

# EXTRA-AND ORDINARY WOMEN OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

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The image of certain marginal female protagonists as they appeared in literature does not coincide with the cognitive analysis of the general designations women received. Examples of Medieval and Renaissance English women show how they were viewed both as heroines and despised creatures. This second conception can be clearly seen through the container and animal metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson) used when addressing these women outsiders of their times.

Many Medieval and Renaissance European women have been viewed through the images portrayed by literary and scientific texts. These made them appear in the margins of society and this with at least a double sense. The term *marginal* could comprise all women if assumed that they did not have the same rights men had. It could also be sustained, however, that those considered *marginal* were the ones who “outsidered” of their society and its conception of women. Here we will try to deal with both

possibilities and show the great contradiction between the admired woman who does not behave as expected and the disdained generic female ideal.

The status of women in Britain in the 15th C could be considered better than what one would suspect if taken into account that there was no explicit ban for them to possess lands, run their own business, have apprentices, state their last will, become queens and even administer the sacraments in the case of lollards (Goldberg 112). Tradition and the interpretation of the Sacred Texts made prohibition unnecessary. Many women who, as it still happens, participated actively in agriculture, hand-craft, or commerce, were just part of their husbands' business and were not considered real workers. Only if the husband was absent could they represent his business within the guilds, such was also the case for widows. Workers of exclusive female crafts, like silk work or laundry, were not allowed to have a guild structure and could not associate like other craftsmen or merchants. This is not to say woman was considered unable to perform a job, but that she should do it under the male supervision and protection.

The access to education was not easy for any one belonging to the lower social classes. Nowadays the main difficulty is to find a valid source to establish how many people could read and write. One of the criteria used has been the numbers of those who could sign, without discussing the validity of a signature to assert literacy, an approximation would be of a 20% of men and a 5% of women in the Elizabethan period, which would rise to a 30% of men and a 10% of women between the years 1640-1649 (Smith 198). Even if the number of schools and universities had increased during this period, there is no doubt that they were not meant for the poor and even the less for women. Only rich families could afford private tuition for their daughters, what favoured such outstanding women as Queen Elizabeth herself. However, there were limits on the education for women since an excess of learning would affect their femininity and mental health. This has been exemplified in the development of a character such as Morgana in the Arthurian cycle. Her knowledge acquired from Merlin does not lead her, unlike him, to wisdom and beauty, but to ugliness and the dark side of magic.

The growth of poverty and the few options women had, may have inclined them to another kind of marginality, prostitution. This profession, considered the lesser of two evils, was well accepted for a long period as the best means to avoid lust and vice take command of the city, it was even compared to the city's sewer. In Europe:

So common place was prostitution that it was managed in much the same way as other urban institutions. Like the members of guilds, prostitutes claimed a special section of the city for their activities. From here, they were not to leave to wander abroad in other districts, but neither could they be expelled (King 77).

So much so, that port cities like Sandwich in Kent and Southampton in Hampshire had their official brothels to serve the high demand of sailors which, if unsatisfied, could endanger the reputation of "honest women". Official prostitution also existed in Spain during the Middle Ages: Valencia, Barcelona, Huesca, Córdoba and Palma de Majorca among others were documented as having had walled areas for the confinement of prostitutes. Because of the benefits obtained, these centres were given as a mercy to be exploited by "respectful persons". The first public *mancebía* in Salamanca dates from the 17th of July in 1497 when Prince Juan, the son of the Catholic Isabel and Fernando, gave the ruling of this institution to one of his father's servants (García-Herrero 73).

