The Women We Love to Hate

Throughout history, some women have refused to conform to their society's ideas of how they should think or act. Margery Kempe, the Wife of Bath from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Guinevere and Morgana from the tales of King Arthur all display characteristics of nonconformity. All four women have resisted gender roles. Where society expects women to be nurturing and selfless, Margery, The Wife of Bath, Guinevere, and Morgana display self-serving behavior. This can still be seen in today's society and in failed relationships because, although it is good for a woman to have her own mind and be independent, it is also necessary for a woman to be nurturing. Today's society requires this quality just as society has always needed nurturing women.

Margery Kempe definitely stepped out of the social standard for women during her time. After all, she left her entire family to “live” for God, not to mention the sexual inclination of her supposed visions. “The assertion of such a mission by a married woman, the mother of fourteen children, was in itself sufficient grounds for controversy; in addition, Kempe's outspoken defense of her visions as well as her highly emotional style of religious expression embroiled her with fellow citizens and pilgrims and with the church” (Greenblatt 383). Evidently, Margery Kempe was tortured by the thought of wickedness in her life. Today, one might say that she had a psychotic disorder. She says in her book that she heard the voice of the devil. “For she was ever
letted by her enemy, the Devil, evermore saying to her while she was in good heal her needed no confession but [to] do penance by herself alone, and all should be forgiven, for God is merciful enow” (Kempe 384). Even going out of her mind, how could a mother bring herself to leave her children? If she had grown children and had given birth to a child every year since she married at age twenty, she would still have had small children at home at the age of forty. Who took care of them? A governess perhaps? That still seems to be an exceptionally self-centered thing to do. While Kempe identified herself with the Virgin Mary as a mother, she was not acting like a mother at all. Her children needed a mother, not a nanny, or a governess. What about her husband? There was nothing in her book that indicated that John Kempe mistreated her, and yet she chose to keep her body to herself for eight weeks or more before the vow of celibacy before the Bishop. The Bible tells wives that their bodies are not their own, but that they belong to their husbands. “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does” (1 Cor. 7.4). Society dictates that she should have been caring for her husband, children, and home, but, instead, she was traveling around the world and having hysterical visions in front of everyone.

Alisoun, or The Wife of Bath, had a very modern way of thinking in certain respects. She believed that if a man would allow his wife to be in control, everything would be fine. Control, in fact, was her main concern. “Upon his flessh whil that I am his wif. / I have the power during al my lif” (Chaucer 163-164). Power is what she truly wanted and would do anything to obtain. Alisoun points out that the Samaritan woman in the Bible had many husbands, and she also made mention of King Solomon with his one-hundred wives and three-hundred concubines, illustrating a double standard that a woman of that time period would never even consider voicing. “Lo, here
the wise king daun Salomon: / I trowe he hadde wives many oon” (35-36). She goes on to say that she wishes God would allow her to do the same. “As wolde God it leveful were to me / To be refreshed half so ofte as he” (37-38). It is sheer genius how Chaucer uses this to show her fleshly and manipulative personality, as well as highlight the gender discrepancies of the time.

Guinevere is another questionable woman. She and others in this text may be fictional, but the fact remains that she turns out to be a pretty self-absorbed person as well. Some may disagree with this observation of Guinevere; however, the fact still remains that she was unfaithful to King Arthur. Sir Agravain says, “I marvel that we all be not ashamed both to see and to know how Sir Lancelot lieth daily and nightly by the Queen” (Malory 440). It is true that men aren't known to be very faithful, historically, but two wrongs do not make a right. Lancelot and Guinevere may have been in love, but she should not have married Arthur if she did not love him, and certainly, she should not have cheated even if she fell in love with someone else. The issue that Arthur's most trusted knight, Sir Lancelot, had an affair with his wife is a matter for another time, but Arthur was betrayed by the two people who are closest to him. This betrayal broke his heart: “the King was full loath that such a noise should be upon Sir Lancelot and his queen” (441). How could Guinevere be respected when she could not even remain faithful to her husband and King? What other misdeeds did she have in mind?

Finally, a famously hated woman who was King Arthur's half-sister, Morgana, also known as Morgan Le Fay among other misnomers, had a story of incest and deceit. First, Morgana and Arthur slept together. It is not known whether or not it was consensual, but either one of them, or both of them, were very wrong. Then, they had a son together, Mordred, who later covets the throne so much that he was willing to kill his own father to become king.
Morgana was envious of the throne as well and wanted her son to be king as much as Mordred did. In many stories, Morgana is portrayed as an evil witch with great abilities that rival that of Merlin the great magician. In the article “Morgan Le Fay: From Healer To Treasonous Queen,” Amberlee Venters says, “Morgan is described as skilled in witchcraft, healing, and the ability to change her appearance at will” (Venters 21). Apparently, she could also change the appearance of others because she turned Sir Bertilek into a green giant in order to trick Gawain in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” “She put this shape upon me to puzzle your wits, To afflict the fair queen, and frighten her to death” (Greenblatt 212). Her actual intention was to scare Guinevere to death by having Arthur go up against the giant during the “Beheading Game.” Trying to scaring someone to death definitely seems like a truly evil thing to do, and surely, Morgana did much more to try to scare people.

Challenging social standards of conduct is not always negative, but abandoning your family, justifying promiscuity, being controlling, delighting in unfaithfulness, and being just plain evil is NOT the way to do it. Margery Kempe, The Wife of Bath, Guinevere, and Morgana are all selfish, self-center, and cold hearted. In all actuality, aside from Margery Kempe, who was very unstable, the Wife of Bath, Guinevere, and Morgana may have been a little mentally unstable as well. Whatever the case, it is clear that they had a darkness in their hearts that did not make others particularly fond of them. Are these reasons to hate someone? No. Society, however, does have a way of trying to keep women in their place. Women can fight the constraints put on them by the world, but they do not have to be evil to do so. While these women are each remembered and discussed for their resistance to patriarchal notions, their resistance was ultimately unsuccessful. Women do not need to disregard who they, for change can be created in
a nurturing manner, with a kind and loving heart. Being a figure others love to hate might bring fame, but true change lies in the heart of women – and men – who are motivated by care.
Works Cited


