

## Uncovering the Forgotten Gender Equality in the Medieval *Gui de Warewic*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*The general perception in medieval romances is that women are subject to gender discrimination. Women are often suppressed, devalued, and portrayed as passive characters for religious, political, and socio-cultural reasons. Such negative perception is a result of the patriarchal tradition in medieval England. This paper aims to challenge this common sentiment and explore how women are not marginalized, devalued, or ignored in medieval texts. In other words, this paper examines how women appear to be resourceful, influential, respected, and independent in the thirteenth-century Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic*.*

**Keywords:** Middle Ages, England, Literature, Romance, Gender Equality, Women.

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## Introduction

The male-female relationships portrayed in medieval literature often reflect societal norms, with men depicted as dominant and women as secondary. However, there are more subtle complexities hidden beneath these superficial depictions. This paper seeks to explore the medieval romance *Gui de Warewic* to uncover the hidden power of women, specifically focusing on the character Felice. Through an analysis of Felice's role, this study aims to challenge stereotypes and emphasize the significant contributions of women in shaping medieval literature. The examination will focus on female characters' agency, influence, and self-determination, emphasizing their pivotal role in shaping the literary tapestry they inhabit.

Gender discrimination exists in medieval literature, portraying women as passive, inferior, weak, or deprived. In a medieval patriarchal society, women are often considered inferior to men (Butler, 1989). Rakoczy notes that patriarchal institutions are believed to be timeless and have always existed in society (Rakoczy, 2004). Female characters are tended to be portrayed as suppressed and passive in medieval literature due to patriarchal dominance. Contrary to this trend, this paper examines how a woman, namely Felice, constructs the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic*. Recent studies explore *Gui de Warewic*, from a range of perspectives. Düzgün examines the impact of Christianity on women's positions, specifically on women healers, by analysing historical and literary works to understand the changes in early Christian beliefs' gender-equal perspectives and contradictory views on women (Düzgün, 2023, 2015). Öztürk explores Saracen-Christian relationships in the Anglo-Norman romances, focusing on *Boeve de Haumtone*, *Gui de Warewic*, and *Roman de Horn*. Drawing on Said's Orientalism theory, Öztürk offers a nuanced understanding of the Saracen-Christian interaction, contrasting oversimplified perceptions of the East-West dichotomy (Öztürk, 2020). Djordjević examines Manuscript A, focusing on the seventy-line list of hero *Gui de Warewic*'s accomplishments by exploring its genesis, manifestation, and purpose, comparing it to other manuscripts, and examining its organization, style, and linguistic elements (Djordjević, 2015). Percy examines the author's alteration of a scene in *Gui de Warewic*, highlighting its dramatic irony and literary influences by arguing the traditional elements of the romance are present and notes the possible literary-historical relevance of the source and its relation to other iterations of the Destruction de Rome-Fierabras tradition (Percy, 1979). Tuten points out medieval writers tend to conceal what they consider bad or unusual, and these writers are men and women from an elite with limited education (Tuten, 2022).

The male-female relationship is usually reflected as one-sided in medieval tradition. Men are depicted as more active, effective, physically, and mentally stronger than women and considered superior to the latter. Women, on the other hand, are portrayed as suppressed, ineffective, and dependent in the shadow of male dominance. Women are usually considered secondary characters in medieval literary narratives (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). This paper will argue that women are more influential than the stereotypical perception suggests and will explore how and why the Anglo-Norman *Gui de Warewic* subverts gender roles. The romance mainly focuses on Gui's heroism, achievements, and rise to fame. However, it fails to acknowledge that Felice is the one who controls Gui and the narrative. The idea of gender roles imposed on the reader is a result of the patriarchal perspective and overlooks the active, influential, and controlling roles that women can take on.

This paper aims to demonstrate how women are typically relegated to the background in medieval romances and are, in fact, the real arbiters of the narrative. Despite their deep attachment to the family, medieval women are severely restricted in their duties. (Quirk, 2001). Women, often suppressed, marginalized, and ignored for various reasons, play a more

significant and influential role in medieval romances than is apparent. *Gui de Warewic* highlights the overlooked position and importance of women. Unlike other romances of the time that marginalise and objectify women, *Gui* challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes by presenting a more nuanced and complex view of gender relations. The narrative acknowledges the agency and power of women in shaping the plot, making it a valuable resource for scholars interested in the study of women in medieval literature. Overall, *Gui* seems to serve as a valuable example that challenges prevailing stereotypes of gender roles and highlights the importance of female characters.