During the Renaissance, the excellence of these establishments was rather varied. In England, some "pubs", called *tippling houses* or *trugging houses* in *cant*<sup>1</sup>, functioned also as brothels, apart from the public baths or *stews*, a Roman legacy which acquired its own English character. Out of the official centres, "free-lance" prostitution and that under the "protection" of pimps and bawds, was frequently practised by lower class women as well as by "courtesans". Alonso talks about different Spanish types of self-governing prostitutes such as the *ramera* whose name (still in use) derived most probably from the green branches, pots... that adorned her window or door as an indicator of her profession (24). Within the *canting-crew*, a marginal group with its own "antilanguage", the above mentioned *cant* which was recorded by different pamphleteers and later transposed to novels and drama (Mele-Marrero, *El cant*), there was a hierarchical

structure whose higher grades were occupied by thieves and male vagabonds. Under their control and in the lowest positions we find the prostitutes, who covered most of the general needs of the camp.

Even though prostitutes could be punished in public and their distinction from honest women was always maintained, their occasional integration in society has also been pointed out. Bawdry contributed to join or separate couples. In cases of impotence or frigidity, the expert opinion of these women could be required and accepted with respect (Mazo-Karras 97).

The above remarks seem to state that other problems, rather than sexual morality, propitiated the closure of brothels in England, as well as in Spain, in the 17th C. Most of these establishments were identified with centres where robbed merchandise was received and sold, where thieves, swindlers and all sorts of the underworld met. These were those who caused the disorder in the city and prostitution was associated with them. According to King:

by the mid-sixteenth century, the institution was in retreat... Fear of the plague, venereal disease, and crime and the newly repressive moral strictures of Protestant and Catholic reform had transformed the prostitute from an urban worker into a despised species (78).

The fact that prostitution was not well seen anymore does not mean the subject was avoided; many pamphlets and literary works deal with it and rather than deploring this activity they present the prostitute, if not always as a heroine, as a main character.

Several reasons may have contributed to this: the relevance acquired by the Spanish picaresque, the demand of the readers for underworld topics, the moral prevention against lust and, finally, it could also be the case they wanted to show a new type of woman, more liberal. Many of these works talk about women who regret their way of life, rehabilitate and get married; others show the example that should not be followed, but in many occasions this “moralistic” touch seems to be hiding certain admiration for a woman. Her capacities, independence, how ingenious she might be, are female features stressed throughout literary works. This is at least what can be found in the protagonist of Robert Greene’s (1592)

*A Disputation between a He Cony-catcher and a She Cony-catcher, a Discussion between Lawrence, a Foist and Fair Nan a Traffic, Whether a Whore or a Thief is Most Prejudicial.* A thief, Lawrence, and a prostitute, Nan, try to discern who is more harmful for society, and in their discussion they bet the price of their suppers. The author gives advice in the prologue on the dangers that derive from being in the company of harlots, “whose quiver is open to every arrow” (268) affecting mainly economy and health; he also devotes an epilogue to “The Conversion of an English Courtesan”, still, his characterisation of Nan is not negative at all. She will win the betting and hers are the longest parliaments in the dialogue. In the anecdotes referred by Nan her wit and her ability for cheating and stealing count more than her sexual arts. When she tells how she conned a thief and obtained his clothes and ring, she ends up by asking Lawrence: “What do you think of a woman’s wit if it can work such wonders?” He, in turn, answers: “Marry, I think my mother was wiser than all the honest women of the parish besides”, and she says: “Why then, belike she was one of our faculty, and a matron of our profession, nimble of her hands, quick of tongue and light of her tail” (Greene 281). Some will observe in these texts only a humorous touch, anteposing the female capacity to the masculine; or moral, since in the end it is the woman the most harmful. Lawrence has to pay for the dinner because she proves to be more capable and wiser when they are to steal and cheat, but, at the same time, she seems to be more dangerous for society than a man is.

