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Galloping through the Middle Ages: The Horse in Life and in Middle English Literature

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Abstract

The horse was an undisputed part and parcel of medieval life. It was an indispensable component of feudal chivalry and warfare, equally important as a means of transportation both for people and goods, for travel, agriculture and entertainment in forms such as hunting and tournaments as the only vehicle for mobility. All classes and genders made extensive use of it. Chivalry which was the most important institution of the Middle Ages, and the political and administrative system of feudalism was possible only with the mounted knight. Knighthood, the vestiges of which extend to the present day was one of the defining force of the Middle Ages. The knight and the horse hence become one. Just as the knight was protected by his armour, the horse was also protected by various forms of armour. The literal and idealistic depiction of the knight and his horse found its depiction in the literature of the Middle Ages. The horses acquired individualising names and symbolic significances in addition to fighting and other skills. In various literary works the horses were depicted so as to shed light and bestow extra significance to the qualities of their riders. Following the symbolism established in *Phaedrus* employing the body and reason dichotomy, the horse and rider figure gained significance in addition to reflecting the social, economic qualities and aspirations of its rider. Furthermore, the horse was accepted to symbolise woman, and hence it pointed to the necessity of males bridling and controlling the weaker sex. The reversal of this power relation found its expression in the woman becoming the rider controlling /riding the male. The horse also found its symbolic function in the allegorical works especially related to the depiction of the seven deadly sins.

Keywords: Medieval horses, horse in literature, Medieval English Literature, status, gender

The Horse in Medieval Daily Life

The horse was an indispensable and important part of medieval life. It was crucial for warfare, equally important in transportation, travel, agriculture and entertainment in forms such as hunting and tournaments as the major vehicle for mobility on land. Women as well as men made extensive use of it. All classes made use of it but the breed and the type denoted

wealth, status and class (Hyland, 1999, p.1). Chivalry which was the most important institution of the Middle Ages, and the political and administrative system of feudalism was possible only with the mounted knight. In Lydgate's debate poem *Horse, Goose and Sheep*, the animals engage in a debate about which one of them is more beneficial to humans, and the horse makes its own case by presenting a long list. He states that he is useful in war and peace, agriculture and trade covering almost all aspects of medieval life (Lydgate, 1900, lines 36-147).

The horses were integrated into agriculture relatively late in England and it was a slow process. During the rule of the Romans in England the number of sheep and horses increased significantly. However, they could not solve the problem of harnessing the horse for traction. "The padded horse collar, invented in Asia and diffusing slowly westward, was joined to other improvements-horseshoes, whippletrees, and traces- to convert the horse into a farm animal" (Gies and Gies, 1991, pp.16-17). Towards the end of the tenth century the horse shoulder collar appeared in Europe and this was one of the most significant advancement in harnessing horses to vehicles (Hyland 1999, p.39). This enabled the horse to maximise on its strength by pushing against the collar, increasing the weight that could be drawn. "The collar also enabled the horse to back the vehicle and exert breaking power going downhill (Hyland, 1999, pp.39-40). The horse provided more advantages as it was faster-gaited and could work longer hours than the strong and docile ox as a plough beast and cart animal (Gies and Gies, 1991, p. 17). One of the earliest representations of the horse as a plough animal can be seen in the Bayeux Tapestry (1087) as Gies states (2011, p.17). In England, as Gautier points out, around 1066 oxen were used for ploughing (1965, p.331) and horses were integrated with oxen in a mixed team about thirteenth century. The ox was being replaced by the horse in the farm and the field. Three reasons have been stated for this change by Pascua as follows : 1. cows became increasingly valuable as a source for milk, 2. improvement in horse traction and shoeing outweighed the traction of the ox (the invention of the padded collar made it possible to extract more power from the horse as it rested on its shoulders without strangulation), 3. murrain- a disease which had a great impact on the ox population (2007,2011, p.92) reduced the number of the oxen; the horses were not struck that badly (Hyland, 1999 p.45).

