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**Fashion of Middle England and its Image in  
Chaucer's Canterbury Tales**

*Bachelor Thesis*

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**Abstract**

This thesis deals with the main features of fashion in medieval England and focuses particularly on the second half of the fourteenth century. It compares period clothing with its image in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Thus the first part depicts the way of dressing in the late Middle Ages and includes the descriptions of male and female attires worn by people of all ranks. The second part examines costumes described in *the Canterbury tales* and focuses especially on the main characters.

**Keywords**

Medieval fashion, English fashion, Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales

## **Anotace**

Tato práce se zabývá hlavními rysy módy ve středověké Anglii a zaměřuje se především na druhou polovinu čtrnáctého století. Porovnává dobové odívání s jeho obrazem v Chaucerových *Canterburských povídkách*. První část tedy popisuje způsob oblékání v pozdním středověku a zahrnuje popis mužského a ženského oděvu nošeného lidmi všech vrstev. Druhá část zkoumá oblečení popisované v *Canterburských povídkách* a zaměřuje se především na hlavní postavy.

## **Klíčová slova**

Středověká móda, anglická móda, Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterburské povídky

## **Declaration**

*I hereby declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

Brno 10<sup>th</sup> December 2012

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Petra Štěpánková

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## 1. Introduction

This thesis aims to confront the image of medieval English fashion in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with reality. It tries to ascertain to what extent clothing described in this piece of writing was true to life. This paper deals with the matter of fashion in Medieval England and concentrates primarily on the second half of the fourteenth century, when the author of *The Canterbury Tales* lived and was composing his most celebrated work. This period is usually called the "late fourteenth century" and corresponds to the reign of the king Richard II who ruled the country for twenty-two years since 1377 to 1399.

Geoffrey Chaucer, often called the father of English Poetry, stands as the most highly regarded English poet of the Middle Ages. He is studied by students all over the world and beloved by teachers, scholars and readers. Much had been written about Chaucer himself and his works, especially about his *Canterbury Tales*.

Being the best-known of Chaucer's works, *The Canterbury Tales* are also his longest writing, numbering 17 000 lines or thereabouts. It is a unique piece of work bringing together people of various temperaments, yet coming from assorted ranks. By portraying so miscellaneous personalities, Chaucer aimed to create a lively image of medieval society. *The Canterbury Tales* provide readers such a faithful delineation of medieval life, including the way of clothing, that even a contemporary reader can easily imagine the joys and sorrows of everyday living in the Middle Ages.

The most popular and discussed part of the *Canterbury Tales* is the General Prologue. It is the opening of *the Canterbury Tales* in which individual characters and narrators in one person are introduced in order of their estate, from the representatives of nobility, through clergy to commoners. In this chapter Chaucer depicts not only the standing and nature of the main characters, but he recounts in great detail also their dress.

General prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* is considered to be in relation with the estate satire, a recognized genre of the medieval era. Since the estate satire affords an interpretation of society by portraying its individual members. That is the reason why Chaucer made hardly any mention of their proper names and referred just to their occupation. The main aim of doing so was to demonstrate the hierarchy of society as well as social standing and morality of every character type. (Rossignol, 120)



When one says “medieval fashion”, then almost everyone imagines, apart from other things, ladies in impressive floor-length robes of multifarious patterns, colours and shapes, with long bell-shaped sleeves, having sophisticated hairstyles covered with even more elaborate head-dresses, and men clad in quite short attires, showing their legs in coloured stockings and peculiar pointed shoes. Unlike these days, when fashion trends changes from year to year, in medieval period it used to be from one generation to the next. In the past clothing have not been about fashion as in the present-day world, people got dressed primarily in order to keep themselves in warmth in all weathers. Something that could be already called fashion started to appear right in the second half of the fourteenth century, but it was related to the upper classes in particular.

There are two different perspectives on medieval fashion discussed in this thesis. The first of them offers a delineation of clothing styles across the medieval society as they were described in the appropriate sources, including both male and female dress worn by the upper, middle and lower class members and ecclesiastical and warrior’s costumes as well. The second part investigates a period fashion from the Chaucer’s point of view and focuses particularly on the main characters. Pilgrims’ attires described by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* are analysed and compared to the characteristic fashion of that time. The results of this work are intended especially for English literature students to get the picture of Chaucer’s pilgrims and their wardrobe.

## 2. Medieval culture

Chaucer lived in the shadow of Hundred Years' War between England and France, Black Death, the crisis of kingship and peasant revolts. During 1348-49 the plague outbreak affected almost all corners of the country and killed almost one-third of the entire population of England. McDowall states that plague as well as war caused not solely the death of many people, but also the growth of challenge to authority. The King's high requirements on nobility and merchants increased their power but weakened the economic strength of town and countryside. The strengthening of the alliance between merchants and gentry at that time played a major role in the political history of the country and was evolutionarily significant for future political development. (43)

The life of people of all social classes was under the control of the feudal system. At the top of the social pyramid in the Middle Ages was set the king, followed by the aristocracy, knights, clergy, tradesmen and at the bottom of this hierarchy were peasants. The common people's and their rulers' ways of living were completely distinct from one another. Elgin notes that division between rich and poor and between gentry and country folk was relatively clear, but on the other hand very little social mobility and interaction between the strata occurred from time to time. The aristocracy lived in castles whereas commoners dwelt in villages in their neighbourhood. What connected both of these groups, was that they lived off the land – nobles hunted in the forests and country folk handled the sheep, cattle and poultry and grew a few crops. Until the fourteenth century, merchants, bankers, tradesmen and other more sophisticated craftspeople formed the middle class. (6)

Robert Swanson characterized the later Middle Ages as a social fluid period, rather than the formal maintenance of traditional hierarchies. A money-based economy required the differentiation of non-agricultural work and recognition of the existence of artisans, bureaucrats and merchants. (Brown, 402) The development of medieval society is evident even in Chaucer's *Canterbury tales*, where the author portrayed a wide range of social statuses.

The open areas outside the towns and small villages were full of bandits, escaped convicts and other outlaws working alone or in small gangs. They lived on mugging, robbing and killing the unvigilant people travelling through the open country. For this

reason the common folks rather avoided moving around. Thus the traffic on the dirt roads consisted predominantly of the mobile nobles, accompanied by their armed escort, groups of merchants, and pilgrims, travelling in large bands in order to frighten the possible robbers. For all that, most journeys were made, just in case, by river or sea to avoid the danger. (Hunt, 90)

Pilgrimages to holy places were part and parcel of life in the Middle Ages. Hunt explains that such journeys were a popular form of penance and might have been done to such destinations as a tomb of a saint or a place famous for some miracle or healing. (47) In Chaucer's pilgrims' case it was a shrine of Thomas Becket<sup>1</sup> at Canterbury. But for some travellers, a pilgrimage might have meant just a day's walking to enjoy the company of others on an important day. There were also other people, for whom travelling from shrine to shrine became a way of life (similar to that of a friar or hermit). (Hunt, 47) Those pilgrimages were linked with the Church, which had a great influence on English society in the Middle Ages and played a far bigger role than today. The Church was during the medieval period the centre of learning and affected the life of all people. Monasteries at that time functioned not only as the place for prayer, but also as a college, library, or a hospital.

Fashion is an inseparable part of every culture and medieval fashion is no exception to the rule. Fashion reflects the image of the time during which it was worn. Familiarity with the fashion of the Middle Ages extends the general knowledge of English cultural history.

## **2.1. Medieval fashion**

Medieval society can be divided into several groups according to the rank in the hierarchy of social classes. The way of clothing differs in relation to people's position in society. "The King himself was a leader of fashion, the nobles followed the King, the merchants followed the nobles after their kind and the peasants were still clothed in the simplest of garments." (Calthrop, 122)

Wool was considered to be the most favoured and hence highly demanded fabric in the medieval era, as it was warm, easily dyeable and able to be produced in any weight

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Becket was an archbishop of Canterbury who was assassinated in the cathedral by knights of King Henry II in 1170 and later made a saint. His tomb has made Canterbury one of Christendom's great pilgrimage centres. (Hunt, 47)

suitable for miscellaneous garments. People living at that time did not have special attire for different seasons, so they were changing their wardrobe from summer to winter just by adding another layer. Medieval underwear was made mostly of linen and cotton, at present so favourite, used to be employed just as padding material of low quality. (Elgin, 7)

Since wool was the essential commodity for manufacturing fabrics in Europe, England with its rainy weather became the principal source of wool. Thanks to the heavy rainfalls there was profusion of first-rate grass and hence the best conditions for grazing sheep. And well-fed sheep produce quantities of prime wool, of course. But as there were too few craftsmen able to make a high-quality fabric from wool, the majority of it was being exported to Flanders. Flemings processed the wool and finished cloth was being imported back to England. Later, as the English merchants did not like paying Flemish weavers, the wool industry started to develop and improve in England as well. (Hunt, 88)

During the Crusader era trade routes to the East opened up and many so far unknown materials penetrated into the European market. Imported fabrics included for instance silk, gauze, figured woven brocade and damask. At first, new materials were imported into Europe from Italy along the Silk Road, but local industries developed gradually. (Elgin, 7-8)

“Although the visible parts of an outfit were made of fine fabric, cheaper material was used for those parts that would be covered by other garments, especially the back. The same applied to linings and interlinings put in for warmth, which were often made of thick blanket cloth.” (ibid, 27)

Medieval attire was often decorated with fur. Elgin observes that “the most popular fur came from a squirrel that was blue-grey on the back with a white underside. The fur was known as vair (grey) and miniver (white) and could have been sewn together in alternating patterns. (15)

The majority of young people living in the Middle Ages inclined to be made in bright and cheery colours, especially red, bright green and blue. The older generation used to be clad in rich russets, brown and black. The popularity of the colours of heraldry (red, green, blue, and gold) was greatly influenced by the significance of heraldry in society. Yet the trend of parti-coloured clothes – each half of the tunic or

hose<sup>2</sup> made in different, contrasting colour - was inspired by heraldry. Nevertheless, the colours were conditional on the accessibility of dyes, and the key factor in the use of colours was the fact that medieval people had to dress themselves in accordance with their rank in the society. (Elgin, 19)

Dyeing of fabrics was being done in pots over an open fire, so it was difficult to achieve the subtlety of colour. Bright primary shades used to be much easier to produce than brown, grey, solid black and pastel ones. That was the reason why the clothes of working people were usually in bright shades, while the aristocracy was attired in hard-to-get colours. The majority of dyes were made from freely growing plants, accessible to people from all social classes. The most frequently used dyes were madder (red) and woad (indigo). (ibid, 45)

Laver points out that in the second half of the fourteenth century new forms of both men's and women's clothing appeared. For instance jupon<sup>3</sup>, later known as doublet, was worn much shorter<sup>4</sup>, very tight and buttoned down the front with a belt low over the hips and became padded in the front to bulge the chest outward. (62)

In addition to jupon the upper classes wore a cote-hardie, a super-tunic of a previous age, which became low-necked and tight-fitting with buttons down the front. The lower classes wore a looser cote-hardie without buttons that had to be put on over the head. The hemline of the fashionable cote-hardie went gradually up and was frequently dagged<sup>5</sup>. The sleeves were tight to elbow, then flaring out and hanging down reaching the knees or even lower. Around the year 1375 the cote-hardie with a collar started to appear. (ibid, 63) Laver termed the houppelande, later called gown, a characteristic garment of the years approximately from 1380 to 1450. (64)

Elgin comments that there was tiny difference in wardrobe of both sexes at the beginning of the fourteenth century and only since 1340's especially younger men started to expose their legs in tunics at hip length and coloured stockings. (9)

Houston suggests that by 1360 fashion did not bear the stamp of the thirteen century anymore. Clearly evident was the fourteenth century trend of tight, sheath-like male and female garments, belts worn low on the hips, fanciful sleeves and very long, pointed shoes. At the end of the century the waistline moved up, skirts became fuller and

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<sup>2</sup> Hose were "leg coverings made of wool or linen." (Elgin, 60)

<sup>3</sup> Jupon was a tight tunic, usually without sleeves. (Houston, 124)

<sup>4</sup> Jupon became so short that it was condemned by the moralists of that time. (Laver, 63)

<sup>5</sup> Dagged means to be cut in curious patterns. (Laver, 63)

sleeves bag- or bell-shaped. (72) But it is imperative not to forget that “many people dressed out of the fashion ... and the advance of costume only affected the upper classes in towns.” (Calthrop, 123, 134)

In the Middle Ages, there was no special clothing for children. Boys and girls used to be dressed simply in the same way as did their parents.

