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HE BETE HUR WYTH HYS NAKYD SWYRDE, AND SCHE CASTE UP MANY A REWFULL RERDE: THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE IN *LE BONE FLORENCE OF ROME*

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Abstract

In medieval romance tradition, it is usually noted that women are seen most explicitly as a threat to patriarchal values, and that the combination of such things as adultery and murder of husband may be thought of as the signs of misogyny. Such tradition is frequently used in clerical antifeminist writings, in which the notion of female promiscuity is fuelled by the role assigned to Eve in the Fall. Likewise, it is usually suggested that the medieval romance heroine is clearly punished for her first marriages, unwanted and unconsummated though they are. However, this paper will argue that while misogyny does indeed exist in the depiction of the violated woman, the heroine's wily resourcefulness in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* seems to elicit a more positive response in the hearts of medieval audience. Hence, such a romance seems to modify the general critical understanding of gender violence and misogyny, and this paper aims to explore how the figure of fallen medieval woman does not necessarily seem to suggest misogyny throughout the romances of medieval England.

Keywords: Medieval England, Middle English Romance, Women, Violence, Misogyny, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*.

Introduction

In Medieval Romance Tradition, it is usually noted that women are seen most explicitly as a threat to patriarchal values and that the combination of adultery, murder of husband and of the mother of the hero attempting to kill her child may be thought of as the signs of misogyny. Such tradition is frequently used in clerical antifeminist writings, in which the notion of female promiscuity is fuelled by the role assigned to Eve in the Fall (Taflı Düzgün, 2016: 93). Likewise, modern medievalists suggest that the medieval romance heroine is clearly punished for her first marriages, unwanted and unconsummated though they are. For instance, in the Old-French *Roman de la Rose*, the evil nature of woman is denounced:

Ha! se Theofrastes creüsse,
Ja fame espousee n'eüsse.
Il ne tient pas homme por sage
Qui fame prent par mariage,
Soit lede ou bele ou povre ou riche,
Car il dit, et por voir affiche,
En son noble livre *Aureole* ,
Qui est bonz a lire en escole,
Qu'il y a vie trop grevainne,
Plene de torment et de painne.

[Ha! If I had only believed Theophrastus, I would never have taken a wife. He holds no man to be wise who takes a woman in marriage, whether ugly or beautiful, poor or rich. For he says, and you can take it for truth, in his noble book *Aureole* , which is good to read in school, that there is there a life too full of torment and strife.](Poirion, 1974, ll. 8561-70).

These lines refer to the hatred of women. Likewise, in the Middle English romance of *Bevis of Hampton*, the hero's mother is a threat to patriarchal values. Bevis's own mother is a strong-willed woman and is of royal descent, but the way she uses her royalty and energy seems to illustrate the anxieties relating to the gender, sexuality and sovereignty of twelfth-century queenship (Taflı Düzgün, 2014: 148). In the romance, Bevis has a tendency to blame of women and these examples may vary in the narratives. The hero's mother procures the death of her elderly husband, Earl Gui (ll.85-102), then she marries the King of

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Germany (ll. 283-88) and she casts off her own son and attempts to kill him (l.338). In the end she falls from a tower, breaks her neck and dies. Bevis does not pity his mother and her death seems an act of divine retribution:

His mother over the castel lai,
Hire lord sethen in the pich she sai;
So swathe wo hire was for sore,
She fel and brak hire nekke therefore

(Bevis, ll. 3459-62)

Bevis' cavalier and dismissive attitudes towards his mother may be explained by misogyny. As R. Howard Bloch puts it: "Are we still dealing with misogyny if good women are presented alongside of negative examples? ... If so, we are forced to incorporate conflicting images of woman—Eve and Mary, woman as seducer and redeemer—within the essentially negative field of antifeminism and to deal with a paradox of history: that the periods of greatest misogynistic activity can also be periods of intense woman worship, as in the example of twelfth- and thirteenth-century mariolatry" (Bloch and Ferguson, 1989: 8). In this context, this paper will argue that while medieval women depiction of violence seems to have been reflected in Middle English romances with signs of misogyny, the heroine's wily resourcefulness in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* seems to elicit the general understanding of the idea of violence and misogyny towards medieval women. Middle English romance owes part of its popularity to its use of motifs, some of which contain representations of women interwoven with the cultural, historical, religious, and political contexts of western medieval society. Thus, this paper shall argue that the importance of the representation of woman will reveal itself structurally and textually in two ways: first, its cultural and religious positioning as exemplified by 'misogyny', and second, by 'the violation of *la femme chaste*'.

