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# IDEOLOGY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY

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***Abstract:*** *This paper analyses the manner in which the medieval ideological system of beliefs, professing the need to confine women on account of their being a potential threat to the medieval Christian society and to the divine order, contributed to the medieval woman's identity construction. A survey of the most important theories regarding the status of women in the Middle Ages, ideological statements and manners of enforcing them, will be made in this article.*

***Key words:*** *ideology, Middle Ages, identity, divine order, sin.*

## 1. Introduction

This article deals with the presentation and analysis of the most important coordinates of the medieval ideology on women namely the system of beliefs, practices and representations of women, a system of statements that managed to determine the status of the medieval woman within the mental and social structures of the Middle Ages.

This paper relies on the accounts of various theorists of the Middle Ages who analyse the status of the medieval woman as well as to the manner in which some of the ideas, beliefs and representations of and about medieval women emerged.

According to Perry, Pedden and von Laue [11], the medieval authors whose writings legitimized the ideology that argued in favour of the inferiority of women in the medieval society and recommended their confinement as a preventive measure, had been influenced by the Greek and Latin classics whose powerful hostility towards women was displayed in their work. Thus, on this foundation, the medieval clergy managed to devise an ideological system in which the ideas of the classics were adapted to the Christian context by being legitimized by the biblical text.

The clergy did not stop at disseminating the misogynist ideas which eventually became norms of the 'divine order' but they also created a more efficient control system which imposed and enforced these norms in society. The novelty of the medieval hostility towards women was that it went beyond affirmation level and became performative.

In the following sections several ideological statements concerning women as well as the effects of their performativity will be presented.

## 2. The mechanisms of ideology

The approach to ideology that this article relies on is Eagleton's [5] work according to which ideology is inextricably linked to the power struggles which take place in society.

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Eagleton [5] further claims that the most important feature of an ideological statement is that it must have an ulterior motive supposedly linked to an attempt to legitimize a particular idea, institution or group involved in the above mentioned power struggle. Thus, an ideological statement is used with the purpose of producing effects.

Another clarification that should be made concerns the definition of the term *statement* that is used extensively in this article. Thus, the best definition of the term statement is given by Mills [8] who differentiates between *utterances* which are neutral from the point of view of meaning, force and effect within society and *statements* defined as utterances which are no longer neutral and are bound to produce effects and changes in society.

In order for any ideological system to function in an efficient manner, justification has to be provided for the issued statements.

## 3. Biblical justification

According to Jacques le Goff [6] the Bible, especially the Genesis, the Temptation and the Fall, seems to be the primary textual foundation used in legitimizing the belief in the inferiority of women in the Middle Ages.

Georges Duby [3] makes a very interesting reference to the works of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine who legitimize the belief in the inferiority of women by referring to the text of the Bible. They claimed that because Eve was the one who tempted Adam, her submission to him was only natural. Hence, the submission of women becomes the natural order and, throughout the medieval period, it becomes common sense and it is always common sense that is the best medium for the dissemination and internalization of ideological statements.

## 4. Sin and Fear

Ariès and Duby [1] stated the fact that women were considered a menace to the pre-established order in the medieval society.

Consequently, strict surveillance, punishment and even ending a woman's life became the instruments used for the enforcement of this ideological postulate. According to Ariès and Duby [1], surveillance was very often achieved through confinement as medieval women were forbidden to leave their rooms so that their space of action should be limited and surveillance should be simpler.

Ariès and Duby [1] associate the confinement of the medieval woman to the fear of shame. The two authors claim that men feared the possibility of having their honour tarnished by the non-conformant behaviour of women

The medieval man's fear of women was associated by Ariès and Duby [1] with another ideological statement namely that women were seen as carriers of death who would use the dark weapons of poison and magic to reverse the divine order.

Naturally, the assistance of the members of the clergy, the supreme authority in such matters, was requested. Thus, what this ideological statement managed to bring about was the ability of the medieval priests to exercise control over women in their home. As a consequence, Ariès and Duby [1] add, even though the lord of the house was theoretically the only one entitled to control and punish the women of the house, this attribute was often disputed by the priests. The argument offered in support of the transfer of authority was the responsibility for the women's souls which required permanent spiritual guidance. Moreover, an effect of enforcing this ideological statement was the invasion of private space and its transformation into public space.