### **2.1.1. Women’s costume**

Medieval women, in general, used to be less extravagant about dress than men, or at least the shape of their attires was more sober. (Laver, 64)

Elgin summarised women’s clothing in the Middle Ages:

Throughout the medieval period, women’s clothing in Europe consisted of a one-piece gown, or kirtle, worn over a basic linen smock, an overtunic of some kind, and a head covering, which at various times might be a hood, a veil and circlet, or a crown (not confined to queens). Although there were many changes in detail, these basic elements remained the same. (12)

Female costume was comprised primarily of a kirtle or a gown, which used to be tight-fitting to the waist and then widening into a full sweeping skirt. The skirt was gathered into generous folds and hung down to the floor. The sleeves were skin-tight<sup>6</sup> to such an extent that they needed buttoning over the lower area. Over the gown ladies used to wear the cote-hardie (see fig. 1). The women’s cote-hardie resembled that worn by men. It had sleeves usually at floor length with streamers of tippets trailed on the ground. (Laver, 64)

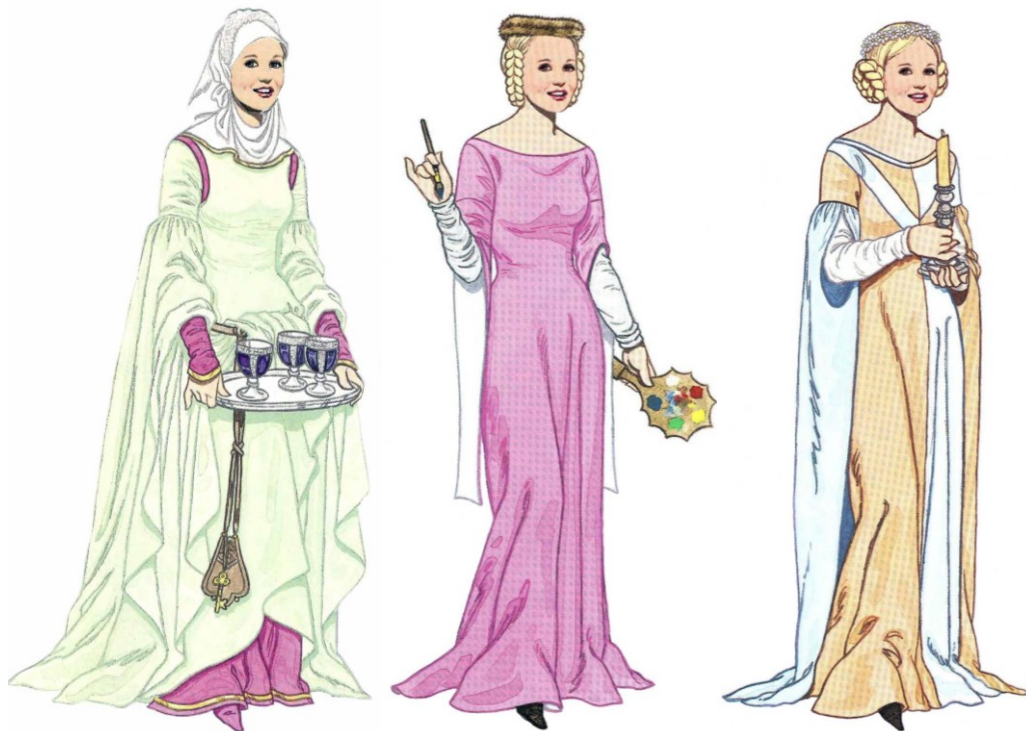
Calthrop states that in the early part of the reign of Richard II<sup>7</sup> the cote-hardie was a universal piece of woman’s clothing. There were two variations of this garment. The first one was simple, well-fitting, with “skirts and bodice in one, buttoned in front, with neck well open, the skirts ample and long, the sleeves over the hands to the first joints of the fingers, and ornamented with buttons from the elbow to the little finger.” This variation was suitable for women of all social classes. Ladies of higher social position

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<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the tight-fitting sleeves of a cote-hardie may have been sewn in place on the wearer. (Elgin, 15-16)

<sup>7</sup> Richard II reigned for twenty-two years - from 1377 to 1399.

adorned the cote-hardie by adding “a belt like a man’s, narrow in width round the waist with hanging end, or broad round the hips and richly ornamented.” The second variation of cote-hardie was identical to that of men, ending short below the hips, but the difference is that women’s garment was worn with the petticoat underneath. (134-135) Elgin adds that the cote-hardie often extended into a long train and was worn with a girdle, slung low over the hips and tied at the front with its ends hanging down and sometimes reaching the floor. (14)

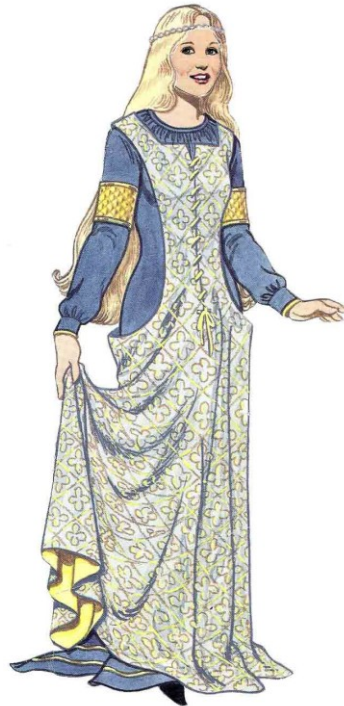


**Fig. 1. Variations of the cote-hardie** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 5-7.

With a slim-fitting cote-hardie was usually worn a girdle, slung low over the hips and tied up in front. The girdle was made from some silken braid or cord, and frequently consisted of a few strands braided together. The knot, where both ends of girdle were joined together, was often covered with a brooch or metal fastening. (Elgin, 51)

Approximately since the middle of the fourteenth century a curious garment called sideless surcoat (see fig. 2), which had large openings at both sides and a reinforced stomacher in the front known as a ‘plackard’, became fashionable. (Laver, 64) This cutaway surcoat was being added to the cote-hardie especially in winter time. It was a

long sleeveless garment, frequently trimmed with fur and having ornamental buttons down the front. The splits down the sides extended from the shoulder to the top of the thigh and exposed the cote-hardie and the hip-belt. (Calthrop, 135-136)



**Fig. 2. Front-laced sideless surcoat over a cote-hardie** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 3.

The second half of the fourteenth century is the time when women for the first time turn the tight lacing to their advantage – it acquired a status as a one of women’s most potent weapons of fashion. Later appeared another and probably even more effective way of attracting men’s attention - décolletage. Women’s robes became gradually more low-cut and exposed the breast to enhance their erotic appeal. Another device to impress male was the abandonment of the veil that was since then worn solely by nuns and widows. The veil was replaced by a wide range of headdresses and over a few decades they blossomed into even more elaborate and ostentatious fashion accessories. (Laver, 64) Yet one more modification with a great erotic effect was neckline cut in such way that the shoulders were left bare. (Elgin, 14)

Since 1360 or thereabouts became popular the houppelande, a garment of Dutch origin, featured any amount of cloth hanging in heavy folds from a high belt and wide, hanging sleeves and neckline in form of high stand-up collar or a V-neck. The



houppelande was cut from four panels, seamed at the front, back and sides. The side seams were sometimes left without stitching together at the lower parts as ventilation. The hems of sleeves, vents and bottom edges of dresses were ordinarily trimmed with an embroidered panel or with fur; alternatively they might have been dagged. By the turn of the fifteenth century the houppelande had replaced the gown and cote-hardie for women coming from any social class. (ibid, 16) Calthrop observes that houppelande with heavy collar and wide, hanging sleeves became the part of ladies wardrobe later during the reign of Richard II, when his second wife had brought over many rich fashions. (136)

On the occasion of sport or riding women used to be attired almost in the same way as did men. Being clad in a houppelande or heavy cloak fastened on the right shoulder, hawking-glove on the left hand and boots laced up at the side or fastened with hook and eye, a woman was prepared for a ride. Also a big round hat could be added to the hood. (ibid, 137)

The underwear, we know nowadays, is a far cry from that worn in the Middle Ages. According to Elgin, women still wore the only garment under their robes, no matter which style was in fashion. Ordinarily a plain smock made of linen or knee-length hose functioned as underclothes. (20) Medieval ladies wore an undergown with long, tight sleeves and a full-length skirt under their dress. (see fig. 4) This tunic used to be either belted with a leather belt or tied with a string. It was even possible to wear it alone in warm weather. (Tierney, 10)



**Fig. 4. Women's underwear** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 9.

The stockings worn by women were at thigh length, held up just above the knee by a suspender. Nevertheless, it was hardly ever possible to see them due to the length of the dress. Until the 1400s, hose used to be made of wool or linen, because knitting was still unknown in Europe at that time. Stockings used to be bias-cut in order to fit as tightly as possible sewn up the back. (Elgin, 51-52)

Headdresses were inseparable from women's clothing in the medieval period. Elgin explains how important was to cover the head with some headgear:

Religious teaching dictated that most women keep their heads covered, either with a hat, a hood, or a veil. Because of this, the hairstyles beneath are hard to define, but it seems likely that hair was worn braided and looped up around the ears. In many cases, women shaved their hairline to give a high forehead and prevent hair from straggling out from under its covering. Hair was only revealed and worn loose by unmarried girls, by queens at their coronation, and by brides, who crowned it with a wreath of flowers. (21)

As it was quite inappropriate for married women to appear in public without any headgear, various wimples, coifs, hoods or heads were popular. A coif was a simple close-fitting cap made of white linen tied under the chin, framing the face and covering the hair completely. Coifs used to be worn by married women and could have been worn either on its own or under a hat or hood. A wimple was looser head covering made of fine linen or gauze, which could be loose or starched and set into folds, occasionally framed by a wire support. The wimple extended to envelop the chin and neck besides the head. (ibid, 49, 60)

Being the all-purpose accessory, the hoods were worn by people of all ranks. It differed just in the fabric used, from wool to velvet. At first, a hood could have been worn hanging down the back or to the side or coiled around the head like a turban. Later, by about 1400, hoods acquired new, somewhat unusual, shapes. The face openings became to be pulled up to the brow and the fabric covering the neck rolled up into a brim. The liripipes started to be wrapped and folded in various ways on top of the head. (ibid, 48-49)

Calthrop implies that while “the day of high hennings was yet to come, the day of simple hair-dressing was nearly dead.” (133)

In the second half of the fourteenth century, a typical headgear and dressing characteristics of noble ladies were wearing a veil, which was covering the crown of the head and hanging down at the back, kept by a jewelled circlet in place, and using a network to enclose the long hair formed into a braid. This network was made of gold or gilded wire and jewels.

