

Comprehend the Women in the Middle Ages from The Parisian Household Book

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Abstract: The late Middle Ages is a crucial period in the history of Western Europe for the transition to modern times. The social outlook of this period has changed a lot compared with the previous times. People who were in this context have generated their own expressions corresponding to the society at this time, mainly manifested as the change of views and values. This paper is aim at selecting the material called The Parisian Household Book (Le Ménagier de Paris) to do primary source analysis, then extensively collecting other documents about women, marriage and family in the Middle Ages for a more comprehensive interpretation. Through the research, we know the living conditions of urban women in the late medieval ages and the requirements of family or society to them from this instruction manual. Meanwhile, the following conclusions are drawn: in medieval marriage, both husband and wife had rights and obligations to fulfill. Some men with high social status taught their wives to manage the family well in order to maintain the stability of their class. For women, those who came from the countryside to the city were willing to accept such guidance, because these might become favorable tools for the improvement of their social standing.

Keywords: women, Middle Ages, marriage, household, social status

1. Introduction

The *Parisian Household Book (Le Ménagier de Paris)* was a late medieval household conduct book that exhorted other married women how to better perform their responsibilities as wives in the family. The source is frequently cited as a reference in the study of medieval women, marriage, family and other subjects. It is a certainty that the original manuscript of this material had been written in French. The first modern text was edited and published in 1846 by Jérôme Pichon [1], later the English version of *Le Ménagier de Paris* appeared in the early twentieth century, translated by Eileen Power [2]. On the other hand, Eileen's translation is abridgment, a few snippets of the text could be paraphrased in anthologies of medieval context, as we seek in a sourcebook written by Emily Amt [3]. Meanwhile, culinary tips and recipes are included in some cookery books like *Early French Cookery* [4].

According to the argument above, we conclude that the text has been continuously collated, translated and compiled by later generations, and then widely applied to various articles or books. However, few people treat this material as a primary source to investigate the author's writing motivation and verify credibility of the text.

In the work, we mainly discuss the historical background, explain why the author wrote such a

text in this era, whether this kind of article had its function or value, and what attitude the people who were involved in it may take. For purpose of an unambiguous understanding, we adopt the same view as Crossley-Holland, that is to consider the author to be the narrator [5]. The highlight of this paper is to start from both men and women standpoint to interpret writing course of the author. Afterwards, we achieve the significance of this research, to comprehend the social position of women in medieval Paris, so as to glimpse one corner of the late medieval society.

2. Information about the Author and Medieval Text

The author of this text called *good wife* is anonymous. After a thorough reading and careful analysis of the text, we can regard the author as a member of a specific class for research. From the text, we analyze that the author had an affluent life, was probably a member of the urban bourgeoisie in Paris at that time, thus, he gave advice and guidance to other young women in the guise of a female voice, that is actually a male perspective from his own class. There are some points in this text supporting the view that he is a wealthy merchant or bourgeois. For example, the author cited Duc de Berry's personal experience with a dog and the case of a lawyer in court he knew, reflecting his close relationship with these upper-class people. He was by no means an ordinary person in society, otherwise he would never have the opportunity to meet the Duc. In the episode where the author guided his wife to do housework, we find that he had a lot of domestic animals such as horses and hounds, and the family has looked after them with great care. These details reflect the good living conditions of the narrator. This article mainly aims to educate young women on how to maintain good relationships with their husbands and manage their families, mainly serves the wealthy elderly men in the emerging urban bourgeoisie of Paris.

Although the author of the text cannot be verified at present, the era of writing or translation of the article can be clarified. The information we have acquired so far told us that the text was written in the closing years of the 14th century. By making a comprehensive survey on the historical course of that period, we can find that some evident changes in this society were the continued strengthening of the French royalty and the growth of citizen class. The rise in power of monarchs stemmed more from their informal alliances with the new merchant class. With the continuous development of commodity economy in the 14th century, the personal dependence of serfs in the traditional feudal system was weakened. The city, a new social component, also played an increasingly important role. In the later period of the Middle Ages, the development of trade and the progress of handicraft industry promoted the prosperity of cities. The new urban bourgeoisie was exerting its political and economic power [6].

To explore the Paris described in this material, the 13th to the first half of the 14th century was the rising period of city, during which the urbanization process of Paris was completed. The Hundred Years War, on the one hand, destroyed people's property and drove them into extreme poverty, but on the other hand, it created speculative opportunities and attracted numerous craftsmen and peasants to go to Paris to acquire a springboard for themselves to break the class limitation [7]. The war exacerbated the shift in the composition of French social classes, as the decline of the population led to the increase of employment opportunities and attracted more immigrants to Paris. The attractiveness of Paris for long time as the political center of France is also an important reason for the concentration of business and manufacturing. Merchants and financiers gathered from all over Europe [8].

