

Forum

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The Wife's Role

To the Editor:

In "Women's Speech and Silence in Hartmann von Aue's *Erec*" (102 [1987]: 772–83), Patrick M. McConeghy sees the suppression of a woman's voice in the late twelfth century as conforming to "comfortable, traditional values" (780) and interprets as "mildly progressive" Hartmann's assigning to Enite a speech to her husband, Erec, about his responsibility to society. "Markedly new, however," concludes McConeghy,

is Hartmann's contention that the rules of social silence for women must not be extended to the private relationship between husband and wife. As a dutiful intermediary between the knight and the world, the lady has a responsibility to speak and to share with him her knowledge and observations. Thus, the husband's traditional dominance over his wife, demanding obedience and silence, is abandoned in favor of an equal partnership in the private sphere. . . . (781)

It would be encouraging to be able to read history as a gradual process of such liberalization, but the evidence in this case is otherwise. Earlier Germanic literature shows that traditionally the wife was the councillor in the marriage relationship and that it was her duty to speak to her husband—indeed, to each man in her family—about his social responsibilities. In the Icelandic sagas this duty is shown most dramatically as the incitement of often reluc-

tant menfolk to vengeance. Similarly, when Wealhtheow tells the hero of *Beowulf* that the men in Heorot "do as I bid" (line 1231), she is probably not claiming personal control over them but explaining that they perform the duties of the warrior according to the precepts she voices. *Maxims I* of the *Exeter Book*, written down around AD 1000, records a number of observations about the woman's role, including her place in the kitchen—or, in Anglo-Saxon terms, at her table: *fæmne æt hyre bordan gerised*. But the woman is not necessarily expected to remain silent there. Lines 84–92, though concerned specifically with the role of a noble woman, are more encouraging: it is the duty of the *wif* "to grow in her people's affection, to be charming (*leohtmod*), to keep secrets, to be generous with horses and treasures, to hand the cup of welcome to her husband first of all when he comes home with his retinue," and, finally, "in that building that they possess together (*bæm ætsomne*), to give him advice (*him ræd witan*)."

Thus it would seem that if McConeghy's interesting reading of *Erec* is correct, Hartmann is advocating not something new but instead a return to this old-fashioned interpretation of a woman's role as confidant and adviser to her husband, and he is dramatizing this traditional role as a challenging moral one that the wife should assume, even though it could endanger her marriage relationship and perhaps even her physical safety.

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