Inventing Womanhood

Williams, Tara

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CONCLUSION

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMANHOOD IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY DISCOURSE

What happens to womanhood as both the historical conditions that prompted new ideas about women and the gendered language that expressed such ideas continue to evolve? The previous chapters have examined how fourteenth-century writers—most notably, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and Julian of Norwich—fashioned or expanded concepts of womanhood and how some fifteenth-century writers, including John Lydgate, Robert Henryson, and Margery Kempe, reimagined those concepts in response to their own aesthetic and social concerns. In tracing that dynamic, this book has moved from focusing on the earliest occurrences of some gendered terms to later uses that were particularly significant in the development of their meanings. Over the course of the fifteenth century, however, changing notions about womanhood and the language employed to signify those notions appeared in a wide range of discourses and texts, from the rolls of Parliament to courtly love lyrics and from royal correspondence to hagiography. In this broader context, we can see the rapid evolution of these terms and ideas as they continued to take on individual and even idiosyncratic constructions but ultimately expanded to become more general abstractions (as we have seen with Henryson’s use of womanhood in the Testament).

By looking at many texts over a long range of time, we can identify larger-scale trends in the evolution of gendered language. The previous chapters examined fewer texts in greater detail, providing close looks at particular takes on and manipulations of womanhood. This conclusion surveys usage more broadly, exploring both the range of possibilities these terms represented (including which meanings are most common and which appear as outliers, and which discourses tend to use this language more often or in particular ways) and how the terms evolved over time (including when the popularity of a word waxes and wanes; how denotations expand, contract, or shift; and how various lines of influence converge or become distinct). Most of the texts I consider here do not foreground gendered
language in the same way the texts examined earlier did; however, these later texts do make significant use of different notions of and concerns about femininity. The terms receive less emphasis partly because they are becoming more familiar as they become more widely used: writers no longer need to attend as carefully to specifying meanings, even though they continue to use the concepts being denoted in innovative and significant ways.

The increasing use of gendered vocabulary testifies to the social and aesthetic utility of the terms; the fact that newly coined words denoting femininity not only persist but also evolve and spread indicates that they were indeed filling the conceptual and lexical gaps described in the introduction. Recent scholarship by James Simpson, Nancy Bradley Warren, and others has reevaluated the fifteenth century and renewed attention to its aesthetic and intellectual developments; it is now recognized as a significant period in its own right (measured in part by the quality of literary and devotional texts that it produced). Writers’ adaptations of terms like womanhood and femininity during this period indicate that gendered language was another area in which they built on their fourteenth-century inheritance rather than merely imitating it.

Not surprisingly, the fundamental dynamic of gendered language in the fifteenth century was one of broadening meanings. This phenomenon happened in different ways with different words; while motherhood became broader as it was increasingly used to denote a human relationship in addition to a spiritual one, for instance, sisterhood grew to include the relationship between nuns in a convent as well as a familial connection. Even as terms like womanhood and femininity become more general, however, they do not entirely collapse into synonyms. Chaucer’s single use of femininity—the first recorded appearance of this term, which is of French and Latin extraction—offers negative connotations. In the Man of Law’s Tale, the narrator apostrophizes the Sultan’s mother, Constance’s first evil mother-in-law: “O serpent under femynynytee, / lik  to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!” About a century later, the Digby Mary Magdalene manipulates such connotations in order to highlight the dual nature of its title character; the first half of the play employs féminité to present women as fleshly, shallow, and changeable but, by the second half, the term develops a positive association with the Virgin Mary. The dramatist reserves womanhood for the invocation that inspires Mary Magdalene’s one miracle: when the queen of Marseilles appeals to Mary as the “flower of wommanned,” she saves both the queen and her child. The term is not only positive but also—as we have seen in previous chapters—closely associated with exercises of feminine power.

The etymological components of womanhood set it up to function as a broad term, denoting the condition of being a woman; its association with prominent concerns (such as feminine authority) may also have contributed to its popularity. This combination of factors means that womanhood remains a critical signal of
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when new ideas about women are at stake in a text. Like other examples of gendered vocabulary in the fifteenth century, it can still carry specific meanings but the overall move is toward generalization. One of the more unusual occurrences, for instance, is in a Middle English version of the Secretum Secretorum, a popular text that belonged to the mirrors for princes tradition but also included an encyclopedic collection of information on various topics. The section on physiognomy explains the significance of physical features in men, such as hairy eyebrows, large nostrils, short necks, fleshy feet, and broad toes, and interprets different types of male voices: “Who þat has a grete voyce and wele souned, he es batus and eloquent, þat es to say pertly spekynge. To smalle voyce tokenes foly and wommanhede.” This text seems to use womanhood to indicate effeminacy rather than a more straightforward womanliness. But this usage, which comes right around 1400, still suggests collectivity since it implies that certain characteristics are common to women and are correspondingly inappropriate or undesirable for men.