Parisian society is a typical hierarchical society, the citizens can be divided into different classes. The upper class was mostly engaged in commercial trade and financial activities, buying and selling luxury goods. Upper-class citizens who made their fortunes by doing business would also get positions in the government and take to the political stage because of the appreciation and needs of the royal family. As their economic strength increased, some of them were canonized as aristocrats,

and they tried to imitate the aristocracy in terms of food, clothing and other aspects. At the same time, their political identity and status are at stake.

This text was written in such a social and historical background, and the author may be part of the urban bourgeoisie. Using the tone of a woman, the author expressed the bourgeoisie's views on the different social division of labor between men and women under the premise of their rising social status and gaining more power of discourse. In other words, the text reflected the requirements for women in the mainstream social discourse system in the period.

3. Summary of the Content

In this material, Firstly, it has described the conditions for two people to get married. The author thought that only responsibility and respect are far from enough between husband and wife. What they should do most was to be kind and honest, love deeply each other and regard each other as the most precious people in their lives. On this basis, wives are expected to love and keep intimate with their husbands, stay away from all other men and women, especially away from those who live in debauchery and corruption. In order to justify this argument, the author has told a classic story called Genesis that come from the Bible. It tells how God created all living things and created the first man, Adam. Considering that it's necessary for him to prevent Adam from living alone, God created Eve from Adam's rib, and then made them become partners or couples to have children, so that they would truly make the blood of the two blend together, and form one flesh in the next generation. The author has discussed that the woman is made of the man's rib through the Bible, that is an analogy to the human body and rib, so the woman who represents a rib ought to love her husband.

Perhaps the author thought that using a single story from the Bible could lack rigor, so several examples about various animals in nature are used in the next paragraphs. For instance, the female birds in the forest will follow their male for a long time, but not be close to other birds. Even wild birds or birds of prey, that are raised by strangers, tend to love the strangers who have fed them. When people refer to some domestic animals like dogs, they always find that a dog follows the owner who feeds it. The dog Macaire that seen by Duc de Berry has proved his loyalty to his master. He saw that his master has been killed in the woods, but he never left his master. He insisted on guarding the corpse, and later he attacked and finally defeated the killer. Beasts of the field, like sheep, wild boar, and stag, follow their master or mistress and keep away from others. Likewise, predatory tame beasts are friendly to those from whom they receive food and whom they love. These are real and visible examples of how animals or beasts stay close to their partners and people who bring up them, while they are inclined to avoid or keep distant with others. Therefore, the author illustrated the idea that the wife is required to have solemn and pure love for her husband.

In the context of the previous statement that couples should be faithful to each other, the author further explained what would the other spouse do if one of them goes astray by citing some specific examples. The first story talks about a sick and dying wife in Venice who admitted that one of her children is not her husband's. She begged her husband to forgive her for violating the law of marriage. The husband forgave her and told her to say no more, that he would always love each child equally and maintain the dignity of his wife and children. The second story is about a wife who has left her husband to go to Avignon with another young man. But then the young man had had enough of her and left her. After the husband knew this, he took a series of remedial measures to save his wife's fame. He asked his wife's brothers to Avignon to dress her up as a pilgrim on her way to St. James, and warmly welcomed her to go back home. The good man restored and preserved his wife's reputation in this manner. Through this case, the author pointed out that a husband ought to maintain the good reputation of his wife, while for a wife, she should be in deliberateness to put herself in a good position and share the responsibility with her husband. The author has given the example of a renowned lawyer in court who had with a poor woman a daughter whom she put with a foster mother.

But the lack of visits and courtesies has led to a decline in his reputation. After knowing this, his wife thought that her husband had been slandered, so she had an obligation to solve the problem and save his honor. Then she took responsibility for the child, and provided her with a better environment to grow up. The behavior of a good wife can be a model for what the wife should do when her husband goes astray. When something similar happens to the wife, the husband is supposed to do the same.

