Inventing Womanhood

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INTRODUCTION

THE ORIGINS OF WOMANHOOD

In 1348, a group of beautiful women began appearing at tournaments dressed as men. Henry Knighton, a canon of St. Mary's Abbey in Leicester, mentions in his chronicle these unusual women and the discomfort they provoked. The passage shows Knighton grappling with the problem of describing women who do not conform to established feminine categories, pointing up the limitations of existing models of womanhood:

In those days a rumour arose and great excitement amongst the people because, when tournaments were held, at almost every place a troop of ladies would appear, as though they were a company of players, dressed in men's clothes of striking richness and variety, to the number of forty or sometimes fifty such damsels, all very eye-catching and beautiful, though hardly of the kingdom's better sort. They were dressed in parti-coloured tunics, of one colour on one side and a different one on the other, with short hoods, and liripipes wound about their heads like strings, with belts of gold and silver clasped about them, and even with the kind of knives commonly called daggers slung low across their bellies, in pouches. And thus they paraded themselves at tournaments on fine chargers and other well-arrayed horses, and consumed and spent their substance, and wantonly and with disgraceful lubricity displayed their bodies, as the rumour ran.

And thus, neither fearing God nor abashed by the voice of popular outrage, they slipped the traces of matrimonial restraint. . . . But God in this as in all things had a marvellous remedy to dispel their wantonness, for at the times and places appointed for those vanities He visited cloudbursts, and thunder and flashing lightning, and tempests of astonishing violence upon them.¹

The most unsettling aspect of these women seems to be that they have "slipped the
traces of matrimonial restraint [laxato matrimonialis pudicie freno].” Because their marital situations are unknown, they cannot be classified as maidens, wives, or widows—the traditional triad of female roles. Those roles take on meaning most fully in a familial context and in relation to men, but Knighton’s women appear outside of that framework and so must be dealt with on their own terms. He struggles to do so by likening them to “players [interludii],” suggesting that they are lower class, and, most extensively, by relating them to recognizable masculine models or characteristics. If Knighton cannot connect these women to their fathers or husbands, in other words, he can underscore a different set of connections to maleness: the women’s manifestation as a mounted “troop [cohors]” armed with daggers and wearing “men’s clothing [apparatu uirili].” However, tension exists between these aspects and the feminine elements of the women’s appearance and behavior; these “ladies [dominarum]” remain unambiguously female, neither actors nor men. Rather than condemning this spectacle with the “popular outrage [populi uocem]” that Knighton projects, people react with fascination and “great excitement [ingens clamor].” The new vision of femininity that the women embody intrigues and disturbs Knighton as well as the tournament audiences, partly because the women are never clearly classified (using the available terms and categories) or controlled.

This is the second issue the passage raises: in “slipp[ing] the traces of matrimonial restraint,” the women also evade the largely subordinate relationship to masculine authority inherent in maidenhood, wifehood, and—albeit to a lesser extent—widowhood, and therefore raise questions about whether and how women might exercise power in other ways. These questions carry a spiritual undertone, since the Church helped both to limit women’s authority as wives and to expand it as virgins or visionaries (most often in the mode of the Virgin Mary, who derived authority from her position as Christ’s mother and intercessor for humanity). However, in addition to commanding the attention of the spectators and the chronicler himself, the women seem to possess wealth and independent agency; they even appear prepared to defend themselves with daggers. Their power does not conform to any sanctioned model, secular or spiritual, and instead—in Knighton’s portrayal—signifies a lack of respect for God and places the women in direct conflict with him. To resolve the thorny issue of female power, then, the passage turns to deus ex machina.

If these women have escaped the restraints of matrimony, however, Knighton has not: he strains to understand and describe these women who exceed conventional feminine identities based on marital status but he lacks both precedent and vocabulary. Although Knighton is writing in Latin, the same problem exists in Middle English and, as I will argue below, became more urgent due to a number
of cultural changes. In response, from the late fourteenth through the fifteenth century, Middle English writers experimented with new ways of imagining and representing women's lives and experiences. Two especially significant aspects of that experimentation were the coining of a number of new gendered terms, including *womanhood* and *femininity*, and the refashioning of others already in use, such as *motherhood*. This book suggests that Middle English writers used these words with remarkable eagerness to signal moments where the writers are particularly interested or invested in exploring new ideas about femininity. As suggested by the episode of the tournament women, some of the most vital issues are how to develop and define the larger idea of womanhood underlying more specific identities like wife or mother and how to construct women's relationship to different kinds of authority, generally masculine and frequently religious. Such concerns appear most prominently in connection with femininity in this period; *manhood* had already been in recorded use for at least 150 years before the analogous terms relating to women appeared in the written record.