Other larger texts, no doubt under the influence of these *Rogue Pamphlets* and the emergent picaresque literature, are those that tell us about Mad Moll and Merry Meg, with several alias. The first acquired fame in the dramatic work *The Roaring Girl* (1605) by Middleton and Dekker, to such extent that she would also have her biography in *The Life and Death of Mrs Mary Frith* (1662). Merry Meg came to be known through the anonymous biography *The Life of Long Meg of Westminster* (1590). The actual existence of Moll, whose real name was Mary Frith, is well attested in letters and legal documents, apart from literary works. It has even been speculated that she could have represented her own dramatic role on the stage, thus, becoming the very first actress of the Elizabethan theatre (Salgado 30). In the case of Meg, her authenticity is

more questionable. Both stand out for their masculine dressing, their thieving and cheating, their quarrels with men and their Robin Hood like defence of the poor and the weak. It is their physical capacity what distinguishes them from other female characters disguised as men so frequent in other works of the same period (such as Shakespeare's). Real persons or not, it is worthy of mention the contradictory description authors make of their works and what they really contain. Shaw points out how Middleton and Dekker promised laughter with the acts of "mad Moll", and the author of *Long Meg* blamed the character for the possible failure of the book.

"If", he adds, "she have any gross faults, bear with them the more patiently for that she was a woman", a characteristic male rider, to shift the blame on to his subject, should the books prove unsatisfactory! (131).

This laughing at women contrasts with "a superb 'feminist' speech, which Middleton might well be proud of composing, both for his rhetorical power and for the liberality of the ideas expressed therein" (Shaw 134):

th'art one of those / that thinketh each woman thy fond flexible  
whore, / If she but cast a liberall eye vpon thee, / Turne backe her  
head, shees thine, or amongst company, / By chance drinks first to  
thee: then she's quite gon, / There's no meanes to help her: nay for  
a need, / Wilt swears vunto thy credulous fellow letchers / That  
th'art in favour with a Lady / At first sight then her monkey all her life  
time, / How many of your sex, by such as thou / Have their good  
thoughts paid with a blasted name / That never deserued loosely or  
did trip / In path of whoredoom, beyond cup and lip. / But for the  
staine of conscience and of soule, / Better had women fall into the  
hands / Of an act silent, then a bragging nothing . . .

Thou and the baser world censure my life, / Ile send 'em word by  
thee, and write so much upon / Vpon thy breast, cause thou shalt  
bear't in mind, / Tell them 'twere base to yeeld, where I have con-  
quer'd. / I scorne to prostitute my selfe to a man, / I that can pros-  
titute a man to me...

(Roaring Girl, III.i. 68-109)

It cannot be talked of just comedy in a parliament like this; there must be any kind of admiration for this independent woman. Moreover, even if Moll defends herself against the accusation of being a prostitute, she does not deny her liberal behaviour, which would make anyone deserve such a designation by that time. This appreciation is one of those that made critics doubt about Dekker's shared authorship with Middleton in this play. Dekker is rather negative about prostitutes in other works, with affirmations like: "What a wretched womb hath a strumpet, which being for the most barren of children, is notwithstanding the only bed that breeds up these serpents" (*Lantern and Candlelight*, 348). In spite of this, the use of *cant*, which Dekker had already mastered in *The Bellman of London*, is a good evidence of his participation in the *Roaring Girl*.

These two women have different ends in the different literary works where they appear (a proof of their success), Moll remains single probably to get rid of marital subjection, whereas Meg ends up as an obedient and happy wife.

This admiration for the liberal woman had its predecessor in Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*, a female character who had married five times, apart from having had other friends in youth, and whose last husband is younger than herself. The Wife of Bath claims freedom for women, praying God to send us "housbondes meeke, yonge, and fressh abedde, / And grace to overbide hem that we wedde; / And eek I preye Jhesu shorte hir lives / That wol nat be governed by hir wifes" (lines 1259-62). It is hard to believe Chaucer gave life to such a complex and elaborated character only as one more humorous touch in *The Canterbury Tales*. As compared to Moll, Alisoun does not adopt a male role, she accepts her female one taking advantage of it to submit her husbands. This does not prevent her from claiming freedom of movement and behaviour, rejecting the image of the medieval woman in many aspects, even in what refers to her knowledge. If at the beginning of the prologue to her tale she says she will talk from experience and not scholarship: "Experience though not auctoritee / Were in this world, it is right ynogh for me / To speke of wo that is in marriage;" (lines 1-3). She uses a great amount of quotes and allusions, sometimes tergiversated, that show the erudition with which Chaucer imbues her.