On the premise of describing the obligations of both husband and wife in marriage, the author transitioned to the next chapter, mainly telling a wife how to take good care of her husband. The narrator pointed out the importance of a woman's marriage and husband to her in that period, therefore the wife must cherish her husband's person carefully. In contrast to the husband's need to care about external affairs, the wife's duty is more limited to various housework. The main job of the wife is to take good care of the husband and ensure that he has a good diet and living. At the same time, the wife is required to keep kindness and love for her husband, amiable, gentle and considerate. When the wife starts her second marriage, she also needs to be concerned about her stepsons' daily life. If a wife quarrels with her husband and is indifferent to family members, it will inevitably create a bad family atmosphere. Stepsons would seek out better shelters to live that offer them more companionship. These children are not deluded, they would rather live in the company of strangers who provide for them and care about them, while the only enchantment of these women is to show them the kindness, intimacy or joy that they want in all ways. Thus, the wife would strive to bewitch her husband by creating a warm and comfortable home living environment.

In terms of keeping the house tidy, the author specifically described how to keep no fleas in the room or in the bed, particularly in Summer. There are six ways to achieve this aim, such as using special items to stick the fleas or using white cloth to foil the fleas, that may be easily removed. Of course, people could be more alert to those fleas hiding in covers, furs and clothes. The usual solution is to seal these things up, leaving the fleas to die in a space without light or air. Faced with mosquitoes in the room, people can light hay to make smoke to repel the mosquitoes or use mosquito nets to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes. When there are many flies gathered in the room, people could try to utilize little bunches of ferns to attract them, or use some food to lure and catch flies, and many other solutions to get rid of flies. In the last paragraph, the author summarized the environment in which flies exist from his perspective, suggesting that flies would be avoided by staying away from this environment.

After providing specific instructions on how to rid the room of mosquitoes, flies, fleas and other creatures, the author turned the topic back to husband's requirements to his wife. Attempting to educate the wife to shield the husband from all troubles is a theme of the next part. It's indispensable for the wife to make efforts to serve her husband. If she follows the instructions in this manual, the husband will always have his affection toward the wife, and forsake all other households, all other women. In addition to looking after her husband, the wife is also required to manage the horses, dogs and other domestic animals in the family, to raise them well, to make them feel comfortable out of consideration for their labor. And so, the husband would think of his wife at all time. He keeps trust and love her so much that he would long to see her again. Husbands, like God himself, would appreciate and reward the obedience from their companion in stories like *miracula* or *exempla* as well as in secular life. Love and affection were some of these rewards given in return for compliance [9].

The last moral treatise is about the advice to a wife to keep dutiful. Firstly, the author pointed that some old women who have devious behaviors, and these disobedient and insincere acts are several bad beginnings, then gradually become worse and worse. Following this argument, the author elaborates on the phenomenon of noncompliance through specific examples. For example, some women begin to serve their husbands well, but after a long time, perhaps because the husband keeps quiet and doesn't scold her, the wife becomes arrogant, she feels that she can do less and less, so she starts to serve her husband less and less, and starts to assert her authority. The author warned other

women not to become more and more unfaithful as in the case, and must be aware of their own position by quoting the story of God and Lucifer, who was once God's most beloved angel. But Lucifer swelled up later, grew more arrogant, and was cast down into the deepest part of Hell by God. This story can better teach the wife that it is obligatory for a good wife to be dutiful in the beginning and abide by the precedent forever.

4. Interpretation and Argumentation

From the text, we can find the requirements of a man for his wife to take on her own role in the late Middle Ages. On the surface, this is the embodiment of his personal will, but in fact, it must be a microcosm of an era, reflecting the requirements of some specific classes for women in that period.

4.1. Requirements and Obligations of Couples in Medieval Marriage

Much of the text is about the husband's requirements and guidance for his wife. Meanwhile, the author used some sentences to express that husbands should also have the same tolerance, respect and love for their wives, rather than just the wives unilaterally serving their husbands. Doctrines and comments in Bible had played an important role in medieval marriage, as did the Biblical Genesis story cited in the text. In the ecclesiastical literature of the High Middle Ages, which dealt directly with marriage, the ideas of companionship and love in marriage were reaffirmed. Peter Lombard in the 12th century explained why women are shaped from men's ribs and not from other parts of the body. If she is made out of his head, it might signify she could rule him. If she is made of his legs, it would be understood that she ought to serve him. However, she is neither master nor servant, she is made of his rib, so that the man is required to regard the woman shaped from him as his spouse or companion, and on this basis, the relationship between them must be founded on love [10].

