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Life of a Wealthy Family in the Middle Ages: A Deep Look into the Historical Paper the Good Wife

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Abstract: This paper reviews the primary source the Good Wife and analyzes the implications under the text. First I'll review the text of the Good Wife. After the reviewing, I'll extend the subject to the life of a typical well-to-do household in medieval Paris and explore the roles of class and gender in affecting the behaviors and social relationship of people living in the Middle Ages. This work shows that difference in status vastly transcends gender inequality for medieval Parisians. It also provides a basis for future understanding of the society in late Middle Ages Paris and encourages more research in investigating the intersectionality of class and gender identity.

Keywords: gender, class, medieval Paris

1. Introduction

The book *the Good Wife* is a guide for woman in medieval period on how to behave decently as a housewife. The author of this book is anonymous, but there is some information on his identity and status available, which can help one to understand the context of the content. First off, from the tone of the text, the author was probably the future husband instructing his would-be-wife on a large assortment of conducts. Secondly, the author was a wealthy upper-class person living in Paris, deducing from the fact that he was highly educated and could afford many servants. Starting from these speculations, I will hence analyze the general situation of upper-class in France and their marriage during medieval period in order to draw forth a background of the text as comprehensively as possible. After the introduction of author and text information, I would extend from the tunnel-vision of merely the author's household to a more general analysis of the way of living by French wealthy families in the Middle Age and how gender difference was overshadowed by the enormous gap in class difference.

2. Information about the Text and Background

Beginning from the background information related to the text and the rich class to which the author belonged to, historians Joseph and Frances Gies described that a typical well-to-do burgher family lived in a multiple-story house "with business premises on the ground floor, living quarters on the second and third, servants' quarters in the attic, stables and storehouses in the rear" [1]. The wealthy, as one may assume, had a number of servants at their disposal who helped with the chores. It was not surprise since a considerable part of the population was employed in domestic service in France then

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[2]. Besides financial superiority, a Paris townsman enjoyed a considerable number of privileges thanks to the king because at that time "in France the kings favored the towns against their lords" in an attempt to confine the power of feudal nobles [3]. With the privileges granted, however, rich townsmen didn't always use them in aid of charity. Instead, they "often used their power selfishly, and in the interest of their families and their own class", and that they "were as cruel and harsh toward the poorer and weaker classes as the feudal lords themselves" [3].

Turning on to focus on the wife of the rich now, one should recognize that despite the gender disadvantage, she had her own worth and dignity, that she was a indispensable role in the family and was revered in her community, possessing rights in property and was able to occupy position of power in church if she's a professional [1]. And if she was a housewife, she "ought to know how to manage times of rest and meals", and "was advised to feed her people well" because the increasing affluence in furnishing and houses required a female responsibility and the management of these goods soon became a source of female agency [4-5]. This kind of female's proficiency in stewardship of the estate was developed on the foundation that "women's control of space through the ownership of houses and land was much inferior to that of men" as a consequence of the development of "privileged patrilineal descent from fathers to sons" in Latin Europe [5].

When it comes to marital relationship, it was recognized the wife to be submissive to her husband, but as his partner, not merely to serve his need. In fact, a married couple were expected to treat each other with respect [1]. How was the marriage settled in the first place, though? At the medieval time, what usually happened was that parents generally decided the future companion of their children, even if a young woman like Christina of Markyate, who preferred the devotion in religion, may be pressured to marry [6]. However, the young people were not forever under the order of the elders. Boys could make decision to become a monk after he reached fifteen years old, and a girl after sixteen or seventeen years old was not within the confines of her father's will in terms of marriage [6]. For upper-class family like the one in the text, the primary end of marriage was always to forge "political alliances and social obligations among relatives and kin", and it was not until the Protestant Reformation that emotional bond between the spouse became an important factor to account for the marriage [7]. In terms of the significance of sexuality after marriage, despite the various reasons of getting married, most writing pieces during the Middle Ages downplayed all but other reasons for marriage but the legitimization of sex and reproduction [8]. And one notification important is that Christian theologians, with all their preference to chastity, acknowledged that not every person was to live a life of virginity and that a majority of people would end up getting married [8]. In fact, marriage became one of the sacraments in church eventually, outweighing "the petty sin involved in the sex act" [8]. In Paris, this was largely owed to the monk Hugh and bishop Peter Lombard, who included marriage as a sacrament in his authoritative work *Sentence* which would secure marriage a definitive position in seven sacrament [5].

