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E 350E Medieval Romance

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The Objectification of Enide

Beauty, especially maidenly beauty, plays a large role in many medieval romances. Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Erec and Enide* is no different. The poem portrays the epic romance between the titular characters Erec and Enide. Erec is a knight known for his bravery and chivalry, and Enide's beauty is her most defining quality. Her immense beauty garners her much adoration throughout the assortment of courts they travel through and is the catalyst for many important aspects of the story. However, her beauty also acts as an instrument of objectification that highlights the underlining tones of misogyny that are present in *Erec and Enide*, and many other medieval tales. In the early passages describing her beauty, Chrétien de Troyes' use of diction, theme, and personification demonstrates the objectification and dehumanization of Enide.

In Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Erec and Enide*, the first passage describing Enide contains diction that heavily emphasizes her beauty. It begins with the statement that she is "most beautiful" (Chrétien de Troyes 6). Already, Enide is singled out for her beauty. She is then described as a "beautiful creature", and Chrétien de Troyes even goes so far as to assert that "never before had such a lovely creature been seen on the face of the earth" (6). The passage continues, with words and phrases like, "lovely", "whiter and brighter", "wondrous", "illuminated", "brilliantly glowing", eyes like a "pair of stars", "finer", and "beauty" (6). Through these descriptive adjectives and phrases, Chrétien de Troyes ensures that the audience is

focused solely on Enide's physical appearance. Her beauty is the most important and defining characteristic that she has, as highlighted by the fact that every single sentence in the passage consistently comments on just how beautiful she is. The words he uses to emphasize her beauty to the reader is also used to create an aesthetically pleasing picture in their minds. Through his extremely descriptive diction, Chrétien de Troyes employs visual imagery to help the audience in their imagination of Enide. For example, in describing specifically her face and hair, he says,

“the shining golden hair of the blonde Iseult was nothing in comparison with this maiden's hair. Her forehead and face were whiter and brighter than the lily-in-bloom... Nature had given her complexion a fresh rosy hue that illuminated her face. So brilliantly glowing were her eyes that they seemed a pair of stars.”

(6). With the above quotation, the reader can almost imagine Enide as a two-dimensional painting, created both by Nature and Chrétien de Troyes through the flowery words he uses to describe her. The second passage continues this type of language with the introductory sentence “my daughter is so wondrously beautiful that her equal cannot be found” (8). And while her “wisdom far surpasses her beauty”, her beauty comes first and foremost when describing her (8). The standard of perfection in these passages, created by Chrétien de Troyes near constant emphasis on her inhuman beauty, seems like an almost impossible beauty standard. The misogynistic ideal that beauty is the most important and valued quality a woman can have holds true in these passages, where her objectification is disguised under all of the pretty language and imagery.

Along with diction, Chrétien de Troyes also employs theme in his descriptions of Enide. The theme specifically explored is the theme of creation. First, Chrétien de Troyes uses a lot of language centered around creation. The words and phrases, “creating her”, “fashioned”,

“reproduce her own model”, “Nature had given her”, “to make”, and “she was made” serve to explain that Enide has been “created” (6). She is seemingly described as little more than an object someone, or something, has made. The theme of creation persists in the second passage as well, when Enide’s father claims that “God never made any creature so wise or so noble-hearted” (8). Furthermore, in the passages, Enide is never named. However, three separate times she is referred to as “creature”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, one of the first definitions of the “word” creature is “a created thing or being; a product of creative action; a creation” (“creature, n.”). Considering this recurring theme throughout the passages, one may ask for what purpose she was created. Chrétien de Troyes supplies an answer in the last sentence of the first paragraph: “To be honest, she was made to be gazed upon, for a man could see himself reflected in her as a mirror” (6). Therefore, Enide is nothing more than a pretty mirror for men to gaze upon for their own gain. In that way, she is degraded and designated to the status of a mere object.

If Enide is a creation, then Nature is surely her creator. In the first passage, Nature is a personified being, specifically a feminine one. She is referenced repeatedly throughout the passage, and each time in the role of creator. For example, Nature had “expended all her effort” in “creating [Enide]” (6). She marveled at “having fashioned... such a beautiful creature” and “there was no way in which she could reproduce her own model” (6). Nature had also “given her a complexion a fresh rosy hue” (6). She even admires her own creation in the sentence “Nature bears witness that never before had such a lovely creature been seen on the face of the earth” (6). In this passage, a stark contrast is created between personified “Nature” and the objectified “creature”, as Enide is unnamed at this point (6). Nature has definition, agency, and choice in this passage. She has a name. Enide, contrasted against Nature as her creation, has none of those

things. Through personification, Nature is literally being humanized, while Enide is dehumanized. This point is only furthered with the repetition of this personified “Nature” once the reader sees Nature as the artist and Enide as the work of art, no more than a sculpture molded to inhuman perfection by her creator. The life Chrétien de Troye gives to Enide in this passage does not compare to the life he breathes into Nature.

Chrétien de Troyes employs diction, theme, and personification in his early passages describing Enide in a way that subtly objectifies her. And the objectification is subtle, because it isn't said outright and might not have even been his purpose. However, it does demonstrate that underlining misogyny present in many medieval tales in the characterization of their female characters. Enide is made to be gazed upon by men, like so many other beautiful female characters whose sole purpose is to exist under the male gaze.

Works Cited

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