### **From Passive to Proactive: Reshaping the Image of Women in Medieval Romances**

*Gui de Warewic* is an important example of the development of the medieval romance genre, which emerged in the twelfth century and quickly became popular throughout Europe. (Ailes, 2007). The romance portrays the cultural and political setting of medieval England and France, incorporating elements of both Anglo-Saxon and Norman culture. The narrative makes references to historical figures such as King Athelstan and Richard Duke of Normandy and places great emphasis on the ideals of chivalry and knightly conduct. The romance also highlights the importance of religious piety and devotion. *Gui* embodies the medieval concept of courtly love, where his love for Felice is a central theme throughout the narrative. As Aston notes, the medieval romance tradition generally reflects the socio-cultural, political, and social values of the period in which it is produced (Aston, 2010). Medieval romance texts may reflect social and cultural values in their portrayal of gender relations. Contrary to stereotypes that portray female characters as less valuable and suppressed compared to men, women are in an equally active position.

Whatever the period or genre, literary texts tend to contain traces of the atmosphere in which they are set. Male-female relations also play an important role in social life throughout history. The male-female relationships are usually biased against women for religious, ideological, cultural, or sometimes political reasons (Peretz & Vidmar, 2021). Likewise, Burge suggests that women usually tend to be portrayed as more passive, ineffective, and weak characters, while the narrative focuses more on the heroism and achievements of men (Burge, 2014). Although medieval tradition and social norms often portray men as superior, women seem to play influential and valuable roles. Although medieval tradition and social norms often portray men as superior, women seem to play influential and valuable roles. From managing households to participating in trade and even ruling kingdoms, women in the medieval period were able to exert power and influence in various ways. Despite facing limitations and restrictions, many women found ways to assert themselves and make significant contributions to society.

Although men look wiser, stronger, and more confident than women, *Gui* challenges this notion by revealing his vulnerabilities to the woman he loves. He seeks her pity and assistance, sharing the struggles he faces as a pitiful man. Unlike other Anglo-Norman heroes, *Gui* does not belong to the aristocracy. Field suggests that *Gui* is a modest man who attains great status and wins his lady's heart through hard work and determination. (Field, 2007). At the beginning of the romance, *Gui* is a pitiful character, weakened by his love for Felice. He is not someone to be admired or emulated. Despite Felice is well-educated and respected, *Gui* sees himself as pathetic in comparison and pleads with Felice to assist him:

Noble Felice, I beg you for God's sake to take pity on me, wretched creature that I am, so that I don't find you so cruel to me that you don't hear my prayer. From now on, I can no

longer conceal – it is a love that makes me speak – the great pain and misery which I suffer both night and day for you [...] (Weiss, 2008, p. 100)

This passage suggests that Gui implores Felice, for the love of God, to have compassion on him, a wretched soul. He asks her not to be so unkind as to ignore his plea. He also mentions that he cannot hide the intense pain and suffering he endures because of his love for her. It's this love that compels him to speak, and torments him day and night. After struggling and suffering for some time due to his deep and excessive love, Gui finally finds the motivation and courage to confess his feelings for Felice and face his fate. Gui's intense love for Felice and inability to think of anything else but her shows that she plays a significant role in his life. Felice impacts Gui's character development, even without deliberately doing anything to him or having any individual influence on his life (Düzgün, 2023). Felices's influence on Gui highlights the idea that female characters are active in narrative to direct hero's actions.