However, Walter of Henley, the author of a late 13th century treatise on farming (*Seneschaucie*) comments on horses as farm animals and compares them with oxen. He states that it was cheaper to feed the oxen and "when their working life ended they could be fattened on grass for a summer and sold for meat, with their hide and hooves, when rendered, providing neatsfoot oil. The horse, because of a church ban on eating horsemeat, was only worth its hide for leather and hair for ropes" (Hayland, 1999, p.43). Hyland also points out that mares were kept as farm animals because of their reproductive qualities, stating that the foals were a bonus.

Hoses as Means of Transportation in Medieval England

Horses were also used as pack animals to carry loads, and there are agreements between the lord and the tenant for such duties even in Anglo-Saxon times (Hyland, 1999, p.45). As Hyland states, where commerce was to be carried out in low population and difficult to reach areas lacking proper roads the pony was the solution. The native ponies could survive by grazing in the pastures. They were basically used for transporting the wool produced by the sheep in these areas. Additionally, their physical qualities with a strong back made them especially useful in carrying mineral ores such as lead, coal, iron and alum especially in the north of England (Hyland, 1999, p.46). The pack horses and cart horses were also essential in transporting all kinds of goods of the king and the court. These were not only goods but also

money was transported by these pack horses (Hyland, 1999, p.47). Clark, commenting on London's economy, underlines the fact that the horse drawn cart was a major factor and a contributor to its traffic (2004, p. 9).The carts were used for short and long-distance haulage. The carts were light two-wheeled vehicles drawn by two or three horses. The horse cart played a vital part in city life for carrying victuals, building material, water and for the collection of rubbish (Clark, 2004, pp. 10-11).

If we are to take a look at the state of transportation of humans, Dent underlines the fact that most people rode horses "because the state of the roads was so bad that and the standards of coach building so low that travel by wheeled vehicles was confined practically to the old, the sick and to ladies in an advanced state of pregnancy. The rest rode, if they could afford it" (1959-62, p. 2).

In the Middle Ages people from all classes and backgrounds travelled; the royals and the nobility moved from manor to manor, diplomats travelled between countries, wars and crusades, duty of the clergy demanded travel and also they travelled for pleasure and pilgrimages. Although originally pilgrimages were required to be made on foot, the pilgrims also resorted to undertaking these journeys on horseback (Hyland, 1999, pp.120,126). Chaucer also depicts his pilgrims in his work *The Canterbury Tales* undertaking this journey on horseback. Clark in his detailed study of horses and their equipment focusing on London, examining the hire charges points out that "a journey to Canterbury and back was not a cheap one, and not one to be undertaken lightly or frequently by townsfolk" (2004, p.9).

> As Pascua states:
> The horse in the early Middle Ages provides a marvellous example to how different social classes used animals in different ways. This is apparent in their names. Horses for the rich were usually classified as destriers, great horses, coursers, and palfreys. For the middle groups, the common terms were rounciers, sumpters, hackneys, pads and hobbies. For the peasants and workers, cart horses, stots, and affers were low-status animals used in harrowing and ploughing. (2007,2011, p. 91)

In addition to the types of horses the physical condition, the colour and the sex of the horse were significant in reflecting the social status of the rider. Well fed and groomed horses implied high status and wealth of the rider or the owner. Chaucer in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* following this correlation, while painting the portrait of the Monk emphasizes the fact that he is riding a palfrey which is "as brown as is a berye" (line 207). Both the type, colour and physical condition of the mount seem to denote the upper class background of the rider as well as his fondness of possessions contrasting the rules of the monastic orders.

In a similar fashion in the Breton lai *Sir Orfeo* Dame Herodis, the queen is visited by hundred otherworldly knights and hundred ladies. The otherworldliness and nobility of the ladies are emphasized by the depiction of their mounts:

> All on snowewhite stedes.
> As white as milke were her wedes.
> I no seighe never yete bifore
> So fair creatours y-core.(lines 121-124)

The noble ladies are mounted on white steeds; both these qualities are emblems of nobility and high status.

