Women in medieval literature were few, especially when one considers the vast number of men. Therefore, each woman present illustrates something important about the role of women and their position in society. Due to the patriarchy that dominated in medieval society, one can imagine that the women must have been timid. By contrast, in examining the women in *La Chanson de Roland*, *Le Roman d'Énéas*, and *Erec et Enide*, one finds that there are strong women with varied personalities. When we consider their personalities, their choices, and how they are treated by men, it becomes possible to understand the complexity of the situation encountered by women in the Middle Ages -- in particular, those women who resisted the rule of men.

**Bramimonde**

In *La Chanson de Roland*, there are many male characters, but only two female characters. Right in the middle of two armies of men who fight for their respective religions, sits Bramimonde -- the wife of king Marsile. A strong woman, this Saracen is, in the end, converted to Christianity through love (*Chanson* 259). This change of faith represents the rupture of her convictions caused by men; what's more, the change also represents the oppression of women.

From the moment we meet Bramimonde, she acts like an intelligent and strong woman: she supports her husband's plan with Ganelon to betray Roland (*Chanson* 67-69). Bramimonde knows that the defeat of Roland (and then, of Charlemagne) will be good for Spain and for the pagan religion because it will prove the prowess of Marsile. After Marsile is conquered, Bramimonde shows her strength by convincing many Saracen men to question the power of the pagan gods:
[...] elle pleure et crie, se lamente amèrement, et avec elle plus de trente mille hommes qui maudissent tous Charles et France la douce. Vers Apollyon ils courent dans une crypte, s'en prennent à lui, l'injurient effrontément: « Eh! mauvais dieu, pourquoi nous faire telle honte? Et notre roi, pourquoi l'as-tu laissé aller à la ruine? Tu paies fort mal ceux qui te servent bien! » Ils lui enlèvent son sceptre et sa couronne, à une colonne ils le pendent par les mains, puis les renversent à terre à leurs pieds, le mettent en pièces à coups de gros bâtons. À Tervagan ils arrachent son escarboucle, et précipitent Mahomet dans un fossé, et porcs et chiens le mordent et marchent dessus » (Chanson 179-181).

Her defiance of the pagan religion and the fact that she leads men to do the same illustrates her strength. It is evident that she resists the control of religion and, by extension, the control of men (who often interpret the rules of religion).

After the Saracens are conquered, Charlemagne gives them the choice to convert (to Christianity) or die, with the exception of Bramimonde who he brings to Aix-la-Chapelle to convert her through love (241). Finally, Bramimonde changes her name to Julienne and converts to Christianity (257-259). Her conversion marks the control of religion over women, which requires that she change who she is—her name and her strong, questioning personality. The strength of Bramimonde is replaced by obedience: "The Saracen queen who appears several times as an opinionated, outspoken visionary ends the tale in brainwashed silence" (Ramey 237). And so, Bramimonde, who was so strong for the duration of nearly the whole story, is vanquished at the end by another religion.

For the most part, Bramimonde serves as an example of a woman who resists the traditional role of women. She is strong and she reigns at the side of her husband; however, the Christian religion renders her silent and submissive.

Aude
Amid Bramimonde and many male characters in *La Chanson de Roland* resides the sister of Olivier and the fiancée of Roland: Aude. This woman appears only in two *laisse*s; she is also the subject of a conversation between Olivier and Roland where she is treated as a bargaining chip between the two friends (*Chanson* 133, 243-245). In spite of her small role, Aude sends a huge message about women and their choices.

Aude, like Bramimonde, exists in a society of men. Her place is illustrated when Olivier threatens Roland that he won't have his (Olivier's) sister for a wife (133). It is clear that her brother thinks that women cannot (or should not) make their own decisions. According to Lynn Ramey, Aude's "[...] relationship with men and men's relationships with one another, dictate her position in society" (234). Society does not permit her to make any decisions. This attitude toward women was widespread in all of medieval society. Therefore, the fact that Charlemagne suggests that his son marry Aude after the death of Roland is not surprising (243). What is surprising, then, is the reaction of Aude: "Ces paroles ne s'adressent pas à moi. Ne plaise à Dieu, ni à ses saints, ni à ses anges, qu'après Roland je continue à vivre" and then, she dies (243). Her refusal to live after the death of Roland has been interpreted as a depiction of Roland's prowess. Thus, Aude is reduced to nothing more than a tool to be used by men to inflate their own egos.

