



Gender inequality in Medieval marriage: An analysis of *The Good Wife of Paris*

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Abstract. This paper studied *The Good Wife of Paris* from pages 53 to 64, a book written by a wealthy elder 'bourgeois', which means people who lived in the urban areas from medieval Paris in the 14th century to his young wife through analyzing the historical background, the author's identity and the main content of the book. This paper explores the conditions of marriage in the wealthy, upper class in the Middle Ages in Paris after the Black Death epidemic through many contents in the book, such as the use of metaphors of the subordination between God and Lucifer and the ownership between the dog and its master and through researching the Canon laws back in 14th century related to marriage. As a result, the paper concludes that marriage then was dominated by an unequal relationship of male dominance and female obedience, even in the relatively elite, wealthy upper and middle classes.

Keywords: medieval marriage, life in medieval Paris, gender inequality, life in medieval Europe

1 Introduction

The author of *The Good wife of Paris* does not mention his name once in the book, which means he wrote the book anonymously. Fortunately, the book's introduction by the editor stated that the author was 'an ageing wealthy Parisian bourgeois'. The French word 'bourgeois' means upper or middle classes [1] in modern society, but in the medieval period, it means the residents of a walled town [2]. Bourgeois in the Medieval period was usually entrepreneur or merchant, and their economic role in society was the economic intermediary between the feudal landlord and the peasants. They work for the land owned by the landlord, which is the fief according to Marxist [3].

Through the content of the book, which involves the responsibilities a wife should take like managing the households and being loyal and tolerate to her husband, it also indicates that the author owns a staff of servants, stables, farm animals, mews, ample gardens in town, and fields in the countryside for hunting and farming' [4] and these elements clearly have shown the wealthiness of the author. What emphasized the author's characteristics even more is that the bourgeois of Paris between 1250 and

1350 only had 140 families or about two thousand people. At the end of the 13th century, those riches pay 80 per cent of the total taxes, according to the text record [5].

Additionally, the fact that he was married at a very late age suggests that he may not belong to the aristocracy even though he was rich. This is because marriage in nobility was considered a diplomatic and political tool or other intention to preserve or gain the family's or the country's benefit nobles; therefore, they might want their children to be married early since their children's children could also inherit part of their wealth [6].

2 Text's information

The Good Wife of Paris was written in 14th century Paris; according to the introduction of the book [7] and France and England were having the Hundred Years' War. In contrast, in such a chaotic and turbulent era, the author could still write this book in a relatively more straightforward language and context since he does not mention any related diseases and wars or anything depressive specifically throughout the book.

The reasons contributing to this phenomenon are possible that the authors wrote the book after the plague, and he was one of the survivors since the plague only lasted for five years(1347~1352).

There were about 25 million people who died in Europe, and more than half of Paris's 100000 population died [8]. Hence, it was doubtful for the author to write the book under such depressing and stifling conditions.

On top of that, the rise in the price level, especially food prices due to the loss of labour after the plague [9] and war, could also have positively impacted the author's financial conditions. This is because the author got his fields for hunting and livestock; he would have a sufficient supply of food and could also make a profit by selling his extra food at the market price. On top of that, the Hundred years' war has also contributed to the decrease in the value of the land; therefore, the author could gain his fiancée at a lower cost than before.

Additionally, one of the factors which encouraged the author to write this book could be the rise of humanism in the 14th and 15th centuries promoted the writing of books on the family and marriage [10]. Humanism originated in Italy in the 13th century and spread throughout Europe in later years [11]. It considered that marriage was beautiful and sacred and wives are worthy of praise; a famous Italian humanist, Leonardo Bruni once said: "Man is a social animal, as all philosophers agree; the fundamental union, which by its multiplication creates the city, is that of husband and wife."

Moreover, Intergenerational marriage with significant age differences between the author and his wife was prevalent. Women typically marry in their 10s, while men marry at least in their mid-20s [12]. From the 12th century onwards, men, especially urban men, were generally resistant to marriage because they did not want the constraints of marriage [13].

Moving on to the laws of marriage, according to catholic law, divorce was not accepted [14]. The relationship between husband and wife should be immutable and

exclusive to each other, and the husband has absolute control over the relationship even though women still have some power in an elite marriage. However, they still must submit to the husband's authority [15].

3 Summary

The Good Wife of Paris (P53~P64) has covered content such as how the woman should love and cherish her husband in a marriage and what the wife and husband should do when the couple is going in the wrong direction. With the housework, she needs to do as a wife and the skills she needs to acquire to do those chores, a wife should try to spare her husband trouble and make him comfortable at home. At last, a wife should always be dutiful.

Firstly, a wife should love her husband very much and maintain a very intimate relationship with her husband, and should always follow her husband anywhere no matter what; just like the relationship between a loyal dog and its master, no matter what the master does, even if it hurts the dog, the dog will always follow the master and comfort and make him happy if necessary. On top of that, even if your husband or wife has done something terrible, such as cheating on you, leaving him for someone else, or being a prostitute, you should always protect her or his reputation from others and accept his or her mistake and give them a second chance.