The Knight and his Horse

The medieval knight was inconceivable without his horse. In fact, except for the English term rooted in Anglo-Saxon *cniht*, in the medieval European vernacular languages the term invariably denoted a mounted soldier; in French *chevalier*, in German *Ritter*, in Italian *cavaliere*, and in Spanish, *caballero* were the terms used. (Gies, 1984,2011, p.3; Oakeshott, 1998, p.25; Dent, 1959-62, p. 3). However, it should not be forgotten that "in England before the Norman Conquest at Hastings in 1066, the warrior classes, however noble, never fought on horseback. On the Continent they always did" (Oakeshott, 1998, p.25)

"The warhorse, after all, was viewed as part and parcel of the knight's martial identity; its quality reflected or contributed to, the knight's own level of social value…" (Pascua, 2007, 2011, p.110). Diaz de Gamez who was writing about the chivalric ideal in the fifteenth century while giving the definition of the knight displayed how the knight and the horse were inseparable in their existence. He says "I tell you that men call knight the man who, of custom, rides upon a horse. He who of custom, rides upon another mount, is no knight; but he who rides upon a horse is not for that reason a knight; he only is rightly called a knight, who makes it his calling."(Ross and McLaughlin, 1977, p. 91). He emphasises the fact that the knight is unimaginable without the horse which is indispensable for his existence, but he also draws attention to the fact that just riding a horse does not make one a knight, he must also embrace all the virtues and qualities of chivalry. Diaz de Gamez elaborates on the idea and refers to the other mounts that were available to the medieval man, that is, the mule and the ass declaring them as unsuitable for knights. He also states the reason for this, emphasising the congruity between the rider and the mount. He states that, knights " have not been taken from among feeble or timid or cowardly souls, but from among men who are strong and full of energy, bold and without fear; and for this reason there is no other beast that so befits a knight as a good horse" (Ross and McLaughlin, 1977, p. 91). He also develops the idea commenting on the medieval practice where the horse and the knight were working as a team and says:

> Thus the horses have been found that in the thick of battle have shewn themselves as loyal to their masters as if they had been men. There are horses who are so strong, fiery, swift and faithful, that a brave man, mounted on a good horse, may do more in an hour of fighting than ten or mayhap a hundred could have done afoot." (Ross and McLaughlin, 1977, p.91).

In a similar line, Lydgate in his early fifteenth century poem (c. 1436) *Horse, Goose and Sheep* narrates the dispute about which animal is more useful to mankind emphasising the military aspect (Withers, 2011, p. 105), and the horse makes a very important statement reflecting the inseparability of the knight and his horse and how much depended on the horse for success in battle; "These emperours, these princes, and these kynges /[…]/ Withouten hors--- spere, swerde nor shield,/ Might litill availe for to hold a feld (Lydgate, 1900, lines 64, 69-70).

The horse was accepted as a noble animal and it was a clear sign of nobility and high status (Crane, 2013, pp.140-41; Miller, 2013, p. 961). The mounted rider automatically had physical and social superiority over the unmounted. The knight and his horse in life and literature were bedecked in apparel and coats of arms displaying their status. In the arming scene in the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Sir Gawain's rich and noble arms and

armour are depicted in detail (Barroff, 2000, lines 566-589,605-639), and his horse Gringolet's trappings which are equally rich are enumerated (Barroff, 2000, lines 597-604). The depiction of the Green Knight who appears at Arthur's court challenging them, and his horse also display their fashionable and high status. The horse and rider are dressed in green and in the highest of fashion (Barroff, 2000, lines 135-220). Both on the continent and in England some of the romance and epic heroes' horses are given by their names and individualised, for example Gawain's Gringolett and Beavis's horse Arondel. The bond between the horse and its noble owner is also emphasised in the literary tradition. Bevis's horse Arondel in the romance *Bevis of Hampton* is typical of the idealised horse; he is swift, runs well (lines 3510 ff), he displays the valued physical qualities (lines 4068-70 and most important of all he is loyal to his knight (line 589) and he fights with him in battles kicking and not letting anyone near (lines 4447-4450). When Bevis is imprisoned he does not let anyone ride him and to restrain him he has to be chained (lines 1515-1534). In another instance he throws off another knight into the mud who tries to ride him (line 2019). Loyalty also works the other way round, when Arondel kills King Yvor's son when he sneaks upon him in the stable with ill intentions it is announced that he is to be killed. Bevis chooses to leave his lands in England and go away rather than surrender his prised horse (lines 3575-2378). At the end of the romance Arondel dies before Bevis and his wife. His son has them buried in a chapel and prayers are said for Bevis and Josian and as well as the royal mount Arondel (lines 4616-17).