While writers often carry out this linguistic and literary experimentation through or in relation to individual female characters like the Wife of Bath, I am most interested in the general concepts of womanhood formulated during this process. Few scholars have tackled that broader idea directly, although Sarah Salih has considered a specific gendered identity in the form of virginity and Jennifer Summit has traced the development and impact of the “woman writer” as a gendered category. Perhaps the work that most closely parallels this investigation of femininity is the recent research attending to medieval notions of masculinity. Isabel Davis, for instance, takes up representations of male selfhood in life writing and Holly Crocker considers Chaucer’s portrayals of masculinity in relation to questions of visibility and agency. Crocker’s concern with constructions of manhood roughly resembles mine with constructions of womanhood. While her analysis does not center on language, she does note the importance—and the slipperiness—of gendered vocabulary: “the Middle English *manhed* has several meanings, whose overlapping resonance indicate this identity’s potential fluidity.”

Although I am interested in the various gendered terms that writers created and adapted, I find *womanhood* to be particularly important, both because it directly invokes the conceptual problem of what defines women collectively, beyond specific experiences or roles, and because it was used so widely and in such interesting ways in the late Middle Ages. The word first appears in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower (associated with characters such as Criseyde, Griselda, Hippolyta, and Amans’s lady), but the invention of womanhood to which my title refers is a complex diachronic process that incorporated a wide set of usages and influences and that involved innovation at the level of both language and literary representation. This process continued into the 1400s as other writers adopted and adapted gendered terms and the related ideas. More than six centuries later,
we tend to think of much of this gendered vocabulary as self-evidently transparent: *womanhood*, for instance, means the condition of being a woman. But what it meant to be a woman—outside the traditional roles of maiden, wife, and widow—was very much an open question in the later Middle Ages and was becoming a more immediate concern after the outbreak of the plague. When Chaucer and Gower employ this new word, then, they do so with surprising precision. It does not mean simply the condition of being a woman but instead signifies particular elements of womanliness, from beauty to an ability to exercise intercessory influence. When later writers pick up *womanhood* and its sister terms to use in their own texts, they do so with a similar sense of the terms’ linguistic usefulness—indicating that this language addressed the gap that had developed between social reality and available vocabulary—but often with a different set of personal and poetic aims.

The gendered language that forms the focus of *Inventing Womanhood* occurs across a range of texts, but many of the earliest or most significant usages appear in literary texts, which privileged neologisms and linguistic creativity. Consequently, this book focuses both on literary texts and on the literary aspects of texts generally perceived to fall outside the canon. Most recent studies of medieval gender treat literary texts less often or less centrally than previous scholarship did; Chaucer was especially important for those earlier critics but Mary Erler, Rebecca Krug, Catherine Sanok, Nancy Bradley Warren, Claire Waters, and others have since incorporated other rich sources such as religious texts and documents related to family life.

Some scholars focus on less well-known texts that we still consider literary, as in Theresa Coletti’s latest book on medieval drama. Nonetheless, while the foundational work by critics such as Susan Crane, Carolyn Dinshaw, Elaine Tuttle Hansen, and Jill Mann has remained influential, canonical literature itself has become more peripheral. This shift in focus has uncovered valuable information about what Krug calls women’s “literate practices”—the many different ways in which they influenced the production, circulation, and reception of texts—and expanded our understanding of women’s representations in texts and roles in society more broadly. It has also illuminated vital connections between secular and religious texts that this project seeks to extend. Both literary and devotional texts, from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to Julian of Norwich’s *Shewings*, include innovative uses of the gendered terms under scrutiny here and influence the much wider spectrum of usage that evolves during the fifteenth century. This attention to the concepts of femininity signified by such language thus sheds new light on canonical literary authors while also participating in the ongoing reevaluation of fifteenth-century texts, which gender-based studies have significantly furthered.

