

Female Agency and Consent in Poems about Sexual Violence in the Middle Ages

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Background

What is a pastourelle?

Pastourelles, also referred to as “rape songs” are poems that depicts a conversation between a man and a women, centering around questions of sex and consent (Harris 1). The majority of existing scholarship about this genre surrounds French pastourelle. This research focuses on a collection of English and Scottish pastourelles, which have both significant overlap with and significant distinctions from French pastourelles.

Conventions of pastourelles

The genre is difficult to define, but there exist common tropes throughout many of them (Smith 19-21):

- Location: isolated, typically in a pasture or forest
 - Significant departure from this: English and Scottish pastourelles that occur in an urban setting.
- Participants: usually between a nobleman and a maiden
 - Power dynamics of class intersect with power dynamics of gender
- Time: almost always occurs in springtime
- Content: scenarios including sexual negotiation and violence

An example is examined in the following section:

“When that byrdes be brought to rest”

	‘My ladye as freshe as floures yn May,’ ¹⁹	
10	Meke your hard harte and rewe on me, Or ellys I dye long before my daye. Swete harte, all ys for your love, parde!’	[soften your hard heart and take pity on me [else [by God
	‘Me thynkethe soo, by your coloure, That ye be full weyke and feble of corage. 15 Your legges be small byneth the kne; Your bryde shall never hoppe yn my cage.’	[I think that, by your complexion, [very weak and sexually feeble [slender beneath the knee

At the start of this poem, there is a clear dialogue established between the man and the woman: an attempt and coercion and a blatant refusal. This dynamic is challenged throughout the rest of the poem and eventually shifts.

25	‘In the walter I wyll me drowne Byfore your syght that I may see. To my dethe I was furst borne; Swete harte, all ys for your love, parde!’	[turbulent sea; drown myself [I’ve been marked for death since my birth
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In this excerpt, the knight threatens to kill himself if the maiden does not have sex with him. Suicide threats as a means of sexual coercion appear numerous times in this collection of pastourelles.

	‘Good sir,’ she sayde, ‘for charyte, 30 Some of your prithe lett ytt swage, ²¹ And yn a place of pryvite, Your bryde shall hoppe yn my cage.’	[as an act of kindness [(I will) allow your erection to be somewhat relieved [in a private place
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This is manipulation works out in the knight’s favor: the maiden’s firm refusal (‘Your bryde shall never hoppe yn my cage’) shifts ‘Your bryde shall hoppe yn my cage’) and the encounter works out in the knights favor .

Scholarship and thematic exploration

Why study pastourelles?

1. **Not allowing modern culture to sanitize the realities of chivalric masculinity**
 - a. Pastourelles are an illumination of “the violence and entitlement underlying chivalric masculinity, which contemporary culture portrays as centered on worshiping ladies, kissing their hands, and holding doors for them” (Harris 2).
2. **Examining how rape culture has endured and envolved**
 - a. Elements of pastourelles that this research examined are still prevalent in modern society’s power dynamics of gender. They provoke complex and nuanced discussions of consent and sexuality that have enduring cultural relevance.
3. **Considering presentations of female empowerment**
 - a. The conception of agency that exists in these poems and interpretations of it allow for a consideration of what true empowerment might look like.



Allegorical knight armed with virtues. “Treatise on the Vices” by William Peraldus, English, third quarter of the 13th c., British Library, Harley 3244, f. 28 (Source: Wikimedia Commons, Public domain.)

The association between sex and death

Suicide threats

In the examined example, a suicide threat is used to coerce the maiden into having a sexual encounter with the knight. Similar statements occur throughout the collection.

- The false assignment of agency and power: the male aggressors use manipulation to convince the maidens that their actions can determine their physical fate, when the reality of the situation is the reverse

The “conflicted lover-tortuer” (Gravdal 39)

Miscontextualizations of male violence towards women as an expression of love.

- This has a strong resonance with modern manipulation tactics and excuses that are made for aggression. It is correlated with passion and, thus, largely diminished
- The line between “seduction and aggression” is blurred in society, literature and law (Gravdal 14).

Questions of empowerment



A shepherdess with her flock and dog, French, c. 1410-1414 (Source: British Library, MS Harley 4431, f. 221. Public domain.)

Harris’ perspective

Resistance is heard “ when women’s literary voices articulate protest against social stigma and vociferously challenge men who assault, mistreat, betray, or harass them” (p. 11).

Complications

1. **Nuance of empowerment**
 - a. It is important that pastourelles give women a voice and, sometimes, the last word but this is not inherently or unilaterally empowering.
 - i. How is this empowerment verbalized?
 - ii. What are its conditions?
2. **Perspective and voice**
 - a. Impact of switching from first person to third person point-of-view in the pastourelles on power dynamics.
 - b. Importance of considering who is authoring the maidens’ resistance and survivor speech.
 - i. Who are these conceptions of empowerment for?

Who is meant to be entertained?

The idea of the “rape joke”

“Pastourelles may tailor sexual violence to their lighthearted ends by downplaying or neutralizing it retrospectively” (Smith 35).

- Entertainment value that stems from the presence of aggression
- “...clearly, someone is meant to laugh at them, but who is the butt of the joke?” (Smith 14-15)

What are the conditions of respect?

Respecting women because of other men

In the pastourelle “I saw me thoct this hindir nycht” the man pressures woman to have sex, then withdraws consent out of respect for “the lord’s bed.” He gets mocked by the narrator for this:

- A genuine reason or an excuse?
- The performance of sexual violence and emasculation of men who are not sexually violent.

How “the threat of rape thus opens a space for female heroism” (Gravdal 23)

It seems that, in order to be respected, women must resist sexual assault. These are the narratives through which they are able to “become Christlike” (Gravdal 24).

Female agency

Is male humiliation the goal of female agency?

In the pastourelle “I met my lady well arrayit,” the maiden ends the poem with a “brutally unflattering assessment of [the man’s] sexual prowess” (Harris 47).

- This connects to the discussion of empowerment: is this statement of insult one rooted in feminine conceptions of agency or one rooted in bolstering male fears about the potential results of said agency?

Concluding thoughts and further ideas

Pastourelles ask the reader what the true goals of female agency—and female empowerment—are and how they might look in a hypothetical, post-patriarchal society.

It is important to note how the worst fear of men, in these pastourelles, appears to be humiliation, particularly humiliation that impacts how they are seen by other men. For women, their worst fear is death. These are not equal in magnitude.

It also asks the larger question: why are threats of sexual violence a necessary part of narratives surrounding female empowerment? What is the solution to this?

Empowerment exists on a spectrum: there are aspects of empowerment (that Harris notes) in these pastourelles, but evident issues with the definition of it that is being presented. Female agency should not be dependent on male humiliation, or on men at all. However, this does not wholly discount the empowerment that is offered to women in these narrative, particularly in how they are given a voice to speak.

Finally, the question of authorship as agency is one that these pastourelles provoke. Though women are given voices, it is unclear who is writing the words that come out. This must also be taken into consideration when evaluating the agency and empowerment in these pastourelles.

Continuing to investigate and understand the presentations of female agency, and how they differ based on who is depicting them, is integral to implementing genuine forms of this agency in modern society.