The military training of the knight's battle horse was of great importance. The mount of the knight was always a stallion because the mares were accepted as inferior in medieval hierarchy and the generative power of the stallion was symbolic of the physical and political might of the rider (Bishop, 1978, p.95). Additionally, the aggressive tendencies of the male mount were an advantage in the battlefield. These battle horses were trained to partake in the battle attacking the enemy, biting with their teeth and trampling with their hooves (Crane, 2013, pp. 142-43.)

Just as the loyalty of the horse to its master was valued it was expected of the rider to take good care of and display respect to horses. "Codes of knightly conduct forbade intentional injury to opponent's horses; it was considered cowardly and dishonourable, both in sport and in actual battle."(Pascua, 2007, 2011, pp. 110-11) In the Middle English poem, *The Anturs of Arther*, a joust between Gawain and Galeron results in the former's horse named Gresell, being shamefully beheaded, Gawain expresses extreme emotion on its loss (qtd. In Pascua, 2007, 2011, lines 547,553-554). Similarly when Bevis is fighting the giant he strikes and kills Bevis's steed Trenchefis. Bevis is very much angered by this unacceptable action and fights and kills his opponent (lines1890-1898).

In relation to the beliefs about horses in the Middle Ages, and to understand their mindset an important source is the bestiaries which give information about animals both real and fantastic. These manuscripts which were beautifully illuminated had three-fold purpose: first of all they provided a natural history, secondly they drew moral examples about behaviour and thirdly they revealed a mystical meaning attached to the animal (Barber, 1999, *Bestiary* Jacket). In the Bodley Bestiary the horse's specific behavioural characteristics are narrated in detail and their fondness for battle and their loyalty to their masters are underlined:

> They are very lively creatures, racing round the fields; they can scent battle, and the sound of the trumpet encourages to fight, while the human voice can urge them on in a race. They are dejected when beaten, and delight in winning. Some of them can

> scent out enemies in battle so well that they try to bite them. Many recognise their masters, and become unmanageable if they change hands. (Barber, 1999, p.102)

The narrator of the bestiary gives historical examples to support these ideas and mentions Alexander the Great's horse Bucephalus and how he would not allow any one to mount him except for his master and how he protected his master. Similarly, Caesar's horse is described behaving in a similar manner. The horse of the Scythian king attacked, kicked and bit the opponent when his master had been killed and they tried to strip him (Barber, 1999, p.103). A further example states how the horse of King Nicodemus starved itself to death after his master's death (Barber, 1999, p.103). Another twelfth century bestiary further adds that "When their master is dead or dying, horses shed tears- for they say that only the horse can weep for man and feel the emotion of sorrow" (White, 1954, p. 86).

At this point it might be beneficial to briefly take a look at the relationship of the medieval knight and his horse. In the Middle Ages as custom demanded the young sons of the nobility were sent as foster children to the castles of other nobles for their upbringing. Hence, the life of a young boy of the nobility would begin as a Page at the age of seven or eight. His duties would be to do various chores for the noble masters such as carrying candles and taking care of the noble chambers, the costumes and armour. Meanwhile they would be educated in manners by the noble ladies. When they reached the age of twelve or thirteen their military training would begin as they became Squires. In the whole process they would be in close contact with horses and would be developing their equestrian skills aiming to qualify as knights one day by excelling in their skills. The knighting ceremony was a very important ritual. The knight-to-be was stripped of all clothing, bathed to purify him and "was clad in white tunic, symbol of purity, and a red robe, a symbol of the blood which he would be required to shed in the service of the Christian faith"(Comte, 1978, p.10). Following this ritual he would fast for 24 hours and spend the night praying, which was known as the vigil. The next morning after confession and mass he would be led to the altar and his sword would be presented to him, and with the symbolic tap of the sword by his lord he would be knighted. After he took his vows as a knight he would be dressed as a knight. But the most important item conferred upon him were the gold spurs which were the distinctive emblem of the knight (Comte, 1978, p.10).