The tendency toward generality becomes more pronounced over time. A later appearance of womanhood in the rolls of Parliament from 1472–73 demonstrates how far the term has moved along the spectrum from individual quality to shared condition. A complaint from Sir John Ashton describes how his house came under assault; perhaps to lend pathos, Ashton details his wife’s fear, explaining that she had recently given birth and “was in right grete dispare of hir lyfe, and by grete space then after so contynued, and in like wyse the said gentilwomen then with hir accordyng to the lawes of God and womanhode as is aforeseid accompayned were in grete dispare of their lyves.” The phrase “the lawes of . . . womanhode” seems to refer to the practice of a group of women accompanying a new mother—a literal kind of collectivity, but also a reference to how women as a whole behave or what customs they observe among themselves.

Ashton portrays womanhood in a positive light; a large subset of texts associated it even more directly with a feminine ideal and the term became widely used to signify that ideal, especially in romantic contexts. Middle English love lyrics—a genre that became widespread during the fifteenth century—made copious use of the term, sometimes on its own and sometimes within the conventional phrase “flower of womanhood” (which we have seen Henryson exploit to memorable effect). “Thair sall no vþir in-to þis warld, but dreid, / Depairt me fra þe flour of womanheid,” proclaims the lover in “Sweet Enslavement.” And the speaker from “The Parliament of Love” instructs, “Go, thou litle songe, thou hast a blisfull day; / For sche þat is the floure of wommanhode / At her oown leyser schall the syng and rede.” Most often—and in far too many cases to cite individually here—we find poets using the word independently to convey the same sense of beauty, virtue, and all-around excellence. In “To His Mistress, Root of Gentleness,” the lover describes his beloved as possessing “Bounte, beaute, and perfyte whomanhood.” Similarly, the speaker in “To His Mistress, Flower of Womanhood” says to his lady, “And
sethe that ye are floure of bewte, / Constreynd y am, magrie myn hede, / hertely to loue youre womanhede.”

“An Envoy to His Mistress” opens with this plea: “O Bewtie pereles, and right so womanhed, / ffor the grete honour and vertue in you I see.” Perhaps most general of all is Lydgate’s “A Ballade, Of Her that Hath All Virtues,” which inquires, “What shoulde I more reherce of wommanhede? / Yee beon þe myrrour and verray exemplayre.” While the concept of ideal femininity existed before the term *womanhood* was coined, its ability to signify so many different aspects in such a compressed space made the relatively new term well suited for this rising genre.

The most interesting uses of gendered language during the fifteenth century, however, continue to be those associated with new or unusual models of womanhood and particularly those that involve questions of female power. In the York cycle plays, for example, Pilate’s wife both symbolizes and contributes to his power and her self-portrait invokes new notions of womanhood in that problematic context: “I am dame precious Percula, of prynces þe prise, / Wiff e to ser Pilate here, prince withouten pere. / All welle of all womanhede I am, wittie and wise, / Conseuyue nowe my countenaunce so comly and clere.”

This usage crosses genres: Percula is a secular character in a biblical drama, manipulating notions of feminine excellence most frequently found in courtly love lyrics to assert her authority in a political and religious context. Queen Margaret is another female figure whose claims to authority were contentious and who recast concepts of femininity. The incapacity of her husband, King Henry VI, and her son’s young age led her to seek the regency in 1454 (albeit unsuccessfully) and to become a forceful advocate for and later leader of the Lancastrian cause. In her correspondence, she argues that other kings should consider themselves injured by the actions against her deposed and now fugitive husband, just as “wymmen, whanne any thynge is done to the dishonoure of wymmenhode.” Margaret’s critics cast her as power hungry and masculine, but this letter hints at her attempts to reconcile the political demands of her royal status with the cultural demands of gender stereotypes: womanhood, like kinghood, is an honorable condition that requires vigorous defense.