Middle English writers’ rising interest in gendered language correlates with several important intellectual and social developments in the later fourteenth century. At the time, two common ways of classifying women were firmly entrenched: the threefold model defined by marital status (maiden, wife, or widow) and the binary
model based on religious types (the perfect Virgin Mary versus the sinful Eve). While the latter was most common in antifeminist texts, the former was integral to women’s identities in social, legal, and religious contexts. Both models, however, demonstrate the tendency to consider women in categories connected to male figures rather than collectively and autonomously. A number of historical shifts made these traditional ways of thinking inadequate and may have prompted Middle English writers to participate in what became the co-evolution of gender concepts and vocabulary. 

Medieval British society was changing in profound ways, affected both by key events (such as the plague and the peasants’ rebellion) and long-term trends (including the rise of the middle class, the development of affective piety, and increasing lay control over marriage); this confluence leads Judith Bennett to argue that 1350 may be the true watershed of the late Middle Ages. These historical developments had pronounced effects on women’s roles that created the need for new ways of thinking about and describing them.

We can see the changes already underway when the women Knighton describes appear in 1348, the same year as the first outbreak of the plague in England. The plague’s decimation of the population critically contributes to this historical divide, initiating some changes and intensifying others but, overall, increasing financial and social opportunities for women in ways that move even further beyond the extant paradigm. The high number of deaths meant that, by necessity, more economic prospects were open to women. Social convention still limited which opportunities were available and to whom (wealthy widows, for example, were best positioned to take advantage) and the opportunities began to decrease within a relatively short period of time; despite those caveats, however, these financial opportunities did noticeably affect women’s social choices. This same time period saw a move to later, companionate marriages and it appears that women’s greater economic prospects allowed them to delay marriage longer and exercise a greater degree of choice in their spouses.

Both married and single women also gained greater access to religious authority with the growing popularity of affective piety in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: the emphasis on personal visions and emotional responses to the humanity of Christ allowed women to position themselves as his mother or lover. They did not have to become nuns or anchorites in order to embrace spiritual devotion; the idea of the mixed life demonstrated how women could integrate intensive devotional practice into an otherwise secular lifestyle. The late fourteenth century also witnessed the rise of Lollardy, but research suggests that women found few opportunities there that were unavailable to them through orthodox religion, especially with these developments in lay piety, which allowed women like Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe to participate in powerful religious vocations (though not without risk).

This combination of factors and their effects on women’s experiences has led some historians to identify the period as a kind of “golden age” for medieval
women. That position has been sufficiently challenged by other scholars and I do not wish to revive the debate here. But the actual available roles for women outside of marriage and a family substantially increased in the late fourteenth century and ideas about what identities or occupations were appropriate for them underwent an abrupt expansion (before a subsequent contraction). For the purposes of this study, I am most interested in how these historical trends affected ideas about women and their possible roles rather than to what extent those changes were realized in real women’s lives.

Historical changes, then, open a gap between existing models for imagining womanhood and the potential roles and experiences of women in late medieval Britain. Not surprisingly, this conceptual gap is marked by a corresponding lexical one: David Burnley explains that linguists use the term “lexical gap” to describe that sociolinguistic condition wherein “radical alterations to [a] society and to its communicative needs . . . may leave a language lacking words for the new circumstances.” The use of new gendered vocabulary addresses both gaps and so the linguistic conditions of the period are another important part of the historical framework for this project. While Inventing Womanhood is not primarily a linguistic study, I do want to consider briefly the unusual nature of the gendered language that it foregrounds, specifically in relation to Chaucer’s linguistic practices since he has the earliest known uses of some of the most critical terms, including femininity and womanhood.

Scholars have subjected Chaucer’s language to much more detailed scrutiny than any other medieval writer’s and it has been productively examined by Ardis Butterfield, Christopher Cannon, Simon Horobin, and others. Cannon has demonstrated that linguistic innovation was part of Middle English literary culture, often in response to source texts in other languages, and argues that Chaucer was typical in this regard; Cannon has also discovered that Chaucer tended to discard his coinages after a few uses, making room for more new words in his vocabulary and maintaining the performance of novelty. Womanhood, however—to take one key example—departs from these general practices. As the following chapter will establish, Chaucer adds the word to his sources rather than taking it from them and he continues to return to it, using it in some of his earliest short poems and many of his longer ones, including the Legend of Good Women, Troilus and Criseyde, and the Canterbury Tales.