The most interesting, and by a long way the most sophisticated, headdress of the fourteenth century was certainly the Crespine<sup>8</sup> (see fig. 5). The two jewelled or stiff-gold-wired hairnets of semi-cylindrical shape were the most characteristic features. (Houston, 87-88) Laver notes that the crespine appeared already towards the end of the thirteenth century and was worn along with a barrette and a fillet. This kind of headdress was a sea change, as against the previous ages, when showing hair was in women’s case counted as immoral. For the last quarter of the fourteenth century it was very characteristic to wear the crespine by itself and having vertical plaits on each side of a face. (66)

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<sup>8</sup> Even Philippa, the wife of Edward III, used to wear the Crespine. (Houston, 86)



**Fig. 5. Crespine of the late fourteenth century** from “Glossary of English Hairstyles and Headdress”; WordPress, 21 Sept. 2011; Web; 20 Nov. 2012.

Towards the close of the fourteenth century so called cushion headdresses appeared. It was in essence a padded roll worn over a hairnet. The hair was coiled on both sides above the ear in a small knob. (Laver, 66)

Jewellery worn in the Middle Ages was considerably substantial and ostentatious. Necklaces, brooches, bracelets, rings and various pendants were very popular. Coronets and necklaces were usually heavy and studded with jewels. There were brooches of various shapes, such as so called cluster brooch had a form of a precious stone surrounded by clusters of small pearls, or a ring brooch that was a circular fastening with a hinged pin. (Elgin, 53) “Brooches with mottoes were quite ordinary in the fourteenth century. Before and after buttons became fashionable, ring brooches, with or without mottoes, were a traditional means by which tunics were fastened at the neck.” (Hodges, 103)

Later during the reign of Richard II, every lady and the majority of women in general carried a purse in the hand or hang it on the girdle. Purses used to be decorated with various ornaments according to their social status. (Calthrop, 136)

The dress of women of all ranks was more or less the same, the major difference was that noblewomen wore gowns of luxurious, high-quality fabrics that were naturally more expensive. Upper-class women had their clothes not only of better materials, but also more elaborate and decorated.

### 2.1.2. Men's costume

Approximately from 1340, men's dress followed the same pattern as the female version. The shorter jupon, later called a doublet, replaced the long tunic. Quite fitted jupon used to be padded at the front with lacing or buttons. Over the jupon men wore the cote-hardie (see fig. 6), which was in case of men's version a belted coat fitted to the waist, where it widened into a full skirt. The skirt of the cote-hardie was reaching the knees and had a slit at the front. The sleeves used to be quite narrow to the elbow and then they flared into a deep hanging flap. (Elgin, 23-24)



**Fig. 6. Cote-hardie with a leather belt and some accessories and a hood with liripipe** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 5.

A girdle worn with a cote-hardie was made of silk braid or any thick silken string. Unlike women, men could have worn a leather girdle. Later a girdle, similar to the belt we know nowadays, appeared. Male leather belt had an old fashioned tongued buckle that had no loop to keep the long end neat. On the belt they could hang some accessories (see fig. 6), such as a pouch, threaded onto it through two holes. (ibid, 51)

From the belt there could be suspended even a sheath for a dagger, an anelace<sup>9</sup> or a misericorde<sup>10</sup>. The pouch was considered to be a rich affair, frequently made of gilded leather or velvet and ornamented in accordance with the purse of the wearer. (Calthrop, 124)

In winter, men would wear an overcoat with an attached hood over the cote-hardie, The overcoat could have had wide-cut sleeves of the same width all the way down. Under the sleeves there were slits enabling the wearer to hide his hands inside (in the same way as present people hide their hands in the pockets), or it could be very loose, having no sleeves, but just the slits at the both sides, and sometimes belted around the waist. (Calthrop, 124-125)

After the cote-hardie, also a houppelande was brought into fashion. The houppelande (see fig.6) worn by men used to be as voluminous as the women's, except that men's version was belted at the natural waistline. Its seams at the front, back and both sides were usually left non-sewn up to the waist in order to serve as ventilation. Huge sleeves were funnel-shaped at the wrist and frequently trailed on the ground. An inseparable part of the houppelande was trimming, usually with fur, or dagging<sup>11</sup>. A fundamental difference between women's and men's houppelande was that men could wore it not only long (especially on ceremonial occasions) but also at any length between knee and calf. (Elgin, 24) "At the close of the century the "houppelande" became a popular out-of-doors dress for men." (Houston, 73)

Under the houppelande, a noble man usually wore a skirt and a cote-hardie made out of thin material and a hose of silk. (Calthrop, 128)

The hemline of especially younger men's attire, such as a jupon and a cote-hardie, became by the second half of the fourteenth century so short that almost the entire legs were exposed. (Elgin, 24)

Padding and quilting across the chest was used to raise the maleness of the wearer. This kind of improvement originated in Italy. Thanks to these methods of dress decorating lighter fabrics, such as silk, took the place of heavier brocades. Another way of adorning clothes was dagging (see fig.7). It came into fashion between 1380 and 1450 or thereabouts and soon became the favourite method of cutting the edges. Dagging means cutting the hemlines, wide sleeves, vents and collars into scallops,

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<sup>9</sup> An anelace (or anlace) was "a short sword or dagger worn by civilians". (Houston, 219)

<sup>10</sup> A misericorde was so called "dagger of mercy worn by knights on the right hip". (Houston, 224)

<sup>11</sup> Dagges was an "ornamental cutting of the edges of garments, dating from circa 1346." (Houston, 222)

leaves, or tongues. The fanatic lovers of fashion brought this decorating technique to extremes and left the vents of the skirt unstitched and its edges dagged, so that the panels remained large strips of cloth rippling when the wearer got moving. Dagging was sometimes used around the stand-up collar of a houppelande, so that it looked like an early ruff. (ibid, 24,26)



**Fig. 7. Men's dagged houppelande and a chaperon with a liripipe** from Tom Tierney; *Gothic Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001).

Tierney depicts the underwear (see fig. 8) worn by men during the medieval period in detail:

Men wore linen underbreeches, called slops that were cut large and gathered at the waist on a tied waistband. The legs of the slops were just short of knee length and were worn tucked into the hose, which were tied to the slops by means of points or tapes. An alternative means of holding up the hose was to tie them to points on the tail of a short linen undershirt. Hose could be footed or not, depending on the footwear to be worn. (10)



**Fig. 8. Men's underwear** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Costumes Paper Dolls* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 9.

As mentioned above, there were two types of garments that men wore underneath their attire. The first one, called braies or breeches, covered the loins and the other one, called hose, covered the legs. These two pieces of underclothes were separate articles for a long time. The earliest breeches reminded a baggy Indian dhoti (loincloth) but as the time flew, it transformed into loose drawers, held up by a string just below the waist. The breeches were getting shorter along with the jupon and finally they were attached to the doublet with the help of laces. Around 1390 the two separate legs of the hose became joined at the centre and started to approximate the nowadays tights. (Elgin, 28)

Elgin states that poorer men could have rolled their hose down, just below the knee, and tied them by a garter in case of working. Stockings used to be bias-cut in order to fit as tightly as possible sewn up the back. (51-52)

The mid-fourteenth century shoes varied in style but in general they were long, flat and pointed. They could be laced up at the instep, or fastened with buckles. Sometimes no shoes were necessary, because hose might have been soled with leather and worn without any other footwear. This alternative was at first the matter of poor men, but gradually it became fashionable also among higher classes. The feet of the stockings were sometimes filled with straw or moss to evoke the impression of pointed look.



(ibid, 29) Calthrop adds that usually the shoes were so long that its points came out approximately 6 inches beyond the toe, but rarely they might have been so long that they had to be tied back to the knees. The footwear could be made of any material, sometimes sewn with pearls on cloth, stamped with gold on leather, or the leather raised. Those intended for walking in the streets were high made of wood and had also long pointed ends. (128-129)

In case of men, it is to mention their hairdressing and external appearance. So extravagantly curled hair as they used to be required in the previous century were not as necessary as before. Beards, being worn by middle-aged men, were kept short and pointed, and cleft at times. (Houston, 84) Otherwise “every form of beard or moustache was used, and the hair was worn long to the nape of the neck” (Calthrop, 128) Elgin comments that hair waved to the nape of the neck used to be worn since the thirteenth century. The most usual hairstyle was a centre parting with fringe. Among young men a bob haircut with rolled curl across the forehead was very popular. (29)

The main characteristics of male headgear did not change as rapidly as did their body clothing. One of the most worn head garment was the hood (see fig. 6), the point of which was becoming longer during the fourteenth century. As the time went on, the point (also known as a liripipe) of the hood was pinned up to the crown of the head and twisted around it. By doing so the hood looked like a kind of decorative turban. Men’s headgear in the Middle Ages included also a hat with wide brim and a narrower-brimmed hat that were occasionally worn over the hood. Sometimes these hats were too small, therefore they were called caps. Around the middle of the fourteenth century there could be a feather attached to the front of the cap or hat. (Houston, 82)

One of the most interesting, universal and widely used headgears was the chaperon (see fig. 7). At the beginning, there was a cape and a hood. At first these garments used to be worn separately, then they were joined together and started to be put on together at the same time. In this way the two headgears were being worn for many years. Later the peak of the hood began to lengthen gradually and finally it became so long that it was reaching the feet. After that the long peak was being twisted around the head in order to form a new type of headgear, reminding an oriental turban. The end of the cape was being stuck out like a cockscomb and jagged at the edge. Up to the present time, the footprints of chaperon are clearly evident in the curious cockade worn by coachmen. (Calthrop, 130)

Noblemen, as well as noblewomen, used to be clad in expensive attires made of fine materials. Even though the upper-class men used to show off their wealth by wearing floor-length robes, they started to wear shorter tunics as they came into fashion.