Female characters touch the lives of their male counterparts even when there is no clear indication of their endeavours. Düzgün explains that misogyny is usually the subject matter in medieval literary tradition, but the portrayal of women is more complex than that upheld perception (Düzgün, 2014). The idea of courtly love is the source of Felice's dominance over Gui, her apathetic attitude, and his extreme love sickness, all of which are crucial for inspiring or initiating Gui's journeys (Wiggins, 2000). Gui's revelation demonstrates the intensity of his emotional relationship with Felice and implies that just having her in his life has the power to determine who he is. Felice's subconscious has a powerful influence over him, and Gui confesses his love for her, highlighting the theme of courtly love prevalent in medieval romances. Women are frequently excluded from important and trivial situations due to the perception that they are passive and submissive (Butler, 1989). They are deprived of autonomy and agency and in most cases, their fathers or husbands make decisions on their behalf, which are then unquestionably obeyed. Tuten suggests that women are often portrayed as submissive and accepting of being controlled by their spouses (Tuten, 2022). Such depiction of women's roles is typical in medieval romance tradition. However, *Gui de Warewic*'s Felice challenges gender stereotypes by portraying a female character as free and independent who doesn't have to submit to societal norms. Felice is a well-educated and confident character who knows what she wants. She expresses this clearly when Gui confesses his love for her and asks for her love in return by stating the qualities of an ideal partner: "I don't want to love any young man unless he's a knight – handsome, courteous, and renowned, brave, and bold, prized for his feats of arms. When I have seen you receive weapons, I will grant you my love if you become as I have asked you" (Weiss, 2008, p. 103). Felice clarifies that she wants to express herself more effectively and asks Gui to listen carefully to what she has to say. She explains that her feelings have changed and hopes that he won't be offensive when she shares her thoughts.

Felice insists on marrying a handsome, polite knight for love. She looks for a confident knight who has great achievements in battles. If Gui displays the qualities of a dubbed knight, she will offer her hand. Felice wants to clarify that she doesn't have a negative attitude towards Gui. As an autonomous character, Felice can manage her feelings and has criteria to decide for him. When Felice expresses her expectations from a prospective husband, she resourcefully guides Gui in the romance. She is strong and determined to control her life. She manages her feelings and thoughts and acts as an exemplar to show that women are not passive, silent, or subordinate. Instead, it is Felice who takes an active role in shaping the narrative. *Gui de Warewic*, through the character of Felice, challenges the male-dominated social norms prevalent in medieval romance traditions, which are shaped by a stereotypical patriarchal mindset. Her portrayal is significant because the narrative highlights

the importance of women's autonomy in relationships and emphasizes the value of living according to one's preferences. Overall, Felice's character sets a powerful example for the social role of a woman and her place in society.

Felice discusses the characteristics she seeks in a potential spouse whom she deems worthy of her. Driver notes that a knight's traits should include good looks, kindness, courage, bravery, boldness, and success in battles – the ideals of chivalry, and these are the only conditions necessary for Felice to consider someone as her spouse (Driver, 2007). Felice's requirements highlight the significance of a person's social status and worth. She desires a partner who embodies the qualities of a true knight in medieval romances (Düzgün, 2023). Felice's statements suggest that her love for Gui depends on whether he can fulfil these qualities. She emphasizes that knights must prove their worth to their lovers through heroic deeds. Thus, Gui must demonstrate his love through his chivalric virtues and courage, proving that love is gained through heroic acts. Felice's demands highlight the independent and significant role of women in social relations, which is underestimated in society. By explicitly stating the qualities she seeks in a potential husband and setting conditions for Gui, Felice emphasizes that women have autonomy in their choices regarding their societal spheres and they have the potential to control their destiny. Felice is portrayed as an autonomous character who challenges patriarchal and traditional norms, in contrast to the silenced and oppressed figures in society (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Felice sets criteria for her prospective partner and this suggests that women are not weak characters, as they are often portrayed.

In medieval literature, knights often embark on adventures to win the favour of their lovers and prove themselves. However, women also have a significant role in shaping the narrative by setting their standards and choosing their suitors. The depiction of female agency in *Gui de Warewic* challenges the patriarchal tradition of romance, opening a space for women to control their choices. Through Felice, the narrative emphasizes the importance of consent and mutual respect in relationships, promoting a more harmonious and satisfying marriage. Weiss asserts that some Anglo-Norman romances portray women as more powerful and capable than men (Weiss, 1993). In this respect, *Gui de Warewic* provides significant examples of how women are more important and influential in social relations than they are often assumed to be. Both Gui and Felice challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the importance of gender equality.