While they present womanhood in a positive light, both Percula and Margaret might carry negative associations; however, other texts invoked new models of womanhood that incorporated substantial power in relation to more admirable figures. The anonymous romance *Ipomadon*, preserved in a late fifteenth-century manuscript and one of several Middle English versions of the twelfth-century Anglo-Norman romance *Ipomedon* by Hue de Rotelande, makes a notable departure from its source by portraying the central female character more positively. After the heroine is orphaned as a young girl, the lords decide that an unnamed but highly virtuous man will raise her: “The moste worthely man and wyse / Shuld kepe this lady mekyll of pryse, / And teche hur womanhoode.” The enterprise is successful insofar as she grows up to be a typically lovely and honorable romance.
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heroine, but she also departs from type by becoming “the Fere,” or the proud one, and openly insisting that she will only marry “the best knyghte.”

The original poem appears to critique the Fere, treating both women and courtly love ironically; while the Middle English version retains the nickname, the anonymous poet introduces it in the midst of a catalogue of the Fere’s excellent qualities and discourages any scrutiny of her upbringing by making it impossible to discern which of those qualities were inherent and which the wise and worthy guardian instilled in her. Rather than problematizing or interrogating womanhood, the English text mitigates Hue’s sharper depiction of the Fere by both drawing attention to her womanhood and encouraging us to accept it as exemplary.

John Capgrave’s depiction of Katherine of Alexandria is even more exemplary and, because it struggles directly with different conceptions of womanhood, even more intriguing. Katherine was “the most important saint in late medieval England” and Capgrave’s version of her life was the most detailed and among the most popular.

In the context of ongoing reevaluations of the fifteenth century and the growing interest in hagiographic and religious texts among feminists in particular, both Capgrave and Katherine are attracting more scholarly attention, with his Life of Saint Katherine at the conjunction of those larger concerns. The text merits substantial consideration here because it is preoccupied by contrary models of womanhood, secular and religious, and it stages an explicit search for a new and more expansive model that can accommodate the unusual experiences and desires of Katherine. In the process, Capgrave shows both how many things have changed since womanhood and its sister terms were coined and how useful that language and the narrative strategies associated with it continue to be. He must draw on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century innovations in this area because Katherine is such an extraordinary female character: a queen who is also a scholar; a maiden whose desire for virginity predates her conversion; and a woman who becomes Christ’s wife, a martyr, and a saint in short order.

Ideas of femininity are at issue in the two major debate scenes, the marriage debate between Katherine and her advisors and the theological debate between Katherine and the philosophers. As the ruler of Alexandria, Katherine challenges her council’s notion of femininity by insisting that she wishes to remain single and is capable of ruling without a husband. “It is full perlyous,” argues an earl, “to be a mayde / And eke a qween,” hinting that these two female identi ties, as Katherine embodies them, are incompatible.

“Why hate ye now that ilk lady must have?” an admiral asks in exasperation, trying simultaneously to comprehend and undermine her insistent rejection of convention (2.884). Later, as a Christian martyr, Katherine undermines her persecutor’s idea of maidenhood by refusing to be seduced by persuasive speeches and appeals to her vanity. This strategy is his last-ditch effort; he reasons, “There is non othir botte / Onto this mayden whech is so stedfast / But fayre wordes, whech draw womanhoode / And makith hem often othir thingis to
tast / Than thei shulde do if thei wold be chast” (5.330–36). He fails to recognize that his concept of womanhood does not apply to Katherine.

There is only one paradigm of womanhood that does pertain: the Virgin Mary’s. By chronicling Katherine’s pre-conversion life in unusual detail, Capgrave shows her remarkable characteristics and accomplishments in a secular as well as a spiritual context; they not only make more sense but also take on more meaning in the latter, where the model of the Virgin Mary renders them legible. When Mary sends the monk Adrian to convert Katherine, he catches her attention by insinuating that his faith can offer her a new model of womanhood. He tells Katherine that he knows a woman who is greater, more beautiful, and more powerful than she is:

“I may thee more boldely mak this commendyng: / Sche paseth yow, certeyn, in all maner thing” (3.454–55). This claim, which directly contradicts the flattery of her lords as well as Katherine’s own sense of her status, makes a profound impression. Astounded, she marvels at Adrian’s statement “More than sche dyd evyr hir lyve before / Of ony mater” (3.464–65).

When she finally brings herself to speak, Katherine first responds as if she has been insulted but soon reveals an intense curiosity about this new exemplar of femininity. The complex passage is worth quoting at length:

How may youre Lady be so worthy woman

As ye commende now in your tale to me,
Of hir hye worchepe and also of hir wytte?
The worthyest of all women we wene that we be—
We herd nevyr of non worthyere yytte!
Wher lyghtte hir londe? We wold fayn know itte.
Who is hir lorde—or wheyther is sche lordelees?
Ye telle us thingys whech we holde but lees!