Thus, there is a relative acceptance of “licentious life” and even prostitution, when we can find characters capable of defending their ideas and integrity overcoming men and, even more, in literature written by men. But the balance seems to be uneven when one considers the designations these women received. In most cases conceptualisations conformed by science and religion have prevailed; according to MacLean those notions are related to passiveness, receptivity, mutability, sensuality, frailty and deprivation (90). It was assumed from the interpretation of Sacred Texts that woman was born from a part of man, she was the first to commit a sin and the one who induces man to commit it too, though later she will become the mother of God. From here that woman has to be mirrored in the incomplete and sinful Eve or pious Mary, whose scarce use of the word in the Bible had to be imitated as well as her seclusion at home. Science, in turn, also contributed to maintaining these notions as exclusively feminine; the reproductory organs in women were taken as the male ones but internal and inverted, the vagina corresponded to the penis and the ovaries to the testicles.

These impressions about woman will take form in a specific conceptualisation, which in terms of her sexuality will be reflected in the designations applied to females during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Usually when this topic is dealt with the terms employed appear within the limits of slang, some of them belong to *cant* in English or *germanía* in the case of Spanish, but in other cases they were of current use and well understood by the general public. As several theatre plays may attest, explanations were not needed and the understanding of the audience was clearly assumed. It is not the case with the first works about *cant* where words are clarified through the use of synonyms, or even complete translations.

This conceptualisation is responsible of part of the lexicon related to women, what can be analysed from a cognitive perspective). Human beings process and understand reality through the use of cognitive models in which properties, relations among elements, schematic images we have about them (not necessarily visual) can be mapped onto other more abstract realities by means of metaphor and metonymy. Thus, our “reality” is mainly conformed by *propositional models*, *image-schematic models*, *metaphoric models* and *metonymic models*.



According to Lakoff and Johnson, part of our human perception of reality is subjected to the physical dimensions of our bodies (29). From this would derive the so called CONTAINER SCHEMA and precisely this is type of metaphor that has structured a great part of the vocabulary applied to women and mainly to those with an active sexual life.

The idea of perceiving our bodies as recipients is not new and not exclusively female. The creation of man as it appears in *Genesis* goes already in this direction. Mieke Bal points out how it is possible to make a reading of *Genesis* in which God would be a potter who created a single body, without any divisions and without any mark of sex, the *hâ-<sup>va</sup> dâmâ*, created from clay. The assumption that it was a man is subsequent. Only when a part (whichever it was) of this creature is taken to form the woman, man is born in opposition (320-22). From here that man has to abandon his own family to look for his wife, his other half, to constitute the initial unit that will finally end up in dust. Either from this perspective or the traditional one, it could be understood that if it was man the first to be created, then he would be a more metaphorical container than woman would, nevertheless language shows that this is not the general assumption. It cannot be denied that in heterosexual relations the act of penetration is mainly carried out by men who *penetrate* the female body. Such physical perception may have imposed the CONTAINER schema onto women, rather than the Biblical reading. This is what can be seen in terms applied to women and especially prostitutes from the Middle and Early Modern English periods: *bawdy-basket*, *baggage*, *strumpet*, and *trug*. Thus, the *cant* term *bawdy-basket* was applied to women who sold “bawdy literature” that they carried in their baskets, but who also prostituted themselves. It is a case of a complex metonymy, where the adjective modifies both goods to be sold, the literature and the woman’s body. At the same time, the basket is not just the container of literature, but also the expression of an ontological metaphor to designate the woman herself. A more illustrating word is *baggage*, which, applied to prostitutes, reasserts the use of the CONTAINER metaphor in this context. There could be some doubts about *strumpet*. The etym of this word is still under discussion (since Johnson proposed *stuprum*) but it has been recently suggested its relation with Germanic terms that have to do with vase or basket<sup>2</sup>.