Gui undergoes a significant change due to Felice's demands, becoming a different character. He is aware of the updates and improvements he has gained and wants Felice to recognize this change. Gui believes that his transformation is evidence of his commitment to their relationship. He explains the differences in his character due to Felice: "Because of you, I have received weapons, and now I have come to learn your wishes. You are what I most desire" (Weiss, 2008, p. 104). As a result of Felice's influence, Gui is dubbed a knight and seeks to understand her wishes. Gui admits that Felice is his most cherished wish, highlighting the challenges and sacrifices he has endured due to his love for her. Gui hopes that Felice can recognize the extent of his devotion to her and her impact on his personal growth. The romance emphasises that Gui expects Felice to understand her significant influence on his development when he shares his transformation. Gui is determined to fulfil Felice's wishes because he loves her deeply and wants to understand her desires. Felice holds a significant place in Gui's life as she helps him become a knight. Women have considerable influence over their admirers' lives and fates, often by setting conditions or granting rewards in medieval romances. Gui becomes a knight at Felice's request and follows her demands.

Participating in tournaments and gaining a reputation as a skilled knight is a crucial aspect of the medieval tradition of chivalry (Barker, 2008). Knights generally participate in such events to gain recognition and prove their worth to their lords and kings (Barker, 2008). Gui's situation differs from the typical perception of medieval chivalric tradition, as he does not intend to prove himself to any lord or king. Gui expresses his feelings and accepts that he does everything for his love for Felice: "My fair love, I have come; I certainly owe my life to you. Were it not for you, I would be dead and destroyed, my body in a wretched plight. You made me take up arms and then told me what you wished..." (Weiss, 2008, p. 108). After competing in tournaments, Gui goes to Felice and expresses his gratitude towards her. He acknowledges that he owes his life to her, as he would perish, and his body would suffer without her. Felice encourages Gui to take up arms and pursue his dreams. Now that he is on this journey of personal development, and he aims to be worthy of Felice, hoping to win her heart.

Gui intends to express his deep appreciation to his beloved for being the source of his motivation and the reason for his actions. Gui's achievements and personal development are directly linked to her constant love and support. He cherishes every moment they spend together and strengthens his determination to succeed in every aspect of his existence. Felice is the source of influence and inspiration for Gui's heroic deeds (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). The knights go on journeys to prove their glory and chivalry to the king, seek fame, or find their true love. Therefore, women are considered an integral part of a knight's journey towards chivalry and dignity. Gui's devotion to his lover demonstrates the power of love and the ability to transform an ordinary man into a great knight or warrior.

Throughout the romance, Felice plays a vital role in motivating Gui. She urges him to become a knight and fight for glory and honour. Gui's love for Felice drives him to face any challenge and overcome any obstacle that stands on his way. Gui's motivation is not to earn fame and prestige but to prove himself as a worthy partner for Felice. Hence, Felice's role in shaping Gui's destiny holds greater significance than any other factor. Gui may have never found the courage to embark on his journey toward recognition and respect if it weren't for Felice's unwavering faith in him and her constant support. Her presence in his life not only fuels his determination but also serves as a reminder of the importance of perseverance and commitment. Gui handles any challenges that may arise in his efforts to motivate Felice. Whether he is taking up arms, seeking fame, or embarking on adventures, all his actions are to win the heart of his beloved (Djordjević, 2015). Felice is the motivation for Gui to achieve fame and glory. Felice is aware of the change that Guy goes through and even she likes this development. She also knows that this development and progress that Gui has gone through are beneficial and necessary for him. However, when Gui states that he has done everything that Felice has asked of him and now it is Felice's turn to reciprocate, and she mentions that it is too early for this expectation:

Felice at once replied: "Not so fast, sir Gui! You are not yet so famous that there's no one as good in the kingdom. You are very brave and valiant, bold, and courageous in battle. If I were to love you above else and give you my love, you would become so infatuated that it would make you quite lazy; you would no longer want to bear arms or enhance your reputation. (Weiss, 2008, p. 108).

Gui confesses to Felice that he has taken up arms for her and has won all the tournaments for her sake. He asks Felice to accept his love, but she politely declines by stating that he has not yet achieved a level of fame where there's no one better in the kingdom. In the case of favouring him above all others and offering her love, Gui might become complacent and lose his passion for battle. She believes that if she bestows her love on Gui, he might no longer

wish to improve himself or seek further renown. Felice is cautious in responding to Gui's advances. She acknowledges Gui's bravery in battle, which makes her respect him as a knight. However, she wants to take some time to understand and evaluate her feelings before pursuing a romantic relationship. Felice intends to establish a strong foundation of friendship. If she responds to Gui's desires, his progress and development as a knight will prevent him from reaching the high rank, she wants him to attain. She wants Gui to complete his development in the adventure he has embarked on, and she offers him new conditions to prove himself worthy of her love.