3. Summary

Having brought up the context of the text, I shall now move on to the part of the summary of it. The text I choose could be roughly divided into three parts: the first part tells what attitude a good wife should adopt towards her husband and everyone else; the second part tells different methods a good wife should use to accommodate the comfort of her husband; the third part includes various ways through which a wife could take care of all sorts of household managements. I'm going to elaborate each part in this section.

To begin with is the behest asking the wife to have a loving and intimate attitude towards her husband, and such attitude should be adopted in both mental thinking and physical manners, according to the husband. The author drew upon Genesis 2:21-22 in the Bible where Adam gave birth to Eve with his rib to justify the point that a husband was his wife's beginning and that a good wife

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should cling to her husband. To the same end, the author also compared good wives to examples of loyal animals such as dogs who always adhered to its protector. After talking about the need in mental reliance on her spouse, the author went to illustrate how a good wife as well as her husband should act properly whenever their spouse went astray. He used several cases, in all of which a man would stand out to protect his wife's reputation, and a woman, in turn, would strive to preserve her husband's honor. One of the cases, for example, talked about how a upper-class man's wife ran off with another young man and was abandoned by the young man later, degrading herself to a common woman. And what happened next was what a wise husband should do, said the text: he asked her wife's brothers to bring her back, and spread out the news that his wife was back from a pilgrimage on which he sent her before. To sum up, both of the couple should "bent [their] heart[s]" to avoid any attacks on honor of each others from people [9]. The follow-up part was a guide on how to care for a husband. Once again, the author referred to animals as example. When a woman showed all her kindness and care and love, a man would be smitten with her, like a horse carefully groomed would react to the horseman; conversely, if she didn't, the man would gradually lose loyalty and patience in her and turned to someone else. A husband could see the care from his wife in tendrils of smoke rising from the chimney, a well-maintained roof, a clean bed without fleas, or a well-tended garden when he returned home after a day's tiring work. That's what a good housewife was supposed to do: always let her husband's comfort take precedence and cherish him as a person. The whole text was also sprinkled with useful house-management knacks. For instance, the author considerately provided six ways in killing the fleas, some tips in keeping roses in winter and methods to clean the spots on the fur. Another example was when hiring servants, the wife had to make inquiries on the servant's disposition, winnowing out those quarrelsome and dishonest ones, and treated those who remained nicely so that they wouldn't insult her household in front of neighbors after they finished their work. As the mistress of the house, the wife also needed to make discreet and cautious allocation of jobs to ensure those who fitted the work best got it. In the end, the author, in consideration for the possibility that a house might be located in wolves-gathered region, offered recipe on how to kill the wolves, except this time it's for the steward and servants to execute rather than the wife herself.

4. Argumentation

If one views the text from the perspective of the author, it seems that it's created to serve as a guide for a wife in managing domestic affairs, without any further implication. However, if one views through this lens of domestic instruction manual on the standpoint of a historian, they shall see deeper implications that reflects the whole medieval culture. There are a number of specific requirements in this guide, but once one zooms out to see the larger picture, they could curate the whole content into a microcosm of what the rich's lifestyle was like in the late fourteenth century of Paris. For example, probably for a fresher taste, "Noble households ate game, and pigs and cows slaughtered in their prime, in contrast to the mature cattle eaten by those in humbler settlements" [5]. From the text of the good wife, this kind of fastidiousness for food taste is reaffirmed. When the wife was in the country, for example, she could see her housekeeper ordering the shepherds and cowherds around [9], which revealed that they literally owned a slaughterhouse with hired herdsman themselves, providing a stable and convenient food source. Apart from that, other forms of estate work such as gardening and poultry-keeping was to be supervised by noblewomen, suggested by Valerie GarverGene [10]. The author of the text was concerned with this as well: the part of good gardening was mentioned in the form of taking care of rosemary in winter, in which it was suggested leaving little buds' stems long and to pack them together fastened with two stones and then put them in the streams so that they wouldn't perish in the freeze. Noblewoman was the inspector of all the servants in her house, and there were certain moral instructions for them to follow. A book written in 1371 by a French knight named Geoffrey de La Tour Landry in hope of his daughters comporting themselves well drew out