However, more than being a simple mirror to reflect the importance of Roland, Aude also reveals the choice of women. The choices of women are limited: what robe to wear, perhaps, or how to arrange one's hair. But Aude makes a choice in dying -- the choice to not marry Charlemagne's son in the place of Roland. Aude's choice illustrates a hard reality for women in the Middle Ages: the only choice of a woman is whether to obey or whether to die. Therefore, Aude made the only decision that she could.

The choice of Aude was an important declaration for herself as well as for the women she represented and those she may have influenced. It shows that there is always a choice -- even if the choice is death. Women were not completely without power.
Camille

Like *La Chanson de Roland*, *Le Roman d'Énéas* is a story full of men with very few women by comparison. One of the most important women is a warrior named Camille. As a warrior, she refuses the traditional role of a woman and takes that of a man.

The prowess of Camille is evident. With the other Amazonians, Camille pushes back the Trojan army. Herself, Camille kills more than one hundred men (*Roman* 441). At least, Camille is just as strong as a man. This characteristic is not very common for women in the Middle Ages. Camille is also a virgin; she chooses her strength over her sexuality: "And Camille, the beautiful Amazonian warrior-maiden, refuses to 'combattre anverse' [do battle on her back] but instead arms herself with a sword and mounts a horse 'por fere chevalerie' [to practice chivalry] (7125, 7119; 195; translation modified)" (Guynn 300). For a woman to use combat instead of sexual relations is an inversion of the traditional gender roles. While this inversion was a foreign concept in the Middle Ages, that the audience was so captivated by a woman who deviated from traditional gender roles indicates perhaps a small respect for and acceptance of mobility between the sexes.

With her masculine role, Camille is vulnerable to the weaknesses of men, such as covetousness. Because of this weakness, Camille is killed by a treacherous blow (*Roman* 449). It is possible that her death acts as a punishment for acting too much like a man; however, the detail in the description of her tomb belies the importance of this character: "The tomb is deviant architecture in the sense that its structural inversion echoes, and apparently immobilizes, Camille's gender insubordination" (Guynn 306). Camille's tomb is detailed over 6 pages, and includes a pillar that is wider at the top than at its base--thus the structural inversion--a mirror so that the city may be warned of enemies, and an eternal flame. These three decorations are symbolic of Camille's importance in the novel: the mirror represents the way in which Camille protected the city; the inverted pillar represents not only Camille's refusal to accept gender roles, but also the precariousness of the situation of women in the Middle Ages; and finally, the eternal flame symbolizes the enduring
struggle for strength, power, and equality. The concentration on Camille's tomb, that represents her gender inversion, reflects that she poses a considerable threat to medieval society, whose existence relied on the superiority of men over women.

Camille represents an important change in medieval society because she contests the authority of men over women. Even though she is killed in the end, her presence and importance serve as an indication that women can be just as strong and powerful as men.

Didon

Another important woman in *Le Roman d'Énéas* is Didon, the queen of Carthage. Like Bramimonde, in the beginning, Didon is a powerful woman -- strong and wise; unfortunately, she allows her emotions to drive her behavior with Énéas and she commits suicide (Roman 167-169). Didon, as queen without king, took the role of a man.

Didon's position of power threatened the noblemen of Carthage. It is obvious that these men are all at once captivated by her beauty and jealous that she had "usurped masculine power and, as evidence of her insubordination, scandalously introduces a lover to her bed" (Guynn 300). The men of Carthage are jealous because she has rejected their offers, but she accepts that of a stranger. They are also jealous of Didon's power. In a sense, she has the best of both worlds: "While maintaining stereotypically feminine sexuality, she also holds, in principle at least, the status of a feudal lord" (Burns 27). The combination of power and sexuality is dangerous for the men of Carthage because, like Camille, Didon indicates a permutation of the roles between men and women. This mutation threatens the power of men; if men must share power with women, each individual man will have less power.

Like Camille, Didon dies in the end, and her tomb illustrates important ideas about her role as a woman. When Didon is buried, the men of Carthage carve an epitaph that speaks of her wisdom and her foolishness in love (*Roman* 173). These words betray a sexist idea: women cannot control their emotions and often sacrifice wisdom in favor of their feelings. Even though she is wise and
powerful, she cannot be permitted to reign because she is but a woman whose emotions are too strong.

It is possible that Didon exists in Le Roman d'Énéas to frighten women who could win power. However, with the exception of her affair with Énéas, she is also very wise and a good queen of Carthage. Therefore, she illustrates the prowess of women, but also the dangers that exist for women with power.