One of the Middle English literary works that makes extensive use of horses and equestrian culture is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The horses that Chaucer depicts in the text and the accompanying illuminations in different manuscripts have attracted ample attention and debate up to the present. The Ellesmere MS which is the most popular *Canterbury Tales* MS boasts 23 miniatures, and a number of critics have commented on how they enhance or omit various details that have been given in the literary text for various purposes. They provide rich visual material in relation to the horses and their riders. As Delasanta points out "seventeen of the pilgrims are at one time or another described in relation to their horse" (1968, p. 30).

Chaucer's depiction of the Knight and the Squire who belong to the upper class is illustrative of the norms of chivalry; additionally the Ellesmere MS illuminations provide further visual embellishment to the text (Herbert-Davies, 2018, p. 24ff.). The Knight weather he is taken as an ideal knight or a mercenary is said to have fine horses (Chaucer, General Prologue, line 74) because unconditionally his military performance depended on his horses. In the Middle Ages a knight was expected to have more than one horse, one for the battle field

a destrier and/or the courser (Oakeshott, 2013, pp.10-11; Gautier, 1965, p.331), one while travelling –the rouncey, and preferably one to carry his equipment. Hence, Chaucer's Knight is an efficient warrior. As Rosenblum and Finley point out although it is not appropriate for pilgrimage, both the Knight and the Squire are riding war horses to signify their wealth and status (Chaucer, General Prologue, line 141), moreover although not stated in the text, in the Ellesmere Manuscript the Knight is depicted wearing spurs which are the ultimate emblem of his status. Similarly, his son the Squire is also praised for his equine skills; Chaucer the narrator says "Well koude he sitte on horse and faire ryde" (Chaucer, General Prologue line 94).

The knight and his horse were conceived as two inseparable and complimentary components to such an extent that sometimes the horse was also punished for the crimes that the rider had committed. In case of the owner being guilty of rape the horse would also be shamed, and its tail would be cut as close as possible to its buttocks (Salisbury, 2011, p.31). Miller examines the issue in detail and underlines the fact that the cutting off of the tail of a horse or the mutilation of it was "a public defamation and ridicule of the horse's rider or owner; it may also be interpreted as a kind of bloody enfeeblement- or figurative castration- of the beast's master"(2013, p. 957).[1]

As Rowland illustrates, for the pilgrims of *The Canterbury Tales*, the horses imply the status of the rider in keeping with the norms and traditions of medieval society. Among those mentioned in opposition to those who are of high status as the Knight and the Squire, the poor and the humble have horse of low status, quality and physical appearance. The Plowman who is at the bottom of the social ladder rides a mare (Chaucer, General Prologue, line 541). The Clerk who is poor and thin himself rides on an unspecified but very malnourished horse who is "lene…as is a rake"(Chaucer, General Prologue, lines 287-88)(Herbert-Davies, 2018, p. 32).

In the Middle Ages the nobility and the upper class took part in activities such as tournaments, the meliee and hunting which all required good mounts. The first two were limited to the males only but women could partake in hunts. Hunting was a privilege of the nobility, and the young males belonging to the lower classes could only take part in these activities as a page or as a hound handler and if and when promoted, around the age of twenty they could become assistant huntsmen (Hyland, 1999, p.83). Technically all the land belonged to the king and the forests were also the property of the king and the hunting rights were granted by the king (Montanari, 1994, p.43). "Hunting was sport, training for war and provider of meat" (Hyland, 1999, p. 83). As Montanari also underlines "Hunting was the true image of war, on a practical and technical level as much as a metaphorical one…Hunting fully expressed the culture of strength and violence that was consecrated in the practice of war"(1999, pp.178-79). The hunt was a ritual which was strictly defined and bound by rules and regulations. The horses used in hunting were required to be swift but they were not especially different. In the hunt, the types of hunt where the chase was done on horse was accepted to be more noble (Cummins, 2003, p.116). The details about the types of hunt, prey and the rituals were given in the hunting treatises of the Middle Ages. The details of these regulations can clearly be observed in the three hunt scenes in the romance of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

[1] The acts of violence and mutilation such as cutting off of the tail, the mane, ears and lips of the horse was not only carried out to defame and insult the knights but as Miller illustrates it was caried out against the clergy or the messengers who brought undesirable news (2013, pp.958-59).