Wheythyr is that dame lyvyng in spousayle
Or levyrh sche sool as we do now?
If sche be weddyd, sykyrly sche may fayle
Mych of hir wyll, for sche mote nedys bowe
Onto hir lord, loke he nevyr so row;
And if sche lyve be hirself alone,
Than may sche make full oft mech mone,

Ryght for vexacyoun of hir lorde aboute—
This know we well; we are used ther-to!
Therfor, goodeman, put us oute of doute:
Tell us the sothe, be it joye or woo,
Although Katherine begins her speech defensive and suspicious, her words betray a growing excitement by the end. She finds it hard to believe that such a woman exists, but she is intrigued by the possibility. The mystery woman (who turns out to be Mary) might be not only a peer but also a model for Katherine, who wonders whether the woman has resolved the dilemmas that Katherine herself has encountered in trying to live out this unusual form of womanhood. This passage resembles Knighton’s description of the troop of cross-dressing women discussed in the introduction in that both reveal the need for new models of womanhood; by the fifteenth century, however, linguistic, literary, and social precedents provide Capgrave with the necessary material to fashion such a model in his text.

The Life of Saint Katherine brings together some of the gendered terms favored by Chaucer, Gower, and their male followers with tactics utilized by Julian and Margery for constructing feminine authority in the mode of the Virgin Mary to create a version of womanhood that is both particularly Capgrave’s and particularly appropriate for the saint’s life he is writing. He stages a collision between spiritual and secular notions of womanhood, associating the term itself more strongly with the latter (and thus recalling its origins as secular rather than religious) while suggesting that the idea must be enlarged to accommodate more meanings and interpretations. This text is consistent with the fifteenth-century tendency to relate womanhood to an ideal femininity, but it also deals squarely with issues of feminine power. As a result, it illustrates how the two primary sets of meanings during the period could be combined and suggests that the capacious nature of womanhood and its related terms allows the bridging rather than the calcifying of differences. The Life of Saint Katherine also reaches back to the fourteenth-century emphasis on the mediating power of womanhood, which offered a conceptual space for bringing together and working through divergent definitions of women’s roles. Chaucer’s Griselda had to reconcile the competing demands of wifehood and motherhood, making her spiritual virtues signify in a secular context; Capgrave’s Katherine struggles with precedents and expectations for maidenhood and womanhood, discovering that her secular virtues fit more comfortably in a spiritual context. In both cases, the conflict can only be mediated within and by ideas of womanhood.

The examples in this study show the interdependent evolution of concepts of gender and gendered language; I have suggested both that the experiences of women and ideas about femininity outstripped the available vocabulary and that the creation of new vocabulary enabled writers to experiment with new ways of thinking about womanhood. Such experimentation was all the more possible because the terms on which I have focused were collective as well as abstract; they allowed for
the consideration of relationships between central and marginal characteristics or cases of femininity and between otherwise incompatible precedents or stereotypes. By positing broad categories, these terms invited explorations of how much might be encompassed and where the borders might be drawn. The process of evolution is never simple or unidirectional, of course; even as denotations are broadening in the fifteenth century, for example, there are two divergent strands of association (with ideal femininity and with questions of female power). Indeed, the ability to contain divergent meanings must have been part of what made these gendered terms so useful and widely adopted.

By looking at Middle English texts, we can see the heterogeneous origins of some of our most important gendered vocabulary and the variety of meanings such terms held from their earliest usages. Recent studies and theories have examined the important function of language in gender construction, but scholars have not attended as deeply to the history of the vocabulary—womanhood, manhood, femininity, masculinity, etc.—that allows us fundamentally to describe gender. Experimenting with representations of women outside of the conventional identities dependent on relationships to masculine authority, Middle English writers confront a variety of challenges—not the least of which is the problem of how to reconcile feminine virtue and authority. At the same time, the gendered language writers now have to describe women in new ways continues to evolve, accumulating different meanings but becoming progressively broader. The invention of womanhood is not the work of a single moment, a single author, or a single word but instead a lengthy and complex process furthered both by women whose lives incorporated expanding opportunities and challenging circumstances, like Margery Kempe and Queen Margaret, and by the writers, male as well as female, who sought fresh ways of representing women and their experiences.