### **2.1.3. Commoners' costume**

The styles of fourteenth century clothing varied from period to period (Early, Middle and Late), but it did not relate to the working classes. Among common people, especially countrymen, the older styles of the previous centuries had been surviving for a long time. (Houston, 72)

Elgin stresses, that although the nobles dominated the medieval fashion scene, the commoners, including the middle class, servants and country folk, highly outnumbered them. The members of the middle class were trying to copy the style of the nobility, but the difference was that they were not able to follow the fashion and their clothes were made of cheaper materials. Even though the silk and brocade were available for cloth merchants, who were trading in assorted fabrics, most ordinary people had to substitute them by woollen materials. Instead of fine materials they applied dagging and edging with fur or embroidery to their clothing. (40-41) Common people could not afford to buy luxurious cloths, and furthermore the amount of money they could spend on clothes was limited by the sumptuary laws.

Elgin demonstrates how townspeople in the late Middle Ages might have been attired and gives an illustrative example. She assumes that:

By the 1400s, the average townsman would be wearing a knee-length houppelande with wide sleeves and a high collar, made of wool and perhaps dyed a deep russet. His wife would be wearing a modest V-necked houppelande with wide revers and narrow fitted sleeves. Gathered with a high buckled belt, it might be lifted in front to reveal an underskirt.  
(41)

Servants employed in noble households used to be dressed simply, but quite well at the same time, so that they reflect the standing of their lord. A common garment distinguishing servants from the other members of household was a livery. It often happened that servants were given some worn-out clothing of their lord as a present. In noble houses the domestic staff sometimes might have had the badge of their lord sewn

on their tunic or dress. Servant's salary included apart from other things one new outfit per year. A lady's maid might have got a cast-off gown thanks to her good relationship to her mistress. Stable boys, gardeners and other outdoor workers were most likely in contact with visitors, so they were clad in better dress as well. But those stuff members, such as kitchen maids and cooks, who might have been rarely seen by guests, were not worth spending money on such things as a livery. Thus these servants wore smocks and aprons, providing them relief from the stifling heat of open fires and ovens. (Elgin, 43)

Clothing of rural peasants and agricultural workers of the Middle Ages almost did not changed during the whole period. There were two basic distinctions between the outfit of the rich and the poor. Unlike the attire of wealthy people, clothing of the poor country folk was not only shorter, but also looser or more fitted according to the activity they were engaged in. (ibid, 43-44)

Poor peasants, for whom the fabric was quite expensive, did not care much about a few little jots or tittles; they would rather satisfied more urgent life requirements. (Calthrop, 132) The majority of people grew their own flax plants for linen or hemp in order to make a rope or a coarse cloth and they usually made their clothes themselves. A lot of country folks used the common land to graze sheep in order that they could spin and weave their own woollen cloth. In that day spinning was a business for women whereas weaving was a men's matter. (Elgin, 44)

Men from lower classes usually put on a woollen tunic, woollen hose, and ankle boots or flat shoes. As pointed shoes, worn by the upper classes were unsuitable for work, their footwear used to have round toes. In order to have a greater freedom of movement when working, they could tuck up their tunic into the belt and rolled their hose down, just below the knee, and tied them by a garter. Instead of shoes, some men wore leather-soled hose, and the poorer ones wrapped their legs in linen or cotton stripes of cloth and tied them with a crisscrossed twine (see fig. 9). Rarely the poorest people might have worn nothing on their feet, having them absolutely bare. In winter, wooden pattens were worn, so that the feet were kept out of the mud. (ibid)



**Fig. 9. Working peasants** from Tom Tierney; *Medieval Fashions* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998) 11,24.

Another garment, typical for women of the middle and working classes and tradesmen, was an apron (see fig. 9). There were many variations of this piece of clothing, differing in the wearer's position. Dirty jobs, such as butchers and fishmongers, required full-length aprons covering front and back, just like a tabard<sup>12</sup>. People engaged in cleaner jobs used to wear aprons of half length, tied at the waist or just tucked in the belt. This type of apron was worn even by women doing domestic or agricultural work. A full-length apron made of leather that was tied up behind the neck and provided more protection to the wearer, was worn by farriers and stonemasons. Among market women so called bag apron, serving also as a carrier, was widespread. A clean white apron was among lower class people a badge of respectability. It made an impression of neatness, even if they could not afford a new robe. (Elgin, 46)

Elgin notes that working class wore clothes of bright colours, as those shades were much easier to produce. But the poorest ones left their homespun natural. (45-46)

Yet the common people went hardly ever bareheaded, but if they did, they had usually a hood spread on the shoulders. In summer during the harvest period, the farmer used to wear either a hood, or a peaked or a round hat with a wide brim (see fit. 9).

<sup>12</sup> A tabard was "a sleeveless outer garment with open side seams." (Elgin, 60)

(Calthrop, 126) Women of lower class backgrounds wore usually the hood, the wimple tied under the chin, or plain hair formed into a braid. (Calthrop, 134) Hoods and woollen caps were worn mostly according to weather, rather than vogue. (Elgin, 44) Wearing luxurious and costly veils was outlawed for women from lower classes.

As commoners' clothing was restricted by the Sumptuary laws, they could have spent on clothes just a very little amount of money. Although, the common people used to wear modest clothes made of lower-quality materials, they were trying at least to imitate the nobles' clothing.

#### **2.1.4. Ecclesiastical costume**

Relatively large and visible part of medieval society comprised clergy. By the overall name of clergy all the religious people were termed, including the pope, bishops, priests, monks and nuns. In the Middle Ages the church was for the most part supported by people who had to pay high taxes. Monks, living in monasteries, were learned and spent their time in worship, copying the books, gardening or teaching the young boys from upper classes. Nuns were not as educated as monks, so they primarily served the people. They for example took care of young girls from noble families who were being sent to convents to gain an education.

Wardrobe of a typical Benedictine monk in the medieval era consisted usually of a long gown, a scapula, a cowl, hose and shoes. Monks tied their tunics around the waist with a cloth or leather belt. Over the tunic they wore a long wide woollen cloth with an opening for the head, called a scapula (see fig. 10), and a hood worn especially by monks, known as a cowl (see fig.10). Some monks could have round their neck a cross on a chain. They would wear also a hair shirt under the habit to impose suffering on themselves. (Alchin, "Middle Ages Clothing")

The colour of monks' habits was dependent on their order. Benedictine monk's habit was at first white or grey, the colours of undyed wool and gradually it became coloured black. Thus the name "Black Monks" signifying the Benedictines was originated. Unlike Benedictines, the habit of Cistercians and Carthusians was restricted by even harder rules, so that they were allowed to wear solely clothes made of undyed wool in order to proclaim their poverty. Cistercian monk's habit was generally a greyish-white or brown, hence the Cistercians were known as "White Monks." (ibid)



**Fig. 10. Examples of the ecclesiastical costumes** from Mary G. Houston; *Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 38,40.

As well as monks, clothing of medieval nuns varied according to their order. The earliest wardrobe of Benedictine nuns contained long woollen habits (see fig. 10) of white, grey, or brown colour. But as the time went, their attire became black. As their clothing was limited even more than the monks', they were not allowed to dye their clothes at all to demonstrate their poverty. A nun's outfit consisted of a nun's habit, belted in the same way as in case of monks, a scapula and the most important garments were a wimple and a veil (see fig. 10), which were attached to a scapula. Nuns might have worn also a hair shirt under their gown and a cross on a chain around the neck. (ibid)

Apart from monks and nuns who were enclosed in their monasteries and convents, there was also a great number of wandering friars in the crowd. Friars did not belong to any particular church, so they lived among the common people and lived on begging. A friar would wear a long robe made of some rough fabric of black or brown colour<sup>13</sup>, belted with a knotted cord, and leather sandals. He would carry a staff and some

<sup>13</sup> Black tunics were worn by Dominicans and brown ones by Franciscans. (Elgin, 55)

container for offerings. A characteristic feature of friars, monks and other clerics was a tonsure. They used to shave a tonsure on the crown of the head as a sign of their humility and esteem for God. (Elgin, 55)

Ecclesiastical habits came out of the clothing of common people. Members of clergy used to wear modest garments, corresponding to their humility and religious beliefs. There were many variations of ecclesiastical costume that differed according to the order of the wearer.

#### **2.1.5. Knights' costume**

The knight's clothing depended on whether he was at war, at home or he attended a tournament. (Elgin, 34) "The armour of the fourteenth century is notable as giving us the transition from the chain-mail of the thirteenth to the full plate armour of the fifteenth century." (Houston, 122) In the later part of the fourteenth century, chain-mail had almost disappeared and was replaced by plate armour. A knight in the second half of the fourteenth century could wear a hauberk at proportions of a vest, under which was hidden a steel cuirass, yet underneath was worn a jupon with scalloped or ornamented hemline, which used to be laced down the back. On the head he wore a headpiece called a bascinet (see fig.11) of a sharp point shape. To the edge of the bascinet was fastened a camail, a mail protection depending from the lower edge of the bascinet. The arms and legs were completely encased in plate armour (see fig. 11). Shoulders were covered by pieces called *épaulières*, thighs by *cuissarts* (or *cuisasards*), shins by *jambes* of plate (or *jambarts*) and elbow guards were called *coudières*. Straight across the hips he wore a wide belt, with a sword (see fig. 11) attached to it on the left side. On the other side, there was usually a dagger or a misericorde. (ibid, 124, 221)

The armour underwent an evolution during the medieval period. It gradually transformed from a plain armour into a more sophisticated one by adding more and more pieces of plate armour.



**Fig. 11. Example of the fourteenth century armour** from Patrick Nicolle; *A Book of Armour* (Manchester: Penguin Books, 1954).

#### **2.1.6. Travellers' costume**

People making a pilgrimage to a holy place might have been of various ranks, including townspeople, clergy and country folk. Travellers would wear clothes suitable for a long journey, such as cloaks, hoods and shoes, that provided as much warmth and protection as possible. A cloak and a hood of men were in most cases two separate garments. The hood used to cover traveller's shoulders or head and frequently was topped by a hat. Women could wear a hooded cloak, and the noble ones even a fur-lined mantles. (Elgin, 41)

Walking footwear could be either fitted around the ankle or cut away over the instep and laced by a buckled strap around the ankle. More fashionable variation had holes cut into the front in the shape of geometric patterns or flowers. Riding boots might have been either at thigh-length, tied up with laces or buckles at calf level, or at knee-length, loose and shapeless, fitted by a tuck on the outside of the leg. (ibid, 42)

Pilgrims coming from lower classes wore usually a homespun russet tunic (see fig. 12) tied around the waist with a cord, rough travel-stained cloaks and a hat with a wide brim. The hat might have been decorated with the badges of shrines that the pilgrim had



visited, which was the matter of some pride. For instance, pilgrims who already visited the shrine of St. Thomas Becket in Canterbury had the right to wear a distinctive badge of that place. Pilgrims could carry a staff (see fig. 12) and a leather water bottle as well. (ibid, 57-58)



**Fig. 12. A pilgrim** from Mary G. Houston; *Medieval Costume in England and France: The 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996) 97.