Tournaments were also equestrian events that were undertaken both for the purpose of training for war and also for display of status and skill (Hyland, 1999, p.99). The earliest references to the tournaments date to the ninth century in Europe. Although the Pope banned it in 1130 it had no effect and it was very popular throughout the Middle Ages (Hyland, 1999, p. 100). The tournaments found their expression mostly in romances where they were used for the depiction of the courtly traditions and in establishing the knights' fighting skills. The meliee was a specific form of these war games where an equal number of opponents fought each other using weapons of war. It was a form of war training and the main purpose was to capture or batter ones opponent. But many fatalities did occur (Hyland, 1999, p.101). As Hyland states, by Edward I's time the meliee had been replaced by the joust, the combat between two individuals using only the lance.

Horse as Metaphor

The horse and its rider were also used metaphorically in various medieval literary and religious texts. Plato in his *Phaedrus* used the metaphor of the horse and its rider equating the rider to the soul or reason and the horse to the body with its sensual weaknesses (1914, p.471 ff.). Plato established the metaphor asserting the need of the soul or reason as the rider to keep the body/horse under control away from passions and lead it away from temptations and sin. The metaphor became popular with classical and later with Christian writers (Rowland, 1966, p.246). Similarly, Prudentius's allegorical work *Psychomachia* written in the early fifth century which became very popular and influential through out the Middle Ages depicted Superbia/Pride on a steed which was uncontrollable and they are destroyed by the opposing virtues as pointed out by Rowland(1966, p.247; Prudentius, 1949, pp.291-92). This metaphor has been employed by Chaucer in his works, especially in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales.* Various aspects of the Miller's portrait, such as his attire and physiognomy imply, is under the influence of his fleshly desires and passions. This aspect is further emphasized by his lack of control of his horse; since he becomes drunk and falls off his horse on the journey to Canterbury (Chaucer, General Prologue lines 3121-23). The representation of the horse in such a metaphorical way can also be observed in the portrait of the Monk in the General Prologue. The monk is breaching almost all the rules of monastic life with the implications especially of gluttony and lust. He does not follow the rule of claustration. In Chaucer's words he was "ful fat and in good point;/… He was not pale as a forpyned goost" (General Prologue lines 200-2005). His indulgence in worldly pleasures is reflected both in the depiction of his physical appearance and metaphorically in his mount; "His palfrey was as black as a berye" (General Prologue, line 207). Similar to his costume, his horse also implies high status since the palfrey was an expensive horse befitting the upper classes, however it was a mount traditional for churchmen (Dent and Goodall qtd in Rosenblum and Finley 2003, p.145). Moreover, he has other horses that he owns. Additionally, his horse is fashionably decorated with bells which most of the critics find unsuitable, indicative of worldliness and his disregard of the monastic rules. Chaucer emphasises his extreme fondness of "pricking" and his final acknowledgement that he was "a prikasour aright" (General Prologue, line 189), trough a pun implies his sexual engagements.[2]

In a similar fashion, the Cook in *The Canterbury Tales* becomes very drunk on the journey to Canterbury and falls off his horse implying his indulgence in the sins of the flesh and his lack of control of the body.

[2] For a detailed analysis see Edmund Reiss and Thomas W Ross's *Chaucer's Bawdy*, sv." Pricken" and Edmund Reiss "The Symbolic Surface of the *Canterbury Tales*".

On the other hand the Clerk of Oxenford described in the General Prologue devotes himself to his study and upholds moral values. He is not tempted by worldly pleasures, on the contrary he has shunned them. His poor condition as well as his disregard for worldly riches is mirrored in his horse, implying the strict control of the flesh by reason and the ruling moral values. The Ellesmere MS realistically depicts this aspect and its reflection in his horse also.

Chaucer in commenting on the Monk's riding and pricking of his horse makes use of another metaphor of the rider and the horse, which was frequently used by the didactic writers of the Middle Ages, where the woman is equated with the horse. By this analogy the woman has to be bridled and controlled by man (Rowland, 1966 p. 248). In this context it is insinuated that the Monk who is fond of hunting the hare and "pricking" his horse, and who has many horses is committing the sin of lechery. In Chaucer's romance *Troilus and Criseyde* the horse and its rider is used metaphorically to imply mastery and possession of Criseyde's body. When Criseyde has moved to the Greek camp she surrenders her steed to Diomedes her new lover (TC ii lines 624-37).