Related to this is *trug*<sup>3</sup>, this term is defined by B.E. (1690) as “a dirty puzzel, an ordinary sorry woman, also a third part of a bushel and a tray for milk”. It seems sensible that, rather than a misspelling for *trull* as it has been thought, it is its primary meaning as ‘container’ what allows a mapping onto the image of a prostitute and from here the derived word *trugging-house*, brothel.

This is nothing new in English, but a continuation of what could be found in its earlier historical stages. Old English has in its lexicon words for human beings like the kenning *‘feorb-būs’* (the house of soul) that points to the general, and, in this case, mainly religious understanding of ourselves as containers. But, during that linguistic period when it comes to address women specifically, we find words with the prefix *in-* making reference to this idea of the container: *ingebriſ*, *innod*, *mōdor innod*, perhaps closer to their capacity as child bearers. In contrast, forms we find for male, *wæpenlic*, *wæpned*, *wæpnedbearn*, *wæpnedcynn*, *wæpnehad*, show how man is perceived as a penetrating weapon (Cortés-Rodríguez and Mele-Marrero). This idea will also be sustained by the verbs used for the sexual act: *pricke*, *slain*, or *stab*.

The conceptualisation of women through the CONTAINER metaphor has been reflected in the language from its very early stages, but another, perhaps richer, metaphor can be traced back to the Middle English period; this, is the one that allows women to be perceived as animals and especially as mounts. In the case of animal designations, Lakoff explains how the complexity of lust makes humans try to apprehend it by means of several conceptual metaphors like the one: “A LUSTFUL PERSON IS AN ANIMAL” (409-10). Again we are facing a generalisation that is going to be restricted to the female area. Even if “lusty” can be applied to men, it is usually women who become animals with especial preference for horses that can be mounted by men who, in turn, maintain the rationality and power denied to women. This structural metaphor found its linguistic expression in Early Modern English designations that may be more or less transparent to our present command of the language. Hence, in *cant* we have *doxy*, a beggar’s harlot, usually a younger prostitute member of the *canting-crew*, who was to serve the men of her group. One of the possible origins of the word is “dock”, ‘a person’s

buttocks' ex *dock*, 'an animal's tail' (Richter 105)<sup>4</sup>. Another case is that of *Gillot*, a diminutive of the female name Gill, that swas applied to 'loose or wanton women', yet, curiously enough, the *OED* registers how it was also applied to mares. If again we may doubt about these previous designations, *hackney-mare* is one that points clearly to the MOUNTS metaphor. Not only do we have a designation that starts from the animal itself, it also specifies gender, *mare*, and, moreover, *hackney* referred to a horse for hire. The same happens with *bobby-horse*, which is said of both a "small horse" and a man's "favourite subject or occupation that is not one's main business" (*OED*). *Hobby*, helps the creation of this compound in the same line of the previous and other words like *jade*, *nag*, or *light/short-heels woman* or *mare*, all used to designate women with a "licentious life" or "simply" prostitutes. Verbs like *to colt*, *to horse*, *to mount*, *to prig* or *to ride* reinforce the use of this structural metaphor that has come down to our days<sup>5</sup>. Contextualized examples of the quoted terms may clarify the way they were understood (underlining mine):

