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Paper Proposal

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Proposed title

Women Accused: Public and Private Displays of Emotion in Middle English Romances

Topics: gendered representation of emotions, emotions in medieval literature, calumniated queens, public and private emotions

Abstract

The romances of falsely-accused queens represented a popular and enduring narrative trope throughout the middle ages and had a particularly fruitful life in the English context. The accusation scene, which is present in all iterations of the tale, stands at the centre of this group of romances and can be regarded as one of the key narrative episodes. This scene is not only central to the development of the plot but it also stands as one of the most emotionally-charged moments of the narrative. In it, a trusted member of the royal household—usually the king’s mother or advisor—challenges the queen’s honour, effectively upturning the status quo and endangering the line of succession. The narratives that unfold from this moment onwards are centred on the restoration of the queen’s honour and of her children as rightful heirs.

Crucially, the scene of the false accusation brings together a variety of characters: the accusers, the deceived kings, the victimised queens, and, often, other participating members of the court who amplify or challenge the emotions exhibited by the protagonists. As such, it stands as a particularly productive setting to study the range of emotional expressions associated with the different types of characters—grief, horror, anger—as well as the specific spaces in which they manifest.

In this paper, I will analyse the false-accusation scene in four Middle English romances: *Octavian* (c. 1350); *Sir Tryamour* (late 1300s); *Helyas, Knight of the Swan* (c. 1512), and *Valentine and Orson* (c. 1555). The aim is to examine how the accusers capitalise on medieval ideas of female shame and the emotional responses elicited from the queens when confronted with their tarnished honour. In particular, I will focus on whether or not the women in the selected romances are offered a trial or a public space to advocate for themselves and how their behaviour in these spaces contrasts with the emotions they exhibit in a private context. My analysis is grounded on an interdisciplinary methodological framework that draws from narratology and the work done by historians of emotions in an effort to bridge methodological gaps and effectively incorporate new methods into the study of emotions in medieval literature.