In some medieval texts and sayings, the properties assigned to horses coincided with those of women such as being "of merry chere, brod-buttkyd, and easy to leap on, good at long-ryging and strong vnder a man" (qtd in Rowland, 1966, p. 248). The analogy became so common that it made its appearance in proverbs one of which said: "wele travelled wymen or wele travelled horses were never good" (qtd in Rowland, 1966, p. 248). The proverb immediately brings into mind the description of the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* who has travelled much literally and symbolically:

> …thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
> She hadde passed many a straunge strem;
> At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
> In Galice at Saint-Jame, and at Cologne.
> She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye. (General Prologue lines 463-67)

And if the analogy is applied to her amorous life: "Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde five,/ Withouten oother compaignye in youthe (Chaucer, General Prologue lines 460-61).

The depiction of the Wife of Bath both in the General Prologue and the illumination of the Ellesmere MS is essential in pointing out how the power structures between the sexes is reversed (Rowland, 1966, pp. 248, 254). The Wife of Bath is depicted in the illumination riding astride in full control of the horse. She is riding an ambler astride displaying good horsemanship, "Upon an amblere easily she sat" (Chaucer, General Prologue line 469), she also has "A foot-mantel aboute hir hippes large, / And on hir feet a pair of spores sharpe (Chaucer, General Prologue lines 472-73). "The side saddle was a recent introduction (ca. 1375), but the Wife's position contrasts with the two other women, the Prioress and the Second Nun, and so seems to emphasize her desire to dominate man as well as beast" (Rosenbaum and Finley, 2003, p.151). The spurs were functional objects for the rider but they had other significance. They were important items of fashion and were status symbols for horsemen, in addition to the fact that they were conferred upon the knights during the knighting ceremony (Ellis, 2004, pp. 124-5). In relation to the portrait in the Ellesmere MS Herbert-Davis draws attention to the way she rides her horse saying "Her legs are also thrust well forward in the brace position emulating the masculine posture that was seen in the illustrations of the male riders (2018, p.45). She is not only riding astride but also in a strong posture of command and if need be attack, moreover as Herbert –Davis points out she is

riding a stallion (2018, p. 45). Hence, the Wife of Bath has seized control in her relations, she is riding the horse with ease and being a practical person is wearing an overskirt to protect her legs and dress. The Ellesmere illumination, in keeping with the references of the Wife of Bath "being a whip" at times has depicted her holding one in her hand. The depiction of the horse and rider in this case employs a double metaphor, making the Wife the horse whom men ride and at that one quite an unruly one, and also the rider of men in the anti-feministic tradition reversing the roles by asserting control over her husbands and lovers (Rowland, 1971, p.137). As Desmond points out, in her Prologue the Wife of Bath "speaks of herself as a woman on top when she depicts her dominance over her husbands with the resonant phrase: 'myself have been the whippe' (line 175)" (2006, p.13). Again when she is talking about her fifth husband Jankyn, she expresses her control over him by saying "He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond" (Chaucer line 813).

> Chaucer's Choice of an equestrian metaphor for the Wife's self presentation nearly encapsulates an iconographic convention for representing the sexually threatening female as a woman capable of riding a man like a horse. This metaphorical depiction of the Wife derives from the textual and visual tradition of the 'mounted Aristotle', an exemplum that expresses the scandalous possibilities in the erotics of sexual difference. (Desmond, 2006, p. 13)

As Desmond puts forward, in the thirteenth century the pictorial depictions of the "mounted Aristotle" began to appear in the margins of manuscripts, on choir stalls and capitals, on tapestries and ivory caskets (2006, p.14). She also states that there are more than 100 examples. This image kept appearing well into the early modern era. In this iconography an old man who is usually depicted as old and learned by his dress, hair, beard and sometimes with eyeglasses, crawls on his hands and knees. On his back is a woman who is riding him and often brandishing a rod or whip in her hand (Desmond, 2006, p.15).