In the analysis of the documents about medieval marriage, we can know that there is no doubt that women were still subordinate and governed in a society dominated by men. Almost all women in secular societies spent their whole lives under the supervision and control of their fathers or husbands, those who are closely related to them by blood or marriage. In marriage, the husband who predominated by force of law and with the guide of homiletic literature occupied a position of absolute authority. Many women feared their husbands, and some were even physically hit or battered by them. Law and social convention permitted a man in any social status to exert his superior physical strength to bear against the spouse. In one of the Lives of the saints, the author had written about the case of a feudal nobleman, who humiliated and assaulted his wife in the face until the blood splashed on his clothes [11].

While in this primary source, what is a sermon and teaching text, we could know that the author had frequently used a voice of female to express a kind of euphemistic exhortation, with provisions on the responsibilities and duties of the wife. Meanwhile, it describes that a husband should tolerate and love his wife, especially when her wife goes astray. The rights and obligations of couples are not equivalent completely, the duties of husband are far less than that of wife, but it also reflects the spirit of contract in the late medieval marriage to a certain extent.

4.2. The Development of Wealth and Social Status of Merchant Class Made Them Attach Importance to Regulating Themselves and Their Families

People tended to marry members of their own class, but this was not always feasible [12]. Indeed, there was a gap of class in general between husband and wife in medieval society. As Pierre Guichard said, "In a purely and traditional patriarchal society, the marriage to a woman from higher status moved up the social rank of an aristocrat" [13]. Combined with the text and the background of the time, we can roughly analyze that the author is probably an elderly man from the wealthy business

class, the experience of Duc de Berry and a lawyer in the court that he cited in the text could become some evidences of the author attached to the upper class. In the paragraph that talked about dealing with fleas in room, we find that the author's solutions related to use milk, honey and many types of food, this illustrated he lived in a life with enough food supply. While the class of his wife is temporarily uncertain, perhaps be the nobility, or might be a woman who has just entered the town from the rural area. In short, it is more likely that his wife is not from the same social standing as the man. As we all know, class gap means conflicts of conceptions, the husband has to build the authority of patriarchy in medieval society. If the wife came from the aristocracy, the husband achieved the promotion of class in this way. Naturally, he had to educate his young wife to better show that his family also belonged to the privileged class.

From another perspective, no matter what class the wife comes from, it is essential for upper class man to educate his wife on how to manage their family. Under the background of the development of commodity economy, regional variations occurred, especially in parts of Western Europe, where cities began to grow and urban elites took over several authorities from the rural aristocracy [14]. Just as a city that began to develop on a large scale in the 11th century, the power of Parisian citizens continued to grow by the end of the 14th century. They were also committed to being close to the noble and enjoying privileges. According to the analysis of the text by the translator called Eileen Power, it is clearly that the narrator is familiar with, and has possibly become a member of the High Court (Parlement) of Paris. While he has the accordant consciousness of the upper class of citizens, that is, he has a very clear understanding of his own social status or class, and strictly follows all kinds of regulations [2].

The upper-class citizens of Paris first achieved commercial success, then this success translated into admission tickets to the political stage. The king not only granted privileges to these citizens, but also placed strict restrictions on their daily behaviors. For fear that they would waste money and disturb social public order, the king enacted a series of restrictive laws, such as stipulating that these commercial bourgeoisie citizens were not allowed to wear clothes made of squirrel skin and sable skin, and citizens' wives were not allowed to ride in carriages [15]. Even if these bourgeoisie achieved political success, they could fall into the abyss in a short time. They actively sought privileges from the aristocracy, but their political identity was at stake. Unstable political power would lead to the collapse of themselves and the whole families. A bourgeoisie who is sober and long-sighted would have been aware of the threat to its position, and this sense of worry and concern is bound to prompt him to act cautiously. Therefore, this family instruction guidance is not only a requirement for the wife, but also an anticipation to take advantage of wife's devotion to her duties to regulate themselves and their family.

4.3. Many Women Themselves Also Want This Kind of Family Instruction Manuals under the Social Circumstance at That Time

In household management, some treatises have been written in the Middle Ages, such as *De regimine principum of Egidius Colonna*, which offers much advice on the general issues of household administration, the fostering and instruction of children. It constructs a bridge between the early-medieval 'mirrors' and late-medieval tracts offering directions to eminent but ordinary lay families [16]. Meanwhile, there also have household manuals that specialized to women, devoted to educating women how to manage the family and care for husband.