- "Thus as an unbridled colt, I carelessly led forth my youth and wantonly spent the flower of my years,..." (Greene 293)
- "Doxies... will for good victuals or a very small piece of money prostitute their bodies, protesting they never did it before and necessity then obliged them to it (though common hackneys)" (B.E., s.v.)
- "Therefore, let us assemble secretly into the place where he hath appointed to meet this gillot..." (Harman 132)
- "There's the gold with which you hired your hackney, here's her pace" (*Roaring Girl* III.i. 64-65)
- "Take heed thou too hackney-mare, / who ne'er art ridden, but paid" (Dekker 381)
- "My wife's a hobby horse" (Partridge *Shakespeare's*, s.v.)
- "'Yon ribaudred nag of Egypt' (i.e. Cleopatra) *Ant.*" (Partridge *Shakespeare's*, s.v.)
- "Women have quick wits, as they have short heels, and they can get with pleasure what we fish for with danger..." (Greene 281)

More metaphors that help designating prostitutes and women in general can sound as pejorative as the CONTAINER and the ANIMAL ones,

but in most cases we are dealing with isolated metaphors and metonymies. These idiosyncratic metaphors mean the mapping of two single images (Lakoff and Johnson 55), the result, either ephemeral or fossilised in the language, does not favour derivations and therefore does not perpetuate a concept as a structural metaphor does, examples are: *whore, harlot, queen, or courtesan*. All these terms can be insulting, taboo or euphemistic, but they are not so negative as those deriving from structural metaphors are, since they do not conform a definite and general concept of woman. The danger lies in assuming a specific conceptual metaphor to apprehend women as a gender and not as isolated cases of persons whose profession may be liked or not independently of their sex. According to Lakoff “Existing concepts may impose further structuring on what we experience, but basic experiential structures are present regardless of such imposition” (271). Therefore, we may perceive ourselves as recipients or containers, problems start when women exclusively are considered pots for men’s use, not only in the Middle and Early Modern English periods, but extending the conceptualisation to our days when we find forms like: *hole, bag, coffee grinder, honey pot, cock inn*, etc. The same happens with A WOMAN IS A MOUNT as derivation of A LUSTFUL PERSON IS AN ANIMAL. There should be nothing wrong in basic, animal instincts, if this is what is being stressed in the initial metaphor, but there is a difference again in gender. When in sexual matters men are referred to as animals, and especially equine ones, we find terms related with their sexual capacity and not with the possibility of being mounted and dominated. *Stallion, donkey, or pony* may serve as examples, since dictionary definitions (*OED, Green’s, Patridge’s, Richter’s, etc.*) always point to the sexual members of these animals, or male restricted meanings like those of *ride* and *rider*. To such examples we can add *horseman*, a promiscuous man, and *cowboy*, registered for male prostitute.

Language and its words may change, fall out of use. Certain concepts remain and they find new ways of expression through images and metaphors that, for better or worse, do not seem to be altered by time.

The image of the liberal woman was outstanding in many literary texts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The prostitute even came to be perceived as a professional. But these exceptional cases were superseded

by another reality, the perpetuation of the conceptualisation of women as simple containers or animals to be mounted.

In the past those less known women like Moll, Nan and Alisoun who dared to tread out of society models (but whose lives were interesting enough to be portrayed by authors like Chaucer or Greene) could only be derogated as horses for riding, empty recipients to be filled. They tried to stand in the margin but were further marginated by means of a metaphor that still applies nowadays.

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## NOTES

- 1 During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries several authors recorded a marginal language called *cant*. Their *Rogue Pamphlets* offered a compilation of a secret lexicon used by an underworld group of beggars, thieves and prostitutes who used it as a self-defense against authority and also as a means to cheat their victims.
- 2 See <http://www/engserve.tamu.edu./pers./fac/mitchell/strumpet1.1.html>

- 3 Similarly, Spanish *germania* presents terms like *depósito de vivos* or *olla*.
- 4 The *OED* says its origin is uncertain, and apart from this proposal, *doll* has also been suggested as the possible etym for *doxy* (Partridge, *Dictionary*).
- 5 In Spanish *germania* we find forms like: *cabalgadura*, *dama de trote*, *establera*, *galopeadora de gustos*, *mujer al trote*, etc.