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the proper manners in treating servants. He asked his daughters to "show courtesy to the lower-class people and to communicate with them politely and cordially so that they will return them "greater reverence, more praise, and more renown" [6].

In the same vein, the wealthy townsman tried to convey this message to his young wife, as he advised his wife to love the chambermaids as her daughter [9]. Indeed, as an upper-class people, they wanted to avoid the awkward situation when they were wallowed in slanders spread by those bad-nature servants who would insult them for trivial things after the lease was due. What's worse? Their neighbour might be convinced by those rumors and reported on them. This was not uncommon. In the research by Bennett, Judith, and Ruth Karras, it was recognized that "even private spaces were susceptible to public oversight. Householders reported neighbors who behaved badly;" [5].

As with regard to the dressing of wealthy class, Dressing was and continues to be a kind of representation of gender and class. Across the Europe, for example, sumptuary laws were passed in order to maintain the status denotation such as that luxurious fabrics were only for aristocracy as well as to tamp down the hype over expensive cloth because "Governments frequently connected the excessive cost of women's clothing to a host of ills, from a weak economy to declining birthrate" Nevertheless, the restrictions couldn't stop the women because they often made changes to their clothing to avoid violating regulations [5, 11]. People seemed to be obsessed with new styles, as indicated by Bennett, Judith, and Ruth Karras, who wrote that the disposing of outdated clothing before it was wore out was encouraged by a surge of new styles in the market [5]. However, not all upper-class were spellbound by the attractive fashion. Again, the French knight Geoffrey de La Tour Landry gave a different expectation of his daughters. He instructed them to "dress moderately" and not to pursue foreign fashions first in worry that they may be mocked [6]. The husband in *the Good Wife*, despite the well-to-do financial ability, seemed to be reserved and cautious in terms of cloth-buying, as he introduced some knacks on cleaning the dust and grease on the fur (fur itself was expensive and could only be afforded by nobility, though) [9], instead of just telling her to throw it away. The trend of loving fashion existed, but whether to follow it varies from each wealthy family.

5. Further Observation

Having looked at how the general lifestyle of a wealthy family could be reflected from the text of *the Good Wife*, one could already started to perceive how the class difference seemed to transcend the gender difference by a large margin. The text makes this point very clear: the wife was the mistress of the house, or to use the original quote, that she was the "master, overseer, ruler and chief administrator" [9]. No matter they were male or female, those under the title of a servant would be subservient to the instructions from the wife. Even Dame Agnes the Beguine (the Beguine belonged to members of a female religious movement and was so well-learned in domestic affairs that great persons always sent whom their daughters to be raised) [6], who was not part of the family, were able to be in charge of the servants' work [9]. Thus it is not hard to recognize that the class and wealth disparity trumped gender difference in medieval Europe.

6. Conclusion

In the Middle Ages, the life of upper class people is supreme and affluent. Although there are plenty of expectations for the wife behaving with obedience, grace and graciousness, but when comparing vertically down with those of a lower class identity, the gender inequality existing in one family is disregarded. Hence, the significance of one's class exceeds that of one's gender at that time. Despite loads of research done on topics of gender inequality and class division, the intersectional examinations across them are quite insufficient currently. Through this work, I hope that more

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research in that respect could be inspired to address the more complex relation of gender and class both in a horizontal and a vertical way.

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