Felice plays a significant role in this exchange by expressing her reluctance to grant her love. She raises concerns about the potential consequences of Gui's infatuation, indicating that her opinions and decisions hold sway in this courtly interaction. In terms of the impact and significance of women in medieval romances, she is dominant in shaping the actions and motivations of the knight, and she worries about Gui's fame and how it might affect their relationship. However, her role is to guide Gui's quest for chivalric honour since he is motivated by his desire for both love and honour. Felice's response highlights the complex dynamics between knights and their beloveds in medieval romance. The text appears to be a statement regarding the importance of women in shaping a narrative or story. Female characters can inspire courage and heroic deeds in men, and their opinions and decisions regarding love and favour are crucial to the plot. The romance highlights Felice's response and significant influence over Gui's motivations. *Gui de Warewic* is an exception and highlights the effects and contributions of women. Although the narrative mainly focuses on Gui's experiences, struggles, and achievements, the influence of Felice is explicitly acknowledged. When Gui returns to Warewic and shares the challenges he faces during his journey, Felice's impact on his character development becomes apparent:

... And he thought of how he was a man of influence, and renowned in foreign lands, and how he had killed so many men, captured towers and cities by force, and had exerted himself far off in strange realms, for the sake of a woman whom he loved so much and for whom he had borne so much suffering – but never for his Creator who had done him such great honour, nor had he bothered to serve Him ... (Weiss, 2008, p. 180)

Gui reflects on his fame and influence in distant lands, contemplating the numerous battles he has fought and the victories he has achieved. He remembers the significant hardships he endures and the tremendous effort he exerts for the love of a woman, Felice – a love that means the world to him. In contrast, he realizes that he has never exerted himself for the sake of his Creator, who has honoured him greatly. These words of Gui indicate that his significant accomplishments and sacrifices are driven by his love for Felice, emphasising the role of women as sources of inspiration and motivation for knights. Gui contemplates his reputation and influence in foreign lands to seek honour and prestige, to impress and win the favour of the beloved woman. Gui's only goal and purpose are to be a suitable partner for Felice, and he is not interested in any other reward. After returning to Warewic from a long and arduous journey to prove his love for Felice, Gui realizes the impact of Felice on his life as a source of motivation and inspiration.

All the tournaments he has participated in, the battles and wars he has won, the cities he has conquered, and the people he has saved are all in pursuit of being a worthy lover for Felice. Felice transforms Gui from an ordinary man into Gui of Warewic. It is considered that the role and position of women in romances have minimal importance as a repercussion of gender roles in society (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). However, the position of women as influencers of knights' quests and actions is evident in the Anglo-Norman literary tradition.

Gui's deeds emphasise that knights fulfil chivalrous ventures through their love for women and embark on heroic journeys.

## Conclusion

The portrayal of female characters in medieval romances tends to be shaped according to the patriarchal and stereotypical thinking of the period. Women play diverse and complex roles throughout history, which may not be accurately represented by the societal norms depicted in these works. The progress made towards gender equality can be better comprehended and further advancements can be pursued by acknowledging the limitations that have been attributed to female characters. Felice in *Gui de Warewic* challenges stereotypes of defining female roles and contributes significantly to the narrative and the character development of romance hero. Her role goes beyond the traditional depiction of women in medieval romances. Felice is a resourceful and independent character and plays a crucial role in Gui's life by challenging him to improve himself. Her agency and assertiveness serve as catalysts for Gui's personal growth, and she turns his lover from an ordinary man into a hero named Gui de Warewic.

Felice's presence highlights the interconnectedness of male and female characters in medieval romances. In this way, Felice challenges the patriarchal conventions of her time and emphasizes the essential role that women play in shaping the stories of medieval romances. Through the portrayal of Felice, *Gui de Warewic* subverts the notion of women as mere accessories to the male narrative. Female characters in the medieval romance genre are dynamic and integral contributors to the narrative development. Felice's agency and influence offer a nuanced and inclusive portrayal of female characters in medieval literature, transcending the romance's patriarchal origins, and her impact on narrative highlights that women are much more determinant in medieval romance than they are thought to be.<sup>4</sup>

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