This anomalous usage suggests the significance of the notion of womanhood to Chaucer and indicates an interest in representing women in ways that depart from tradition. The usage is further complicated by, in my interpretation, Gower’s role as a co-innovator in developing the meanings of womanhood and related terms as well as the long process of inventing the concepts being signified, which includes many adaptations throughout the fifteenth century. Because Chaucer and Gower were thinking about women in new ways (outside the extant identities of maiden, wife, and widow—all terms that were already in use), new abstractions were required.
Womanhood proves to be a popular one because of its ability to mediate different categories, such as secular and sacred, wife and mother, or female saint and courtly lady. The later uses of this and related terms by Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, the York dramatist, Osbern Bokenham, Margaret of Anjou, Robert Henryson, William Dunbar, John Capgrave, the Digby dramatist, and many anonymous writers, confirm that these abstractions were useful for talking about women. Womanhood is one central manifestation of what appear to be more general preoccupations with how to represent women and with what qualities or opportunities they should or could have (including, perhaps most urgently, their access to authority).

Womanhood offered a way to investigate forms of feminine power, such as intercession and mediation, that can occur in a secular context, but the most established avenues to authority for women were spiritual. Both Warren and Coletti have demonstrated that religious traditions offered useful models and ample material for women to fashion claims not only to authority but also to political and social significance, while Carolyn Collette’s work on Anglo-French texts has shown that secular female agency depended on contemporary religious as well as political ideologies. Reexamining those models, some Middle English writers turned to another key term, motherhood. While womanhood was secular and human from the outset, motherhood originated as an explicitly sacred term, as did manhood and fatherhood; this pattern underscores that the concept of motherhood, particularly as embodied by the Virgin Mary, offered women their primary access to the divine. The first known occurrences of manhood in the 1200s and early 1300s, on the other hand, were theological and it was often paired with godhood or godhead to denote the two aspects of Christ’s nature. Motherhood and fatherhood came into use later, appearing in the fourteenth century. In both cases, the earliest uses of the terms were religious: fatherhood described God’s relationship to man or the relationship of male religious authority figures to those for whom they were responsible, while motherhood applied only to descriptions of Mary. More secular uses of motherhood (i.e., uses that involve human women) begin with Gower and Julian of Norwich. Particularly for women writers, this reimagined concept of motherhood with its connection to the most powerful female spiritual figure provides a model for authority that can be tweaked in fruitful ways.

Inventing Womanhood begins with the earliest appearances of the gendered language that strove to capture new concepts of femininity, reading womanhood as an interpretive key for two of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. In contrast to scholars who have seen gender as a minor issue in the Knight’s Tale and as either highly individual or fundamentally universal in the Clerk’s Tale, I argue that Chaucer reshapes both stories around the notion of womanhood and its connection to social power in the forms of intercession and submission. In the first narrative, Theseus brings his Amazon queen and her sister into Athenian courtly society, where the sister becomes an object of disruptive desire. In the latter, the marquis Walter marries the lower-class
Griselda and tests her by pretending to murder their children. Both tales radically transform the female characters—from Amazon warriors to Athenian ladies and from peasant maiden to marchioness—and they must verify that they possess the virtues of womanhood proper to their post-transformation roles. I identify submission as the crucial quality but confirm that Chaucer also considers the potential for feminine authority that can coexist with such deference. He further revises his sources to intensify the internal and generic contradictions that these characters represent. Although Walter’s motivations have puzzled critics, I propose that he tries Griselda’s womanhood by assessing her ability to reconcile her duties as a wife and mother; her behavior similarly incorporates elements from romance and hagiographic traditions. The Knight’s Tale probes the capability of Hippolyta and Emelye to subsume their Amazon natures within the Athenian model of womanhood and, by extension, to combine mythical legends with courtly literature. In Chaucer’s versions, Griselda negotiates these layered paradoxes successfully but the Amazons are never satisfactorily assimilated into royal society nor into womanhood itself.