The Horse in Middle English Allegorical Works

It is necessary to refer to the allegorical rider and its horse in medieval literature as well. As mentioned earlier with the development of the allegorical frame of mind and the Christian teachings becoming prominent following the allegorical battle between the Vices and Virtues the concept of the Seven Deadly Sins was formulated. The Seven Deadly sins became a very popular vehicle both in didactic, religious and literary texts. Prudentius's Luxuria rides a horse which is totally uncontrollable implying the temptations ruling the body. The assignation of the horse for this specific sin implied the metaphor of the reason and soul being unsuccessful in checking sensuality, and additionally the noble horse was the natural indicator of the upper classes who indulged in pride and luxury.

In relation to allegorical riders it is necessary to refer to Langland's *The Vision of Piers Ploughman.* Piers in his dream wakes up to a "field full of folk" and as he goes about seeing the world he is living in, he meets Lady Church, however due to his ignorance he cannot recognise her. Lady Church begins educating him and talks about Lady Meed who is about to go to Westminister to put her case before the judges about her illicit marriage to Fraud. As she represents the misuse of money Langland bitterly satirizes those who are under her influence by the allegorical horse and rider metaphor:

> And Favel fette forth thane foles ynowe
> And sette Mede upon a sherreve shoed al newe,
> And Fals sat on a sisour that softeli trotted,

And Favel on a flaterere fetisly atired.
Tho hadde notaries none;annoyed were
For Symonye and Cyvylle sholde on hire feet gange.
Ac thane swoor Symonye and Cyvylle both
That somonours sholde be saddled and serven hem echone.
'And late apparille tise provisours in palfrey wise;
Sire Symonye himself shal sitte upon hir bakes.
Denes andsouthdenes, drawe yow togidres;
Erchdekenes and officials and alle youre registerers,
Lat saddle hem with silver oure synne to suffre—
As devoutrye and divorses and derne usurie—
To bere bisshopes aboute abrood in visitynge.
Paulynes pryvees for pleintes in consistorie
Shul serven myself that Cyvyle is nempned.
And cartsadle the commissarie—oure cart shall he drawe.
(1978, lines 163-180)

All the important figures and the clergy have mounts representing the sins they are committing.

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to end with mentioning the Unicorn, the horse "that never was" (Megged 3). The Bestiaries included a section related to it which followed the typical format beginning with its description continuing with its habits and behaviour and generally an allegorical explanation relating it to religion and morals. The Unicorn is described as a small animal sometimes resembled to a young goat in the Rochester Bestiary of twelfth century (36-37) and the Latin Bestiary dating to the thirteenth century (84-85) which is said to be called the Rhinoceros by the Greeks. It is described to have a straight horn in the middle of its head and to be very swift. He can only be trapped by the following method: "A girl who is a virgin is lead to the place where it dwells, and is left there alone in the forest. As soon as the unicorn sees her, it leaps into her lap and embraces her, and goes to sleep there; then the hunters capture and display it in the king's palace"(Barber, 1999, p. 36). Some other bestiaries state how it is hunted and killed. The allegorical interpretation stated that the unicorn was Christ, made incarnate in Mary's womb, captured by the Jews and put to death ("Medieval Bestiary: Unicorn"). The fierceness implied the inability of Hell to hold Christ and the single horn represented the unity of Christ and God. His small size indicated the humbleness of Christ. According to popular belief its horn was highly valued as it could detect poison and if dipped in a poisonous drink it made the drink harmless. It was also believed to be a powerful aphrodisiac (Medieval Bestiary : "Unicorn")

Conclusion

It can be stated that the Middle Ages were shaped by the horse and horse power. Most work, travel, trade and military activities were accomplished with the help of the horse. The use of the horse in many different areas increased as the horse gear technology developed. The horse became an indispensable agent in all walks of life. It would not be wrong to say that the feudal system of the Middle Ages was only possible owing to the horse which was the essential and defining component of the knight. The horse being such an indispensable and crucial component of medieval life also found its place in the culture and literature of the times. Various literal, social and metaphoric uses of the horse was common in the religious and secular works of the Middle Ages. Moreover, in addition to the manuals on horse breeding, care and hunting, the equestrian terminology abounded in idioms, sayings, proverbs, religious and secular literary works some of which are still in use.

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