The main attribute of the pilgrim costume was comfort, which was a necessity for pilgrims travelling to a distant place. Sensible footwear, warm clothes and a hood or a hat were very handy for travelling and protected the wearer from the rain, dust and dirt on the way.

## **2.2. Fashion reflecting social status**

*Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.*

(Mark Twain)

Formerly well-situated people could have been identified by the length of their robes. By wearing such clothes they wanted to flaunt their wealth. Elgin states that being clothed in fine and long attire meant that the wearer could afford to obtain it and

did not need to work hard as well. While peasants wore clothes cut to the thigh, aristocracy wore robes reaching the ankles (9). A characteristic feature of noble's clothing was also the material of which their dress was made. Nobles wore expensive fabrics such as velvet and silk whereas peasants were dressed in cheap and modest materials suitable for working clothes and providing them warmth and dryness in unfavourable weather conditions. Another recognition sign of wealthy people was the fur, edging their garb.

To left the impression of bulk and substance, the luxurious dress was made of heavy materials, imported from the East via Italy or France, such as velvet, brocade, silk, or damask. These fabrics were decorated with appliques or stamps of large repeat flowers or leaves, reminding exotic fruits of Eastern origins. Fabrics in geometric patterns, checks or stripes were regarded as elegant. (Elgin, 18-19)

Bring observes that the external aspect of the high medieval society was connected with extraordinary stateliness. Aristocracy took pleasure in excessive ostentation and ornamentation. The clothing of upper classes noticed a rising vogue of striking and multifarious colours, length and width being randomly impacted by fashion. (35)

The king and queen had an absolute unique wardrobe. Also knights and clergy were attired in a dress specific for their post. The commoners wore distinct clothes than aristocracy, and furthermore they were not allowed to wear what the nobility did.

Hunt provides an explanation as to why the sumptuary laws were being launched. The main aim was to regulate what commoners may wear in order not to threaten the feudal hierarchy by imitating the nobles and dressing in their style. (67)

One of the restrictions established during the reign of Edward III deals apart from other thing with the matter of clothes. Sir Nicholls (1854) quotes that:

Grooms and servants of lords, as well as they of mysteries and artificers”  
... are to have clothes for their vesture or hosing, whereof the whole cloth shall not exceed two marks; and they are to wear nothing of silk or of gold or silver embroidered; and their wives and children are to be of like condition in their clothing and apparel. The Act then, with similar exactitude, prescribes the clothing and apparel to be worn by “handicraftsmen and yeomen, and by esquires and gentlemen, and by merchants and citizens, and by knights and by the clergy,” and lastly, by “carters, ploughmen, drivers of the plough, oxherds, cowherds, shepherds, swineherds, and other keepers of beasts, threshers of corn, and

all manner of people attending to husbandry, and all other people that have not forty shillings of goods and chattels.” These latter, from the carter downwards, are prohibited from wearing “any manner of cloth but blanket and russet of 12*d.* a yard, with girdles of linen, according to their estate.”... And finally “to the intent that this ordinance may be maintained and kept in all points without blemish, it is ordained that all makers of cloth within the realm shall conform them to make their cloths according to the price limited by this ordinance. (43)

In the course of time, fashion played a major role in medieval society. Sumptuary laws were used as a device to prevent common people from wearing as lavish clothing, jewellery and other accessories as the aristocracy, without reference to wealth. All members of lower class society were not allowed to wear themselves as the nobles, even if they could afford it.

### **2.3. Regal costume**

Being the most important and influential figures, kings and queens in the Middle Ages, as well as the rulers in other historical periods, used to wear the most luxurious clothing of all nobles. Especially on the occasion of coronation or any other special social event, they wore a spectacular robe, usually made of the most luxurious scarlet silk fabric and trimmed with the finest fur.

The most precious kind of fur in the Middle Ages was an ermine. This fur was used for decorating the robes of Kings, Princes and Nobles. Its name is derived from Herminia (Armenia). Elgin emphasises that:

Ermine, the winter fur of the stoat, was worn only by royalty. When sewn together, the white coat and black tail give an impression of black spots on white. In 1406, the trousseau of Princess Philippa, daughter of Henry IV, included ‘a hood of scarlet cloth and a hood of black cloth, both furred with miniver,’ and ‘a cap of beaver furred with ermine garnished with a silk button and tassel. (15)

The most favourite form of clothing decoration among ecclesiastical and secular people was embroidery. In 1351, even the king Edward III and his wife were clad in

robes of red velvet “embroidered with clouds of silver and eagles of pearl and gold.” (ibid, 18)

A king ordinarily wore a lavishly decorated crown on his head and carried a sceptre and an orb. These items, known also as the crown jewels, symbolised the power of the king.

### **3. Geoffrey Chaucer**

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the early 1340's, probably in London. Howard mentions that the exact date of his birth is unknown, but allegedly it was in 1343, as evidenced by many known facts of his life (40) He lived during the reign of three different kings: Edward III (1327-1377), Richard II (1377-1399) and Henry IV (1399-1413).

Howard proposes a hypothesis about Chaucer's knowledge: “Of Chaucer's education we know nothing. Certainly at an early age he learned French, as it was the language used in the schools of his youth. ... We know that he studied Latin, the basis of medieval education. ... When Chaucer learned Italian is uncertain, but for a person of quick intelligence ... it probably presented no great problem.” (40)

Young Geoffrey took up an appointment of a page in the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster and Connaught and wife of Prince Lionel, Duke of Clarence. How long exactly he served there is not known, but it is assumed that Chaucer was in attendance on the Countess on many court occasions around the year 1357. During his service in the Countess's household probably started his association with the royal family and friendship with John of Gaunt. After his service in army (during the invasion of France in 1359) he functioned as a courier, delivering letters back and forth across the English Channel. According to some written records, in 1367 Chaucer was referred to as a valet of the King Edward III and two years later as an esquire. (Howard, 41-43)

Young Geoffrey learnt a lot about the aristocracy thanks to his work experience in the household of the Countess of Ulster. Also the promotion, foreign service and marriage into the family of John of Gaunt provided him the opportunity to observe polite manners, study the sciences and the arts, the literatures of France and Italy. All these factors had a decisive influence on Chaucer as an author and made him one of the best-equipped English poets. (Burgess, 29)

Howard notes that Chaucer's "appointment as a page marked the beginning of an association with the royal family that lasted until his death. Probably no other English poet had a longer or more intimate relationship with royalty than did Chaucer, yet we cannot find one shilling's advantage that he reaped from this association purely as a poet." (42)

According to Howard, Chaucer had been working hard on his masterpiece for about thirteen years before he passed away in 1400. It is believed that Chaucer made a pilgrimage after his wife Philippa died (in 1387) but it is more probable that he let his pilgrims travel from London to Canterbury just because he was familiar with that journey. Since the standard way to France from London passed right through the Canterbury, he should have travelled that way many times in his life. (119)

The year was 1400 when Chaucer died. Since he was about sixty-seven years old, it is almost certain that he did not die of old age. Hypothetically it might have been the plague that struck that year but the real cause of his death is not known. (ibid, 52) Chaucer influenced generations of writers even after his death. His works and the language he wrote in had a huge impact on the English literature. Chaucer was the first to use the English language as a language of literature and proved that it is comparable with the French or Latin.

### **3.1. Chaucer's social status**

Paul Strohm observes that Geoffrey Chaucer was born in a state of family affairs appropriate to take up a career as civil servant. His father, John Chaucer, was not solely a prosperous and wealthy London wine merchant, but also was himself in service of Edward III in the capacity as deputy chief butler (being responsible for certain customs collections). (Boitani and Mann, 3) Even "Geoffrey's grandfather, Robert le Chaucer, was the deputy for the king's butler for the port of London, which meant that he collected a certain percentage of the wine for the king's use from every wine ship entering the port." (Howard, 39)

Howard implies that also poet's mother, Agnes de Northwell, brought some assets into the marriage as an heiress to her uncle, Hamo de Copton, a wealthy official of the mint. (40) After death of both parents, Geoffrey seemed to "have inherited little property from either of them." (Coulton, 26) Howard also highlights the importance of the Chaucer family's place of residence at the time of Geoffrey's birth, for they were

living in one of the wealthiest regions in London, in the Thames Street in Vintry Ward. (40)

Being a civil servant, Chaucer is commonly considered to be a member of middle class. Burgess states that he “belonged to that growing class from which, in the centuries to follow, so many great writers sprang.” (29) Albert puts forward a hypothesis that the Chaucer family belonged by the birth of Geoffrey to bourgeoisie. The author works on an assumption that Geoffrey’s ancestors from both sides of the family came from relatively equal social class. The Chaucers were for generations engaged in the wine and wool trade or worked with the Royal customs. Members of the Stace family were involved in the king’s service or in parliament. (Albert, “The Contribution of Early Family History to the Achievement of Eminence.”)

Coulton points out that Geoffrey would never have found a place in the higher society being just a son of vintner, which is the evidence of his own brilliant qualities. (22) Chaucer initiated his own career in 1357 with his appointment to the household of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster. Later, in 1359, he was in military service in the English army, then he became a member of the king’s household and since 1370 he was being sent on diplomatic errands throughout Europe. (Boitani and Mann, 3)

One of the most significant facts indicating that Chaucer was a person of importance was the amount of money paid by the king toward his ransom when he was taken prisoner. It happened in 1359 when Chaucer was in military service with the English army in France. During the campaign he was captured and the king contributed £16 to ransom Geoffrey. (Howard, 45)

Being the first to have been buried in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey proves that he was an outstanding personality of English history as well.

### **3.2. Chaucer’s knowledge of fashion**

Coulton mentions that the first reference to Geoffrey Chaucer in connection with clothing comes from the household accounts of the Countess of Ulster. On the list of clothes given to different members of household for Easter from 1357 there is also a record of “Geoffrey Chaucer, who received a short cloak, a pair of tight breeches in red and black, and shoes. In these red-and-black hosen the poet comes for the first time into full light on the stage of history.” (21)

According to Boitani and Mann, the marriage with Philippa Roet to a certain extent influenced Chaucer. He encountered all sorts of people regularly travelling on business between England and the continent who shared not solely hard goods, but also social values and aesthetic expectations. Court and city was characterized by an international French style, for instance in clothes design, textiles and architecture (among others). Also Chaucer's own domestic life was supposed to be a melting pot consisting of English and continental French, as it was in his diplomatic and business functions. (22)

Chaucer's knowledge of fashion must have resulted from his rich experience gained during his entire life. There was any amount of circumstances and factors that certainly must have influenced him in many respects, from his childhood, when he was growing in merchant background, through his appointment of a page in the household of Countess of Ulster and his service in the English army, to his office of diplomat in the king's service. During his life he must have met all sorts of people on various occasions. Since time immemorial the society has been consisted of the rich, as well as the poor, intelligent and stupid, cultured and uncultured, educated and uneducated, pretentious and modest, gently and cruel, decent and indecent, virtuous and immoral.