The Middle English *Le Bone Florence of Rome* presents both a fairly close and a slightly different rendering of the Old-French narrative of similar title. It survives in only one manuscript, Cambridge University Library manuscript Ff.2.38, which has been edited by Carol Falvo Heffernan (Heffernan, 1976). This manuscript contains a large number of Middle English narratives usually described as romances, as well as religious texts. While the earliest studies on the French *Florence de Rome* were discussed by scholars in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the earliest studies on *Le Bone Florence of Rome* were done by Knobbe who focused on the style (metaphors, rhyme, etc.) of the romance and by John Edwin Wells who claimed that the author of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* was more interested in the heroine than in the hero (Wells, 1918: 124). In the 1920s, Laura Hibbard seemed to have been convinced by Wells' idea that the heroine, and therefore the 'chaste woman motif', is more important than the hero and his battles (1924: 15). In the 1950s, Margaret Schlauch expanded the idea of the same motif studying it not only in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, but also in other medieval texts including Chaucerian ones (1927). Later, Dieter Mehl concluded that *Le Bone Florence of Rome* had no crusading spirit (1968: 140). The manuscript in which *Le Bone Florence of Rome* survives, CUL Ff. 2.38, preserves both religious texts and Middle English romances, among them, *the Earl of Tolous*, *Octavian*, *Robert of Sicily* and *Sir Degare* contain the 'chaste woman motif'. In addition, Constance in Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale* and Gower's Constance in *Confessio Amantis* can be studied in the light of the 'chaste woman motif' similar to that depicted in *Le Bone Florence of Rome*. Therefore, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, the above mentioned romances, and Chaucer's and Gower's works, all seem to have focused on the 'chaste woman motif', which provides a cultural representation of Western medieval texts.

In *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, Otes is the highly respected and generous emperor of affluent and peaceful Rome. As the story begins, the widowed emperor is at war against Garsy, the very powerful but very old emperor of Greece. The origin of the conflict is Otes's only child Florence, a maiden of incredible beauty and learning, who refuses Garsy's marriage proposal. As Garsy is rejected, he wages war on Florence's father:

Sche schall lygg be my syde
And taske my flankys wyth hur honde
That ys so feyre Y vndurstonde
Yn bedde me to byde.
She schall me boPe hodur and happe,
and in her louely armes me lappe

(ll. 108-113)



Garcy, a harmless, old man wants to embrace ('brace'; 'happe') and cuddle ('acolez'; 'hodur') Florence.¹ Even though he has not seen her before but only has heard of her beauty, he wants to marry her. When his messengers return to Constantinople and describe her beauty again, Garcy's desire to marry Florence becomes inevitable. Garcy seems to unite her physically, and when Florence touches his 'flankys' and embraces him, they will become one. Florence refuses the offer of the king, and such a rejection helps Florence's young and beautiful body to be saved from possibilities of rape. Florence's father is killed on the battlefield and on the battlefield, two dispossessed Hungarian brothers fight with remarkable ardour. Emere in particular proves so brave that he is eventually offered the princess' hand and imperial crown. They get married and the groom inherits but Florence requests that he captures Garcy before the marriage is consummated. Florence does not want to share his bed until he takes revenge on Garcy for killing her father: 3yt schall ye neuyr in bedde me by, / Tyl ye haue broght me Syr Garcy' (ll. 1000-01). Florence and Emere are thus separated. The new emperor's brother, Miles, however, is rather unhappy with this turn of events and devises treacherous plans in order to take possession of Florence. First, Florence's brother-in-law Miles tries to marry her by force:

Sir Miles seyde to thes hundurd all,
Thys herytage to me wyll falle,
My brodur comyth neuyr agayne.
I wyll wedde the yonge bryde,
He slepyd neuyr be hur syde,
Nor hath hur not by layne.
(ll.1066-1070)

In these lines, Miles tries to convince Florence that his brother Emere has perished at the battle field and he will never come back to Rome and Miles will both be the owner of the heritage of Rome and the husband of the beautiful Florence. After a series of failures, Miles manages to abduct her, beats her with a sword and hangs her up the tree by her hair:

And felle of on hur palfray
He bete hur wyth hys nakyd swyrde
And sche caste up many a rewfull rerde,
And seyde ofte, 'Weleawaye!
Schall Y nevyr my lorde see?'
'No, be God that dyed on tre',
The false traytur can saye.
(ll. 1425-1431)

These lines suggest that Miles attempts to rape Florence, but she reacts against him and this is the reason why he bitterly beats her. In the Middle English Dictionary, 'bete' refers to 'beating' and 'whipping' and these words refer to the sexual violation and portrayal of force.² As Corinne Saunders puts it: 'in late medieval English law, rape and abduction were inextricably linked: the term *raptus* originally meaning seizure, could refer either to rape or abduction (2000: 106). Likewise, Catherine Dunn states that *raptus*, a Latin term, could denote rape, abduction and adultery (2013: 10). Such a *raptus* is ended with the prayers of Florence and she again confirms that Miles is a 'false traytur'. Even though physical violence is articulated here, Miles' sexual projects are frustrated and thanks to divine intervention, Florence preserves her chastity. Then Miles leaves Florence alone in the forest. Florence is rescued by a man, Terri, and during the time that she spends with his family. However, this time, she defends herself against a knight of the household who tries to rape her:

He leyde hur downe on her bedd,
The lady wepyd sor efor dredd,
Sche had no socowre thare.
Before hur hedd lay a Stone,
The lady toke hyt anon
And toke hyt yn a gethe,

¹ Online Middle English Dictionary (OMED): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html>. Accessed July, 2017.

² Online Middle English Dictionary (OMED): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html>. Accessed July, 2017.



On the mowthe sche hym hyt
That hys for tethe owte he spytt
Above and also benethe.
Hys mowthe, hs nose braste owt on blood
(ll.1600-09)

These lines suggest that the knight wants to sleep with her, but Florence cries out ('wepyd') and she is scared ('dredd').³ Then, she grabs a stone and gives harm to the knight. As the knight is injured and angry with Florence, he kills Betres, Sir Terri's daughter who sleeps in the same room with Florence: When he wyste they were on slope / To Betres throte can he grope/In sonder he schare hyt tyte (ll. 1630-32). In the Middle English Dictionary, the word 'gröpen (grope)' refers to 'touch with the hands or fingers' and the word 'shären' (schare) means 'to cut with a weapon'.⁴ This knight articulates violence towards Betres here and then he continues his wicked deeds by putting a bloody knife into the hand of the sleeping Florence: And fonde Betres his doghtur dedd / The bedd was full of blode redd / And a knyfe in Florence hande (ll. 1648-50). Then Florence is accused of murder and banished (ll. 1696-1707). The calumniated empress travels down to a port where she saves a thief from the gallows on the condition that he will now serve her: 'wolde Pou serue me wele' (l. 1732). However, he proceeds to sell her to a sailor who attempts to rape her as soon as they set sail: In hys armes he can hur folde/Hur rybbes cracyd as they breke wolde / In struglynge can they stryve. (ll. 1849-51)