When women were believed to have reversed the divine order, Duby [4] claims,

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punishment was the following stage in the enforcement of the norm. It was again the priests who were entitled to become the instruments of divine justice. Thus, as Duby [4] points out, the range of punishments was very wide. From a few days of fasting as punishment for talking in the church, working on Sundays or not taking care of the sick to more than seven years for abortion or for killing a man. Duby [4] draws attention to the fact that there was a striking laxity regarding the punishment for the sins of men as compared to the ones that women were to receive. Women, for instance, had to go through a period of three to five years of total abstinence for lesbianism whereas men had to fast for not more than a few days when accused of homosexuality.

The conclusion that Duby [4] draws with regard to the above mentioned practices is that the medieval ideological system was built as a defensive weapon. We might add that sin was inscribed in the feminine body and thus the fear of shame triggered an increase in surveillance and an increasingly fierce system of punishment of medieval women.

### 4.1. Overflowing boundaries

The woman's body in the Middle Ages, Ariès and Duby [1] state, was considered the house of evil, the dwelling of dark forces. The justification for this ideological statement was linked to menstruation. Women were believed to belong to the dark forces because their cycle was identical to the cycle of the moon which lasted 28 days. This rationalization put an equal sign between the taming of the forces of evil and exercising control over women.

Apparently, the uncleanliness of the woman's body during menstruation was very well internalized by medieval women. According to Walker Bynum [12] medieval women were very self-conscious with regard to their impure body therefore they tried to cleanse it by depriving themselves of food. Walker Bynum [12] draws attention to the fact that food was their only responsibility as well as their own possession because women were responsible for preparing and serving food to men. Also food was associated with sexual pleasure because the pleasure of eating (the sin of gluttony) was considered as serious as sexual pleasure.

Consequently medieval women understood fasting as a way of purifying their bodies. A much desired result of the very long periods of fasting was that medieval women would no longer menstruate and their excretory functions were suppressed. The lack of menstruation and excretory functions became markers of sanctity of the feminine body and medieval women went through great pains to achieve this state. The fact that the ideological statement regarding the uncleanliness of their bodies was rationalized and internalized is a demonstration of the fact that medieval women as subjects of the medieval ideological system of beliefs supported and perpetuated the system by adopting its statements which became part of their own being, of their own self.

### 4.2. Domination at all costs: youth-abbeys

Male domination, which was a prerequisite of the 'divine order', was enacted in some extreme forms during the 15$^{th}$ century. According to Muir [9] there were the so-called *youth-abbeys, youth-kingdoms* or *brigades*. These were groups of young men who went through a social rite by means of which they became men in the eyes of their community. The most important task that these young men had to fulfil was that of displaying dominance over a woman which often took the form of gang rape. Their masculinity was

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acknowledged by the entire community after this exercise of domination. Muir [9] comments on the newly acquired status of the woman who was a victim of such an abuse:

"The young female victims of such cruelty underwent a rite of passage of a rather different sort. The rapists and, unless they had mistakenly chosen their victim without proper sensitivity to public opinion, the rest of the community considered her to be the guilty party. Typically, she had broken or appeared to break the normal rules of sexual behaviour: she was a servant kept as a concubine by her master, the mistress of a priest, an "abandoned" wife. The boys acted therefore, as enforcers of the habitual misogyny of the community, collectively marking a woman who in the community's eyes had already shamed herself. The consequence of the marking for her was often tragic. For most victims of a gang rape the only alternative to becoming a beggar or vagabond was to enter the communal brothel." [9]

This account illustrates a very harsh mechanism of public punishment for an act which was considered to have gone against the divine order. These young men were probably not encouraged by the church in this punitive ritual but what this practice shows is that the norms of (sexual) behaviour imposed by the medieval clergy were not only adopted by the medieval lay people but also enforced in a brutal but nonetheless personal manner.

According to Eagleton [5] the effectiveness of any ideological system consists in the way in which the process of rationalization unfolds with the individuals who are subjected to the system. The process of rationalization functions perfectly only when the subjects of the ideological system start to judge themselves and others according to the norms of the respective system. Hence, the subjects perpetuate the system by reproducing and enforcing its statements and prerequisites ad infinitum.

The *youth abbeys* were seen as instruments of moral and divine justice but we cannot overlook the fact that these groups of young men took advantage of the ideological system and managed to disguise their own propensity to engage in brutal acts in the name of social order. They might have also used this seemingly praised practice so as to mask the satisfaction of their own sexual desires.