#### **4. Fashion in Canterbury Tales**

Especially in the first chapter of his masterpiece, called General Prologue, Chaucer introduces his pilgrims one by one and apart from other things depicts their costumes in full details. To sketch in the pilgrim's social and financial status he describes such specifics such as length and shape of dress, its colour, fabric from which it was made and accessories. Chaucer's pilgrims came from all social classes with the exception of the highest and the lowest ones.

Elgin points out that Chaucer, as well as his contemporary Langland in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, created in his *Canterbury Tales* a vivid image of medieval society by drawing a detailed portrait of the characters' wardrobe, highlighting its great importance for determining their social status. (10)

Brink explains how Chaucer relates, rather than describes and how he creates the association between imagination and understanding. Constituent elements of pilgrims' external appearance have a symbolic meaning; they express indirectly travellers'

character and manner. In the end the reader receives a faithful image of described people and is almost able to see them bodily before him. (151)

The pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* differ in many ways from the typical costume of travellers. Chesterton states that "the garments and attributes of the Canterbury Pilgrims are expressive. They express what the people are; they express what the poet means." ... "Chaucer's coloured figures are all the more coloured, because their colours<sup>14</sup> mean something, as do the colours of heraldry." (58-59) People assigned various meanings to different colours, such as faithfulness to blue colour, passion to green, and so forth.

Chaucer portrays in his *Canterbury Tales* all levels of English life and pays close attention to his characters' clothing. Individual characters are described one after another according to their social rank in the society.

#### **4.1. The Knight**

As a character of the highest position of all the pilgrims, the Knight was the first one to be introduced by Chaucer in the opening of *the Canterbury Tales*. He was a worthy and genteel man, embodying honour, courtesy, chivalry and truth.

According to Calthrop, Chaucer's knight is quite old-fashioned and belongs rather to the chivalrous time of the first half of Edward III's reign than to the less gentle time of Richard II. (145)

"Speaking of his equipment, he possessed  
Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed.  
He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark  
With smudges where his armour had left mark." (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*  
21)

As for the Knight's attire, Chaucer did not describe it in full details. He just communicated that he wore a fustian tunic. The fustian was "a coarse cloth made of brushed cotton weft and linen warp." (Elgin, 60) The smudges on the Knight's jupon

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<sup>14</sup> For more about meaning of colours see F.M. Adams and C.E. Osgood; Cross-Cultural Study of the Affective Meanings of Colour. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 1973.



indicate that he must have been clad in a hauberk, which used to be worn over a tunic, sometime before. In contrast to his character qualities, his outer appearance was quite neglected rather than it was appropriate for a gentle knight. To clarify the state of the Knight's non-chivalric clothes, narrator provides an explanation that he had returned from the military service just before he set out for the journey to Canterbury. By doing so Chaucer might have aimed to give an indication that it is better not to judge people just by their outer appearance.

There was not a mere mention of any weapon or any other garment, such as sword or dagger, suspending from the belt. There is not even any remark about some headpiece or plate armour covering his upper or lower limbs. To the long and the short of it, Chaucer's knight does not correspond to the traditional concept of the man of war. Therefore the Chaucer's knight presents perhaps an authentic image of the fourteenth-century chivalry.

#### **4.2. The Squire**

Another traveller was the Squire, a son of the Knight and a candidate for knighthood. As Chaucer depicted him, the young squire seems to be handsome but quite effeminate. He was over-careful of his appearance, especially of his curly locks, and could sing songs and poems but he also knew how to ride a horse.

A squire was usually a boy of twelve or so coming from a wealthy family or he was a son of the knight. Squires used to wear simple tunics, wool stockings and leather shoes, or they might have been shoeless, wearing just leather-soled<sup>15</sup> hose. (Elgin, 38)

Houston notes that a young man in the height of the fashion, as the youthful squire in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, would be dressed in the mode of the courtiers – a short fitted cote-hardie with wide sleeves belted in waist and parti-coloured hose. The sleeves of his gown would have been dagged at the edges. Being clad in a tunic embroidered with red and white flowers and having long and wide sleeves, the Squire should have looked like a truly gay and elegant figure. (Houston, 118)

Chaucer portrays his squire in the following way:

“With locks as curly as if they had been pressed.

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<sup>15</sup> The foot area used to be soled as shoes, therefore no footwear was necessary.

...

He was embroidered like a meadow bright  
And full of the freshest flowers, red and white.

...

Short was his gown, the sleeves were long and wide.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 21)

Chaucer’s squire was clad in a short gown with wide long sleeves, lavishly decorated with embroidered flowers of white and red colour and his hairstyle comprised of curly hair. The narrator assumes that the Squire’s locks were made in an artificial way, most likely by kinking up his hair overnight. All the features of his outer appearance suggest that he was a young (the youngest of all pilgrims), lively and primarily wealthy man. By such an exact delineation of the fabric of which the gown was made of Chaucer wanted to emphasise the Squire’s social status. And the length of the gown along with his hairstyle might have underlined his youth and vitality.

#### **4.3. The Yeoman**

Then there was the Yeoman, a servant of the knight and squire. He was also an expert woodsman and a crack shot with a bow and an arrow. His clothing Chaucer described in a great detail:

“This Yeoman wore a coat and hood of green,  
And peacock-feathered arrows, bright and keen  
And neatly sheathed, hung at his belt the while  
- For he could dress his gear in yeoman style,

...

A saucy brace was on his arm to ward  
It from the bow-string, and shield a sword  
Hung at one side, and at the other slipped  
A jaunty dirk, spear-sharp and well equipped.  
A medal of St Christopher he wore  
Of shining silver on his breast, and bore  
A hunting-horn, well slung and burnished clean,

That dangled from a baldrick of bright green.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 22)

Being a woodman, he was attired all in green. He wore a green coat and a hood of the same colour. He had also a green belt on which a number of yeoman equipment was hanging. There was a sheath full of arrows decorated with peacock feathers and on the other side a dagger. Yet a hunting horn was suspended from his belt and on his arm there he had a brace to secure his bow. He wore a silver medal of St Christopher on his breast, which “may have a particular aptness, since he is described as a forester and St Christopher was the patron of foresters.” (Andrew, 68) The whole outfit of this character indicates his occupation and social position as well.

#### **4.4. The Prioress**

The Prioress was the fourth of the pilgrims portrayed in the General prologue. She was accompanied by another nun who functioned as her secretary and three priests. The narrator spoke of her as a gentle, religious and rather educated lady who knows French quite well. She was also kind, a bit shy and very sensitive, so that she cried over a mouse caught in a trap. The Prioress appeared to be interested more in her three dogs she had with her than humans. She was very particular about her appearance and always kept her attire neat. Chaucer pays more attention to her veil and accessories than to her dress itself:

“Her veil was gathered in a seemly way,  
...  
Her cloak, I noticed, had a graceful charm.  
She wore a coral trinket on her arm,  
A set of beads, the gaudies tricked in green,  
Whence hung golden brooch of brightest sheen  
On which there first was graven a crowned A  
And lower, Amor vincit omnia.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 23)

Hodges comments that “Chaucer’s Prioress wears an appropriate headdress, consistent with her interest in propriety, and illustrative of her status as a nun, prioress, and lady.” (30)

Although Chaucer does not provide a complete delineation of her habit, the negative critic reviews asserts that Chaucer's presentation of Madame Eglentyne's dress symbolizes her pride, vanity and love of luxury. Other critics incline to the opinion that the Prioress's elegant clothes fit to Chaucer's intention of portraying her as a devotee of Mary, dressed in the Marian tradition. But being compared to convent rules for nun's clothing of that period, the evidence of contemporary historical record, fourteenth-century sumptuary legislation, and other literary descriptions of nun's habit, Chaucer's portrayal of the Prioress implies his brevity and restraint of his depiction of the Prioress's attire, as he omitted numerous clothing abuses of nuns, often included in other medieval sources. He mentioned no fabric, decoration, colour or fur, although she might have worn some. (Hodges, 63-65)

In more detail Chaucer describes the Prioress's rosary and brooch. The material and colour of the rosary are also appropriate for her as a prioress, as well as pilgrim. The Latin motto on the brooch is in accordance with other mottoes of the Middle Ages as well, but other specific personal items made of precious metals were forbidden for nuns. (Hodges, 82-83) Lowes states that the inscription "Amor vincit omnia" was a Virgilian<sup>16</sup> motto that may bear an erotic meaning. But he also supposes that while Chaucer might have been aware of it, the Prioress might have had just a shallow knowledge of Latin. (qtd in Hodges, 85)

Chaucer's Prioress wore a veil on her head in a proper way but her cloak seems to be a bit too luxurious for her status. But as it is not described in more detail, it is hard to judge. The author mentions also her high and large forehead that could symbolise her intelligence. Then the narrator focuses on her accessories – a string of green beads and golden brooch. Rosaries were ordinary items, but the same cannot be said about her pendant made of gold. The inscriptions on brooches were quite common at that time and that on the Prioress's one "Amor vincit omnia" means "Love conquers all." This may be associated with either with religious, or with courtly love. To sum it up, the outfit of the Chaucer's Prioress partly accorded with the common knowledge of the nun's attire and partly did not. From the narrator's depiction of the Prioress it follows that although she was a nun, she never forgot to be a woman. Concluding from the care she took of her appearance and her possessions, she might have wished to live a bit different life.

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<sup>16</sup> Virgil was a Roman poet (70-19 BC) from whom Chaucer borrowed the motto "Amor vincit omnia" on the Prioress's brooch. (Andrew, 297)

#### **4.5. The Monk**

Chaucer's Monk was an outrider for his monastery who obviously got on well, concluding from his possession, hobbies and overall manners. The narrator depicts that he owned a few horses furnished with the fine saddles and bridles and he himself was clad in luxurious clothes trimmed with fur. He had great fondness for hunting and fine food, and by everything he did, he violated the monastery orders. As for his outer appearance, Chaucer notes that he was hairless and rather fat. The following was written about his wardrobe:

“I saw his sleeves were garnished at the hand  
With fine grey fur, the finest in the land,  
And on his hood, to fasten it at his chin  
He had a wrought-gold cunningly fashioned pin;  
Into a lover's knot it seemed to pass.

...

Supple his boots, his horse in fine condition.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 24)

The Monk's habit, as Chaucer described it, is somewhat different from the ordinary way of monks' clothing in the Middle Ages. It does not fully correspond to the Benedictine monk's habit of that time; it rather gives rather the impression of anybody else's wardrobe. Unlike other common monks, his habit had fine fur-trimmed sleeves and his hood was fastened with a golden pin, which indicates that Chaucer's Monk was a quite wealthy man. The narrator provides also a depiction of his footwear and observes that the Monk shoed supple riding boots that implies they were most likely made of leather.