Le Bone Florence of Rome, which seems to manifest in the female body, is multi-faceted. Salisbury notes that violence 'takes a variety of forms—social, psychological, economic, spiritual, physical, verbal, sexual—all of which are intended to injure another person in some way (2002: 2). Likewise, in her article, Riddy suggests that Florence's body is "sick, deformed and wounded; needing to be fed, clothes, kept warm, given rest, eroticized, tormented and vulnerable; the corpse - all these varieties of the body in time are accommodated by the poem, and not as animal but as human (2004: 207). Florence's body takes a variety of forms all of which are intentionally injured her in many ways. Even though, signs of misogyny are portrayed in the romance, Florence's wily resourcefulness -her heroically sufferings in silence and her patience- elicits the general understanding of the idea of violence and misogyny. In *De Patientia*, St Augustine defines that "the patience of man which is right and laudable and worthy of the name of virtue, is understood to be that by which we tolerate evil things with an even mind, that we may not with a mind uneven desert good things, through which we may arrive at better. Wherefore the impatient, while they will not suffer ills, effect not a deliverance from ills, but only the suffering of heavier ills" (Schaff, 2007: 527). Florence is persecuted throughout the romance, because she wants to remain a virgin for her very earthly husband, and her saintly behaviour might be the epitome of her patience.

Florence prays ardently and escapes dishonour when a tempest cracks and then destroys the boat. She finds refuge in a nunnery: 'dwellyd as nonne in Beuerfayre'(l. 1913) and one day discovers that she has healing powers: 'and helyd her on sche went away'(l. 1921). The news spreads that there is a nun who performs miracles: 'the worde sprang in mony a cuntre / into Rome the ryche cyte' (ll. 1930-31). Florence's numerous persecutors, all of whom suffer from horrible diseases such as 'fowle meselle' (l. 1965), 'crompylde and crokyd' (l. 1977), and 'woundys' (l. 1992) make their way to the nunnery. Florence's husband, who was injured on the battlefield 'was festurd wythowte delyte' (l. 1943) also comes to see the famous nun in order that she may cure him. They publicly confess their misdeeds and her persecutors are healed 'sche handylde ðem wyth hur hande' (l. 2110). Emere recognises Florence and takes her back to Rome. Florence and her husband, Emere, reunite; a reward for Florence's marital fidelity and 'they gate a chylde the furste nyght '(l. 2164) who will succeed Emere at the head of the empire. From beginning to the end of the romance, Florence is persecuted and forced to leave her home, because she wants to remain a virgin for her very earthly husband, and her saintly behaviour might be the epitome of her patience. At the very end of the romance, the poet repeats what have mistreated Florence and how her persecutors are denounced:

ForPy schulde men and women als,
Them bethynke or Pey be false
Hyt makyth so fowle an ende.

³ Online Middle English Dictionary (OMED): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html>. Accessed July, 2017.

⁴ Online Middle English Dictionary (OMED): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html>. Accessed July, 2017.



Be hyt neuyr so slylye caste,
3yt schamyP Pe maystyr at Pe laste
In what londe Pat euyr lende.

(ll. 2176-81)

These lines provide didacticism such as acting falsely and treating slyly are not good attitudes and suggest the idea that such attitudes are not appreciated by the society. As Saunders puts it: 'the practical possibilities of escaping rape become important: from tales founded in the firm belief that God will preserve the deserving virgin, and that, indeed, to be raped would demonstrate a lack of merit, we move to a type of story that upholds female inventiveness. The focus on the physical aspect of virginity leads to an interest in action rather than passivity' (2001: 151). While Florence's rejection of suitors is what triggers her torture, her wily resourcefulness- constant prayers and her sudden ability to call on God - elicits a more positive response in the hearts of medieval audience.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that while medieval women depiction of violence is reflected in Middle English romances with signs of misogyny, the heroine's wily resourcefulness in *Le Bone Florence of Rome* elicits the general understanding of the idea of violence and misogyny towards medieval women. After the public confession of the rapist, the murderer and the kidnapper, the idea of misogyny towards Florence disappears. While the violence against Florence is emphasised many times in different forms in the romance, such a romance modifies the general critical understanding of misogyny. Hence, the figure of fallen of medieval woman or the violation of the chaste medieval woman does not necessarily suggest the hatred for women throughout the romances of medieval England.

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