**Enide**

*Erec et Enide* by Chrétien de Troyes demonstrates the relationship between Enide and her husband and their quest for equality and mutual respect in their marriage. Possibly the most progressive woman in medieval literature, Enide does not search to have the power of a man, nor to behave like a man, but to be the equal and the companion of her husband.

In the beginning, the intelligence of Enide is emphasized as much as her beauty. The combination of a noble and pure heart with beauty and intelligence proves that Enide is courtly and also that she "relies upon a combination of charm and intelligence to overcome the disadvantages that society puts in her way" (Adams 82). Enide shows her ingenuity and proves her love for Erec through using her intelligence (and her speech) to overcome obstacles or to help Erec overcome obstacles. For example, she used her ingenuity to avoid the betrayal of the count Galoain (Troyes 267-269). Therefore, with her courage, Enide saved not only her life, but that of Erec as well.

To prove that he is a strong man, Erec tries to force Enide to be silent and submissive (the traditional role of women). But Enide, driven by love for Erec, often speaks (in spite of Erec's ban on talking) to warn Erec of danger. Without the warning of Enide, both would probably be dead. What is interesting is that it takes both the strength of Erec and the words of Enide to survive. The necessity of the two for their protection illustrates that they are equal in a sense -- they are both different with very different strengths, but the strengths of Enide are just as important to survival as those of Erec. What's more is that eventually Erec recognizes that Enide's words are spoken out of
love for him: " [...] she is following the dictates of her heart rather than his artificial restrictions, and that her actions are motivated by a concern for his well-being so strong that she is prepared to provoke his wrath rather than betray her better instincts" (Pearcy 162). Therefore, it is evident that Enide refuses the traditional role of women only out of love for Erec.

Even though they found a marriage based on love, respect, and equality, there is always an element of submission of Enide to Erec. When they return to court, "[h]er submissive love retains an element of gratitude toward her husband for having lifted her out of poverty" (Schleiner 367). Her submission to Erec is representative of the Middle Ages where relationships were based on submission (of women to men, of vassals to lords, and of knights to dames). But, in spite of the submission of Enide, we can see that she is a strong woman who fights for what she loves.

**Conclusion**

In medieval literature, there are very few women in comparison to the large number of men present. Therefore, the few women who are depicted are very important for understanding the role and the life of a woman in the Middle Ages. It would be easy to assume that all the women are weak and that all the women in the Middle Ages were submissive to their husbands and lords.

The refusal of each woman (Bramimonde, Aude, Camille, Didon, and Enide) to accept sexism, and the variety of ways in which these women resisted show that there is "an array of historical and fictive women who move through the courtly world while deploying varied forms of resistance to its misogynistic, hierarchical, and normative paradigms of gendered interaction" (Burns 25). So, by examining the women of medieval literature, we find a portrait of women who are not at all weak, but women who make their own decisions (even if the only options are unbearable-- as is the case with Aude).

Two of these women, Bramimonde and Didon, were strong in the beginning; but at the end they were subjugated by men. The conversion of Bramimonde and the suicide of Didon mark the abandonment of their true identities. Bramimonde, who was so loud in her questioning of her
religion, was rendered silent by Christianity. Didon, who was so wise, becomes foolhardy in her love for Énéas. The fact that these voices, these points of view of these two women are extinguished, illustrates the control of men over women in medieval society. Men were afraid of women who questioned the feudal construction.

Two other women, Aude and Camille, show the power of a woman's decisions. Aude is not at all free -- she is like a prisoner in her own life. The only important choice that she has the power to make is between death and the acceptance of a man she doesn't love as husband. Her choice to die illustrates the difficult position of women in court -- it is necessary to obey or risk death. Camille was freer than Aude because she was not constrained by courtly rules. She chooses to be a warrior. Camille becomes nearly a man -- a fact that threatens Tarchon who tries to lower her back to her feminine position. In the end, she is used as a warning for all women who think of becoming a man, or at least acting like one.

The resistance of Enide is much more subtle than that of the other women. She does not want to become a man; she only wants a marriage of equality. The equality in the marriage of Erec and Enide is not exactly what we would call "equal" nowadays; however, for the society in which Erec and Enide exist, even the slightest equality between husband and wife was extremely radical.

As a whole, Bramimonde, Aude, Camille, Didon, and Enide represent a variety of feminine personalities that fight against the sexism that existed in medieval society. Often, women didn't succeed. Even more often, the women are used by men to show the dangers of a woman who is not obedient. However, the spark of women who don't accept misogynistic society existed, exists, and will continue to exist until the elimination of misogyny.
References