When the husband is out of the house taking care of his duties, such as work, the wife is expected to provide him with the best services and care. No matter what he was going through outside, he will always have hope because an understanding and caring wife is waiting for him at home and ready to serve him; prepare his pyjamas and linen clothes for the next day, wash his feet and provide him with drinks.

Furthermore, a wife must keep the room and bed free of fleas. This could be done by lots of techniques such as taking a tray covered in birdlime or turpentine and lighting a candle in the middle; the fleas will stick to it.

What is more, as a wife, to save their husband's trouble, they do their best to serve him so that he can feel comfortable. So he will be willing to leave everything behind, other women, to be with you.

Lastly, a wife should always be dutiful from beginning to end. Some wives think their husbands are very kind and tolerant, so when they are lazy and become less respectful and obedient, their husbands will not accuse them. The truth is this kind of marriage is the same as the relationship that God had with Lucifer; Lucifer, in the light of God's love for himself and the identity of the Lord angel, constantly challenged God's bottom line and finally angered God and made God throw him into the hell.

4 Terminology

Common woman: This means prostitute in medieval Europe, especially in England, meaning ordinary woman; it was used to refer to women who had multiple sex partners for money [16].

5 Argumentation

The author's relationship with his wife differs from the modern notion of two people as equal individuals in marriage. The author's relationship with his wife was more like that of master and servant, or even master and pet, from the book's content alone; their status was not equal. In the author's mind, his wife should be obedient to him and provide him with meticulous care [17]; at the same time, he does not mention his duties as a husband and how he should express his love for his wife in this marriage.

In the chapter 'Dutiful', the author writes that women, as wives, should always do their duty to take care of their husbands and the family. If she slackers, does not consistently fulfil her responsibilities and expects her husband not to mind, her husband will one day treat her the way God sent Lucifer to hell. In Christianity, Lucifer is Satan. Satan was his name after God sent him to hell, and he was an angel once, but he betrayed God and became the fallen angel [18]. On top of that, angels are often regarded as agents of God in

Abrahamic religion and its roles included the servants of God and providing guides and protection for humans [19]. Although overall, the relationship between God and angels is a relationship between superiors and subordinates, the fact that the author uses this as an example to tell the wife always to do her duty reveals that the author sees himself as a superior and his wife as a subordinate or even a servant in this marriage.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the book, the author emphasizes that the most intimate relationship a wife can have is with her husband, and the wife should be with her husband no matter what he does. At this point, the author used the relationship between a dog and its master as an example to illustrate it; He wrote that dogs would be closer to the people who give them food but are reserved to other animals and would not leave their owner no matter what the owner does to the dog even beat the dog. Both pets and livestock are legally the property of their owners [20], and the author uses this example to illustrate marriage, which means that he does not treat his wife as a person who enjoys the same rights as him and objectifies his wife as his property.

What is more, his wife was also more like a housekeeper or a servant than a lover based on what he had written. Most of the book's content was the author instructing his wife on how to manage the household chores, such as arranging the sheets and taking care of him...etc. The content of how she, as a wife and how he, as a husband, should love each other was relatively minor. One of the possible reasons for this could be the rise in the price of labour due to the depopulation caused by the plague and the Hundred years' war [21]; in the late 11th century, a famous poet named Marbode wrote a poem in praise of a kind wife: "these(the wife's services to the household)are so useful to us, so convenient." [22] therefore the author could also be looking for a 'free labour' to help him manage the households.

All of this could be attributed to the patriarchal society of the Middle Ages [23], in which men are the dominants and the centre; this could be seen directly in the Catholic law of marriage that I wrote about in the text's information section at the time that men were in charge of marriage.

6 Conclusion

Through the above research and analysis, a book written by an older Black Death survivor who was living in Paris in the late Middle Ages to his recent married young wife about the guidance and instructions on how to be a decent, responsible, expected and good wife; it is concluded that in that era, the phenomenon of gender inequality, women being objectified and the gender roles for them in marriage is responsible for housekeeping. Women need to take thoughtful and meticulous care of their husbands and listen, obey, love and be loyal to them; they should forgive and tolerate their husbands no matter what happens to make their marriage last because Canon law forbids divorce.

This paper has found details such as the rhetorical devices the author used, like the metaphors of comparing his relationship with his wife to the dog with its owner and God with Lucifer, the fallen angel. Moreover, more general conditions of medieval French marriage were also being explored; such as the significant age gap between the author and his wife mentioned in the book's introduction reveals that intergenerational marriage was common at that time. The author's argument could be considered his wife as free labour due to the historical background of the Black Death pandemic. Despite the status inequality in their relationship, the author's financial situation and identity are also being analyzed.

The paper has explored the marriage conditions in the late medieval period of Paris. It has evaluated and concluded that gender inequality of men is superior to women was a significant, expected and noticeable phenomenon. In further research, the paper could include more content such as the changes in marriage patterns in different medieval periods and compare them to see whether or not the status of female has been raised. In addition, the effects of Christianity on marriage structure could also be further researched to see the relationship between marriage, gender roles and religion.

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