While Chaucer may have the first recorded uses of many gendered terms, he is not the sole determiner of their meanings; my second chapter treats Gower’s equally influential explorations of these ideas through narratives of transformation in the Confessio Amantis. Critics have emphasized morality and aesthetics in Gower, but his representation of gender is innovative and in some ways more radical than Chaucer’s: Gower considers the multiplicity of human nature—which, in the Confessio, encompasses manhood, womanhood, and beastliness—and particularly figures or moments where those aspects overlap. This reading challenges early feminist readings of Gower as insensitive to women’s concerns and extends the work of Diane Watt, who has argued for his embrace of amorality and ambiguity. I show that Gower’s portrayals of beastly women in the tales of Florent, Tereus, Cornix, and Calistona reveal the unreliability of external evidence as a signifier of womanhood and that his portrayals of womanly men in the stories of Achilles and Deidamia, Sardanapalus, and Iphis indicate that feminine behaviors and desires are not innate but can be learned or feigned. The chapter then turns to the frame of the Confessio to posit that its traditionally recognized emphases on morality and politics are mediated through a third concern: gender. I contend that the lady for whom Amans harbors unrequited love is not, as critics have assumed, a conventional romance exemplar but instead the moral center of the text. Amans must learn how to balance the multiple facets of his own nature and then apply that knowledge by conceding his lady’s authority to refuse him; this requires him to use the lessons from the tales to resolve the disjunction between romance conventions and reality in interpreting both his own manhood and his lady’s womanhood.

The third chapter maintains that Lydgate and Henryson create their own significant versions of femininity, as signaled by their use of gendered language. The Temple of Glas, which has received little critical attention despite a recent rise of
interest in Lydgate’s poetry, describes a love affair between a lady and a knight brought together by Venus. I demonstrate that Lydgate imagines womanhood as a constraint on the lady that dictates her response to the knight’s advances as well as her behavior after marriage. Henryson’s *Testament of Cresseid* continues the story of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, tracing Cresseid’s descent into poverty, illness, and finally death after leaving Troilus. I argue that Henryson portrays Cresseid’s womanhood as a condition of physical vulnerability; exploiting the etymological generality of womanhood, he expands it from a set of virtuous qualities or behaviors into an existential condition and thus approaches our modern usage. Countering the prevailing interpretation of this text as antifeminist, I show that Henryson critiques Chaucer’s portrayal of Criseyde, which claims to be sympathetic yet finally fails to offer any justification for her betrayal of Troilus. Even more directly than Chaucer and Gower, Lydgate illuminates the shortcomings of social models of gender while Henryson moves beyond those models entirely and approaches the modern conception of womanhood.

Turning to the women writing inside this intersection of gender and language (and also from poetic to devotional texts), my fourth chapter argues that Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich participated in the creation of new ideas about femininity associated with manipulations of gendered language but that, rather than creating or adopting a new term, they remake motherhood. This tactic allows them to take advantage of the existing model of womanhood that offers the strongest foundation for constructing a feminine form of power. Both writers selectively utilize the Virgin Mary as the spiritual and literary paragon of womanhood and exploit the slippage between biological and metaphorical motherhood in religious discourse to authorize women. Julian’s *Shewings* describes and interprets her visions, which inspire her theology of Jesus as mother. Although scholars have treated her mother imagery as primarily figurative, I show that she works to broaden the definition of motherhood and link the religious image more closely with human women. This expanded idea authorizes her text as a mothering gesture. Margery Kempe, wife and mother of fourteen children, chronicles her life and travels as a controversial spiritual figure in her *Book*. Critics have dismissed her motherhood as immaterial to her religious adventures; I demonstrate, however, that she combines Marian maternal imagery with the sexual imagery of affective piety to create herself as an unparalleled intimate of Christ. These women writers are an integral part of the social and literary culture from which the new gendered terms emerged and which they influenced, but Julian and Margery also mark out an alternate path through the Middle English possibilities for addressing the post-plague changes to ideas about womanhood.

The use of gendered terms rapidly expanded throughout the fifteenth century. While *womanhood*, for instance, first occurred in fourteenth-century canonical literature, it quickly spread to a wide variety of texts, including the *Secretum Secreto-
rum, rolls of Parliament, royal correspondence, hagiography, drama, romance, and courtly love lyrics—where its usage became so common as to be almost *de rigueur*. The conclusion considers this final stage in the medieval evolution of womanhood, looking at how the gendered terms that appeared in the fourteenth century became crucial to fifteenth-century Middle English literary culture while the concepts denoted by those terms continued to change. It might be said that medieval women—like those in Knighton’s chronicle—invented womanhood, since their actions pushed the cultural boundaries that historical forces had begun to destabilize. If the invention of womanhood began as a social development, however, it quickly became a textual phenomenon for Middle English writers, who were able to experiment with radically new ways of imagining and representing women’s lives and identities.