#### **4.6. The Friar**

The sixth in a row was the Friar, a wanton and cheerful man who had a fondness for young women. He arranged a number of marriages for them after getting into difficulties. He lived not only on begging along the roads, he was corrupted and in exchange for some gift, he gave penance to anyone. He was able to use the most immoral methods to get the money.

“He kept his tippet stuffed with pins for curls,  
And pocket-knives, to give to pretty girls.

...

“Of double-worsted was the semi-cope  
Upon his shoulders, and the swelling fold  
About him, like a bell about its mould  
When it is casting, rounded out his dress.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 25-26)

According to Chaucer’s delineation of the Friar’s costume, he wore a semi-cope made of double-worsted, which was in fact a fabric of high quality, or at least better than just mono-worsted. The quality of the material indicates that the Friar was not poorly off. The bell-shaped semi-cope was flowing down in folds, covering his dress underneath. The narrator mentions that Friar’s robe had a hood, functioning as a pocket, where he carried some items, gifts for pretty girls. That is the evidence that the Friar had a great partiality for young girls.

#### **4.7. The Merchant**

There was also the Merchant among the pilgrims travelling to Canterbury. He was trading in furs and other materials, imported from Flanders, and kept on talking about his business. He was cunning like a fox and knew how to bargain and sell with a profit. The narrator highlights that his outer appearance, including his dress, was so impressive that hardly anybody would have recognized that he was in debt.

“There was a Merchant with a forking beard  
And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,  
Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat  
And on his feet daintily buckled boots.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 26)

Chaucer’s description of Merchant’s attire is rather indeterminate. He mentions that the Merchant was clad in a motley dress, which most likely means that it was parti-coloured. It may also imply that it was made of some fine material. Either way, his clothes were colourful and left a good impression on the narrator. His headgear is described as “a Flemish beaver hat”. Planché explains that this type of hat was being

made most probably in Flanders and so called beaver hats seemed to be the object of attention at that time. (qtd in Houston, 84) Merchant's footwear was furnished with stylish buckles that raised the tone of the overall impression as well. As he was said to be in debt, we may presume that his good-looking fashionable costume, whether it was made of expensive high-quality fabric or not, was intended to demonstrate that the Merchant was a successful cloth trader despite his financial worries.

#### **4.8. The Clerk**

A student at Oxford, The Clerk, travelled to Canterbury too. The horse he was riding was extremely thin and the Clerk himself was not much fatter than the quadruped. He was a man of few words but when he said something, it made sense. After the knight, he was another respected person among the pilgrims. As he preferred spending money on books rather than clothes or food, his attire was according to the narrator threadbare.

“The thread upon his overcoat was bare.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 27)

In the Clerk's case Chaucer probably wanted to demonstrate the unimportance of the outer appearance again, as he did it before when describing the knight.

#### **4.9. The Man of Law**

Another traveller was a very capable lawyer, who understood the law well and knew all the cases and judgements. He seemed to be the busiest man of all, but appearances were deceptive in his case.

“He wore a homely parti-coloured coat,  
Girt with a silken belt of pin-stripe stuff.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 28)

His parti-coloured coat did not say much about him but judging from its colouration, it might have been made of some fine fabric. The girdle of silk cloth he had around his belt confirms the assumption that the Man of Law was a wealthy man. Silk was being imported from the East at that time, which was reflected on the price. Therefore silk was not accessible to everyone.

#### **4.10. The Franklin**

Then there was the Franklin, a wealthy landowner. While being a man of fortune, he was not of high social background. He enjoyed spending money in a good company and spoiled himself with large amount of a good wine and food. Since he was optimistic and kind man, most of the people liked him. Of his clothing was not written much:

“A dagger and a little purse of silk  
Hung at his girdle, white as morning milk.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 29)

Of Franklin’s outer appearance Chaucer mentioned just his white beard, which signifies that he was of advanced years. The girdle was made of some white cloth or cord and there was a dagger and a purse hanging on it. Especially the purse indicates Franklin’s good financial state, because only a man of wealth could afford to have a pouch and, what is more, made of silk.

#### **4.11. The Haberdasher, the Dyer, the Carpenter, the Weaver and the Carpet-maker**

There was also a group of tradesmen, consisted of a haberdasher, a dyer, a weaver and a carpet-maker. All of them belonged to an association of tradesmen, which was clearly evident from their clothes. Each of them was clad in a fine livery of the same guild. Along with them there was a cook who was good at his job, but he had an ulcer on his knee that spoiled the overall impression of his great cooking skills. It is probable that the Cook wore an apron, typical for cooks, but Chaucer did not mention any detail of his clothes.

“A Haberdasher, a Dyer, a Carpenter,  
A Weaver and a Carpet maker were  
Among our ranks, all in the livery  
Of one impressive guild-fraternity.  
They were so trim and fresh their gear would pass  
For new. Their knives were not tricked out with brass



But wrought with purest silver, which avouches  
A like display on girdles and on pouches.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 29)

All of the craftsmen were rather luxuriously dressed in the liveries of the same guild. The profession of each of these five artisans was connected with art, so it is pretty natural for them to be neat and trim, wearing elegant and fashionable clothes. Concluding from their fine dress, newly looking high-quality equipment, wrought with pure silver, and the pouches, another symbol of wealth, they all must have been doing well.

#### **4.12. The Shipman**

The Shipman was a huge man of abrasive and immoral manners who knew all the seas and ports very well, he could read in the stars, but sitting on the horse’s back, he was suffering great inconvenience. Of his appearance the narrator said:

“In a woollen gown that reached his knee.  
A dagger on a lanyard falling free  
Hung from his neck under his arm and down.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 30)

The length of his gown as well as the fabric it was made of corresponds to his profession and the age he lived in. The dagger hanging on the lanyard, a cord used by sailors especially to carry some items like a dagger, can be termed as a characteristic for sailors.

#### **4.13. The Physician**

Among pilgrims there was a physician too. He was an expert in his field and knew everything about medicine. Gold was his biggest indulgence and he kept some that he earned during the plague outbreak.

“In blood-red garments, slashed with bluish grey  
And lined with taffeta, he rode his way.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 31)

The Physician was attired in a bright-red garb, which may mean that his clothes were made of scarlet<sup>17</sup>, a fine fabric not accessible for a common man. Chaucer depicts his dress as trimmed with taffeta<sup>18</sup>, another high-quality material made of silk. These details about the Physician's clothes prove that being a member of the middle class he could afford it.

#### 4.14. The Wife of Bath

Next pilgrim was the Wife of Bath, an excellent dressmaker and weaver. Being married five times, she had rich experience with love. As she was a very travelled woman, she knew how to ride a horse; she loved fun and company as well. When introducing the Wife of Bath, Chaucer pays attention especially to her outward appearance. The description of her clothes is most likely the most detailed one. First of all he depicts her Sunday outfit and a few lines later he gives a description of her pilgrimage costume:

“Her kerchiefs were of finely woven ground;  
I dared have sworn they weighed a good ten pound,  
The ones she wore on Sunday, on her head.  
Her hose were of the finest scarlet red  
And gartered tight; her shoes were soft and new.  
...  
Well wimpled up, and on her head a hat  
As broad as is a buckler or a shield;  
She had a flowing mantle that concealed  
Large hips, her heels spurred sharply under that.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 31-32)

The headgear she wore on Sundays was according to the narrator a number of kerchiefs forming a huge and heavy garment. On her legs she wore tight bright-red stockings and soft shoes. Since the Wife of Bath was, in Chaucer's words, very skilful

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<sup>17</sup> “Scarlet was originally a fine woollen fabric; later, a colour.” (Cumming, 269)

<sup>18</sup> “Taffeta was originally a plain, glossy, silk fabric; later a thin, glossy silk with a wavy lustre. There were many varieties.” (Cumming, 272)

seamstress, it is highly possible that she made her ostentatious headdress herself. Even though the headgear was said to weight about ten pounds, it is clear that it was just an exaggerated comparison. Nevertheless, the weight of this garment may stand for that the kerchiefs were made of some high-quality material and they might have been somehow decorated, which made it so heavy. Munro states that “the most highly esteemed, most regal colour in medieval Europe, especially during the fourteenth ... century, was that shade of brilliant or vivid red known as scarlet. ... And the most expensive woollen textiles (rivalling imported silks) of this era were the scarlets.” (Netherton and Owen-Crocker, 56) As the Wife of Bath had picked the scarlet hose on Sunday, it is obvious that she aimed to imitate the way of noble women’s clothing. The trouble is that from the narrator’s delineation is not comprehensible whether her stockings were of scarlet colour or of scarlet fabric. Anyway, the whole Sunday outfit looks as if she wanted to flaunt her wealth and pride of her own work.

Her more casual traveller’s costume seems to be rather modest in contrast with the Sunday one. On her head the Wife of Bath wore a very broad hat that appears to be similar in appearance to the typical traveller’s headgear. As Laver states, towards the end of the fourteenth century most of women abandoned the veil and since it was worn only by nuns and widows. (64) This may imply that the Wife of Bath wore a wimple in order to protect her hair from the unkind weather, as it is known that English weather is rather rainy and windy. Chaucer mentions that she covered her gown with a mantle, flowing down and hiding her large hips. This outer garment signifies that she aimed to protect her dress as well. The last thing the narrator revealed of her pilgrim outfit were the spurs on her riding shoes. This detail proves that she wore not solely practical dress, but also sensible footwear suitable to wear on pilgrimage. Even if the Wife of Bath used to wear two costumes so distinct from one another, the both give a true picture of this pilgrim.

#### **4.15. The Plowman**

There was also a plowman among the travellers. He was a true Christian with a good heart and despite being a poor farmer he was an honest worker and a good neighbour who fairly paid his tithes to the Church. Too little is known of his clothing:

“He wore a tabard smock and rode a mare.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 34)

The narrator pointed out just Ploughman's tabard smock, which corresponds to his modesty and humble origin. The Plowman travelled with his brother, a Parson, whose dress was not described at all. But as he was very poor and a perfect example of an ideal Christian, we may assume that he was dressed plainly in a modest ecclesiastical habit.

#### **4.16. The Miller**

The Miller was a big brawny man who could beat perhaps anyone. His outer appearance, due to his red beard and a wart on his nose, made him look creepy. The narrator mentions that on their way to Canterbury, the Miller played the bagpipes.

“He wore a hood of blue and white coat.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 34)

He wore a blue hood on unspecified shape and material. The colour of his coat suggests that it might have been made of undyed wool, because white was a typical colour of undyed woollen fabric.

#### **4.17. The Reeve**

There was also the Reeve, an old choleric man who was constantly in a bad mood. He was a very capable manager of quite large estate. But on the other hand he was shrewd and even cunning, as he was cheating his lord. Chaucer describes him as a skinny man, having his hair shorn in the priest's style.

“He wore an overcoat of bluish shade  
And rather long; he had rusty blade  
Slung at his side

...

