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Digital Manor

Patriarchal Culture and its Impositions on Joan Martyn

Virginia Woolf's "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" unfolds against the backdrop of medieval England, a period wherein patriarchal culture critically dictated the lives of women with stringent norms and expectations. Delving into the historical context of medieval England's patriarchal culture and the role of women, a view into Woolf's narrative illustrates her skillful weave of Joan Martyn into the fabric of this societal framework. As Modernist scholar Dr. Heidi Stalla states in her article, "The Play of Fact and Fiction in Virginia Stephen's 'The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn,'" "... critics have tended to interpret Woolf's 1906 short story... mostly in the context of revisionary feminist history" (191); using this notion, an analysis of Woolf's narrative through a feminist perspective is illuminated. Focusing on "The Journal's" central female character, Joan Martyn manifests as both a reflection and emblem of patriarchal culture's impositions—its restraints and stereotypes.

Characterized by a deeply entrenched patriarchal system where power, both political and social, resided predominantly in the hands of men, medieval England acts as the overarching setting that challenges Joan Martyn's agency. Shifting across this era, as Dr. Amanda E. McVitty affirms in "Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England: Gender, Law and Political Culture," "...manhood, chivalric values, and the need for kings [and the male population, in effect] to align

their manly bodies with the social body and body politic” (234) confines women to narrow positions within society. Marriage and motherhood were considered the primary duties of women, emphasizing their roles in perpetuating familial lines and securing alliances. In Woolf’s narrative, Joan Martyn becomes a symbolic representation of the impositions placed upon women in medieval England. Woolf’s feminist perspective critiques these constraints, inviting readers to view her potential as a wife and mother as a demanded, taxing role. And, as the Diary provides “insight into...Joan’s interior life” and portrays the weight of her impending marriage contract” (Stalla 191), such assets in the Digital Manor—along with the Wedding Ring, Rocking Chair, Basket of Yarn, and Cupboard of Spices—represent the traditional, stereotypical life binding Joan Martyn. In the same context, as stated in “Women in the Medieval Common Law,” “...in the medieval common law...women [were] stripped of their independent...status” (Mason 145). Representing overbearing patriarchy, Ancestral Portraits of male heads of house are used in the Digital Manor as another ode to patriarchal forces.

Moreover, the animalization of another woman in the narrative becomes a jarring moment that encapsulates the effects of patriarchal culture on Joan. This act, seemingly contrary to Joan’s previous character, is indicative of internalized patriarchal values. Women, constrained by societal expectations and essentially influenced by masculinist ideals, reflect the nature of a culture that fosters womanly degradation and reinforces hierarchical norms. While readers are able to perceive the offensiveness of male aggression through Joan’s view of Anthony speaking violently to Beatrice; as “‘The Details of Life and the Pulsings of Affect’: Virginia Woolf’s Middle English Text” includes, it is also through Joan that readers view her “distrust and...dislike” of Beatrice and her “doubt [of Beatrice for] ‘whether she could have spoken, or whether snarling or howling was her only language’” (Mitchell 121). Woolf skillfully uses this

moment to underscore the impact of patriarchy on women's perceptions. Within the Digital Manor, a Wolf watching over a Baby Bassinet signifies Joan's patriarchally-construed view of Beatrice, a lower-class mother. By animalizing Beatrice, as described in "Woolf's Copernican Shift: Nonhuman Nature in Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction," "...Woolf was aware of class connotations...using them to indicate Joan's class-constructed perspective" (Swanson 60) at the onset of embedded misogyny from patriarchal culture.

Serving as an exploration of the standards of patriarchal culture, specifically during medieval England, "The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn" situates its main female character in a setting defined by gender roles and class structures. Exhibiting Woolf's nuanced portrayal of the stereotypes faced by women, through a feminist perspective, the Digital Manor becomes a symbol of the impositions placed upon women—Joan Martyn—within a patriarchal world.

Works Cited

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