to a woman, but when he mentioned the male lawyer, the paragraph was obviously shorter. It was his method to intimidate the sisters and to prevent them from

behaving the same.

In my opinion, one cause for gender inequality is due to religion. God believes that women came from men's flesh, so females have a sense of belonging and even owning to male. Most medieval people were strictly religious, and without questions, accepted this belief. And with the establishment of laws and the creations of writing, it affirmed and solidified the belief that women were less than men. "Courtesy literature sharply segregated roles for men and women" [5] The desires of men and aristocrats, and maybe even women (which is not mentioned in the primary source) increased the production of these books, which disseminated into cultured families. As they read these books, they followed these rules and shaped themselves into a personality that matched society's expectations. Many women citizens lived under oppression, or at least to say under many obligations and responsibilities, and not many were able to be like Joan of Arc, a female warrior. The roles for women were more delicate than men: tasks like farming, growing gardens, buying decorations, and properly dressing themselves and not aggressive behaviours like war.

Apart from my observations on gender inequality, another I made during the reading was the author's or narrator's style of writing. He wrote elegantly, using metaphorical language to vividly express his ideas, and making comparisons to different animals. For example, similes to wild beasts and birds in the "Be Very Loving and Intimate with Your Husband" part, comparisons to horses in the "Shield Your Husband from All Troubles" part and the detailed observations about pest infections and creatures like mice in chapters IV and VI. What I can infer from his writing is one, he received proper education and two, he has experience with animals. It may suggest that he was a frequent hunter, he liked to observe nature, or he raised many animals. The way he was able to write from a wife's perspective may suggest that he took care of his wife and liked to think from a female perspective.

After reading the selected passage from "The Good Wife's Guide," I still have some questions, for example, what is the importance of reputation in medieval society and what does it mean when a woman overpowers her man? Additionally, after my research on the extremely complicated topic of medieval marriage that concerns many aspects, I wish to learn more about it, its evolution and all the laws that came with it. Also, "The Good Wife's Guide" sparked my interest in reading a book written from a female perspective about her daily life in the Middle Ages. This way, I will be able to compare between the thinking of women and men about marriage and love.

6 Conclusion

"The Good Wife's Guide" is a 14th century assembly of wifely courtesy writings. The anonymous author is inferred to be a Parisian bourgeoisie who hired many servants, lived in a huge house, owned other estates in the countryside, ate fancy meals, and participated in governmental affairs. Marriage in Paris during the Late Middle Ages was strongly influenced by Christianity, the Church, and the series of laws (canon law for example) it created. Marriage was considered not only a ceremonial and religious event but was intricately involved with politics and other systems. To summarise the

selected range in one sentence, "The Good Wife's Guide" offers a series of criterion of what a husband wants and expects from a 'good' wife. Finally, my intake from this source is deeper and more comprehensive understanding of women in the Middle Ages, specifically in France, incorporating the extent of female limitations or female oppression seen from both the way the author describes and compares women to animals and other research conducted. It gave me many inquiries that I wish to further investigate.

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