The taming of the body as well as a further limitation of the medieval woman's capacity to act were the elements of another medieval ritual, namely courtly love. In the case of courtly love, women acquired an ornamental, inoffensive status. In other words, medieval women were cleverly rendered neutral and de-historicized by means of objectification.

## 5. Courtly love as instrument of discipline

Courtly love was a ritual that managed to demonstrate the exact opposite of what it represented. In other words, representation can be viewed as a form of casting out undesired propensities by putting them on display and laying too much emphasis on them and on their gratuitous nature.

Duby [4] states the fact that these love games were aimed at disciplining women. In support of this statement, Duby [4] refers to a treatise written by André de Chapelain, a 12$^{th}$ century cleric, entitled *De Amore*. This work, written by a clergy man, sets the strict rules of courtly love games by means of which women could allegedly overcome their own sinful nature. After expressing his contempt for feminine nature, André de Chapelain enumerates the duties that women have in this pedagogical game.

Thus, a woman was permitted to decide

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whether a knight in her service should speak or not at a certain moment and she was also allowed to give flowers to the best lover. Women's behaviour and even their body posture were prescribed to the last detail in the courtly love writings of the 12th century clerics. Duby [4] stated that medieval women were grateful for the mock-authority that they were given.

In a nutshell, in a male dominated society, women were given the impression of domination and a simulacrum of authority.

By means of this game women were rendered harmless, powerless and de-historicized. The fact that the image, status and identity of the medieval woman did not improve after the creation of this game can be inferred from the language that André de Chapelain uses when referring to women. As Duby [4] points out, the book is full of metaphors which send to horse riding and the need to control women so as to be of use to their masters.

The lord of the house was still the supreme judge in the serious matters happening on his estate. In contrast to this position of power and responsibility, the woman was the judge in a so-called "love court". Pernoud [10] describes such mock-courts: the lady was the supreme judge and her court was responsible for deciding the legitimacy of the love affairs brought before her court. Love affairs had to abide by certain rules of conduct which stood at the basis of courtly love. The 'judges' – Aliénor d"Aquitaine, Adèle de Champagne, Emergarde de Narbonne, etc. – observed and enforced the rules of courtly love issued by the priest André de Chapelain. The rules of courtly love were obviously in accordance with the ideological system of the church and the enforcers were the lady-judges who, by their simulacrum of authority, had to disseminate the above mentioned norms of conduct.

Camille [2] pointed out that the condition of the medieval woman did not improve in spite of the icon that the woman became for the vassals of her husband. Camille [2] also noticed that these images were created by men for their own benefit because women were either assigned the role of spectator to medieval men's acts of bravery or they were seen as exotic beings at men's disposal. Camille [2] also believed that this representation of women condemned them to never-ending "oppressive simulations of their social position" [2].

The body of the medieval lady became an object of trade as it was put on display by the lord of the house for his vassals to admire her beauty. Such a case was presented by Duby [4]: on the same day of the year, King Arthur would display the naked body of his wife to his vassals. The fact that the king decided to show the beauty of the queen's naked body is not a gratuitous act but a favour made by the king to his male subjects. As a consequence, a counter-favour was expected which generally consisted of eternal loyalty to the king. King Arthur's example is an illustration of the fact that women were even more objectified as beauty became an object of trade. Marchello-Nizia [7] associated the seduction exercised by the queen with an attribute of royal power. Therefore the queen is a mediator in a power relation established between men.

Duby [4] rightfully claims that with courtly love, a knight who was in the service of a lady was not particularly interested in building a relationship with the lady but his aim was that of showing loyalty to the lord of the house.

## 6. Conclusions

The process of feminine identity construction in the Middle Ages was

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governed by a set of ideological statements with a clear agenda. The aim of this ideological system of rules set up by the church was to legitimize the domination of women by men. The manner in which domination was justified was by creating a false image of the medieval woman as the embodiment of evil, sin and death. This image, which became the core of the medieval woman's identity, managed to inculcate fear of women in the minds of medieval men.

Given the above mentioned views on women, ways had to be found to tame this evil in the medieval woman therefore a strict system of confinement, surveillance and punishment was instated and courtly love games as a means of internalization, rationalization, dissemination and enforcement of ideological statements was created.

The ideological system of statements devised by the medieval clergy managed to fashion the image and identity of medieval women in the most efficient manner, namely by rendering them conformant and willing to replicate the ideological beliefs as well as by attaching shame and guilt to their bodies.

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