Marriage was almost a necessity for women at that time, which was also the mainstream value form or social expectation [17]. Marriage was normative and expected at all social levels. In this period, the value orientation was women in the home to do housework or management and other trivial things. It was a common phenomenon to write a courtesy book for women. Christine de Pizan was the first woman to write a courtesy book for other women. Her *Trésor de la cité des dames ou Le*

livre des trois vertus was written for Marguerite of Burgundy, wife of the dauphin. The book defines the moral virtues and duties of women of all ranks. Many noblemen wrote similar courtesy manuals for their daughters. The *Livre du chevalier de la Tour Landry (1371–72)*, written for his daughters by a knight of considerable status who lived in the period of Hundred Years' War, that warn against impropriety, praise politeness, courtesy and dress in modesty, especially tell the women to guarantee marital chastity. The knight had given a straightforward depiction of sexual temptations and of some punishments by violence—battery, even death—what follow the disobedience or insubordination by women [18].

Such instruction manuals were probably written by aristocracies in an earlier period, and subsequently recognized and accepted by other class of society. As one scholar has argued, the English poem “*How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter*”, may have been read aloud in households of the gentry or of aspiring urban bourgeoisie [19]. It has educated women in practical affairs as regulating their servants, accompanied by giving tithes to the church, showing esteem and fidelity to their husbands. Quite similar themes were conveyed by a German poem “*Good Conduct for a Young Lady*,” in which the narrator tells her daughter to be submissive to her husband by the tone of a mother, avoid rumor or scandal, speak gently, act appropriately and so forth [20].

Here we need to refer to the social context of the late Middle Ages again. In the later period of medieval times, rural women chose to migrate to the cities for a better prospect, where they were inclined to join in the food, beverage, cotton textile industries, or work as caregivers of various types. Despite there existed many unexpected menaces of urban livelihood, large quantities of young women nevertheless moved to towns, particularly during the late Middle Ages. Towns could provide them with an expectation for broader personal freedom, keeping away from the close-knit villages of the medieval rural regions. They also had given the hope for a woman that she might improve in her social standing, either through an ideal marriage or through her own auspicious occupation and work. The wish of their eudaemonic future was adequate to break through anxieties about drudgery [21]. A few urban women would later have the opportunity to marry with bourgeois men, and through this way they elevated the class. There are few such cases, but enough to keep these women anticipating to this. I believe that there is a great temptation to climb up the social ladder and pursue a better life for everyone in any era. Instruction manuals on how to teach women manners were already influential in the society, and women who wanted to change their fortunes and promote social status were pleased to have a guidance on how to adapt to the requirements of bourgeois men better. After all, women could have initiatives of their own. Therefore, such a book may be very suitable for social needs in the background at that time.

5. Conclusion

The paper is a textual analysis of this household instruction manual for women. After summarizing relevant articles, we investigate the historical background in which the text was written, then study the urban women in the late Middle Ages by analyzing the characteristics of Paris (as a typical city) reflected in the text. As for the author, we could not identify him as a specific person, but limit him to one member of a certain class. In this paper, we mainly discuss the period that the author had lived in was an interim from feudal system to capitalism, during which the civic class kept growing along with the development of the city.

On the basis of generalizing the main content, combined with other complementary documents, we reach a few conclusions about medieval women and marriage. Firstly, the couple in medieval marriage had both rights and duties, although these may not have been equal. Some medieval sources already reflect the dominance of the husband over the wife, and comparatively speaking, the wife is expected to undertake more responsibilities than the husband, but in general, the spirit of contract has been mirrored in the text. Secondly, affluent bourgeois men expected to write or distribute such

household manuals to their wives. The husband's dedication to disciplining his wife to be obedient is a symbol to cope with his sense of class instability. Apparently, what is reflected in the material is the husband's instruction to his wife, it would actually embody the positioning of women under the influence of social mainstream value judgment. The last point, in traditional societies before the advent of industrial civilization, women were in a subordinate position, nonetheless, they still have assumed their particular roles in society, and exerted their own subjective initiatives. The research suggests that women who immigrated from rural areas to towns also had expectations of a superior life. They came to the city to earn a living, thus it was a collective appeal to improve their living standards. In addition, moral treatises on women had a tendency to spread from the aristocracy to other classes, subsequently grow in popularity in the Middle Ages. Many women could regard these medieval conduct books as an instructive tool for self-enhancement, later they would be proactive to pursue these.

The most prominent point of this paper is not only to analyze why this kind of manual was written at this time from the view of men, but also to expound the attitudes that women might adopt to these conduct books, combined with the characteristics of that period. It's significant to fully consider women's standpoint, only in this comprehensive prospective can we fully comprehend women in the Middle Ages. Surveying medieval women from the medieval household guidebooks is a topic what is worthy of further study. Given that there are other relevant textual sources available for research, the next step could be to focus on how these moral discourses affected women substantively.

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