His coat was tucked under his belt and splayed.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 36)

The Reeve was attired in a long blue overcoat, belted in the waist. On the side there was a rusty blade attached to his belt. The narrator also mentions that his coat was splayed and tucked under the belt.

#### 4.18. The Summoner

The Summoner was in the group of pilgrims too. He was a nasty man with a red face full of unsightly pimples and scabs. So ugly was he that even children were scared when he appeared. His work was to bring the offenders before the Church courts. He was a corrupted and often drunken officer of the Church.

“He wore a garland set upon his head  
Large as the holly-bush upon a stake  
outside an ale-house.” (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 37)

The visage of the Summoner absolutely corresponds to his occupation. His disfigured face may stand for some skin disease, such as leprosy. Of his clothes not much has been written. The author states that he had a large garland on his head. The reason for wearing the garland might have lain in his disease. In case he was really sick, it may be a sign of his willingness to hide his face. By portraying him in such horrible way, Chaucer probably wanted to highlight the disfavour of medieval folk to his profession, because summoners were certainly among the most hated people of the ecclesiastical class.

#### 4.19. The Pardoner

And last but not least, there was the Pardoner, riding together with the Summoner. He was a church official as well, whose duty was to sell pardon to sinners. Although he spoke of his selling price as a bargain, he was shrewd and corrupted. He was not good-looking, but dressed in a noble way. He had yellowish sparse hair hanging down to his shoulders. Chaucer compares his hair strands to the rat tails, which in itself signifies how unsightly looking he was.

“He wore no hood upon his head, for fun;  
The hood inside his wallet had been stowed,  
He aimed at riding in the latest mode;  
But for a little cap his head was bare  
And he had bulging eye-balls, like a hare.

He'd sewed a holy relic on his cap;  
His wallet lay before him on his lap." (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 37)

The Pardoner wore just a small cap on his head with a holy relic sewed on it. The narrator mentioned also a wallet, which was definitely an important accessory of every pardoner. Pardoner's outer appearance symbolises his hypocrisy and corruptness – he was clad in fine clothes but there was a little kindness inside.

#### **4.20. Fashion from tales**

Chaucer describes not solely how his pilgrims arrayed themselves, but mentions also what some of the protagonists from the tales wore. For example in *The Miller's Tale* he depicts the outfit of the carpenter's wife Alison in full details:

"She used to wear a girdle of striped silk;  
Her apron was as white as morning milk  
Over her loins, all gusseted and pleated.  
White was her smock; embroidery repeated  
Its pattern on the collar, front and back,  
Inside and out; it was of silk, and black.  
The tapes and ribbons of her milky mutch  
Were made to match her collar to a touch;  
She wore a broad silk fillet, rather high,  
And certainly she had a lecherous eye.  
...  
And by her girdle hung a purse of leather,  
Tasselled with silk and silver droplets, pearled;  
...  
Her collaret revealed  
A brooch as big as boss upon a shield.  
High shoes she wore, and laced them to the top." (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 106-107)

The wife of the carpenter was clad in a white smock with an embroidered collar made of black silk. The narrator observes that she wore a pleated apron of bright white colour. By emphasising its brightness, he wanted to indicate that it was fresh and unsoiled. Her dress was belted with a girdle of striped silk. She had a white mutch on her head, decorated with tapes and ribbons probably also made of silk. She wore a broad high headband of silk as well. There was a leather purse hanging from her girdle adorned with silk tassels and silver droplets and pearls. Chaucer mentioned a big brooch on her collar and laced shoes. The delineation of Alison's outfit reflects her youth, beauty and tenderness. Although the smock and apron signify that she came from the lower class, they were clean and tidy, which command respect. All her garments suggest a certain wealth of her jealous husband, an old carpenter who would have moved heaven and earth to satisfy his young wife and keep her far from the other men.

Stanbury states that "while Chaucer is perhaps best known to many for techniques of description, the dazzling arts of synaesthetic concreteness that fabricate the portraits in the General Prologue or of Alisoun in the Miller's Tale, those portraits are also independent from a recording gaze within the narrative, or what we might call a focalizer." (qtd in Brown, 470).

In The Miller's Tale Chaucer describes the attire of one more character – a young parish clerk, Absalom:

"His shoes cut out in tracery, as in use  
In old St Paul's. The hose upon his feet  
Showed scarlet though, and all his clothes were neat  
And proper. In a jacket of light blue,  
Flounced at the waist and tagged with laces too,  
He went, and wore a surplice just as gay  
And white as any blossom on the spray." (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* 108)

The tracery on the clerk's shoes was cut according to the windows in St Paul's Cathedral. Elgin states that cut-out patterns on the front of the shoes were popular at that time. (52) His hose were scarlet, the jacket was blue and his surplice was of bright white colour. The usage of bright colours indicate that Chaucer again might have wanted to highlight the youth and vitality of this character.

Apart from others, in *The Parson's Tale*, which is the very last one of *the Canterbury tales*, the author talks a lot about dressing too. Actually, it is a sermon in which Parson demonstrates his sentiments on the manner of clothing and blames on the wasting of cloth, adorning by cutting it into curious decorative patterns:

As for the first sin, that of excessive clothing, it is expensive to the detriment of the people, not only in the costly embroidery, the ostentatious notched ornamentation, the undulating vertical strips, the coiling decorative borders, and such waste of cloth in vanity, but also in the costly fur in their gowns, so much punching with blades to make holes, and so much slitting with shears. Furthermore, the excessive length of these gowns, trailing in the dung and the mire, on horse as well as on foot, both of men and of women, is such that all that trailing cloth is in effect wasted, consumed, threadbare, and rotten with dung, rather than given to the poor, to their great loss. ...On the other hand, to speak of the horribly immoderate scantiness of clothing, there are these short cut coats or short jackets that for their brevity, and with wicked intent, don't cover men's shameful members. (Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: A Complete* 416-425)

Parson was another representative of the spiritual estate. This character presents the opposite of the other corrupted Church officers and members. Although the Parson does not His sermon and critique of the medieval way of clothing in one provides a conclusion to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.



## 5. Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to compare the image of medieval clothing in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* with the period fashion described in other available sources dealing with the matter of clothing in the Middle Ages.

Firstly, there are various male and female garments typical for the late fourteenth century investigated in the first part. The attire of noble men and women, clothing of the people from the lower working class, habits of various members of clergy, armour worn by medieval knights and a typical pilgrim costume – are all described in outline and supplemented with a few pictures for better visual understanding. The embedded images have only an illustrative character and do not correspond to Chaucer's pilgrims. Hence there are further pictures presented in Appendix that provide a more faithful illustration of the characters from the *Canterbury Tales*. The fashion that is reflective of social status and regal garb are included as well. Furthermore, this section deals with the great poet himself, the social background he came from and his knowledge of fashion.

The second part examines the English clothing during the latter years of the medieval era as it was depicted in *the Canterbury Tales* written by Geoffrey Chaucer. There are nearly all the main characters' wardrobes from Chaucer's masterpiece described one after another and analysed in detail. In addition to that, a few characters from the tales narrated by the pilgrims are included. Chaucer's comprehensive and lively descriptions of his travellers' costumes are then processed and compared to the information gained from the accessible sources, which were introduced in the first part.

Geoffrey Chaucer was a great scene painter and thanks to his unique narrating skills he created a perfect image of his time. Chaucer's descriptions of his pilgrims' clothing in the *Canterbury Tales* are more or less in accordance with the period fashion as it was described in other sources dealing with the matter of medieval fashion. He paid a lot of attention to describe the clothes in order to sketch in their personality of the main characters.

Unlike other authors, Chaucer's characters came from various classes of society and were portrayed just as the real people living at that time. This kind of realism, as well as Chaucer's satirical interpretations of the main characters made his work a valuable recording of the Middle Ages. He managed to show future generations a representation of what life was like in medieval England, describing it not only from its bright side, but

also from the darker one. Chaucer went down to history as a brilliant poet and author of the cardinal work of English medieval literature. He enabled the readers to look inside the life in the Middle Ages and familiarize themselves with medieval fashion.

Hopefully this thesis may provide students and other fans of Chaucer or medieval enthusiasts all necessary information and allow them to get a rough idea of Chaucer's pilgrims' appearance including medieval fashion in general.

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## Appendix 1. The Knight



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (49)

## Appendix 2. The Squire



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (260)

### Appendix 3. The Yeoman



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (286)

### Appendix 4. The Prioress



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (139)



## Appendix 5. The Monk



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (155)

## Appendix 6. The Friar



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (213)

## Appendix 7. The Merchant



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (256)

## Appendix 8. The Clerk



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (220)

### Appendix 9. The Man of Law



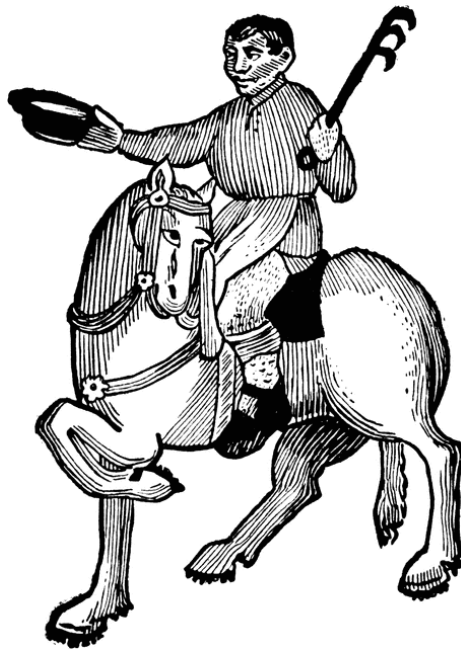
Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (136)

### Appendix 10. The Franklin



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (281)

### Appendix 11. The Cook



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (130)

### Appendix 12. The Shipman



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (138)

### Appendix 13. The Physician



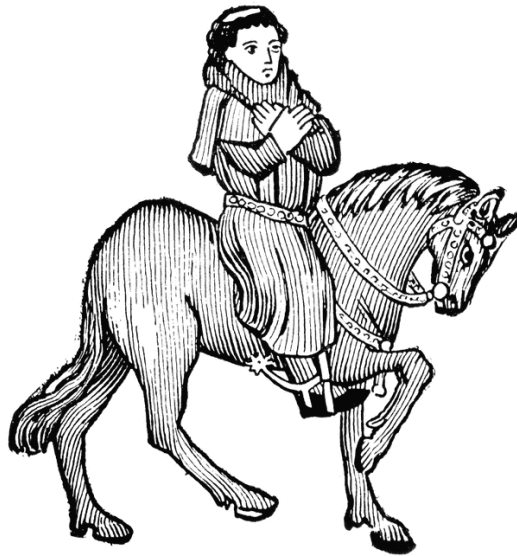
Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (184)

### Appendix 14. The Wife of Bath



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (203)

## Appendix 15. The Parson



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (297)

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Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (127)

### Appendix 17. The Summoner



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (216)

### Appendix 18. The Pardoner



Source: Bates, Katharine Lee. *Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims*. Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1914. Print. (190)